

Social Work Career Orientation of Social Work Students at Hanoi National University of Education in the Context of Digital Transformation: Current Situation and Related Factors

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Abstract: This study examines the career orientation of social work students at Hanoi National University of Education in the context of digital transformation. Specifically, it explores students' professional awareness, attitudes toward the profession, factors influencing career choice, self-assessed core professional competencies, and perceptions of digital transformation in Social Work education and practice. The study employed a quantitative survey design with a sample of 272 undergraduate social work students. Data were collected through a structured google form questionnaire and processed using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the major dimensions of the study. The findings show that students reported relatively high levels of professional awareness of social work (M = 4.19), ability to apply digital technologies (M = 4.16), and self-assessed core professional competencies (M = 4.06). In contrast, attitudes toward the profession (M = 3.76) and factors influencing career choice (M = 3.59) were more moderate. Students also showed fairly positive perceptions of digital transformation, especially in relation to professional change, career education, and the positive impacts of digital applications, while still recognizing challenges such as information overload, confidentiality risks, and the pressure to continuously update digital skills. In terms of post-graduation intention, the largest group reported that they might work in social work after graduation, whereas fewer students had made a firm commitment to the profession. Overall, the study suggests that students possess a relatively solid foundation of professional awareness, values, and digital readiness, but their long-term career commitment remains less stable. These findings highlight the need for social work education to strengthen career guidance, practice-based learning, and professional identity development in the digital era

Keywords: social work career orientation; social work students; digital transformation; professional awareness; digital competence; Hanoi National University of Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, career orientation is increasingly regarded as an important dimension of student development because it is closely associated with professional identity formation, learning motivation, employability, and long-term career commitment. For professionally oriented disciplines, career orientation is not merely a matter of occupational preference; rather, it reflects a gradual process through which students develop awareness of a profession, evaluate its social meaning and future prospects, assess their own suitability and competence, and position themselves in relation to future employment. This issue is especially significant in social work education, where professional preparation

involves not only disciplinary knowledge and practical skills but also the internalization of professional values, ethical responsibility, and commitment to social justice and human well-being (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021; Terum & Heggen, 2016).

From the perspective of social work science, social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline oriented toward social change, social development, social cohesion, empowerment, and the enhancement of human well-being. Its professional foundation is built on principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity, which means that the professional orientation of social work students cannot be understood solely in terms of employment intention, but must also be considered in relation to value commitment, ethical sensitivity, and readiness for practice in complex social contexts (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). In this sense, the career orientation of Social Work students is inherently multidimensional, involving cognitive, affective, ethical, and competence-based components that are shaped throughout the educational process.

At the same time, social work education is currently being reshaped by digital transformation. In Vietnam, digital transformation has become a strategic national priority, and the education sector has been explicitly required to strengthen the application of information technology and digital transformation in teaching, learning, and training management through major policy documents such as Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg and Decision No. 131/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister, 2020, 2022). Within this policy context, universities are expected not only to modernize instructional environments but also to prepare students for professional practice in a labor market increasingly influenced by digital systems, online communication, data-based management, and artificial intelligence. For social work, these changes are particularly consequential because digital technologies are now involved in information searching, case documentation, assessment processes, remote communication, service coordination, and technology-mediated support for clients and communities (Prime Minister, 2020, 2022; Reamer, 2019).

The growing digitalization of social work creates both opportunities and challenges for professional education. On the one hand, digital platforms, online resources, simulation-based learning, and technology-supported communication may broaden students' access to knowledge, expose them to emerging models of practice, and expand their awareness of new career pathways in social work. On the other hand, the use of digital tools also raises major concerns related to confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, data protection, technological competence, and ethical accountability. Recent scholarship has therefore emphasized that Social Work education must extend beyond traditional professional competence to include digital competence, critical technological literacy, and the capacity to use digital tools in ethically responsible ways (Fjeldheim et al., 2024; Reamer, 2019). From a pedagogical perspective, this means that career orientation in social work should no longer be examined only through conventional dimensions such as professional awareness, attitudes toward the profession, and motivation to work in the field; it should also be understood in relation to students' perceptions of digital transformation, their self-assessed digital capability, and their evaluation of the opportunities and risks that digitalization brings to future professional practice.

Although the literature on social work education has increasingly addressed professional identity, ethical standards, and digital competence, the literature reviewed for this study suggests that fewer studies have examined these issues through the lens of students' career orientation as a comprehensive construct integrating professional awareness, professional attitudes, perceived competencies, and intention to pursue social work after graduation. This gap appears particularly relevant in the Vietnamese higher education context, where social work training is developing within simultaneous pressures of professionalization, educational reform, and digital transformation. In this regard, empirical research is needed to clarify how social work students perceive their profession, how they respond to the digital turn in professional education and practice, and which factors are associated with their future career orientation. Against this background, the present study investigates the career orientation of social work students at Hanoi National University of Education in the context of digital transformation. Specifically, it examines students' professional awareness, attitudes toward the profession, self-assessed core professional competencies, perceptions of digital transformation in social work, and the factors related to their intention to pursue social work after graduation. By doing so, the study is expected to contribute both to the scholarship on social work education and to the improvement of career education and curriculum development for social work students in Vietnamese universities (Fjeldheim et al., 2024; Prime Minister, 2022; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Career orientation in higher education

In higher education, career orientation is commonly understood as a developmental process through which students form awareness of a profession, evaluate its personal and social meaning, and gradually position themselves in relation to future work. Rather than reflecting a simple occupational preference, career orientation is closely associated with professional identity formation, perceived competence, motivation, and long-term commitment. From this perspective, students' orientation toward a profession is shaped not only by labor market expectations but also by their educational experiences, sense of belonging, and confidence in their future role (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

For the present study, career orientation is understood as a multidimensional construct reflected in students' professional awareness, attitudes toward the social work profession, perceived professional competence, and intention to pursue social work after graduation. This operationalization is consistent with the structure of the questionnaire used in the study, which measures these dimensions through students' self-reports on professional understanding, attitudes, core competencies, and future career intention.

2.2. Social Work as a professional career

Social work is defined internationally as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Its foundation is closely linked to social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity, which means that orientation toward social work cannot be reduced to job choice alone; it is also related to value commitment, ethical sensitivity, and readiness to engage with complex social problems (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

Research on social work education further suggests that students' identification with the profession is not fixed at entry but develops through educational and field-based experiences. Terum and Heggen's longitudinal study found that students' identification with the social work profession was shaped by educational experiences, including interactions with teachers, peers, and placement supervisors, indicating that professional orientation is an outcome of socialization within the training process rather than merely an individual predisposition (Terum & Heggen, 2016).

2.3. Digital transformation and Social Work education

Digital transformation has become a defining condition of contemporary higher education. In Vietnam, this direction has been institutionalized through Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg approving the National digital transformation program and decision No. 131/QĐ-TTg on strengthening information technology application and digital transformation in education and training through 2030. These policy documents indicate that digital transformation is not only a technological shift but also a systemic educational reform affecting teaching, learning, management, and human resource development (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2020, 2022).

Within social work, digital transformation is increasingly influencing both practice and education. Reamer argues that technology has transformed the nature of social work education and practice, especially in areas such as academic delivery, field education, communication, documentation, supervision, and professional ethics. Related professional standards have likewise emphasized that technology use in social work requires clear benchmarks for competence, confidentiality, information management, and ethically responsible practice in digital environments (National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education & Clinical Social Work Association, 2017; Reamer, 2019).

Recent studies also show that digital competence is now an essential component of readiness for social work practice. Zhu and Andersen (2022) report that the integration of digital competence knowledge areas across Norwegian social work education remained limited and that a significant gap existed between digital competence requirements and the curricula used in social work education. Similarly, Fjeldheim et al. (2025) note that educators' engagement with digital competence is affected by uncertainty about content, unfamiliar technical language, the rapid pace of digitalization, distribution of responsibility, and the need for critical reflection. Taken together, these findings suggest that social work education is under growing pressure to prepare students for digitally mediated practice while also addressing ethical and pedagogical challenges associated with technological change (Fjeldheim et al., 2025; Zhu & Andersen, 2022).

2.4. Factors related to Social Work career orientation

The literature indicates that several groups of factors may shape students' career orientation in social work. The first group concerns professional awareness and attitudes. Students who better understand the nature, values, and roles of social work, and who perceive the profession as meaningful and socially valuable, are more likely to develop stronger identification with the field and more stable professional commitment (IFSW, 2014; Terum & Heggen, 2016).

The second group concerns perceived competence. In professionally oriented programs, students' confidence in their ability to communicate, assess, intervene, collaborate, and reflect is closely related to their readiness for practice and their willingness to remain in the profession. In the present study, this dimension is especially important because the questionnaire includes a full section on students' self-assessment of core professional competencies, making it possible to examine whether stronger perceived competence is associated with a clearer intention to pursue social work after graduation.

The third group concerns digital-context factors. Research in higher education shows that digital literacy is positively associated with career competence and career readiness among university students. Jian et al. (2025), for example, found that digital literacy and career competence were meaningfully related in a study of university students in China. In social work, digital-context factors are even more salient because students' readiness for practice increasingly includes the ability to search for reliable digital information, use digital tools appropriately, protect client confidentiality, and manage the opportunities and risks of technology use. At the same time, barriers such as low computer self-efficacy and computer anxiety may also affect students' readiness to use information and communication technologies effectively, suggesting that digital capability should be treated as a substantive factor in career orientation research (Jian et al., 2025; Meinhardt-Injac & Skowronek, 2022).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Sample

The study was conducted with undergraduate students enrolled in the social work program at Hanoi National University of Education. Participants were students who were studying in the program during the data collection period and voluntarily agreed to complete the survey. Responses with substantial missing data or obvious inconsistencies were excluded from the final dataset.

The final sample consisted of 272 students. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants in terms of gender, academic cohort, and post-graduation career intention.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	43	15.8
	Female	229	84.2
Academic cohort	75	165	60.7
	74	26	9.6
	73	21	7.7
	72	60	22.1
Post-graduation career intention	Work in social work	69	25.4
	Might work in social work	110	40.4
	Undecided	71	26.1
	Not work in social work	22	8.1

As shown in Table 1, the sample was predominantly female, with female students accounting for 84.2% of the respondents. In terms of academic cohort, students from 75 represented the largest proportion of the sample (60.7%), followed by 72 (22.1%), while 73 and 74 accounted for relatively smaller proportions. With respect to post-graduation career intention, the largest group of students reported that they might work in social work after graduation (40.4%), followed by those who were undecided (26.1%) and those who intended to work in social work (25.4%). Only a small proportion (8.1%) stated that they did not intend to pursue social work after graduation. These characteristics suggest that the sample mainly reflects the perspectives of female students and students from the most recent cohort, while also indicating that most respondents remained at least open to the possibility of entering the social work profession.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed for students majoring in social work at Hanoi National University of Education. The questionnaire was created in the form of a google form and then distributed to students through their class groups. This procedure enabled students from different cohorts to access the survey conveniently and complete it in a flexible manner. Before responding to the questionnaire, students were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of the information provided. The survey did not require personally identifying information beyond the basic background variables needed for analysis. These procedures were intended to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy throughout the study.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Social Work career orientation

The descriptive results indicate that students reported a relatively positive profile of social work career orientation. As summarized in Table 2, the highest-rated dimension was professional awareness of Social Work ($M = 4.19$), followed by self-assessed core professional competencies ($M = 4.06$). By contrast, attitudes toward the profession ($M = 3.76$) and factors influencing career choice ($M = 3.59$) were lower, although still above the midpoint of the scale. This pattern suggests that students generally had a solid cognitive understanding of the profession and fairly strong confidence in their professional abilities, while their motivational commitment and career-choice influences were somewhat less pronounced.

More specifically, students showed the strongest awareness in distinguishing social work from charitable or voluntary activities, as well as in understanding the competency, ethical, and professional requirements of the field. These results suggest that respondents had a relatively clear recognition of social work as a professional discipline with its own values, standards, and practice boundaries. At the same time, lower mean scores were found for students' understanding of current models of social work practice, employment fields for social work graduates, and future career opportunities. This indicates that students were more confident in their grasp of the profession's values and ethical foundations than in their understanding of practice settings and career pathways.

Students' attitudes toward the profession were generally moderately positive. The highest-rated item in this dimension was the belief that social work has meaningful value for society, followed by positive responses regarding participation in profession-related activities, confidence in the future development of the profession, and opportunities for self-development through the profession. These findings show that students clearly appreciated the social and humanistic significance of social work. However, lower scores were observed for strong motivation to pursue the profession and long-term commitment to the profession, suggesting that although students valued social work as a meaningful field, this did not always translate into a strong and stable intention to remain in the profession over time.

A similar pattern can be seen in the results on factors influencing career choice. Students were most strongly influenced by motives related to contributing to the community, self-development through professional practice, creating long-term social value, and helping vulnerable groups. In contrast, family influence and external influence from friends, teachers, or experienced others received the lowest ratings. The role of career stability and job opportunities in the context of digital transformation was also only moderate. Overall, these findings suggest that students' choice of social work was driven primarily by intrinsic, value-based, and prosocial motivations, whereas external pressure and pragmatic employment considerations played a less decisive role.

Students' self-assessed core professional competencies were rated at a fairly high level. The highest mean score was found for active listening in work with clients, while relatively high scores were also reported for self-evaluation and reflective practice, information gathering, and problem analysis. The lowest score in this group concerned writing professional reports clearly and according to standard requirements, although this item still remained above the midpoint. Taken together, the results indicate that students perceived themselves as possessing a relatively solid foundation of professional competence, but some practice-related skills, particularly documentation and professional writing, may still need further strengthening.

Overall, the findings in this section suggest that students' social work career orientation was characterized by a relatively strong professional awareness and fairly high self-confidence in core competencies, but only moderately strong emotional commitment and career motivation. In other words, students seemed to understand the profession well and value it highly, yet their long-term determination to pursue it appeared less fully consolidated. This has important implications for social

work education, as it indicates the need not only to strengthen professional knowledge and skills, but also to support students' career commitment, professional confidence, and clearer understanding of future career development pathways.

4.2. Students' perceptions of digital transformation in social work education and practice

The findings also show that students held generally positive perceptions of digital transformation in relation to social work education and practice. Among the five dimensions in this area, the highest-rated was ability to apply digital technologies ($M = 4.16$), followed by awareness of changes in the profession under digital transformation ($M = 3.92$), perceived positive impacts of digital applications ($M = 3.88$), and perceived impact of digital transformation on career education ($M = 3.87$). The dimension with the lowest mean score was perceived negative impacts of digital applications ($M = 3.69$), although this still indicated a moderate level of concern rather than indifference. Taken together, these results suggest that students generally recognized digital transformation as both an opportunity and a challenge for their future profession.

Regarding awareness of professional change, students expressed relatively high agreement with statements emphasizing the importance of digital skills for contemporary social work practice, the need to search for and use reliable digital resources, and the importance of digital safety in professional work. Students also recognized the role of digital data, case management software, and the emergence of new career opportunities in the digital era. Comparatively lower scores were found for items related to the role of artificial intelligence and the risk of information leakage, although these items still remained close to the upper range of the scale. Overall, the findings indicate that students were relatively aware that digital transformation is reshaping both the content and the conditions of social work practice.

Students also reported fairly positive perceptions of the impact of digital transformation on career education. The highest ratings in this dimension were associated with the view that the Internet enables access to new models and emerging trends in social work, that digital learning environments encourage students to explore suitable career pathways more proactively, and that digital transformation expands and develops social work career trends. Slightly lower, though still fairly positive, ratings were found for the idea that online learning directly helps students understand social work career trends more clearly. This suggests that students perceived digital transformation as particularly useful in broadening information access and career exploration, even if its immediate instructional effectiveness was not rated equally strongly.

The strongest results in the entire digital-transformation block were found in students' self-assessed ability to apply digital technologies. Students rated highly their ability to protect client confidentiality in digital environments, store and manage data safely, use AI to support analysis of social issues, and search for digital resources relevant to study and practice. Even the lowest-rated items in this dimension, such as evaluating the reliability of digital sources and using digital platforms to simulate and handle professional situations, still received relatively high scores. These findings indicate that students generally saw themselves as capable of engaging with digital tools in learning and professional preparation, which is an encouraging result in the context of digital transformation.

At the same time, students acknowledged both positive and negative impacts of digital technology. On the positive side, they most strongly agreed that digital transformation increases access to diverse career information, expands labor market opportunities, and helps clarify future career pathways. They also positively valued digital connections with professional resources, case materials, and innovative models of social work. On the negative side, the most salient concerns involved information overload, risks of client information leakage, and the pressure of continually updating digital skills. Students also expressed moderate concern about difficulties in using digital tools and building professional relationships through online environments. These findings suggest that students did not perceive digital transformation in purely optimistic terms; rather, they understood it as a complex process that generates both empowerment and pressure.

Overall, the findings show that students' perceptions of digital transformation were broadly positive, especially in relation to their own digital capability and the opportunities created for career learning and professional development. However, the results also reveal a parallel awareness of ethical, technical, and relational challenges in digitally mediated social work. This implies that social work education should not only expand digital learning opportunities but also strengthen training in digital ethics, information safety, critical technology use, and the relational dimensions of professional practice in online environments.

4.3. Post-graduation career intention

Students' post-graduation career intention provides an important complementary perspective on their overall career orientation. The largest group of respondents reported that they might work in social work after graduation (40.4%),

followed by those who were undecided (26.1%) and those who intended to work in social work (25.4%). Only a relatively small proportion stated that they did not intend to work in social work (8.1%).

These findings suggest that although only about one quarter of the students had made a firm commitment to entering the profession, the majority remained at least open to the possibility of pursuing social work. At the same time, the relatively large proportion of students who were undecided or only tentatively oriented toward the profession indicates that career intention was not yet fully stabilized for many respondents. This result is consistent with the earlier finding that students' professional awareness and self-assessed competence were rated more highly than their long-term professional commitment and motivation. In other words, students appeared to understand the profession and value it, but many had not yet translated that understanding into a definite post-graduation career decision.

From an educational perspective, this pattern highlights the importance of strengthening career guidance, practice exposure, and professional identity formation within the social work program. More specifically, students may benefit from clearer information about employment pathways, stronger opportunities for field-based engagement, and more systematic support in linking professional values, digital competence, and future career planning. On the basis of the descriptive findings presented here, post-graduation career intention appears to be a promising focus for subsequent inferential analysis aimed at identifying the factors most closely associated with students' willingness to pursue social work as a profession.

Table 2. Summary of major study dimensions

No.	Major dimension	Questionnaire source	Number of items	Mean score	Range of item means	Interpretation
1	Professional awareness of social work	Part I – Question 1	10	4.19	4.03–4.32	High
2	Ability to apply digital technologies	Part II – Question 3	10	4.16	4.13–4.23	Fairly high to high
3	Self-assessed core professional competencies	Part I – Question 4	10	4.06	3.94–4.22	Fairly high
4	Awareness of changes in the profession under digital transformation	Part II – Question 1	10	3.92	3.83–4.00	Fairly high
5	Perceived positive impacts of digital applications	Part II – Question 4	10	3.88	3.85–3.91	Fairly high
6	perceived impact of digital transformation on career education	Part II – Question 2	10	3.87	3.74–3.93	Fairly high
7	Attitudes toward the social work profession	Part I – Question 2	10	3.76	3.53–4.12	Moderately positive
8	Perceived negative impacts of digital applications	Part II – Question 5	10	3.69	3.62–3.77	Moderate to fairly high
9	Factors influencing career choice	Part I – Question 3	10	3.59	3.18–3.81	Moderate

5. DISCUSSION

The findings show that social work students at Hanoi National University of Education had relatively high levels of professional awareness, digital application ability, and self-assessed core professional competencies, whereas their attitudes toward the profession and career choice motivations were more moderate. This suggests that students generally understood the profession and felt fairly confident in their competencies, but their long-term commitment to pursuing social work as a career was not equally strong.

A notable result is that students showed strong awareness of social work as a professional field distinct from charitable or voluntary activities and recognized its ethical and competency-based requirements. However, they were less confident in their understanding of practice models, employment fields, and future career opportunities. This indicates that students' awareness was stronger in conceptual and ethical aspects than in practical and career-development aspects of the profession.

Students also expressed a generally positive attitude toward social work, especially in recognizing its social meaning and humanistic value. However, lower scores for strong motivation to pursue the profession and long-term commitment suggest a gap between valuing the profession and actually planning to remain in it. This is consistent with the post-graduation intention results, where many students reported that they might work in social work or were still undecided, while fewer students had made a definite commitment.

The results on career choice factors further show that students were mainly influenced by intrinsic and prosocial motives, such as contributing to the community, helping vulnerable groups, developing themselves, and creating long-term social value. In contrast, family influence and external pressure were less important. This suggests that students' orientation toward social work was largely grounded in personal values rather than external expectations.

Another important finding is that students reported relatively high confidence in their digital abilities, including searching for resources, managing data safely, protecting confidentiality, and using digital tools in learning and professional preparation. At the same time, they also recognized concerns such as information overload, risks of information leakage, and the pressure of continually updating digital skills. This indicates that students viewed digital transformation as both an opportunity and a challenge for social work education and practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that social work students had a relatively solid foundation in professional awareness, values, and digital readiness, but their career commitment remained less stable. Therefore, social work education should not only strengthen students' knowledge and competencies, but also provide stronger support for career guidance, practice exposure, and professional identity development in the context of digital transformation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the career orientation of social work students at Hanoi National University of Education in the context of digital transformation. The findings show that students had relatively high levels of professional awareness, self-assessed core professional competencies, and digital application ability. They also recognized both the opportunities and challenges that digital transformation brings to social work education and practice.

At the same time, students' attitudes toward the profession, career choice motivations, and post-graduation career intention were less stable than their levels of awareness and competence. In particular, many students appreciated the social meaning and humanistic value of social work, but fewer had made a firm decision to pursue the profession after graduation. This suggests that understanding the profession does not automatically lead to strong long-term professional commitment.

Overall, the study indicates that social work career orientation is shaped not only by students' knowledge of the profession and their perceived competencies, but also by their motivation, career expectations, and perceptions of digital transformation. These findings highlight the need for social work education to strengthen career guidance, practice-based learning, and support for professional identity development, so that students can move more confidently from professional awareness to long-term career commitment.

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