

# Education of Social Work

Subjects: Social Work

Contributor: Binahayati Rusyidi, Yi-Yi Chen, Yao-Chi Shih, Mary McCarthy, Yu-Hao Tseng

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) stipulates that the social work profession aims to enhance the wellbeing of individuals, groups, and communities impacted by social disadvantages through intervention practices, teaching, research, and policy making based on principles of human rights and social justice.

Keywords: competence ; education quality ; profession commitment ; profession development ; social work

---

## 1. Introduction

Of critical importance is that social workers are professionally prepared to “engage people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” ([International Federation of Social Workers \(IFSW\) 2014](#)). The Council on Social Work Education ([Council of Social Work Education \(CSWE\) 2008](#)) of the United States and the IFSW ([International Federation of Social Workers \(IFSW\) n.d.](#)) have specified the need for competency-based education as a foundation for supporting and evaluating educational outcomes. The goal is to produce quality graduates and competent practitioners.

How effective is education in preparing social work students to be capable practitioners? Implementation research has been designed to inform educational institutions about the effectiveness of their efforts to prepare competent graduates ([Holden et al. 2017](#)). Existing studies assess the impact of competency-based education within countries as opposed to across international communities ([Hessenauer and Zastrow 2013](#)), such as the Netherlands ([Baartman and Ruijs 2011](#)), Sweden ([Tham and Lynch 2014](#)), mainland China ([Guo et al. 2014, 2016](#)), and India ([Stanley and Gnanapragasam 2020](#)). Additionally, few studies have been conducted to identify how social work education and the development of the profession work in partnership to ensure readiness for practice.

## 2. Competency-Based Education of Social Work

Competency-based education identifies the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to perform professional tasks, and builds educational programs that prepare students to carry these competencies into the workplace. Some major features of competence-based education include using student-centered learning strategies, allowing flexibility in learning to enable students to demonstrate competence, and emphasizing learning outcomes over process.

Principally, competence-based education in social work is developed based on performance outcomes in three domains: Cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. The cognitive area covers learning the theoretical and procedural knowledge necessary for social work practice; the affective area is about learning and internalizing attitudes based on social work values, professional identity, and practice contexts; and the psychomotor area refers to the skills needed to perform social work tasks that are developed and strengthened through classrooms and fieldwork activities. Competence-based education, therefore, enables students graduating from social work programs to integrate the application of knowledge, skills, and core values to specific uses in specific practice contexts ([Nelson-Newell and Nelson-Gardell 2014](#)).

The most referred-to set of social work competencies is the one regulated by the CSWE of the United States. There are nine competencies identified in the latest version of Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) ([Council of Social Work Education \(CSWE\) 2015](#)), covering ethics, research, policy, and practice. Compared to the previous version made in 2008, the content is consistent, but the structure is simplified with more integration across the levels (individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities) of practice. The accreditation system enforces the educational standards that define competent preparation and certifies programs as demonstrating effectiveness in their educational program and availability of resources for teaching and scholarship ([Council of Social Work Education \(CSWE\) 2015](#)).

At a global level, the IFSW and the International Association of Social Work Education jointly updated a policy of Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training in 2019. There is a compulsory standard that binds every social work education program to produce competent graduates. They identified a core curriculum consisting of two components:

Contexts of social work and social work practice. The first component is aimed at building a critical understanding of social-political-economic-culture and historical structures that influence the social work profession. The second component refers to a broad set of competencies needed to perform professional interventions ([International Federation of Social Workers \(IFSW\) n.d.](#)). Growing attention has been given to the implementation of competence-based education as a crucial approach to strengthening social work education and practice in other parts of the world, such as the Asian region. Yet, some changes and adaptations are needed so that competence standards brought from the Western world are transformed for other cultural contexts ([Guo et al. 2018](#); [Han et al. 2016](#)).

### **3. Students' Perception of Professional Competency and the Influential Factors**

A list of factors has been identified in the literature associated with students' perceptions of professional competence. Researchers adopt an ecological approach to summarize the factors in the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of the environment surrounding students. At the micro level, professional commitment matters. Commitment, calling, and passion are interchangeable terms in related studies, which refer to the meaningful sense felt by individuals toward their work. Professional commitment has been regarded as an individual characteristic that can affect someone's sense of competence as it motivates them to pursue their professional goals ([Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011](#)). A study in China confirmed that students with higher levels of calling towards the social work profession reported higher levels of professional competence ([Guo et al. 2014](#)). A recent study with students in China also found that students who wanted to pursue their education in advanced social work reported higher levels of competence than their counterparts ([Guo et al. 2018](#)). Other personal characteristics such as gender ([Guo et al. 2018](#)) and psychological attributes ([Stanley and Gnanapragasam 2020](#)) have been found to be significant predictors of competence.

At the mezzo level, education quality, which is dependent on faculty, instructors, and practicum partners, is regarded as a very important predictor. A study among 534 undergraduate students in the United States revealed that a positive learning environment is associated with professional identity as a social worker, self-autonomy, and independence ([Hessenauer and Zastrow 2013](#)). Perception about the educational environment has been confirmed as a significant predictor of competence. Satisfaction with the content of the curriculum is positively associated with greater competence ([Guo et al. 2018](#)). Similarly, a study by [Guo et al. \(2014\)](#) found that perceptions of higher competence were commonly reported by students from social work programs with greater career-oriented characteristics. A career-oriented environment is characterized by various attributes including an educational environment that delivers substance and tools of practice in line with students' careers, emphasizes the importance of transferring skills for use in various practical contexts, and applies various teaching methods that encourage students to reflect and become fully involved. Noticeably, the practicum or internship is crucial in social work education linking education with career development ([Tham and Lynch 2014](#); [Flanagan and Wilson 2018](#); [Fors 2016](#)). Those who are satisfied with their placement tend to report greater confidence about what they will face in their job and confidence in their skills to perform adequately in future jobs.

At the macro level, the development of the social work profession reflects the status of professional education and practice, and the linkage between both in society. Among the few studies that have been conducted with first-hand data, the research team of [Wang et al. \(2015\)](#) compared the perceptions of professional competence between social work students in mainland China and the United States. Chinese students reported lower levels of professional competence than American students. The authors suggested that one reason for this difference is that developed countries, compared to less developed ones, allocated more resources and support for social work education so graduates might experience relatively effective educational processes. The authors of this research, who had education experience overseas, recommend further examination of this finding. The standardization of social work education in Western regions is more advanced than in less developed regions ([Noble 2004](#)). It is not merely due to resource availability but also the coherence among education, practice, and licensing systems. In Indonesia or Taiwan, the professional community of social work has yet to reach an agreement about what should be taught in school in order to prepare students for employment. Such a gap may lead to students' confusion about the knowledge, skills, and competencies that will be expected when they enter the workforce, thereby buffering the effects of education quality and personal commitment to the profession.

### **4. Profession Development of Social Work in Indonesia and Taiwan**

Indonesia and Taiwan share some similarities in the development of the social work profession according to the reviews of [Fahrudin \(2019\)](#) and [Ku \(2019\)](#). Social work practice was introduced by international aid agencies after World War II. The earlier focus was on social-economic development closely tied to literacy education, public health, and infrastructure development. To date, the dominant social welfare problems faced by and resources available to social workers vary in Indonesia and Taiwan primarily due to the different stages of social and economic development for each country.

Indonesia's GDP per capita in 2021 was approximately \$4292 and the country is still categorized as a middle-level human development state by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) standards. Community development, poverty alleviation, child welfare, and natural disaster assistance are the most prominent social work foci in Indonesia. Many social policies and services are rapidly emerging, but people's recognition of social work, government administration, funding systems, and workforce development is in flux ([Fahrudin 2019](#)). Meanwhile, Taiwan's GDP per capita is estimated to reach around \$35,510 in 2022 ([International Monetary Fund 2022](#)) and has been ranked among countries with very high human development levels ([National Statistics, R.O.C./Taiwan 2022](#)). Legislation guiding social welfare systems was established in Taiwan much earlier than in Indonesia (in the 1980s). The most discussed practice fields are child welfare, family services, care for older adults, and people with disability ([Ku 2019](#); [Lin 2010](#); [Lin and Shen 2008](#)).

On top of the differences, the social work profession in both countries is struggling to earn greater public recognition. The traditional culture in both countries regards caring and helping jobs as voluntary, charity, or family obligations so they are not properly paid ([Fahrudin 2019](#); [Nugroho and Santi 2014](#); [Yu 2013](#)). Therefore, social work remains less preferred compared to other social sciences and medical professions when young people select their college majors. To improve professional status, educational requirements and licensure are set in law, and many jobs are funded by the government. Furthermore, the social work education community assures competence-based education to meet global standards set by the IFSW and the CSWE to promote public recognition ([Nugroho and Santi 2014](#); [Fahrudin 2019](#); [Chou et al. 2006](#); [Chang and Mo 2007](#); [Feng 2008](#); [O'Leary et al. 2019](#); [Fahrudin and Yusuf 2016](#)).

One strategy for improving the public recognition of the profession in both countries is building the licensing system through close cooperation between social work educators and government agencies. In Indonesia, the exam for license certification for a generalist social worker started in 2012 and has been overseen by a semi-governmental body. A law on social work was introduced in 2019 to strengthen and extend the role of the profession in response to increasing societal needs and problems. Taiwan's social work licensure started in 1997 and has been implemented by a government agency ever since. After more than two decades of effort, the recently built certification system of advanced expertise in areas such as medical services and gerontology is managed by a professional organization through a competitive contract funded by the government. Social workers in practice are encouraged to earn a license, particularly for employment in protective services, medical settings, and agencies funded by the government.

Before any independent department or program was launched, social work in both countries developed as a branch or concentration in sociology, education, or political science. As the demand for a professionally prepared workforce grew, the undergraduate degree became the primary level of social work education, including a licensure requirement in both countries. Despite the efforts to develop a knowledge system in line with local contexts, the curricula, theoretical foundations, and textbooks used for tertiary education in both countries are greatly shaped by education models, thoughts, and scholars from the West, especially the United States, where many of our social work educators obtained their education.

## Indonesia

The undergraduate program of social work in Indonesia was first offered in the mid-1960s. Currently, there are 33 higher education institutions offering undergraduate programs. The majority of them are public institutions and are administered by the Ministry of National Education and Culture. Some universities are governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and one is ruled by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The vast majority of lecturers do not have a doctoral degree and many lack a degree in social work as well as practice experience ([Fahrudin 2019](#)). By general regulation of higher education, a faculty member for an undergraduate program must hold a master's degree or above. The Ministry of National Education (MONE) is working to require a doctoral degree as the standard for social work faculty at the undergraduate level. A limited number of qualified practitioners teach at the university due to both time constraints and program administrative rules.

Competency-based education in higher education has been promoted by the MONE starting in the 2000s. The policy aims to ensure that social work programs have graduates with the ability to respond to societal needs and labor force demands. In 2012, the MONE introduced a National Qualification Standard that requires institutions to set outcome-oriented learning for their graduates. The Indonesian Social Worker Association (IPSPI) introduced standards regarding core competencies for undergraduate social work programs that are assessed in a national competency exam. The core competencies set by IPSPI include the integration of knowledge, values, and skills to perform generalist social work tasks. As a response to the policy, in 2015, IPPSI regulated that 40% of the total 144 credit points required at the undergraduate level must be allocated for the core social work curriculum. The remaining credit units (60%) can be allocated for external and internal institutional requirements. The core social work curriculum covers 17 courses with a minimum of 2 field practicums

(Nugroho and Santi 2014). Currently, the core social work curriculum with outcome learning set for undergraduate education has been applied widely among undergraduate social work programs in Indonesia. However, no systematic study has been conducted to assess the extent of its implementation and effectiveness.

## Taiwan

The first social work program in higher education was established in the 1970s (Feng 2008). To date, there are 24 undergraduate programs, 23 master's, and 5 doctoral programs (Taiwan Social Work Education Association (TSWEA) 2021). Over 90% of the 324 full-time faculty members have doctoral degrees, compared with 65% in the 1990s (Ku 2019), as a result of higher education policy. The Ministry of Education has been urging every program in higher education to fulfill this standard through routine accreditation (Yu 2013). Among a series of higher education reforms in the 1990s, there was a dramatic increase in social work programs particularly in occupation-oriented colleges and private universities. The content and quality of professional education have been a concern since the newly recruited faculty members may not have related teaching or practice experiences (Feng 2008; Yu 2013; Lin 2010). The curricula look universal across programs due to the legally mandated education requirements of the license exam. The list of courses evolved slowly over the years and is not necessarily in line with the practice demands. The primary reason is that a government agency regulates licensing, and the professional community has limited influence on the teaching content (Feng 2008; Ku 2019).

The present Act for Professional Social Workers amended in 2007 requires social workers to complete 15 courses, which cover the values, knowledge, and methods of social work. Foundational courses include the introduction to social work with respect to core values and population groups served, human development and social environment with respect to theories and perspectives, and the introduction of social welfare with respect to macro practice. Methods were taught in casework, group work, community work, and research including statistics. Little variation can be observed across Taiwan's universities in terms of the practicum structure and the array of courses. Certain programs emphasize specific practice competencies by integrating a few more topic-specific courses along with adapting fieldwork and service learning to expand the practicum learning. Certain programs focus on medical settings or child welfare because they belong to medical or education schools, respectively. Few programs encompass issues of indigenous people that might be reflective of local demands and student identities. In recent years, gaps in education and practice caused by the license-bound curriculum have been criticized by the professional community (Ku 2019; Yu 2013; Lin 2010; Feng 2008).

**Table 1** provides a comparison of social work programs, faculty, licensing and curriculum requirements.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Social Work Programs in Indonesia and Taiwan.

	Indonesia	Taiwan
Counts of programs	33 undergraduate programs, majority public	24 programs, 7 public and 17 private
Social work educators' degree	Majority of lectures do not have terminal degrees of PhD or in social work	Most full-time faculty members have doctoral degrees
Requirements for social work license	Undergraduate degree of social work, that is 17 courses and minimum 2 time of field practice	Undergraduate degree of social work, or 15 courses at least 45 credits plus two times of practicum more than 400 h

	Indonesia	Taiwan
Required courses of undergraduate program	<b>[values]</b> Introduction to Social Welfare; Social Work Values, Ethics and Human Rights;	<b>[values]</b> Introduction to Social Work; Introduction to Social Welfare, or Social Work Ethics;
	<b>[knowledge]</b> Psychology for Social Work; Sociology for Social Work; Social Policy and Planning; Social Work Practice Theories; Human Behavior and Social Environment;	<b>[knowledge]</b> Sociology; Psychology; Social Psychology; Social Policy and Social Legislation; Social Welfare Administration; Human Behavior and Social Environment;
	<b>[skills, micro practice]</b> Generalist Social Work Methods; Social Work Method with individuals and families; Social Work Methods with Groups; Social Work Methods with Communities;	<b>[skills, micro practice]</b> Case Work; Group Work; Community Work;
	<b>[skills, macro practice]</b> Human Service Organization Management; Social Work Practice in Multi-culture Society; Social Work Supervision; Social Work Research Method.	<b>[skills, macro practice]</b> Program Planning and Evaluation; Social Work Management, or Non-Profit Organizations Management; Social Work Research or Social Research; Social Statistics.

## References

1. International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). 2014. Global Definition of Social Work. Available online: <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work> (accessed on 15 October 2019).
2. Council of Social Work Education (CSWE). 2008. Education and Policy Accreditation Standards. Available online: <https://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2008-EPAS> (accessed on 22 February 2021).
3. International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). n.d. Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training. Available online: <https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards-for-social-work-education-and-training/> (accessed on 15 October 2019).
4. Holden, Gary, Kathleen Barker, Sofie Kuppens, and Gary Rosenberg. 2017. Self-Efficacy Regarding Social Work Competencies. *Research on Social Work Practice* 27: 594–606.
5. Hessenauer, Sarah, and Charles Zastrow. 2013. Becoming a Social Worker: BSW Social Workers' Educational Experiences. *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work* 18: 19–35.
6. Baartman, Liesbeth, and Lotte Ruijs. 2011. Comparing Students' Perceived and Actual Competence in Higher Vocational Education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 36: 385–98.
7. Tham, Pia, and Deborah Lynch. 2014. Prepared for Practice? Graduating Social Work Students' Reflections on Their Education, Competence and Skills. *Social Work Education* 33: 704–17.
8. Guo, Yu, Yanjun Guan, Xuhua Yang, Jingwen Xu, Xiang Zhou, Zhuolin She, Peng Jiang, Yang Wang, Jingzhou Pan, Yufan Deng, and et al. 2014. Career Adaptability, Calling and the Professional Competence of Social Work Students in China. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 85: 394–402.
9. Guo, Yu, Katie Findley, Chien-Chunga Hung, Shuang Lu, and Yuqi Wang. 2016. Competency-Based Education: Evidence from Social Work Postgraduates from Five Universities in China. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review* 10: 280–94.
10. Stanley, Selwyn, and Mettilda Gnanapragasam. 2020. Professional Competencies in Social Work Students: Emotional Intelligence, Reflective Ability and Empathy-A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis. *Social Work Education* 40: 827–42.
11. Nelson-Newell, Jason M., and Debra Nelson-Gardell. 2014. A Competency-Based Approach to Teaching Professional Self-Care: An Ethical Consideration for Social Work Educators. *Journal of Social Work Education* 50: 427–39.
12. Council of Social Work Education (CSWE). 2015. Educational Policy and Accreditation Standard. Available online: <https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2015-EPAS/2015EPASandGlossary.pdf.aspx> (accessed on 22 February 2021).

13. Guo, Yu, Shuang Lu, Chien-Chung Huang, Yuqi Wang, and Yiwen Zhang. 2018. Core Competency Education of Social Work Students: An Empirical Assessment Through Scale Development. *International Journal of Social Work* 5: 58–78.
14. Han, Meekyung, Diana Nguyen, Edward Cohen, Laurie Drabble, Hoa Nguyen, Soma Sen, and Tuan Tran. 2016. Exploring the Transferability of Competency-Based Education Model to Social Work Education in Vietnam. *Social Work Education* 35: 659–71.
15. Dobrow, Shoshana R., and Jennifer Tosti-Kharas. 2011. Calling: The Development of a Scale Measure. *Personnel Psychology* 64: 1001–49.
16. Flanagan, Niamh, and Elaine Wilson. 2018. What Makes a Good Placement? Findings of a Social Work Student-To-Student Research Study. *Social Work Education* 37: 565–80.
17. Fors, Jim-Olav. 2016. Development of Professional Commitment Among Students in Social Work Education. *Social Work Education* 36: 529–41.
18. Wang, Yuqi, Yu Guo, Kate Findley-Bhatta, Shuang Lu, and Chien-Chung Huang. 2015. Competencies of Graduate Social Work Students in China. Research Report # 21. New Brunswick: Rutgers University, School of Social Work. Available online: <https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/huamin-research-center/publications> (accessed on 15 October 2019).
19. Noble, Carolyn. 2004. Social Work Education, Training and Standards in The Asia-Pacific Region. *Social Work Education* 23: 527–36.
20. Fahrudin, Adi. 2019. Programming of Social Work in National Contexts. In *Asian Social Work: Professional Work in National Contexts*. Edited by Ian Shaw and Rosaleen Ow. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1181–94.
21. Ku, Yeun-Wen. 2019. Social work in Taiwan: State Programming and the Search for an Empowered Profession. In *Asian Social Work: Professional Work in National Contexts*. Edited by Ian Shaw and Rosaleen Ow. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 166–80.
22. International Monetary Fund. 2022. GDP per Capita, Current Prices. Available online: [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO\\_WORLD/TWN](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO_WORLD/TWN) (accessed on 27 December 2022).
23. National Statistics, R.O.C./Taiwan. 2022. Human Development Index, HDI. Available online: <https://www.stat.gov.tw/cp.aspx?n=3067> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
24. Lin, Wan-I. 2010. The Development of Social Work Education in Taiwan: Issues of the Post-professionalism. *NTU Social Work Review* 22: 153–96, (In Traditional Chinese).
25. Lin, Wan-I., and Shih-Han Shen. 2008. The Academic Trend of Social Work and Social Welfare since the 1980s in Taiwan. *Social Policy and Social Work* 12: 219–80, (In Traditional Chinese).
26. Nugroho, Fentiny, and Kanya Eka Santi. 2014. Social Work Education in Indonesia: Challenges and Reforms. In *Global Social Work: Crossing Borders, Blurring Boundaries*. Edited by Carolyn Noble, Hele Strauss and Brian Littlechild. Sydney: Sydney University Press, pp. 85–95.
27. Yu, Hon-Yei. 2013. Reflection on Social Work Education: Commitment or Betrayal of a Trust? *Taiwan United Way Review* 2: 1–18.
28. Chou, Yueh-Ching, Muhammad M. Haj-Yahia, Frank T. Y. Wang, and Li-Yeh Fu. 2006. Social Work in Taiwan: A Historical and Critical Review. *International Social Work* 49: 767–78.
29. Chang, Chin-Fen, and Li-Li Mo. 2007. Social Work Education in Taiwan: Toward Professionalism. *Social Work Education* 26: 583–94.
30. Feng, Joyce Yen. 2008. Building Professional Competence-the New Focus of Social Work Education in Taiwan. *China Journal of Social Work* 1: 36–49.
31. O'Leary, Patrick John, Amy Young, Donna McAuliffe, and Yanuar Wismayanti. 2019. Developing Social Work Role in Indonesia Child Protection System. *International Social Work* 62: 814–28.
32. Fahrudin, Adi, and Husmiati Yusuf. 2016. Social Work in Indonesia: History and Current Situation. *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice* 4: 16–23.
33. Taiwan Social Work Education Association (TSWEA). 2021. Periodical of TSWEA, 40. February. Taipei: Taiwan Social Work Education Association, (In Traditional Chinese).

