



## The role of field practicum in the development of professional skills of future social workers

### Nina Tverezovska\*

Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor  
National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine  
03041, 15 Heroiv Oborony Str., Kyiv, Ukraine  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0672-9308>

### Iryna Demchenko

Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor  
National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine  
03041, 15 Heroiv Oborony Str., Kyiv, Ukraine  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4302-7564>

### Mohammad Daud Ali

Assistant Professor  
University of Haripur  
22620, Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3023-4196>

### Tetiana Hryhorenko

Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor  
National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine  
03041, 15 Heroiv Oborony Str., Kyiv, Ukraine  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4616-6853>

### Daria Suprun

Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor  
National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine  
03041, 15 Heroiv Oborony Str., Kyiv, Ukraine  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4725-094X>

**Abstract.** Against a backdrop of growing social challenges, work placements are becoming increasingly important in the training of social work professionals; however, their impact on the development of students' professional skills remains under-researched. The purpose of this article was to investigate the influence of work-based practice on the dynamics of professional skill development among future social workers and to evaluate the role of the type of practice base, students' educational

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\*Corresponding author ([tverezovskaya@nubip.edu.ua](mailto:tverezovskaya@nubip.edu.ua))



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level, and prior volunteer or employment experience in this process. The study adopted a quantitative descriptive-comparative design. The sample comprised 187 students from the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine enrolled in the specialty 231 “Social Work” (taking into account the higher education standard for the field of “Social Work and Counselling”). Data were collected via questionnaires administered before the start and after the completion of work-based practice. The study systematised theoretical approaches to understanding work-based practice as a pedagogical phenomenon and reveals a statistically significant increase in students’ self-assessed competence across all five clusters of professional skills: communication skills, assessment of client needs and resources, planning and implementation of interventions, reflective practice, and ethical decision-making. The largest effects were recorded for communication skills and reflective practice. Students who undertook practice in rehabilitation centres and centres for persons with disabilities demonstrated higher gains in communication skills, needs assessment, and intervention planning. Practice in organisations supporting internally displaced persons most strongly enhanced the ethical dimension of professional training. Although prior experience was associated with a higher initial level of competence, the gap between students with and without such experience significantly narrowed after the completion of practice. The practical significance of this study lies in the use of its findings to update work placement programmes, select placement settings, develop methodological guidelines, and strengthen the supervisory support provided to future social work professionals

**Keywords:** practical training; social work; professional competence; supervision; reflective learning; practice bases; professional identity

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## Introduction

The training of future social work professionals in the context of contemporary global challenges – armed conflicts, mass displacement of populations, growing social vulnerability, and the transformation of the welfare state – is acquiring a new dimension. University education can no longer be confined to the transmission of theoretical knowledge: society expects professionals capable of acting in complex, unpredictable, and frequently crisis-laden situations. It is for this reason that field practicum, as a form of professional learning, is occupying an increasingly prominent place in the system of training future social workers, becoming the educational and professional space in which theory acquires applied meaning and the student gradually transitions from the role of learner to that of future practitioner.

Contemporary approaches to the preparation of social workers demonstrate that practicum is one of the key forms of professional development, as it directly ensures the integration

of academic learning, real professional experience, ethical responsibility, and engagement with service users. In the standards of the Council on Social Work Education, field education is defined as an essential component of professional formation that enables students to apply the knowledge, values, and skills of social work in a real or simulated professional environment (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). At the same time, research in the field of field education indicates that a gap may arise between university preparation and the demands of practice, particularly when the educational process is insufficiently oriented towards the formation of the specific professional skills required for client work, case documentation, inter-professional collaboration, and decision-making in complex situations. This raises a fundamental question for higher education institutions: under what conditions does field practicum genuinely ensure the acquisition of competencies needed by the future

social worker. This question is being actively investigated by scholars across different countries. J. Caspersen & J.C. Smeby (2021) demonstrated that the quality of learning during practicum depends significantly on the nature of the specific tasks the student performs, rather than merely on the duration of their placement. These findings are consistent with those of a Scandinavian study in which it was shown that different types of learning activity during practicum directly influence the development of professional competence and professional identity among social work students (Kuusisto *et al.*, 2024).

The issue of professional identity formation through practical training warrants separate consideration. Reflective writing, when integrated into the practicum process, has been shown by J. Christensen & A. Wärnsby (2023) to facilitate a deeper awareness among students of their own professional role, values, and the meaning of social work. C. Hitchcock *et al.* (2025) extend this perspective by emphasising that social work education should foster professional resilience – that is, the capacity to withstand demanding practical situations, to maintain ethical orientation, professional motivation, and readiness for responsible intervention. Alongside the discussion of the content of practicum, a parallel debate has emerged concerning its forms. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of the traditional face-to-face model of field education and prompted the search for alternative models of practical training. B. Mitchell *et al.* (2021) established the viability of remote and virtual field placement in social work, regarding it not merely as a temporary crisis response but as a potentially flexible learning format. S. Harris & M. Newcomb (2024) demonstrated the possibilities of simulated placement in a blended real and digital environment, which allows professional situations to be modelled, practical skills to be developed, and the learning process to be sustained under conditions of limited access to traditional practice settings. Accordingly, contemporary field practicum increasingly transcends the classical model of the student's

physical presence within an institution and encompasses a combination of in-person, remote, simulation-based, and digital formats.

The Ukrainian scholarly community is likewise actively engaged with these issues. Z.M. Komarynska & O.V. Kozak (2025) emphasise practical training as a key factor in the professional development of future specialists in the field of social security. Under conditions of martial law, this issue acquires particular significance, as societal demands on the social support system are growing whilst the personnel, organisational, and resource capacities of social services remain constrained. N. Tverezovska *et al.* (2026) highlight the importance of integrating learning, the research dimension, and practice in the preparation of future social workers, which is essential for the development of evidence-informed social work.

An analysis of the scholarly literature makes it possible to identify several problem areas that remain insufficiently researched. First, the question of how specific types of tasks undertaken during field practicum affect the development of particular groups of professional skills among future social workers requires more differentiated investigation. Second, the role of the supervisor as a pedagogical actor in the process of practical training is explored predominantly in international contexts, whereas Ukrainian conditions demand separate analysis that accounts for martial law, the staffing pressures on social services, and the uneven access of students to high-quality practice settings. Third, the criteria for assessing the outcomes of field practicum remain a matter of debate – in particular, the relationship between formal indicators, such as the number of hours completed and tasks performed, and qualitative indicators related to reflection, professional identity, ethical sensitivity, communicative readiness, and the capacity to act in complex cases. It is precisely these gaps that define the relevance of the present article.

The aim of the study was to determine the influence of field practicum on the dynamics of professional skill development among future

social workers and to evaluate the role of the type of practice setting, educational level, and prior experience in this process. Achieving this aim involved addressing the following objectives: 1) to systematise approaches to understanding field practicum as a pedagogical phenomenon in the training of future social workers; 2) to identify the key factors that determine the effectiveness of field practicum in the context of professional skill development; 3) to outline the current challenges and prospects for the modernisation of field practicum within the Ukrainian educational context. The scholarly novelty of the work lies in the comprehensive comparison of international and domestic approaches to the organisation of field practicum in the training of future social workers, as well as in the identification of the specific character of this process under conditions of martial law and the transformational changes taking place in the social services system of Ukraine.

### Literature Review

The question of organising field practicum in the training of future social workers has a long research tradition; however, it is precisely recent years that have been marked by a substantial rethinking of its content, functions, and effectiveness. This shift in scholarly perspective is associated with the increasing complexity of social demands, the growing need for evidence-informed social work, the digitalisation of social services, the spread of remote and blended formats of professional interaction, and the crisis conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflicts, and the mass displacement of populations. Under such circumstances, field practicum is increasingly regarded not as a concluding stage for consolidating theoretical knowledge but as the central mechanism of professional development for the future social worker.

In international scholarly discourse, the practical training of social workers is understood as a distinctive form of professional learning that ensures the integration of academic preparation, real-world experience of engagement with

clients, supervisory support, ethical reflection on professional actions, and the formation of professional identity. In the standards of the Council on Social Work Education (2022), field education is identified as an essential component of training that enables students to apply the knowledge, values, ethical principles, and skills of social work in a real or simulated professional environment. This approach fundamentally transforms the understanding of field practicum: it emerges not as an appendage to the curriculum but as a space in which the student transitions from the acquisition of knowledge to the performance of professional action. In the work of M. Bogo (2015), field education is conceptualised as one of the foundational components of clinical and professional training for social workers. The researcher emphasised that it is precisely practicum that enables the student to learn how to integrate theoretical knowledge, professional values, ethical principles, supervisory feedback, and concrete action in situations of helping. Accordingly, the effectiveness of practicum cannot be assessed solely on the basis of its completion or the number of hours undertaken. Far more important are the content of the tasks, the degree of the student's integration into the professional environment, the quality of supervisory support, the opportunity to reflect on one's own actions, and the gradual assumption of professional responsibility.

Particular significance for understanding field practicum as a pedagogical phenomenon attaches to studies concerned with the relationship between practical training and learning outcomes. J. Caspersen & J.C. Smeby (2021) argued that the effectiveness of practicum depends not merely on the duration of the student's placement at the practice setting but, above all, on the nature of the learning tasks, the level of professional engagement, and the quality of the educational experience the student gains during placement training. This position is of special importance in the context of the problem under investigation, since the aim of the work is not a general description of practicum but rather the

determination of its influence on the dynamics of professional skill development among future social workers. The research focus therefore lies not only on the fact of completing a placement but, above all, on which professional situations, actions, tasks, and forms of interaction bring about the development of competencies. A closely related position is that of K. Kuusisto *et al.* (2024), who linked learning activities during practicum with the development of professional competence and professional identity among social work students. The authors emphasised that professional development occurs when the student does not merely observe the work of practitioners but participates in real or simulated professional actions, receives feedback, analyses their own experience, and relates it to the values of social work. It is for this reason that the type of practice setting, the nature of the tasks, and the quality of supervision may affect the development of particular groups of skills – including communicative, analytical, organisational, reflective, and ethical – in different ways.

Field practicum may also be understood within the broader context of work-integrated learning. D. Chilvers *et al.* (2021) considered field education in social work as one form of work-integrated learning, within which academic content acquires a practical dimension through the student's involvement in a professional environment. This approach is productive for the analysis of field practicum, as it enables the latter to be regarded not merely as a component of the educational programme but as a mechanism of transition from university study to professional activity. In the same direction, A. Curto-Reverte (2025) underlines the role of work-integrated learning in the European Higher Education Area as a model that ensures the link between learning, professional activity, and the formation of competencies relevant to the contemporary labour market. Thus, the first objective of the article – the systematisation of approaches to understanding field practicum as a pedagogical phenomenon – draws logically on the conception

of practicum as an integrative educational and professional environment.

An important factor in the effectiveness of field practicum is the student's own active engagement in the process of professional learning. P. Beesley (2024) argues for the significance of collaborative experiential learning in the practical training of social workers, emphasising that the development of professional skills occurs through joint case analysis, teamwork, discussion of complex situations, and the collective elaboration of solutions. This approach is important for social work, since professional activity in this field almost invariably involves interpersonal communication, team coordination, inter-agency collaboration, and attention to the client's perspective. Accordingly, practicum must create conditions not only for the individual performance of tasks but also for the student's participation in real processes of professional collaboration. Reflection is one of the key conditions for the effectiveness of field practicum, as it ensures the transition from the immediate performance of professional actions to their deliberate analysis. J. Christensen & A. Wårnsby (2023) demonstrated that reflective writing helps students to achieve a deeper understanding of their professional role, value dilemmas, and their own ways of acting in practical situations. Practical experience acquires educational significance when the student does not merely record completed tasks but analyses them in relation to theoretical knowledge, supervisory feedback, and their own professional development. It is for this reason that reflective practice functions not as an optional element but as a necessary component of effective field practicum.

A distinct place in the scholarly literature is occupied by supervision as a mechanism for ensuring the quality of practical training. Significant for the understanding of supervision is the study by K. Duncanson *et al.* (2024), which emphasises the importance of integrating service user perspectives into the supervision of students. This approach helps future social workers to develop a deeper understanding of the

client-centred nature of the profession, to become aware of the consequences of their own actions, and to learn to make decisions that account for the needs, resources, and rights of service users. Within this context, supervision is not reduced to monitoring the student's completion of tasks but emerges as a pedagogical space for the formation of the capacity for ethical reasoning, professional judgement, responsible intervention, and critical analysis of practical situations. The significance of interaction between the university, students, and practice settings is highlighted by M. Liu *et al.* (2021) in their analysis of the development of field education in social work in China. The authors showed that the effectiveness of practicum depends on the coordinated action of all participants in the educational process: students, lecturers, supervisors, and representatives of the organisations in which the placement takes place. This point is directly relevant to the second objective of the article, as it allows the identification among the key factors of practicum effectiveness not only of the content of individual tasks but also of the organisational readiness of the practice setting, the quality of partnership between the university and the institution, the availability of supervisory support, and a professionally rich environment.

At the same time, contemporary research demonstrates that practical training requires a renewal of its formats in response to new technological and social conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of the traditional understanding of practicum as the student's exclusively physical presence within an institution. B. Mitchell *et al.* (2021) establish the viability of remote and virtual field placement in social work, considering it not merely as a temporary crisis response but as a potentially flexible learning model. In the same context, S. Harris & M. Newcomb (2024) analyse simulated placement in a blended real and digital environment, which allows professional situations to be modelled, communicative readiness to be developed, and case analysis skills and student confidence to be fostered prior to entry

into real-world practice. Accordingly, the modernisation of field practicum involves the expansion of its forms, including through simulation-based, remote, and blended models. The digitalisation of social work brings into focus yet another dimension of professional skills. H. Zhu & S.T. Andersen (2022) emphasise that digital competence is becoming an increasingly integral part of the professional activity of a social worker, as contemporary practice involves the use of electronic documentation, online communication, digital services, remote client support, and inter-agency collaboration. In the analysis of field practicum, it is pertinent to note that the type of host institution influences not only the content of the student's professional tasks but also the level of their engagement with digital tools in social work. For example, placement in community organisations, centres supporting internally displaced persons, or institutions that work with digital databases and online referrals may create different opportunities for the development of digital readiness compared with placement in traditional social services.

Structural contradictions of field practicum are also widely represented in contemporary literature. C. Morley *et al.* (2024), analysing the experiences of students, educators, and practitioners in relation to modified field education standards during the COVID-19 pandemic, show that the system of practical training has considerable adaptive potential whilst simultaneously revealing problems of quality, equitable access, supervisory continuity, and student support. In a closely related problem area, D. Jackson *et al.* (2023) examined work-integrated learning through the lens of equity and inclusion, emphasising that different groups of students may have unequal access to quality practical experience. This is of particular importance for the Ukrainian educational context under martial law, when access to practice settings, safe environments, supervisory support, and resource provision may be uneven. The problem of accessibility and flexibility in practical training is also illuminated through the model of employment-based placements.

M. Lynch *et al.* (2023) argued for such placements as a more flexible and socially equitable model of practicum organisation, capable of broadening students' access to quality professional experience. For the present article, this source is significant in light of the investigation of the role of prior volunteer or employment experience among students. If a student already has some experience in the social field, field practicum may serve not only an introductory but also a deepening function, facilitating the deliberate development of professional skills, professional identity, and readiness for more complex tasks.

Interdisciplinary research confirms that field practicum is a universal pedagogical mechanism for the development of professional skills across different fields of training. W.A. Alkhelaiwi *et al.* (2024), analysing the competence of nursing students during clinical practicum, show that it is precisely the practical environment that makes it possible to assess the future professional's capacity to act in real professional situations. R. Carranza Guevara *et al.* (2025), drawing on the training of accounting students, demonstrated the link between pre-professional internships and the development of skills and perceptions of employability. H. Gutiérrez-Pulido & C. Orozco-Rodríguez (2025), analysing the professional internships of engineering and science students, showed their influence not only on applied skills but also on academic development. Thus, practicum is not merely a specific requirement of social work but a broader educational mechanism that enables the transition from knowledge to competent action.

Additional understanding of the role of practicum in professional development is provided by studies conducted in the field of engineering education. L.Y.Y. Luk & C.K.Y. Chan (2022) propose examining the outcomes of engineering internships through a system of learning outcomes formed as a result of the student's engagement with a real professional environment. The question of professional resilience and identity constitutes another important dimension of the analysis of field practicum. C. Hitchcock *et al.* (2025) showed

that social work education should promote the development of professional resilience among students and newly qualified practitioners, since it is precisely this quality that helps to sustain motivation, ethical orientation, and the capacity to act in emotionally demanding professional situations. B. Moorhead *et al.* (2026) extend this perspective by analysing the mechanisms that sustain the professional identity of social workers. In the context of the present article, this provides grounds for regarding field practicum not merely as a means of forming individual applied skills but as an environment of professional self-determination in which the student relates their own expectations, values, personal resources, and readiness to work in the field of social assistance.

The Ukrainian context of practical training has its own specific characteristics, linked to the transformation of the social services system, the consequences of the war, the growing number of vulnerable population groups, and the need to prepare specialists capable of working under conditions of resource scarcity and high emotional burden. Z.M. Komarynska & O.V. Kozak (2025) emphasised that practical training is the leading factor in the professional development of future specialists in the field of social security, as it ensures the connection between theoretical knowledge and real professional situations. A. Solnyshkina (2023), analysing the methods and directions of practical training of social workers using a Ukrainian university as a case study, emphasised the significance of practicum for the formation of applied skills, professional adaptation, and readiness to work in social institutions. S. Tkachuk (2024), investigating the field practicum of future vocational education specialists, likewise regards it as a component of professional training that ensures the link between the educational process and future professional activity.

Of particular significance for the issues raised in this article is the work of N. Tverezovska *et al.* (2026), in which field practicum is examined in connection with the research dimension of preparing future social workers for practice

with older adults. The approach proposed by the authors broadens the understanding of practicum's functions, as it enables the latter to be interpreted not only as a space for the acquisition of applied skills but also as an environment for the development of analytical thinking, a research culture, and the capacity to combine practical activity with professional analysis of social problems. This approach is significant for the problem under investigation, since the professional skills of a future social worker are not limited to communication with clients or the performance of individual procedures but encompass the capacity to assess needs, analyse resources, plan interventions, document outcomes, and critically reflect on the effectiveness of one's own actions.

Thus, the analysis of the scholarly literature provides grounds for regarding field practicum as a complex pedagogical phenomenon that combines the student's professional immersion in a real social work environment, the performance of professionally significant tasks, supervisory support, reflective engagement with experience, the development of professional identity, and the formation of readiness for responsible intervention. At the same time, the existing research demonstrates that the effectiveness of practicum depends not merely on the fact of its completion but also on the type of practice setting, the nature of the tasks, the quality of supervision, the student's educational level, their degree of prior preparation, and any volunteer or professional experience they may have. It is precisely for this reason that the subsequent empirical analysis in this article is directed towards identifying the dynamics of professional skill development among future social workers before and after completing their field practicum, as well as towards evaluating how the type of practice setting, educational level, and prior experience influence this dynamic.

### Materials and Methods

The study was carried out within a quantitative descriptive-comparative design using questionnaire-based surveying as the primary method of

empirical data collection. The choice of this approach is justified for the study of the dynamics of professional skill self-assessment in a large sample, as it provides standardised measurement before and after field practicum and enables comparison of results across students depending on their type of practice setting, educational level, and the presence or absence of prior volunteer or employment experience. This logic of empirical measurement is employed in studies of the practical training of students across various specialties, where attention is focused on the assessment of competence, learning experience, and the outcomes of professional development in a real or simulated professional environment (Alkhelaiwi *et al.*, 2024).

The study was conducted at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine amongst students in the specialty 231 "Social Work" who undertook field practicum during the 2023-2025 academic years. Data collection was carried out in two stages: at the start of the field practicum (pre-measurement) and immediately upon its completion (post-measurement). This design made it possible to track the dynamics of students' self-assessed professional skill development and to compare changes across individual competency clusters. A total of 187 students enrolled in the specialty 231 "Social Work" at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine who undertook field practicum within the timeframe stipulated by the curriculum were included in the study. Among the participants, 124 were undergraduate students in Years 3-4 and 63 were postgraduate students in Year 2. The gender distribution of the sample was 78% female and 22% male. The mean age of participants was 21.8 years, with an age range of 19 to 32 years.

Sample formation was carried out by means of total sampling: all students enrolled in the specialty 231 "Social Work" who were undertaking field practicum during the designated period and who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. The inclusion criteria were: status

as a full-time or part-time student enrolled in the specialty 231 "Social Work" at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine; active completion of field practicum of no less than 90 hours in duration; and voluntary informed consent to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were the absence of confirmed informed consent and failure to return a completed questionnaire at both measurement stages. Following the application of the exclusion criteria, 16 students were excluded from the initial sample of 203 individuals. The final sample comprised 187 participants, with a retention rate of 92.1%. Students completed their field practicum at institutions and organisations of four types, located primarily in Kyiv and the Kyiv region. The first group comprised social service centres, territorial centres for social welfare provision, and social service delivery centres. At these institutions, students were involved in work with older adults, families in difficult life circumstances, and persons with functional limitations. This group included 68 students, representing 36.4% of the sample.

The second group comprised rehabilitation centres and centres for persons with disabilities, including day centres for social and psychological rehabilitation, early intervention centres, and institutions providing services to persons with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum conditions. Field practicum was undertaken at such institutions by 42 students, representing 22.5% of the sample. The third group comprised organisations supporting internally displaced persons (IDPs), including civil society organisations and local government structures involved in providing humanitarian, psychosocial, and legal assistance to IDPs under martial law conditions. This group included 51 students, representing 27.3% of the sample. The fourth group comprised general educational and special educational institutions, including comprehensive secondary schools and educational rehabilitation centres, where students worked alongside social educators, educational psychologists, and specialists

in inclusive education. This group included 26 students, representing 13.9% of the sample. The allocation of students to practice settings was carried out in accordance with the contracts in force between the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine and the host institutions, as well as in consideration of student preferences and available placements.

The primary data collection instrument was an original self-assessment questionnaire for professional skill development, designed in accordance with the competency-based model of social work specialist training set out in the Higher Education Standard of Ukraine for the specialty 231 "Social Work" and updated in line with the current List of Fields of Study and Specialisms, under which training is provided in the specialty I10 "Social Work and Counselling" (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2019; Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 1021, 2024). The international logic of professional competency formation and assessment in social work was incorporated with reference to the educational policies and accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education (2022). The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first, biographical, part contained questions regarding the mode of study, year of enrolment, type of practice setting, and prior experience of volunteer or paid employment activity in the social field. The second, diagnostic, part comprised 32 statements grouped into five competency clusters.

The first cluster addressed communication skills and contained 7 statements concerning the establishment of contact with clients, active listening, and the maintenance of documentation. The second cluster encompassed the assessment of client needs and resources and contained 7 statements concerning the collection and analysis of information and the prioritisation of interventions. The third cluster was focused on the planning and implementation of social interventions and contained 7 statements concerning the development of an individual plan, coordination

with other specialists, and the application of social work methods. The fourth cluster encompassed reflective practice and contained 6 statements concerning the analysis of one's own actions, awareness of professional boundaries, and the capacity to engage with feedback. The fifth cluster addressed ethical decision-making and contained 5 statements concerning adherence to principles of confidentiality, responses to value dilemmas, and the safeguarding of client rights. Each statement was assessed on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 denoted "not developed at all" and 5 denoted "fully developed". The questionnaire was completed twice: at the start of the practicum and upon its completion.

Preliminary piloting of the instrument was conducted with a pilot sample of 18 students who were not included in the main study. As a result of the piloting, the wording of four statements was refined. Internal consistency of the scale was verified by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was 0.83 for the overall scale and ranged from 0.71 to 0.86 for individual clusters, indicating a sufficient level of instrument reliability. The interpretation of internal consistency indicators was carried out in accordance with the methodological recommendations of M. Tavakol & R. Dennick (2011). The survey was administered in an online format via the Google Forms platform, with a secure link accessible only to registered participants. Students received the link to the questionnaire through the official academic communication channels of the Department of Social Work at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine. The average time to complete the questionnaire was 12-15 minutes.

Statistical data analysis was performed in SPSS Statistics, Version 27.0. Descriptive statistics – including means, standard deviations, and frequency analysis – were used to characterise the sample. A paired samples t-test was used to compare pre- and post-test results. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Tukey's post-hoc test was used to analyse differences between

student subgroups depending on the type of practice setting and educational level. The level of statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Cohen's d coefficient was calculated to assess the practical significance of the identified differences.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles enshrined in the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association (World Medical Association, 2013) and the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles of the International Federation of Social Workers (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). The study protocol was approved by the leadership of the Department of Social Work and Rehabilitation and endorsed in accordance with the internal academic integrity procedures of the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Prior to commencing the survey, each student received a written explanation of the aims of the study, the procedures for data collection and storage, and information about the right to decline participation or to withdraw consent at any time without any consequences for their academic performance or practicum grade. Informed consent was confirmed by an active tick in the relevant field of the electronic questionnaire.

No personal identifying data – including name or surname – were collected. Students were assigned conditional numerical codes at the stage of primary data processing. The correspondence between codes from the first and second measurement waves was ensured through a unique identifier independently selected by the participant. This approach precluded de-anonymisation of data by the researchers. The collected data are stored in a secure, access-restricted environment and will be destroyed upon completion of the research project. Members of the research team were not members of the committees responsible for the assessment of the practicum of study participants. Students were separately informed that the results of the survey do not constitute a component of their assessment and are not communicated to practicum supervisors. None of the

questionnaire items concerned personal experiences, client situations, or confidential information about host institutions. Risks to participants were assessed as minimal.

## Results and Discussion

The empirical analysis was directed towards determining how field practicum influences the dynamics of professional skill development among future social workers, as well as how this process varies depending on the type of practice setting, the educational level of the students, and the presence of prior volunteer or employment experience in the social field. In accordance with the research objectives, a systematisation of approaches to understanding field practicum as a pedagogical phenomenon is presented first, followed by an analysis of the pre- and post-measurement results across the five competency clusters, and then an identification of the current challenges and prospects

for the modernisation of field practicum within the Ukrainian educational context. This logic enables the combination of theoretical synthesis with empirical findings, and demonstrates that field practicum is not merely a formal component of the educational programme but a complex mechanism of professional development for the future social worker.

### Systematisation of approaches to understanding field practicum

The first result of the study was a systematisation of approaches to understanding field practicum in the training of future social workers. The analysis of scholarly sources made it possible to identify several interrelated approaches, each of which foregrounds a distinct dimension of practical training: the competency-based, experiential-activity, reflective, supervisory-partnership, digital-innovative, socially just, and interdisciplinary approaches.

**Table 1.** *Systematisation of approaches to understanding field practicum in the training of future social workers*

Approach	Content of the approach	Educational emphasis
Competency-based	Field practicum is regarded as a space for applying knowledge, values, and professional skills in a real or simulated environment	Formation of professional competencies and learning outcomes
Experiential-activity	Practicum is understood as learning through the student's involvement in real professional actions, task performance, and interaction with clients and specialists	Transition from theoretical knowledge to professional action
Reflective	Practicum acquires educational significance through the processing of experience, the keeping of reflective journals, reflective reports, and supervisory discussion	Development of professional identity, self-reflection, and the capacity to analyse one's own actions
Supervisory-partnership	The quality of practicum depends on the interaction between the student, the university, the practice setting, the supervisor, and service users	Professional support, feedback, client-centredness
Digital-innovative	Practical training can be delivered through remote, simulation-based, blended, and digital formats	Readiness for new formats of social work, digital communication, and online documentation
Socially just	Practicum is analysed from the perspectives of accessibility, equal opportunity, and financial and resource barriers	Overcoming inequalities in access to quality practical experience

Table 1. Continued

Approach	Content of the approach	Educational emphasis
Interdisciplinary	Practical training is regarded as a universal mechanism for the development of professional skills across different fields	Comparison of social work experience with medical, engineering, economic, and other specialties

**Source:** developed by the authors on the basis of M. Bogo (2015), Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (2019), B. Mitchell et al. (2021), Council on Social Work Education (2022), R. Lateef et al. (2023), W.A. Alkhelaiwi et al. (2024), C. Morley et al. (2024), B. Moorhead et al. (2026)

The systematisation presented demonstrates that field practicum cannot be reduced merely to the student's completion of a prescribed number of hours at a host institution. It emerges as a complex pedagogical phenomenon that integrates the competency-based, experiential, reflective, supervisory, digital, socially just, and interdisciplinary logic of professional training. It is precisely this multidimensionality that explains the necessity of analysing the effectiveness of practicum not only in terms of the overall indicator of skill gains but also according to individual competency clusters, types of practice setting, educational levels, and students' prior experience.

### Dynamics of students' professional skill self-assessment

Analysis of the paired measurements revealed a statistically significant increase in students' professional skill self-assessment following field practicum across all five competency clusters. The recorded dynamic confirms the pronounced developmental effect of field practicum and its significance for the formation not only of individual applied skills but also of the

broader complex of professional characteristics of the future social worker (Table 2). The largest gain was recorded in the cluster "Communication Skills" ( $\Delta = 1.06$ ;  $d = 1.82$ ), indicating that direct interaction with clients during practicum is the most influential factor in the development of this group of competencies. In the post-test, students rated their capacity to establish professional contact significantly higher, as well as their ability to sustain dialogue in consideration of the cultural and age-related characteristics of the client, and to document the outcomes of communication. This dynamic is consistent with the conclusions of P. Beesley (2024), who argues for the significance of collaborative experiential learning as a means of forming professional interaction through the involvement of students in joint case analysis, collegial discussion, and practical communication. Field practicum thus proves to be not merely an environment for testing knowledge already acquired but a space of primary professional socialisation in which communicative competence develops as an integrative capacity to combine empathy, professional distance, active listening, explanation, and documentation.

**Table 2.** Dynamics of students' professional skill self-assessment before and after field practicum ( $n = 187$ )

Competency cluster	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Communication skills	3.12 (0.64)	4.18 (0.51)	18.42	<0.001	1.82
Assessment of client needs and resources	2.87 (0.71)	3.91 (0.58)	16.33	<0.001	1.60
Planning and implementation of interventions	2.64 (0.78)	3.67 (0.63)	14.89	<0.001	1.45

Table 2. Continued

Competency cluster	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Reflective practice	3.38 (0.62)	4.31 (0.48)	17.21	<0.001	1.69
Ethical decision-making	3.56 (0.59)	4.27 (0.52)	13.94	<0.001	1.28

**Note:** M – mean value; SD – standard deviation; t – paired samples t-test value; p – level of statistical significance; Cohen's d – effect size

**Source:** developed by the authors on the basis of field practicum data

A high gain was also observed in the cluster “Reflective Practice” ( $\Delta = 0.93$ ;  $d = 1.69$ ). This result may be explained by the fact that field practicum was accompanied by the keeping of practicum journals, interim discussion of difficulties, and the writing of final reflective reports. The use of such instruments facilitated the transition from a simple description of completed tasks to an analysis of one's own actions, difficulties, professional boundaries, and value orientations. The results obtained are consistent with the conclusions of J. Christensen & A. Wårnsby (2023), who demonstrated that reflective writing enhances students' capacity to reflect on their own professional role and professional values. A similar logic is confirmed by K. Kuusisto *et al.* (2024), who link learning activities during practicum with the development of professional competence and professional identity among social work students. Accordingly, field practicum is most effective when it is not reduced to the performance of individual assignments but is combined with purposeful reflection, supervisory feedback, and the gradual formation of a professional sense of self within the helping system.

Significant gains were also observed in the clusters “Assessment of Client Needs and Resources” ( $\Delta = 1.04$ ;  $d = 1.60$ ) and “Planning and Implementation of Interventions” ( $\Delta = 1.03$ ;  $d = 1.45$ ). These competencies have a complex structure, combining interpersonal interaction with analytical reasoning, contextual assessment, prioritisation of assistance, the use of theoretical models, inter-professional coordination, and the selection of appropriate intervention strategies. This finding is consistent with J. Caspersen & J.C. Smeby (2021),

who emphasise that the effectiveness of practicum depends significantly on the content of the tasks the student performs during placement training. In the same context, M. Bogo (2015) highlights the importance of combining professional action, supervision, ethical analysis, and real experience of working with clients. The results obtained provide grounds for concluding that field practicum is most effective at developing complex competencies when the student does not merely perform individual actions but is progressively drawn into the logic of professional case analysis, needs identification, planning of assistance, and evaluation of its outcomes.

The smallest – though nonetheless statistically significant – gain was recorded in the cluster “Ethical Decision-Making” ( $\Delta = 0.71$ ;  $d = 1.28$ ). This may in part be explained by the relatively high baseline score for this parameter ( $M = 3.56$ ), given that the ethics of social work formed part of the prior theoretical curriculum. At the same time, even a gain of this magnitude is of considerable significance, since ethical dilemmas in social work acquire real substance precisely in a practical context, where the need arises to reconcile the client's interests, resource constraints, institutional requirements, and professional standards. In this connection, the results may be interpreted through the lens of the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, which emphasises the primacy of human dignity, social justice, professional responsibility, and respect for human rights as the key orientations of professional activity (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). Accordingly, field practicum functions as a space

for the contextualisation of ethical principles, in which the student transitions from abstract knowledge of norms to their application under conditions of real moral complexity.

### Influence of the type of practice setting on the development of professional skills

One-way analysis of variance revealed statistically significant differences between types of practice setting in the development of individual competency clusters. The identified differences demonstrate that the educational effect of field practicum depends not merely on the fact of its completion but on the character of the professional environment into which the student is immersed (Table 3). Students who undertook practicum at rehabilitation centres and centres for persons with disabilities demonstrated the highest scores on the clusters “Communication Skills”, “Assessment of Needs”, and “Planning of Interventions”. This tendency may be

explained by the high level of complexity of the professional environment: work with persons with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, and other functional limitations requires adaptive communication, attentiveness to non-verbal cues, the individualisation of support plans, and the coordination of actions with specialists from diverse professional backgrounds. In this context, the results are consistent with the conclusions of K. Duncanson *et al.* (2024), who emphasise the significance of incorporating service user perspectives into the supervision of students, and with the study of M. Liu *et al.* (2021), which highlights the role of coordinated interaction between students, lecturers, and practice settings in enhancing the quality of field education. It may therefore be concluded that it is precisely the level of structural and substantive complexity of the practical environment that largely determines the intensity of students’ professional development.

**Table 3.** Development of professional skills by type of practice setting (post-test,  $M \pm SD$ )

Competency cluster	Social service centres (n = 68)	Rehabilitation centres (n = 42)	IDP support organisations (n = 51)	Educational institutions (n = 26)	F	p	$\eta^2$
Communication skills	4.11 ± 0.52 <sup>a</sup>	4.34 ± 0.48 <sup>b</sup>	4.23 ± 0.49 <sup>ab</sup>	4.01 ± 0.54 <sup>a</sup>	3.12	0.027	0.05
Assessment of needs	3.87 ± 0.61 <sup>a</sup>	4.12 ± 0.51 <sup>b</sup>	3.94 ± 0.57 <sup>ab</sup>	3.72 ± 0.62 <sup>a</sup>	3.47	0.017	0.05
Planning of interventions	3.59 ± 0.67 <sup>a</sup>	3.91 ± 0.58 <sup>b</sup>	3.72 ± 0.61 <sup>ab</sup>	3.42 ± 0.66 <sup>a</sup>	4.21	0.006	0.06
Reflective practice	4.28 ± 0.51	4.39 ± 0.42	4.35 ± 0.48	4.19 ± 0.52	1.23	0.299	0.02
Ethical decision-making	4.21 ± 0.54 <sup>a</sup>	4.37 ± 0.48 <sup>a</sup>	4.41 ± 0.49 <sup>a</sup>	4.08 ± 0.58 <sup>a</sup>	2.91	0.036	0.05

**Note:**  $M$  – mean value;  $SD$  – standard deviation;  $F$  –  $F$ -test value;  $p$  – level of statistical significance;  $\eta^2$  – effect size; different letter superscripts within a row indicate statistically significant differences between groups according to Tukey’s test ( $p < 0.05$ )

**Source:** developed by the authors on the basis of empirical data

Organisations supporting internally displaced persons produced the highest scores for ethical decision-making ( $M = 4.41$ ), although the differences between individual groups according to Tukey’s test were not statistically significant. This result is logical given the specific character of this environment, in which students encounter resource deficits, high-intensity needs, the traumatic experiences of clients, and the necessity of

responding rapidly to situations of moral tension. Z.M. Komarynska & O.V. Kozak (2025) emphasise that the practical training of future social security specialists acquires special weight when it is linked to real social problems, the needs of vulnerable groups, and the necessity of acting under conditions of limited resources. The results of this sub-cluster therefore provide grounds for suggesting that a crisis social environment

intensifies the moral-practical dimension of the training of the future social worker.

Students who undertook practicum at educational institutions demonstrated somewhat lower scores on the majority of clusters, although these differences proved statistically significant only with respect to communication skills and the planning of interventions. This is likely connected to the fact that, in an educational environment, the role of the social worker frequently overlaps with the functions of the social educator, psychologist, and administrative staff, with the consequence that the student does not always gain access to the full range of specifically social-work tasks. This interpretation corresponds with the conclusions of R. Lateef *et al.* (2023), who emphasise that the effectiveness of a placement depends directly on the extent to which the institution is able to provide the

student with a clearly structured professional role and to involve them in a genuine field of practice. In this sense, lower scores may be attributable not to the weaker educational potential of the setting itself but to the lesser degree of clarity of the functional space within which the student constructs professional action.

#### **Educational level, dynamics of professional skill development, and the influence of students' prior experience**

Comparison of results between undergraduate and postgraduate students revealed expected differences in baseline skill levels and less pronounced differences in the dynamics of their development. This analysis made it possible to evaluate the developmental potential of field practicum for students with differing levels of prior preparation (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Development of professional skills among undergraduate and postgraduate students ( $M \pm SD$ )

Competency cluster	Undergraduate (n = 124)		Postgraduate (n = 63)		t	p
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test		
Communication skills	2.98 ± 0.67	4.09 ± 0.53	3.39 ± 0.51	4.36 ± 0.44	3.42	0.001
Assessment of needs	2.74 ± 0.73	3.84 ± 0.61	3.12 ± 0.63	4.07 ± 0.51	2.57	0.011
Planning of interventions	2.51 ± 0.81	3.58 ± 0.66	2.89 ± 0.69	3.84 ± 0.56	2.73	0.007
Reflective practice	3.29 ± 0.65	4.24 ± 0.51	3.57 ± 0.54	4.45 ± 0.41	2.91	0.004
Ethical decision-making	3.48 ± 0.62	4.19 ± 0.54	3.73 ± 0.51	4.44 ± 0.46	3.18	0.002

**Note:**  $M$  – mean value;  $SD$  – standard deviation;  $t$  – independent samples  $t$ -test value for the post-test;  $p$  – level of statistical significance

**Source:** developed by the authors on the basis of empirical data

Postgraduate students had statistically significantly higher scores both at the beginning and upon completion of practicum, which is expected given their prior educational preparation, greater academic experience, and more developed professional motivation. More revealing, however, is the finding that the gain in both groups was almost equal: the mean gain for undergraduates was  $\Delta = 1.09$ , and for postgraduates  $\Delta = 1.01$ . These results provide grounds for concluding that field practicum retains its developmental potential regardless of the student's initial level

of preparation. In the broader professional-educational context, this result corresponds to the logic of competency-based training, according to which practicum should ensure the attainment of professional learning outcomes through the involvement of students in a real or simulated professional environment (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

The data obtained also indicate that postgraduate field practicum may serve a more complex educational function than practicum at the undergraduate level. Whereas for undergraduates

it more frequently performs the function of initial professional immersion, for postgraduate students it becomes a space for in-depth case analysis, engagement with complex social problems, and the integration of research and practical reasoning. In this context, the work of N. Tverezovska *et al.* (2026) acquires particular significance, in which it is argued that the integration of learning and practice promotes not only the formation of applied skills but also the development of a research culture, analytical reasoning, and readiness to work with complex social problems. Accordingly, field practicum at different educational levels fulfils a common developmental function, yet its substantive content and professional depth may differ substantially.

Additional analysis was conducted with the aim of clarifying the influence of students' prior volunteer or employment experience in the social field on the dynamics of skill development during field practicum. Among the study participants, 41 students (21.9%) reported having such experience of at least six months' duration. Students with prior experience had statistically significantly higher pre-test scores across all clusters; however, after completing practicum, the difference between the groups notably decreased. The results point to the equalising potential of field practicum, since after its completion the differences between students with and without prior experience were considerably reduced. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of M. Lynch *et al.* (2023), who argue for employment-based placements as a flexible model of practical training capable of combining the student's prior experience with formalised educational outcomes. At the same time, the results of this study demonstrate that volunteer or employment experience alone does not substitute for pedagogically organised practicum, since it is precisely structured field practicum that converts individual fragments of prior activity into an ordered system of professional learning.

The significance of prior experience may also be interpreted through the category of professional identity. B. Moorhead *et al.* (2026)

emphasise that the sustainability of the professional identity of social workers is formed through the combination of experience, reflection, the support of a professional environment, and an awareness of the significance of one's own role. In this sense, field practicum may fulfil a dual function: for students without prior experience it becomes the initial mechanism of entry into the profession, whilst for students with experience it becomes a means of reflecting upon, structuring, and professionally deepening the practical knowledge already acquired.

### **Current challenges in the organisation of field practicum**

The results of the study and their comparison with scholarly sources make it possible to identify a number of current challenges in the organisation of field practicum for future social workers. Their specification is important, since it is precisely these challenges that account for the uneven development of particular groups of professional skills and the differences between students who undertook practicum at different types of practice setting. One of the most prominent challenges is the uneven educational potential of practice settings. The results demonstrated that rehabilitation centres, IDP support organisations, social service centres, and educational institutions create different opportunities for the development of communicative, analytical, organisational, and ethical competencies. This means that an equal duration of practicum does not guarantee an equal educational effect. The content of tasks, the student's integration into professional processes, access to client work, and the clarity of the professional role are of crucial importance. No less significant a challenge is the quality of supervisory support. The highest gains were recorded where students had the opportunity not merely to perform tasks but also to discuss them, receive feedback, reflect on errors, and analyse professional situations. This position is evident in the works of M. Liu *et al.* (2021) and K. Duncanson *et al.* (2024), which highlight the significance of

supervision, partnership between the university and the practice setting, and the integration of service user perspectives.

Particular attention is required by the insufficient structuring of complex professional tasks. Communication skills grew most intensively, whilst the assessment of needs, planning of interventions, and ethical decision-making required more complex pedagogical guidance. This indicates the need to design practicum tasks more deliberately according to levels of complexity: from observation and communication through to independent case analysis, participation in the planning of assistance, and the evaluation of intervention outcomes. In this context it is important to consider the conclusions of S.J. Ferns *et al.* (2025), who emphasise that work-integrated learning must be a specifically designed component of the educational programme rather than merely an organisational episode of the student's placement at an institution.

The digitalisation of social work constitutes a significant challenge. Contemporary practice increasingly involves the use of electronic documentation, online communication, remote counselling, digital databases, and inter-agency collaboration. H. Zhu & S.T. Andersen (2022) show that digital competence is becoming an important component of the professional activity of a social worker. A similar tendency concerning the significance of digital readiness and soft skills in the professional development of graduates is observed by S. Musa *et al.* (2025) in their analysis of the impact of internships on employability, soft skills, and digital competence. Accordingly, field practicum must ensure not only traditional immersion in an institution but also the acquisition of digital instruments of professional activity.

An important problem area remains the social inequality of access to quality practical experience. Different students have unequal starting resources, prior experience, opportunities to combine study, work, and practicum, as well as differing access to high-quality practice settings. D. Jackson (2015) emphasises that work-integrated

learning promotes the development of employability skills, but its effectiveness depends on overcoming organisational barriers, the quality of tasks, and students' readiness to engage reflectively with professional experience. D. Jackson *et al.* (2023) emphasise that practical training can not only broaden professional opportunities but also reproduce social barriers, if the conditions of accessibility, support, and resource provision for students are not taken into account. In the same context, C. Morley *et al.* (2024) regard placement poverty as a significant problem in field education, since unpaid or resource-intensive practicum may exacerbate the financial vulnerability of students and limit their capacity to participate fully in the professional environment.

It should additionally be noted that field practicum is not an equally accessible or equivalent experience for all groups of students. D. Jackson *et al.* (2023) show that participation in work-integrated learning may produce different outcomes for students depending on their starting resources, social circumstances, access to support, and opportunities to engage fully with the practical environment. In the broader international perspective, G. Di Pietro (2022) also emphasises that internships contribute to the development of not only professional but also communicative, adaptive, and intercultural skills, though the effectiveness of such experience depends on the conditions of its organisation. For the Ukrainian context, this means that students may differ in terms of prior experience, place of residence, resource capacity, level of professional confidence, and access to high-quality practice settings. A further challenge is the emotional burden of practicum. Working with individuals in difficult life circumstances, with traumatic experience, disability, loss, or in need of crisis support may be not only professionally developmental for students but also psychologically demanding. Data from P.-L. Wu (2024) concerning the influence of clinical practicum stress on the professional competence of nursing students provide grounds for a broader interpretation of the results of the present study,

since a practical environment may simultaneously be both a resource for skill development and a source of emotional stress, requiring supervisory support, preparation for crisis interaction, and reflective guidance.

### **Prospects for the modernisation of field practicum**

In light of the results obtained, the modernisation of field practicum should be linked above all to the transition from the formal allocation of students to practice settings towards the substantive design of practical experience in accordance with the expected professional competencies. Practice settings should be evaluated not merely on the basis of the availability of contracts or the capacity to receive students but also in terms of which specific groups of skills they are most effectively able to develop: communicative, analytical, reflective, ethical, organisational, or digital. The results of the study demonstrated that different types of institution create unequal opportunities for students' professional development; therefore, practicum programmes must incorporate more clearly defined tasks related to the assessment of client needs, the planning of interventions, inter-professional collaboration, the maintenance of documentation, and the evaluation of helping outcomes. This logic is consistent with the conclusions of S.J. Ferns *et al.* (2025), who emphasise the need for the specific design of a work-integrated learning curriculum, as well as with the findings of G. Di Meglio *et al.* (2022), in which internships are regarded as a factor in graduates' entry into the professional environment and subsequent employment.

An important direction for modernisation is the individualisation of practical training, taking account of the student's educational level, prior volunteer or employment experience, professional motivation, and readiness for the independent performance of complex tasks. For undergraduate students, field practicum should ensure a gradual entry into the profession, the development of basic communicative skills, familiarisation with

the logic of a social institution's operation, and the formation of an initial professional identity. For postgraduate students, it is appropriate to strengthen the analytical, research, and coordinative components of practicum – in particular, case work, the evaluation of intervention effectiveness, inter-agency collaboration, and participation in the development of individual support plans. The systematic review by G. Di Pietro (2022), dedicated to international internships and skill development, additionally confirms that practical training can form not only professional but also intercultural, communicative, and adaptive qualities, provided it is organised as a coherent educational trajectory rather than an isolated episode of institutional placement.

The supervisory component of field practicum requires particular strengthening. Supervision should fulfil not only a monitoring function but, above all, an educational, reflective, and supportive one. It is advisable to introduce regular supervisory meetings involving the university-based practicum supervisor, a representative of the practice setting, and students, at which complex cases, ethical dilemmas, difficulties in communicating with clients, the boundaries of professional responsibility, and methods of documenting work outcomes could be analysed. Such a model would transform practicum from a collection of completed assignments into a sequential process of professional learning in which the student gains not only the experience of action but also the opportunity for its reflection. Ukrainian research also confirms the importance of this approach: L. Honchar & S. Holovko (2024) regard work-based practical training as a factor in the formation of the professional competence of future economists, whilst S. Tkachuk (2024) emphasises the role of field practicum as a component of the professional training of future vocational education specialists, demonstrating its universality as a mechanism of professional development regardless of the field of study.

The results obtained indicate the need for broader use of simulation-based, blended, and

digital formats as a preparatory or supplementary component of field practicum. This does not imply a substitution of real interaction with clients but rather the creation of a safe learning space in which students can practise communicative situations, crisis responses, ethical choices, the maintenance of professional documentation, and case analysis in advance. In view of the digitalisation of social work, it is appropriate to supplement the content of practicum with tasks involving electronic documentation, remote communication, work with digital databases, online client referrals, digital maps of social services, and inter-agency collaboration in a digital environment. Such an approach brings practical training closer to the real changes taking place in the field of social work and enhances students' readiness for professional activity within a hybrid, crisis-ridden, or geographically dispersed social support system.

The modernisation of field practicum must also address questions of accessibility and social justice. For students who combine study with paid employment, have family responsibilities, live at a distance from high-quality practice settings, or have limited resources, it is appropriate to provide flexible organisational arrangements: partially remote supervision, individualised timetabling, the possibility of practicum at one's place of employment provided its content meets educational outcomes, and additional supervisory support. In this way, field practicum may become not only a means of professional learning but also a more equitable educational model – one that does not exacerbate inequality between students but instead creates conditions for quality professional experience irrespective of the learner's starting resources.

The results of the study thus confirm that field practicum is an important mechanism for the development of professional skills among future social workers, as all five competency clusters increased statistically significantly following its completion. The most pronounced gains were recorded in communication skills

and reflective practice, whilst the development of needs assessment, intervention planning, and ethical decision-making depended significantly on the type of practice setting, the complexity of the professional environment, and the quality of supervisory support. Synthesis of the data obtained demonstrates that the modernisation of field practicum must involve the substantive design of tasks, the differentiation of practice settings according to their educational potential, the strengthening of supervision, the digitalisation of practicum content, and the provision of socially equitable access for students to quality professional experience.

### Conclusions

The study conducted confirms the central role of field practicum in the process of forming the professional skills of future social workers. In accordance with the aim of the study, it was established that field practicum ensures a statistically significant and practically substantial development of all key clusters of professional competencies among students of the specialty "Social Work". The greatest effect was identified for communication skills (Cohen's  $d=1.82$ ) and reflective practice ( $d=1.69$ ), confirming the significance of direct interaction with clients, with the specialists of the practice setting, and with instruments of reflective analysis in the process of transforming theoretical knowledge into practical skills. A somewhat smaller, though nonetheless significant, gain was observed in the skills of assessing client needs and resources, planning and implementing interventions, and ethical decision-making. This dynamic indicates the more complex structure of these competencies and the need for more sustained pedagogical and supervisory support for their full development.

It was established that field practicum should be regarded not merely as a stage of consolidating theoretical knowledge but as a multidimensional educational-professional space in which competency-based, experiential-activity, reflective, supervisory-partnership,

digital-innovative, socially just, and interdisciplinary approaches are integrated. This systematisation demonstrates that the effectiveness of practicum depends not on the fact of the student's presence at the host institution alone, but on the content of professional tasks, the quality of integration into the practical environment, the level of supervision, the opportunities for reflection, digital readiness, and the accessibility of quality practical experience. The empirical results demonstrated that the effectiveness of field practicum is determined by a number of interrelated factors. These include the type of practice setting, the content and complexity of tasks, the quality of supervisory support, the student's educational level, the presence of prior volunteer or employment experience, and the opportunity for systematic reflective engagement with practical experience. The type of host institution proved to be a significant factor in the differentiation of learning outcomes. Students who undertook practicum at rehabilitation centres and centres for persons with disabilities demonstrated higher indicators of development in communication skills, needs assessment, and intervention planning. This is explained by the specific character of the professional environment, in which work with persons with intellectual disabilities and complex functional limitations requires adaptive communication, the individualisation of approaches, and inter-disciplinary coordination. Conversely, organisations supporting internally displaced persons produced the highest indicators of development in ethical decision-making, reflecting the specific character of work under conditions of martial law, resource deficits, crisis demands, and the constant emergence of ethical dilemmas.

Prior volunteer or employment experience in the social field was associated with a higher baseline level of competencies at the start of practicum; however, following its completion, the difference between students with and without such experience notably decreased. This provides

grounds for concluding that pedagogically organised field practicum with clearly defined learning objectives, supervisory support, and reflective instruments is a more powerful factor in competency development than unstructured practical experience. No substantial differences were identified in the intensity of competency gains between undergraduate and postgraduate students. Despite the fact that postgraduate students had higher baseline scores and concluded practicum with higher indicators, the dynamics of their development were comparable with those of undergraduates. This indicates that field practicum is an effective learning instrument for students at different educational levels, and that its developmental potential is not exhausted at the stage of initial training.

Analysis of the data obtained made it possible to outline the current challenges and directions for the modernisation of field practicum within the Ukrainian educational context. The main challenges include the uneven educational potential of practice settings, the insufficient structuring of complex professional tasks, the need for high-quality supervisory support, the digitalisation of social work, the social inequality of access to quality practical experience, and the emotional burden placed on students during work with vulnerable population groups. The prospects for the modernisation of field practicum are linked to a transition from the formal allocation of students to practice settings towards the substantive design of practical experience in accordance with the expected professional competencies. A differentiated approach to the selection of practice settings, taking account of which specific groups of skills each is most effectively able to develop, is advisable. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain the diversity of practice settings, since each professional environment forms a unique set of competencies important for the future activity of the social worker. Prospects for further research lie in the broadening of the study's focus through an assessment of the quality of supervisory support as an important determinant of field

practicum effectiveness, as well as in the conduct of longitudinal studies concerning the application of acquired skills during the first years of graduates' professional activity. The study of experience at other Ukrainian universities with a view to determining the universality of the identified patterns within the system of social work training also holds promise. Separate attention is warranted by an analysis of the influence of martial law on the content and forms of field practicum and on the adaptation of host institutions to conditions of limited resources and increased workload.

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## Роль виробничої практики у розвитку професійних навичок майбутніх соціальних працівників

### Ніна Тверезовська

Доктор педагогічних наук, професор  
Національний університет біоресурсів і природокористування України  
03041, вул. Героїв Оборони, 15, м. Київ, Україна  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0672-9308>

### Ірина Демченко

Доктор педагогічних наук, професор  
Національний університет біоресурсів і природокористування України  
03041, вул. Героїв Оборони, 15, м. Київ, Україна  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4302-7564>

### Мохамад Дауд Алі

Доцент  
Університет Харіпура  
22620, м. Харіпур, провінція Хайбер-Пахтунхва, Пакистан  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3023-4196>

### Тетяна Григоренко

Доктор педагогічних наук, професор  
Національний університет біоресурсів і природокористування України  
03041, вул. Героїв Оборони, 15, м. Київ, Україна  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4616-6853>

### Дар'я Супрун

Доктор педагогічних наук, професор  
Національний університет біоресурсів і природокористування України  
03041, вул. Героїв Оборони, 15, м. Київ, Україна  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4725-094X>

**Анотація.** В умовах зростання соціальних викликів виробнича практика набуває ключового значення у підготовці фахівців соціальної роботи, однак її вплив на розвиток професійних умінь студентів залишається недостатньо дослідженим. Метою статті було визначення впливу виробничої практики на динаміку розвитку професійних навичок майбутніх соціальних працівників та оцінювання ролі типу бази практики, освітнього рівня і попереднього волонтерського або трудового досвіду у цьому процесі. Дослідження здійснено в межах кількісного описово-порівняльного дизайну. Вибірку становили 187 студентів Національного університету біоресурсів і природокористування України, які здобувають освіту у сфері соціальної роботи за спеціальністю І10 «Соціальна робота та консультування» з урахуванням стандарту вищої освіти за спеціальністю 231 «Соціальна робота». Анкетування проводилося до початку та після завершення виробничої практики. У дослідженні систематизовано підходи до розуміння виробничої практики як педагогічного феномену та виявлено статистично значущий приріст самооцінки всіх п'яти кластерів професійних навичок: комунікативних навичок, оцінювання потреб і ресурсів клієнта, планування та реалізації втручань, рефлексивної практики й етичного прийняття рішень. Найбільший ефект зафіксовано для комунікативних навичок і рефлексивної практики. Студенти, які проходили практику у реабілітаційних центрах та центрах для осіб з інвалідністю, продемонстрували вищі показники розвитку комунікативних навичок, оцінювання потреб і планування втручань. Практика

в організаціях підтримки внутрішньо переміщених осіб найбільше актуалізувала етичний компонент професійної підготовки. Попередній досвід забезпечував вищий стартовий рівень компетентностей, однак після завершення практики різниця між студентами з досвідом і без нього зменшувалася. Практичне значення дослідження полягає у використанні його результатів для оновлення програм виробничої практики, добору баз практики, розроблення методичних рекомендацій і посилення супервізійного супроводу майбутніх фахівців соціальної роботи

**Ключові слова:** практична підготовка; соціальна робота; професійна компетентність; супервізія; рефлексивне навчання; бази практики; професійна ідентичність