

Social Work Students' Attitudes Towards the Relevance of Their Studies

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Abstract. Social work education is the cornerstone of preparing students to address complex social problems with professional competence and ethical sensitivity. As the field of social work develops, it is imperative to understand social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their studies to real world practice. Aim of the research - to explore social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their academic studies to real-world social work practice.

Research subject - Social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their studies. Research objectives: 1) identify the relevance of the study; 2) to explore how social work students perceive the relevance of their studies to their future professional practice. The study is based on a quantitative methodology, using a survey questionnaire to collect data from 97 students enrolled in a bachelor's degree programme in social work at a Lithuanian higher education institution. The study used descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and Kruskal-Wallis test to analyse the data. The results showed that students found the study process relevant and meaningful for their personal and professional development. Students generally appreciated the opportunity to apply their knowledge in real-life situations to improve their professional skills. However, state-funded students rated the study process as more relevant than non-state-funded students. The paper concludes that programmes can be attractive to social work students if they are designed and delivered in a way that promotes students' interest in their studies, the application of theory to practice, and support from lecturers and peers. This study contributes to the literature on social work education in higher education by providing insights into social work students' perceptions of the relevance of the study process.

Keywords: attitudes, learning process, support, relevance, social work, study.

I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of social work education is constantly evolving to meet the dynamic needs of society. As such, social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their studies are becoming a focus of academic inquiry. This research explores the complex relationship between academic pursuits and future professional practice and aims

to uncover the underlying perceptions that shape students' educational experiences.

The research problem focuses on uncovering social work students' attitudes towards the perceived relevance of their learning process. It is hypothesised that social work students have positive attitudes towards their learning process, an assumption that will be explored in depth through this research.

The aim of the research is to explore social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their academic studies to real world social work practice.

Research objectives:

1. To determine the relevance of study.
2. To explore how social work students perceive the relevance of their studies to their future professional practice.

Drawing on a rich tapestry of literature, this study draws on the National Association of Social Workers [1], who emphasise the importance of social work education providing essential knowledge, skills and values through social work education, researchers who assert that social work education must be a harmonious blend of theory and practice to produce skilled professionals, a curriculum that equips students with evidence-based approaches to critically analyse and improve professional practice [2], [3].

This study will contribute to the existing literature by providing insights into how social work education can be further tailored to increase its relevance and effectiveness in preparing students for the challenges of professional practice.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Literature review.

The integration of academic study with professional practice is a central element in the education of social work students. Social work education aims to equip students with

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the necessary competencies for effective practice by combining theoretical knowledge with practical application, thus developing competent professionals [2]. Social work students are equipped with the necessary tools to critically analyse and improve their professional practice through evidence-based approaches [3]. Social work education equips students for professional practice by providing essential knowledge, skills, and values [1]. The relevance of coursework to practice is consistently emphasised, fostering a learning environment where students can see the direct link between what they are learning and the impact it has on their professional skills [4]. As they progress through their studies, students often gravitate towards subjects that resonate with their personal and professional interests. This intrinsic motivation not only enriches their academic experience, but also ensures that the knowledge they acquire is relevant and transferable to their future roles in social work [5].

The relevance of academic study to future professional practice is a critical concern for social work students. Research highlights the traditional focus on social work education and the increasing interest in social work education across higher education. Researchers in a longitudinal study of social work students, enriched with national registry data, found that classroom preparation positively influenced knowledge and competence, while the quality of placements indirectly influenced learning outcomes through programme coherence [6]. Research suggests that students' perceptions of the relevance of their coursework are significantly related to their academic engagement and motivation [7]. Furthermore, the integration of practice skills into the curriculum is considered essential to the preparation of competent social workers [8], [9].

However, challenges remain in bridging the gap between academic learning and practice in the field. Some scholars argue for a more practical approach to social work education to better prepare students for the realities of the profession [10], [11], [12].

A growing body of research suggests that social work students generally perceive their education as relevant and valuable for their future careers. For example, one study found that students who participated in fieldwork experiences reported a greater appreciation for the practical application of their coursework [13].

In addition, integrating contemporary issues such as digital literacy, cultural competence and evidence-based practice into social work curricula has been shown to increase students' perceptions of relevance [14], [15], [16].

In addition, research highlights the central role that lecturers play in shaping students' attitudes towards their education [17]. Lecturers' mentoring and teaching styles can have a significant impact on students' perceptions of the relevance of their studies [18], [19], [24].

Research also contributes to this discourse by demonstrating that field placements, particularly those that involve collaboration with peers, professionals and clients, are instrumental in enhancing the integration of theory into practice [20], [25].

In essence, the education of social work students in higher education is not an isolated academic endeavour, but a comprehensive preparation for their impending

professional responsibilities. The congruence between academic content and practical relevance is what makes their studies invaluable, shaping competent practitioners who are well versed in the complexities of social work [21], [22], [26].

In conclusion, while social work students generally view their education as relevant to their future roles as practitioners, continued efforts are needed to align academic curricula with the dynamic demands of the social work profession.

Survey instrument.

Understanding social work students' perspectives on the relevance of their education is crucial for curriculum development and for ensuring that future professionals are well prepared for the challenges they will face. In Lithuania, a study was conducted to explore these attitudes among students enrolled in different social work programmes.

In order to assess the attitudes of social work students towards the relevance of their academic studies, this study adopted a quantitative research methodology, using an electronic survey as the primary data collection instrument. The survey was designed to capture students' perceptions of the extent to which their coursework matched their interests, contributed to their professional practice and was integrated with their current professional activities.

The survey instrument was derived from the established Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES) to ensure its suitability for the educational research context. Participants were presented with a series of statements that encouraged them to reflect on different dimensions of their learning experience, including the level of engagement, the perceived importance of the content learned for professional practice, and the practical applicability of their studies (Fig. 1).

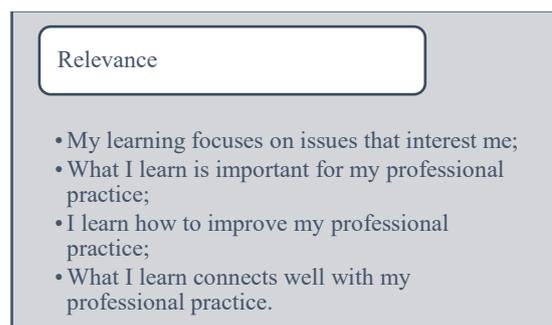


Fig. 1. Statements of relevance.

The responses collected from these electronic surveys provide valuable quantitative data that allows the analysis of student attitudes and the identification of trends. This information is crucial to understanding how students perceive the relevance of their studies to their future professional roles in social work.

Whilst maintaining rigorous academic standards, this methodology facilitates a thorough examination of the educational experiences of social work students. The findings from this research are intended to make a meaningful contribution to curriculum development in social work education programmes.

Data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23, with the reliability of the test items assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculations. In accordance with academic standards, a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 or higher was considered acceptable, indicating satisfactory internal consistency between survey items.

The study adhered to the fundamental principles of the European Code of Conduct for Research Ethics (ALLEA, 2019) [23].

Sample.

The study included 97 participants, both full-time and part-time students, who were studying their social work degree through blended learning methods. This diverse group included individuals from non-traditional, daytime and distance learning programmes, providing a wide range of student experiences and insights.

The study was conducted in January 2023. The survey data was analysed by funding, mode of study and course.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results.

The study presents the results of a survey of social work students' perceptions of their learning. The survey asked students to rate the extent to which they agreed with four statements about the relevance of the learning process on a five-point scale. The data presented in Figures 2-5 appear to be from a survey assessing the relevance and impact of learning activities on professional practice.

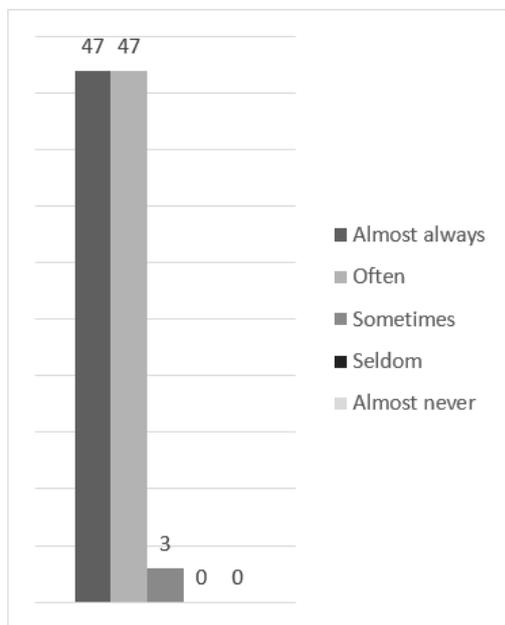


Fig. 2. Distribution of responses to the statement "My Learning Focuses on Issues That Interest Me".

The data presented suggest a strong positive correlation between the level of interest in the subject matter and the frequency of focus on learning (see Figure 2). With 94% of respondents indicating that they focus on topics of interest 'almost always' or 'often', it can be concluded that personal interest is a significant factor in the learning engagement of the study participants. This finding is particularly relevant for professional social

workers, as it implies that fostering a genuine interest in their field could enhance their learning and, by extension, their competence.

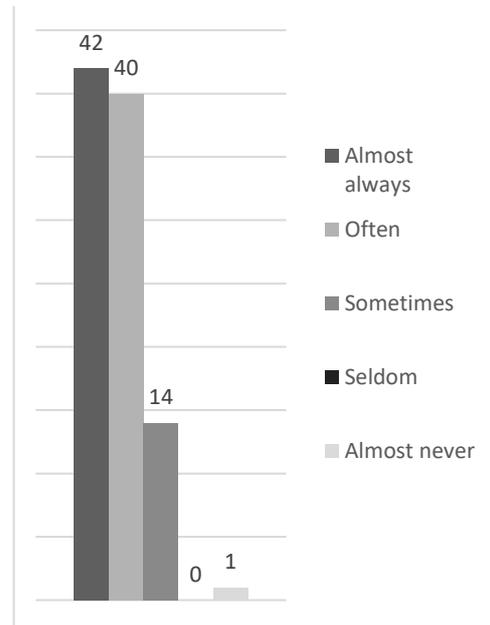


Fig. 3. Distribution of responses to the statement 'What I learn is important for my professional practice'.

The data presented suggest that a significant majority of respondents believe that what they learn is important for their professional practice, with 82 out of 97 respondents indicating that it is 'almost always' or 'often' important (see Figure 3). This implies a strong perceived relevance of the educational content to their social work practice. In summary, this study would highlight the high value placed on educational content by future social workers, suggesting that the curriculum is well aligned with professional needs.

In conclusion, the study shows that the current educational provision is considered by most participants to be highly relevant to their future careers. This relevance is essential for the development of the competencies required for effective professional practice in social work.

The data presented suggest that a significant majority of individuals feel that they frequently learn how to improve their professional practice, with 77 out of 97 respondents indicating that they do so 'almost always' or 'often' (see Figure 4). This indicates a strong commitment to continuous professional development among the participants. The study seems to underline the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in professional practice, which is particularly relevant for social workers working in dynamic and often challenging environments.

The summary of the study would highlight that the majority of participants are proactive in seeking opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. This proactive approach is crucial for social workers who need to remain adept at navigating complex social situations and adapting to new challenges and information.

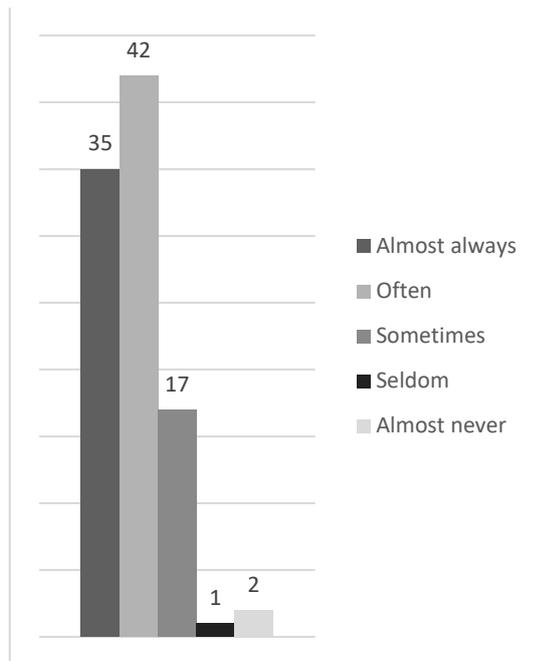


Fig. 4. Distribution of responses to the statement "I learn how to improve my professional practice".

One conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that there is a positive culture of self-improvement and skill enhancement among the professionals surveyed. This culture is likely to contribute to more effective and competent social work practice, ultimately leading to better outcomes for clients.

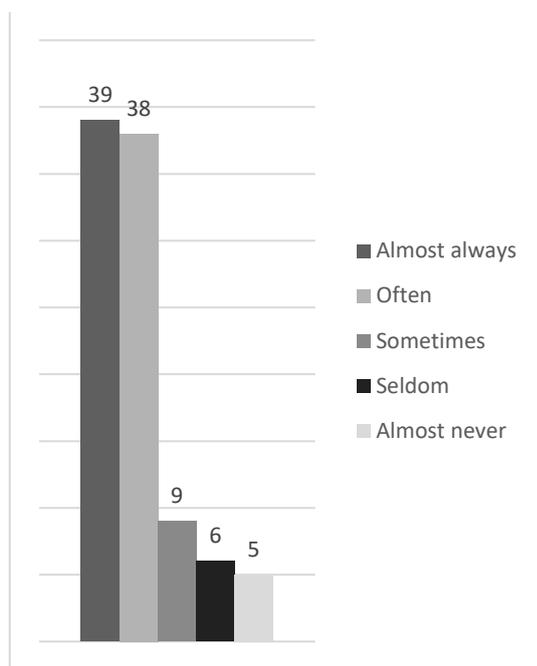


Fig. 5. Distribution of responses to the statement "What I learn connects well with my professional practice".

The data presented suggest that a significant majority of respondents feel that their learning is highly relevant to their professional practice, with 77 out of 97 respondents indicating that it is 'almost always' or 'often' well connected (see Figure 5). This suggests a strong link between educational content and practice in social work. However, a minority reported a less frequent link, which

may indicate areas where curriculum development could be focused to improve practice relevance.

In summary, the study suggests that the educational experiences of most participants are effectively preparing them for their professional roles as social workers. The high rate of positive responses reflects well on the educational programme's ability to link theory and practice.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the competencies required of professional social workers are generally being met by current educational provision. This is evidenced by the high number of respondents who see a clear link between what they are learning and their professional practice.

A significant majority of respondents report that their learning is often focused on issues of personal interest and is important for their professional practice. In addition, a significant number of participants report that their learning activities effectively contribute to the improvement of their professional practice and are well connected to it.

Descriptive statistics of the statements.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of four statements about the relevance of the study process in relation to learners' perceptions of their learning. The statements are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree. The table shows the minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis of each statement.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR STATEMENTS ABOUT RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL WORK STUDIES (N=97)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic		Statistic	
My learning focuses on issues that interest me.	3	5	4,45	,559	-,361	,245	-,880	,485
What I learn is important for my professional practice.	1	5	4,26	,781	-1,026	,245	1,690	,485
I learn how to improve my professional practice.	1	5	4,10	,872	-1,070	,245	1,756	,485
What I learn connects well with my professional practice.	1	5	4,03	1,104	-1,297	,245	1,155	,485

Analysis of social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their studies reveals a generally positive outlook. The mean scores, all above 4, indicate agreement or strong agreement with the statements presented. In particular, the statement 'My learning focuses on topics that interest me' received the highest mean (4.45) and the lowest standard deviation (0.559), suggesting a consistent and enthusiastic response reflecting students' high level of interest and motivation in their learning topics.

In contrast, 'What I am learning is well connected to my professional practice' received the lowest mean (4.03) and the highest standard deviation (1.104), suggesting varied responses and a perceived lower relevance of course content to professional practice among students. This divergence suggests an area for curriculum development to improve practice relevance.

The negative skewness values for all statements indicate a rightward shift in responses, with more students agreeing than disagreeing - a trend that was most pronounced in responses to the statement relating to professional practice, which had the most negative skewness value (-1.297). This asymmetry suggests a subset of students who may not find their studies applicable to their professional roles.

When these findings are compared with similar studies, such as that of [20], the effectiveness of field education in social work education is observed. However, there remains a call for better alignment of research with professional practice, a sentiment echoed in the research by [10] which highlighted a gap between research and practice in social work.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the responses of funded and unfunded students to four statements (see Table 2) relating to their learning and professional practice.

TABLE 2 INFERENCE STATISTICS (KRUSKAL-WALLIS) FOR STATEMENTS ABOUT THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL WORK STUDY BY STATE FUNDING (N = 97)

	My learning focuses on issues that interest me	What I learn is important for my professional practice	I learn how to improve my professional practice	What I learn connects well with my professional practice
Chi-Square	1,399	5,920	2,564	,584
df	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	,237	,015	,109	,445

Analysis of students' attitudes towards the relevance of their social work studies reveals notable differences, particularly in the perceived importance of their education for professional practice. There is a significant difference between funded and unfunded students, as shown in Table 2. The chi-squared value is 5.920 with 1 degree of freedom and an asymptotic significance of 0.015. This value is below the alpha level of 0.05, which allows us to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the groups on this statement.

Looking more closely at the Ranks section, we can see that the median rank of state-funded students is 55.20, which is higher than the median rank of non-state-funded students, which is 42.40. This suggests greater agreement with the statement among state-funded students, a finding confirmed by the Mann-Whitney criterion, which deems the difference statistically significant ($U = 865.000$, $Z = -2.433$, $p = 0.015$, $r = -0.247$). However, the effect size (r) is small, indicating that the difference, although statistically significant, may not be substantial in practical scenarios.

Conversely, no significant differences were found between funded and non-funded students on the other three statements: "My learning focuses on topics that interest me", "I learn how to improve my professional practice" and "What I learn is well connected to my professional practice". The corresponding chi-squared values are 1.399, 2.564 and 0.584 with asymptotic significances of 0.237, 0.109 and 0.445 - all exceeding the alpha level of 0.05 - so we maintain the null hypothesis for these statements.

In summary, Table 2 shows that state-funded students are more likely than non-state-funded students to believe

that what they are learning is important for their professional practice, but there are no differences between the groups in other aspects of their learning and professional practice. Comparison of these findings with similar studies reveals a consistent pattern; for example, [27] found that financial support mechanisms can influence students' perceptions of the relevance of their educational experience to their future careers.

Table 3 shows the correlations between relevance and reflective thinking, based on a survey of 97 participants.

TABLE 3 SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION BETWEEN THE RELEVANCE OF THE SOCIAL WORK STUDY PROCESS AND REFLECTIVE THINKING STATEMENTS (N = 97)

Statements about the relevance of the study process		Statement of reflective thinking
		I think critically about how I learn
My learning focuses on issues that interest me.	Correlation Coefficient	0,253*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,012
	N	97
What I learn is important for my professional practice.	Correlation Coefficient	0,277**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,006
	N	97
I learn how to improve my professional practice.	Correlation Coefficient	0,323**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001
	N	97

Analysis of social work students' attitudes towards the relevance of their studies reveals a positive correlation between the learning process and reflective thinking (see Table 3). The data indicate that students who critically engage with their learning material, focusing on topics of personal interest, show a significant correlation ($r = .253$, $p = .012$, $N = 97$), suggesting that interest-driven learning is associated with deeper engagement and reflection.

Furthermore, the importance of what students learn in relation to their professional practice also shows a positive correlation ($r = .277$, $p = .006$, $N = 97$), suggesting that relevance to professional practice is a key factor in students' perceptions of the value of their education. This is further supported by the strong correlation between learning to improve professional practice and reflective thinking ($r = .323$, $p = .001$, $N = 97$), highlighting the importance of practical application in educational settings.

These findings are consistent with those of [28], who focused on reflective learning from both academic and practice in social work. Similarly, [29] reported that practical application of learned skills was highly valued by social work students, reinforcing the importance of tailoring educational content to professional needs.

Table 4 below shows the Spearman's correlation between the relevance of the study process and the statements about the interpretation of the study process, based on a survey of 97 participants.

Table 4 SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDY PROCESS RELEVANCE AND STUDY PROCESS INTERPRETATION STATEMENTS (N = 97)

		I make good sense of other learners' messages	Other learners make good sense of my messages	I make good sense of the tutor's messages	The tutor makes good sense of my messages
My learning focuses on issues that interest me	Correlation Coefficient	0,333**	0,397**	0,370**	0,432**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	97	97	97	97
What I learn is important for my professional practice	Correlation Coefficient	0,274**	0,279**	0,337**	0,341**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,007	0,006	0,001	0,001
	N	97	97	97	97

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Spearman correlation analysis presented in Table 4 shows a positive relationship between students' interest in the subject matter and their ability to make sense of messages from peers and tutors. Specifically, the correlation coefficients range from 0.274 to 0.432, all of which are significant at the 0.01 level, suggesting that as students find the learning material more relevant to their interests and professional practice, their understanding of communication within the learning environment improves.

This finding is consistent with the work of [30], who found that engagement with course content significantly improved students' academic performance and interaction quality. Similarly, [31] reported that the learning environment of course material is a strong predictor of student satisfaction and perceived learning.

In conclusion, the current study supports the existing literature, which highlights the importance of aligning educational content with students' career aspirations and interests to foster a more effective learning experience.

Table 5 shows the correlations between different statements about the relevance and interactivity of the study process.

Table 5 SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION BETWEEN STATEMENTS ABOUT THE RELEVANCE AND INTERACTIVITY OF THE STUDY PROCESS (N = 97)

		I explain my ideas to other learners	I ask other learners to explain their ideas	Other learners ask me to explain my ideas
I learn how to improve my professional practice	Correlation Coefficient	0,329**	0,308**	0,268**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,002	0,008
	N	97	97	97

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis presented in Table 5 indicates a positive relationship between the relevance of the learning process and the interactivity of the learning process among social work students. Specifically, the Spearman's correlation coefficients (.329**, .308**, .268**) suggest a moderate relationship between students' learning to improve their professional practice and their engagement in explaining ideas to others, asking for explanations, and being asked to explain ideas. These results are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), indicating a reliable relationship between these variables.

Comparatively, these findings are consistent with those of [32] who reported similar positive correlations between the impact of interactive teaching methods on student learning outcomes at university level. Similarly, [33] found that increasing students' involvement in their learning processes and building relationships with students through teaching sessions can facilitate improvements in students' motivation and academic success.

The study shows moderate positive and significant correlations between learners' explanations of their ideas and their learning outcomes in terms of improving professional practice.

Table 6 shows the correlations between the relevance study process and tutor support in a study.

TABLE 6. SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDY PROCESS RELEVANCE AND TUTOR SUPPORT STATEMENTS (N = 97)

		The tutor stimulates my thinking	The tutor encourages me to participate	The tutor models good discourse	The tutor models critical self-reflection
My learning focuses on issues that interest me	Correlation Coefficient	,265**	,019	,305**	,329**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,009	,855	,002	,001
	N	97	97	97	97
What I learn is important for my professional practice	Correlation Coefficient	,528**	,383**	,423**	,345**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,001
	N	97	97	97	97
I learn how to improve my professional practice	Correlation Coefficient	,421**	,338**	,407**	,316**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,001	,000	,002
	N	97	97	97	97
What I learn connects well with my professional practice	Correlation Coefficient	,411**	,219*	,370**	,227*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,031	,000	,025
	N	97	97	97	97

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The analysis of Spearman's correlations presented in Table 6 shows a varying degree of association between the relevance of the learning process and the supportive statements made by the tutors. In particular, 'My learning focuses on topics that interest me' shows a significant positive correlation with 'The tutor stimulates my thinking' ($r=.265$, $p=.009$) and 'The tutor models good discourse' ($r=.305$, $p=.002$), suggesting that when tutors stimulate students' thinking and model effective discourse, students find the learning material more relevant to their interests.

Furthermore, the strongest correlation is observed in 'What I am learning is important for my professional practice', specifically with 'The tutor encourages me to participate' ($r=.528$, $p<.001$), suggesting that tutor encouragement has a significant impact on students' perceptions of the importance of their learning for professional practice. This finding is consistent with the work of [34] who explored how teachers can encourage student engagement in the classroom.

In terms of improving professional practice, 'I am learning how to improve my professional practice' correlates strongly with 'The tutor models critical self-reflection' ($r=.421$, $p<.001$). This echoes the findings of [35] that critical reflection on the critical incident studied was effective in improving social work practice, and that additional critical analysis of the wider issues raised by the research findings may enhance social work as a values-based, client-centred and social change profession.

Finally, 'What I learn is well connected to my professional practice' shows a moderate correlation with 'The tutor model good discourse' ($r=.370$, $p<.001$), supporting the notion that good discourse modelling by tutors helps to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, as discussed by [36].

Table 7 below shows the results of a correlation analysis between two statements related to the relevance of the study process and two statements related to peer support.

TABLE 7. SPEARMAN'S CORRELATION BETWEEN THE RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY PROCESS AND THE STUDY PROCESS PEER SUPPORT STATEMENTS (N = 97)

		Other learners encourage my participation	Other learners empathise with my struggle to learn
My learning focuses on issues that interest me	Correlation Coefficient	.164	.294**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.109	.003
	N	97	97
I learn how to improve my professional practice	Correlation Coefficient	.266**	.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.623
	N	97	97

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis of Spearman's correlation presented in Table 7 indicates a positive relationship between the relevance of the study process and the statements about peer support among social work students. Specifically, when students focus on topics that interest them, there is a significant correlation with the encouragement they receive from other students ($r = .164$, $p = .109$), although this result is not statistically significant. However, there is a stronger and significant correlation with the empathy they perceive from peers in their learning difficulties ($r = .294$, $p = .003$).

Furthermore, the data shows a significant correlation between improving professional practice through learning and peer support ($r = .266$, $p = .009$), while no significant correlation is found with peer empathy ($r = .051$, $p = .623$). These findings suggest that peer support plays a role in enhancing the educational experience, particularly through encouragement and shared interest in learning topics.

Comparing these findings with similar studies such as [37] and [38], we find congruence in the positive impact of peer support on student engagement and learning outcomes. [37] highlight that peer and teacher interaction, social presence and social media use have a positive impact on active collaborative learning and student engagement, thereby influencing their learning outcomes. While [38] emphasise the contribution of empathy to a supportive educational atmosphere.

Discussion.

The study confirmed the hypothesis that social work students have positive attitudes towards their learning process. Students showed high levels of interest, motivation, and relevance in their learning and high levels of application of their learning to their professional practice.

The study showed that social work study programmes are effective in providing students with learning opportunities that meet their interests and needs as professionals. The programmes also help students to improve and enhance their professional practice by linking theory and practice.

The study showed that learners have different patterns of response to different statements, with some statements having more asymmetric and peaked distributions than others. This suggests that there may be some variability in how learners perceive and experience their learning process, depending on their personal and contextual factors.

The study suggests that state funding may have an impact on how students perceive the relevance of their learning to their profession, but not on how they engage with their learning or how they apply it to their practice.

This implies that state funding may influence learners' expectations and satisfaction with their learning, but not their actual learning outcomes or behaviours.

The study highlighted that reflective thinking is an important factor in increasing the relevance of learning to professional practice. Students who engaged in reflective thinking reported higher levels of relevance and application of their learning than those who did not. This suggests that learning should develop learners' reflective thinking skills to help them make meaningful connections between their learning and their professional practice.

The study showed that learning should increase learners' interest and relevance in order to improve their communication and understanding. Students who reported higher levels of interest and relevance also reported higher levels of communication and understanding with other learners and tutors. This suggests that learning should provide opportunities for learners to interact and collaborate with others and to receive feedback and guidance from tutors.

The study showed that explaining ideas to other learners is an important aspect of the learning process that improves learners' professional practice. Students who explained their ideas to other learners reported higher levels of application of their learning than those who did not. This suggests that learning should encourage learners to share and discuss their ideas with others and to learn from the perspectives and experiences of others.

The study showed that tutor support was an important factor in increasing the relevance of learning. Students who received more tutor support reported higher levels of relevance and application of their learning than those who received less tutor support. This suggests that learners should be provided with adequate and timely tutor support and that their progress and performance should be monitored and assessed.

Study limitations

The study does not provide information on the demographic or professional background of the participants, which could influence the interpretation of the results. The survey also appears to lack a neutral option, potentially forcing participants to choose a more positive or negative response than they might otherwise. In addition, the data do not indicate the specific nature or context of the learning activities, which limits the ability to generalise the findings to wider populations.

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and may not be representative of the population of social work students in online courses. Second, the data collection method was based on self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to bias and social desirability effects. Thirdly, the study did not measure students' actual learning outcomes or behaviours, but only their attitudes and perceptions. Therefore, further research is needed to validate and extend the findings of this study and to explore the causal relationships between the variables.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the literature on learning in social work education by providing insights into social work students' attitudes towards their learning

process. The study suggests that learning can be an effective and engaging way of delivering social work education if it is designed and delivered in a way that promotes learner interest, motivation, relevance, communication, understanding, reflection, application and support from tutors and peers.

CONCLUSIONS

- The study suggests that participants' learning experiences are highly relevant to their professional interests and needs. The strong positive responses indicate that the learning is perceived as relevant and useful, which can enhance motivation and the application of new knowledge in professional settings.
- Learning experiences with professional interests and needs are strongly positive, suggesting that relevance in training is key to increasing motivation and practical application in professional contexts.
- The impact of government funding on perceptions of educational relevance is notable, but does not directly correlate with student engagement or practical application of learned knowledge.
- The development of reflective thinking skills is crucial for bridging the gap between academic learning and social work practice, indicating a need for curricula that foster such skills.
- An engaging learning environment plays a significant role in improving communication and understanding, indicating the importance of interactive and stimulating educational environments.
- Collaborative environments that encourage interaction and the exchange of ideas are fundamental to the learning process, emphasising the value of teamwork and communication in educational strategies.
- Peer-to-peer teaching methods are shown to be effective in reinforcing the application of knowledge in professional settings, highlighting the benefits of peer learning models.
- The need for effective tutor support is clear, as it makes learning more relevant and applicable; this underlines the importance of tutor accessibility and responsiveness.
- The preliminary nature of the study's findings, due to the small sample size and the potential for self-report bias, calls for further research to confirm and extend these findings. This suggests that a broader investigation could provide more definitive insights into the educational strategies discussed.

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