

Two Generations, A Vocation: Comparative Study Between Students Cohorts In Social Work, Faculty Of Sociology And Social Work, West University Of Timisoara

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Abstract:

The paper aims to identify the trends regarding the similarities and differences between students enrolled in the studies of the license in the field of social work, cohorts 2024 and 2025. The research is quantitative with a focus on objectivity and clarity. The research sample consists of 145 students enrolled in the social work specialization - frequent education, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, West University of Timisoara. The main results show that the research hypotheses are valid because most of the students in both student cohorts are female. At the same time, most students come from small families, with 3 or 4 family members, because with the globalization and evolution of society, birth rates have decreased and numerous families are no longer so present. It is clearly seen from the analysis of the data that most of the students from both cohorts live in rent and at home, together with the parents, being more centered on personal space, privacy and at the same time the lack of places in the student dormitory is highlighted. The differences that arise between the two study cohorts are generally related to the way they look at the field of social work, knowledge in the field, but also from where they heard about social work. The practical implications of the study support that the promotion of this field should also be carried out among men to create a balance between genes, but also the promotion of the profession so that future students learn the importance of the social worker in the Romanian society.

Keywords: questionnaire, social work, students, trends, profile

Introduction

The article „Two generations, a vocation: comparative study between student cohorts in Social Work, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, West University of Timisoara” provides an objective perspective on the motivation demonstrated by students from the 2024 and 2025 cohorts when enrolling in the Social Work program. It is important to observe the profile of social work students, defined by their gender, background, age, and the path they chose after completing high school. All these characteristics—combined with the type of family they lived in, diagnosed chronic illnesses, family members, and their place of residence during studies—reveal to national research both the positive aspects and the vulnerabilities of current students enrolled in undergraduate social work programs.

In Romania, research on trends in social work—particularly studies focusing on the profile of students or graduates of accredited undergraduate social work programs—is insufficient and even non-existent. Notable in this context is the study

conducted by Lazăr (2015), which focused on the general profile of social workers in Romania. The results showed that exactly ten years ago, only 4,607 individuals were registered with the National College of Social Workers of Romania, 88% of whom were female, with an average age of 36 years. Furthermore, the social work profession is predominantly female, including both newcomers—recent graduates—and professionals with work experience in the field.

Bulgaru (2013) noted that the current context is transforming the methods used in educating social workers, as globalization requires professionals in the field to be prepared for a new type of intervention—innovative and problem-centered social practice. The author particularly emphasizes the need for intercultural competencies. She describes the models proposed by Healy and Estes, which focus on adapting university curricula to the international level in order to make interventions more realistic and applicable. Among the innovative disciplines with potential to enhance students' competencies are: case management, social gerontology, rural social work, social work in international contexts, emotional intelligence, and the social worker's role in preventing and combating human trafficking. (Buzducea, 2009)

All these subjects are already included in the Social Work undergraduate program at the West University of Timișoara, which is aligned with the training and professional standards of the social work profession.

Also, 11 years ago, the international literature was already discussing the importance of international practice placements aimed at the professional training of social workers. Cleak et al., (2014) argued that international placements contribute to the development of critical thinking, professional flexibility, and intercultural knowledge. The research results indicated that the majority of students enrolled in undergraduate social work programs were female, and that through international learning they discovered new skills, learned new models of intervention, developed their professional competencies, and had greater opportunities to work in fields such as migrant protection and community development, drawing inspiration from international practice models. (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2011)

In the international literature, university training programs for social workers are not perceived solely from a theoretical perspective focused on coursework, but rather as having much deeper and more practical implications—shaped by professors seen as mentors, by interactions within the student community, and by field practice experiences. (Miller, 2013)

Peterson et al., (2014) conducted a study that examined the educational patterns of students enrolled in both undergraduate and master's social work programs, and how these patterns influence their professional development. The study's conclusions indicate that a welcoming and positive environment—among students, university faculty, and social workers in the institutions where field placements take place—is associated with a stronger sense of independence, autonomy, and the formation of a professional identity.

The present study also explores the motivation of students to enroll in the undergraduate Social Work program. In this regard, Ornovețchii (2022) conducted research demonstrating the internal and external factors that influence career choice. The study begins by presenting theories of motivation related to professional

development: Bodrov identifies three stages of professional motivation—choosing a long-term profession, selecting the institution where one will work, and the direct performance of professional duties. Holland argues that career choice is linked to individual personality, based on six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, enterprising, social, and conventional. Super emphasizes that choosing a career is more closely related to self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence, being a process influenced by the stage of life in which the person finds themselves—development, exploration, establishment, maintenance, or disengagement. It can be observed that motivation is connected to multiple aspects, ranging from personality traits to external influences. (Swanson & Fouad, 2014; Schein & Maanen, 2013)

Simcenco (2021) published a study discussing social impact and inner satisfaction as strong sources of motivation in choosing a professional career. These factors can also serve as motivational drivers for specialists in the field of social work. Additionally, other factors can be identified, such as financial security, quick employment opportunities, professional stability, contribution to societal development, providing support to vulnerable groups particularly the elderly and children—and the desire for personal growth and development. (Pânișoară & Pânișoară, 2010)

Professional motivation and the achievement of performance in one's field of activity are well-researched topics in the specialized literature; however, they are not extensively explored within the field of social work. Zubenschi (2016) argued that there is not a single ability, value, principle, or motivation that drives individuals, but rather a combination of factors and mixed influences that inspire a desire for both personal growth and contribution to the common good. Rădulescu-Motru (1997) developed the concept of the “person of vocation,” referring to an individual's calling to do good, their authenticity, and their genuine commitment to collective well-being.

Zubenschi (2016) study included teachers, social workers, and doctors, based on the premise that these professionals contribute directly to the welfare of society. The results indicated that motivation tends to decrease with professional experience and age. Moreover, burnout is more prevalent among professions focused on human interaction and collective welfare, and this professional exhaustion reduces the motivation to do good. In the field of social work, it was observed that professionals tend to align more strongly with altruism and empathy rather than with leadership-oriented traits.

Souto-Otero et al., (2023) link the motivation behind choosing a field of study to the way students understand the employment process. The research hypothesis starts from the premise that the university study program influences one's professional career. Furthermore, the university also changes the perception of how students understand employability and professional performance. There are two conceptions of employability: “Thin” refers to educational performance, professional training, and academic qualifications, while “Thick” is directly related to practical experience, the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competences. Studies in the field show that human-oriented professions are usually chosen out of vocation rather than for economic or financial reasons. However, as in any domain, there are also students who, by pure chance, end up studying a certain specialization and later realize that it suits them, developing a strong vocational motivation. (Anastasiadis & Zeyen, 2022; Bright et al., 2022)

The choice of a career in social work can also be observed through the volunteering experience that young people acquire before enrolling in undergraduate studies. Pituła et al., (2022) consider that volunteering holds a special significance in the current period, as it reflects the motivation to bring about change and to become actively involved, motivations which stem from diverse personal factors. Volunteering is perceived as a form of humanitarian support and solidarity, both towards others and towards society as a whole. In a constantly changing world, affected by humanitarian crises, the actions of volunteers—whether individual or organized—are perceived as expressions of responsibility and civic engagement. (Nichol et al., 2022; David, 2024)

Collins et al., (2010) conducted one of the first British studies focused on the well-being of students enrolled in social work programs. The students' responses show that they experience the responsibilities of their academic program from multiple perspectives. A percentage of 81% expressed a strong desire to perform well in their courses and to maintain full attendance in academic activities. Moreover, it was observed that students who had not previously participated in volunteer activities found the study experience significantly more challenging. In addition to the difficulties and stress encountered, there are also positive aspects related to the personal satisfaction they experience during field placements, as beneficiaries are perceived as a source of energy and well-being. It can be seen that the passion for helping others and the sense of vocation play an important role in choosing this field of study, as they help compensate for the challenges faced.

Even within higher education programs focused on social work, students may experience doubts, questions, and uncertainties. In this context, the effectiveness of initial assessment becomes essential for observing student retention. The main concern is related to the process of employment and professional integration. Ross et al., (2024) emphasized that professional identity can also be developed through the direct involvement of students in research processes, allowing them to become active participants in practice. The study indicates that through direct engagement and research experience, students can achieve better outcomes in learning, personal development, and overall wellbeing.

The initial assessment of social work students can provide educators with insights into their levels of resilience or emotional intelligence. It is the responsibility of educators to train students who are able to overcome barriers and effectively manage the challenges of the social work profession. Understanding students' wellbeing is closely linked to their level of resilience and the competencies associated with it. (Grant & Kinman, 2012)

The international literature on social work education refers directly to self-care, to each student's level of emotional intelligence, and to the development of practical rather than purely theoretical skills, such as overcoming burnout and fostering empathy and compassion. All these aspects represent a set of characteristics through which the future social worker is shaped physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and professionally. O'Neill et al., (2019) emphasize that the way students are engaged in activities throughout their university studies can strengthen their confidence and self-esteem and help prevent professional burnout in the future.

As presented, the Romanian national literature does not thoroughly explore the need for initial assessment of students enrolled in social work programs and

offers limited analysis of the relationship between future professional performance and the motivation behind choosing social work as a field of study. At the international level, there are studies addressing these aspects; however, gaps still exist, particularly regarding contemporary developments. The present study examines differences between cohorts of social work students to identify similarities and variations over time, even within a one-year interval.

Methodology

The purpose of the research is to observe the trends and differences between the cohorts of students admitted in 2024 and 2025 to the specialization Social Work - Frequency Education, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, West University of Timisoara.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Students in both cohorts are aged between 18 and 19, indicating a direct transition from high school to university.

H2: Students in both cohorts are predominantly female.

H3: Both cohorts of students have prior experience in volunteer activities.

Sample and instrument

The quantitative method, respectively sociological anchor, was used by questionnaire. The tool collected data on the initial evaluation and the reasons why they chose social work - frequent education from the Department of social Work, the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, the West University of Timisoara. The sociological survey through the questionnaire was applied at the beginning of the academic year 2024 and 2025, with implications also on socio-demographic aspects in order to better understand the profile of the student at social work.

Babbie (2020) specified how important the stage of elaboration of the questionnaire is for it to be valid. It all starts with the clear and objective formulation of the questions, then there is a pre-testing period, marked by the actual data collection and statistical analysis.

Data collection and processing

Data collection was carried out through two questionnaires containing identical items, administered during the first meeting with each cohort of students admitted to the Social Work program (full-time), Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, West University of Timișoara. The first questionnaire, addressed to the 2024 cohort, was collected on the first day of the initiation week in September 2024, while the second questionnaire, addressed to the 2025 cohort, was collected in September 2025. A total of 145 students from both cohorts participated in the study, all of whom gave their full consent to take part in the initial evaluation and in the subsequent comparative research.

Results and Discussion

The main themes that emerge from the quantitative analysis of the collected data are: demographic profile of students enrolled in social work in 2024 and 2025.; students' perception towards the bachelor study program social work: frequency education; identification of differences between the cohorts of students 2024 and 2025; association of demographic variables with the variables of attitude and behavior.

The gender of respondents is divided as follows: 75 respondents in the 2024 study cohort declare themselves women, and 5 men versus 58 respondents in the 25 study cohort declaring themselves women, 6 men and 1 single respondent do not declare their gender. The environment of origin indicates for the 2024 cohort that 50 people coming from urban and 30 from rural areas, and for the 2025 cohort, 35 people come from urban areas and 30 from rural areas. There is a great trend towards enrolment in educational and socio-human studies of women. However, with the 2025 cohort, one can also notice a trend of male gender representation in human areas.

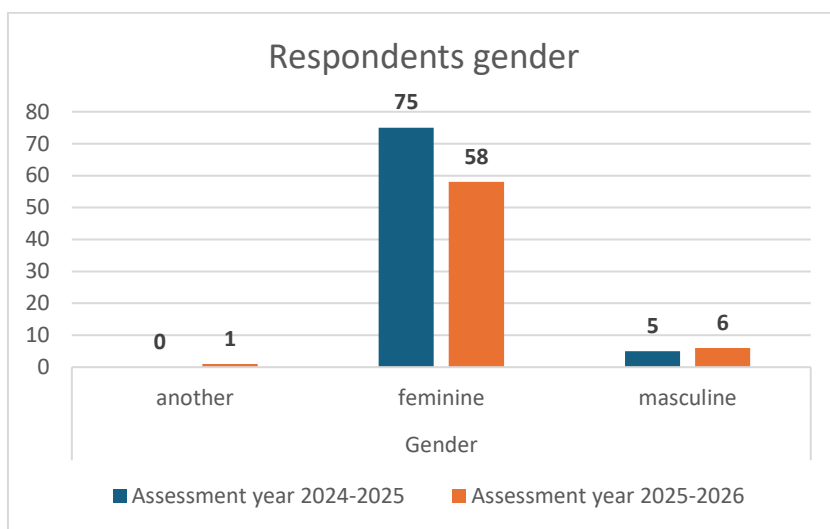


Fig. 1

The respondents' age shows that most are between 18-19 years, in the 2024 cohort, there are more 18-year-olds compared to the 2025 cohort. As for, the age of 19, remains constant in both cohorts. As for adults over 30, they are more present in the 2025 cohort, being a diversification of older age compared to 2024. Regarding the environment in which students graduated from high school, 76 of those enrolled in 2024 graduated in urban areas, and 4 in rural areas compared to 59 enrolled in 2025 who graduated in urban areas and 6 in rural areas.

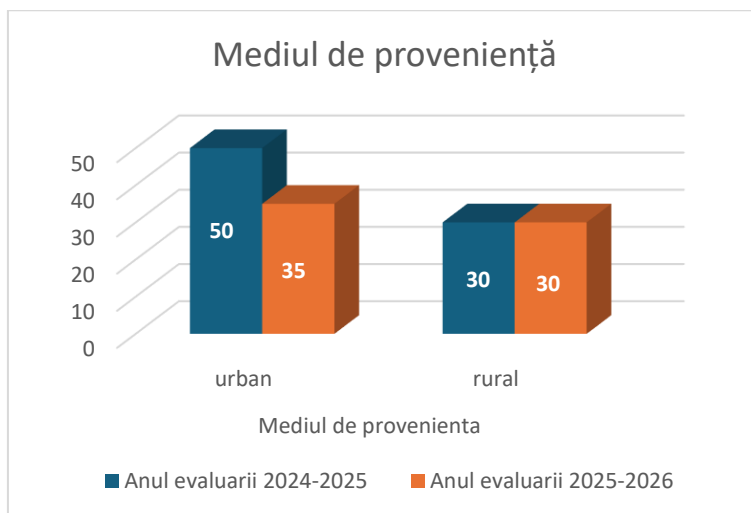
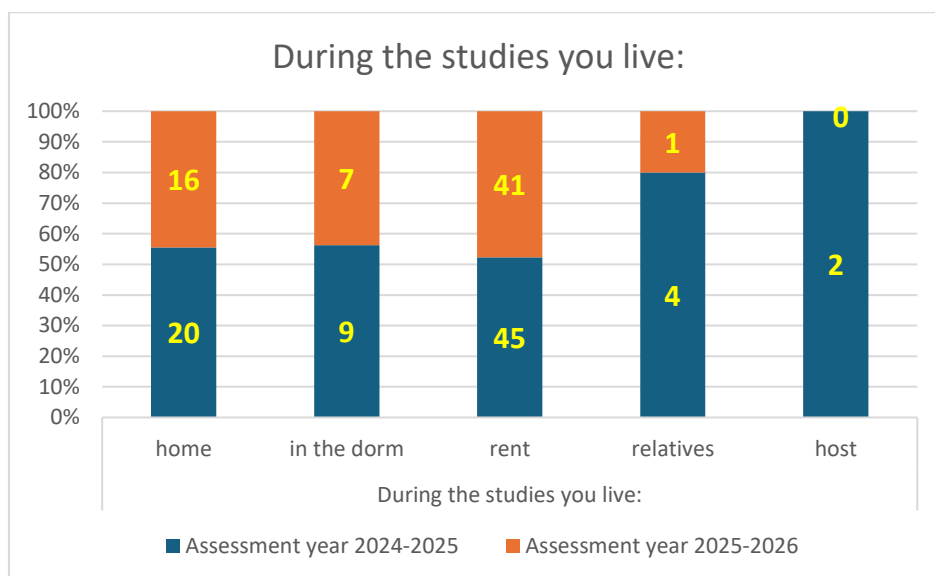


Fig. 2

There is also a decrease in urban respondents and an increase in rural respondents, as of 2025, an accessibility of university education for rural high school graduates is observed. Regarding this analysis of the two cohorts of students, it is noted that traditional students are more distinguished in 2024, and the year 2204 comes with an age diversification for students „non-traditionalists” who resume studies or want a professional reorientation.

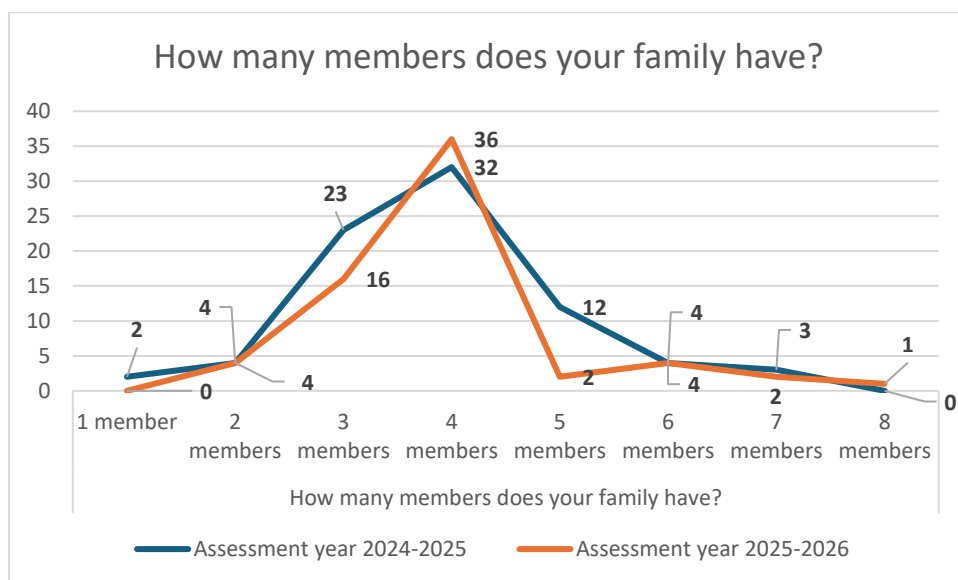
The family type of origin brings the following results: from the cohort 2024 students, 52 people come from a nuclear family, 18 from a single parent family, 6 lived with a biological parent and a step parent, 3 respondents have parents who left for work abroad, and 1 respondent has disabled parents. In the case of the 2025 cohort, it is noted that only 39 people come from nuclear family, 17 from single parent family, 5 participants in the study have parents working abroad and 4 have lived with a biological parent and a step parent.

In the case of chronic diseases that the respondents stated, it is noted that from cohort 2024, 76 declare that they have no chronic disease, and the others face diagnoses such as: polycystic ovary syndrome (a respondent), chronic headache (a respondent) and scoliosis (a respondent). In the 2025 cohort, 57 students stated that they do not manifest chronic diseases, and the others face spastic tetraparesis (a respondent), AIDS (a respondent), depressive-anxious syndrome (a respondent), myopic astigmatism (a respondent), hypothyroidism (two respondents).

**Fig. 3**

In 2025, there is a trend of openly declaring health conditions, even disability, which leads to transparency, as well as a greater openness of the university towards the educational and social inclusion of students with disabilities or chronic diseases.

For both the 2024 and 2025 student cohort, four-member families are the most present, with 36 and 32 students confirming this from the two cohorts. Nuclear families are the most dominant in the two generations. Then, the three-member families take the next place, with 16 respondents from the 2024 cohort, and 23 respondents from 2025. Numerous families with over 5 family members are rare and steadily declining. In the case of cohort 2024, there are 12 respondents coming from such a family, and in 2025, only four. For families consisting of 6-8 members there are extremely small values, located between 1-3 cases. A tendency to decrease the birth profile is observed, being a slight change, but also present, with a focus on small families, according to the trends in Romania, with urbanization and career desire.

**Fig. 4**

At question „During the period where you live”, the answers show in the following way: for cohort 2024, 20 respondents live at home with their parents, 9 students in the student dorm, 45 students for rent in Timisoara, 4 students at relatives and 2 students in a host. In the case of the 2025 cohort, things look similar because, 16 students live at home with their parents, 7 in the student dormitory, 41 students rent in Timisoara and one student at relatives. We notice a constant pattern of how students choose to live, and it is also noted that most students come from other counties and choose to rent in Timisoara for independence and comfort. There is, however, a low number of people living in the home for two reasons: limited number of seats or preference to larger space and independence.

On question „Why did you sign up for the Social Work” specialization, the respondents provided answers that design vocation and humanistic fields, and the similarities arise between both cohorts, because, 35 students in each cohort mentioned that they want to bring changes in the society. Other reasons that are in the second place of student responses bring the desire for continuous learning, improvement in a particular field, professional development, but also direct influences from the family. There are also respondents who point out that the surrounding cases inspired them to choose the field of social work.

When asked „Where did you hear about the social work field”, the main sources of information of the 2024 cohort show that they are family and former cohorts, followed then by social networks such as Instagram and Tik Tok. In the case of the 2025 cohort, there is a significant increase in the influence of social networks in the choice of domain, followed by the family. An intergenerational change can directly change, because if in 2024 the educational options were chosen according to the direct experiences of the family or graduates, they are now chosen according to the social channels and materials presented online.

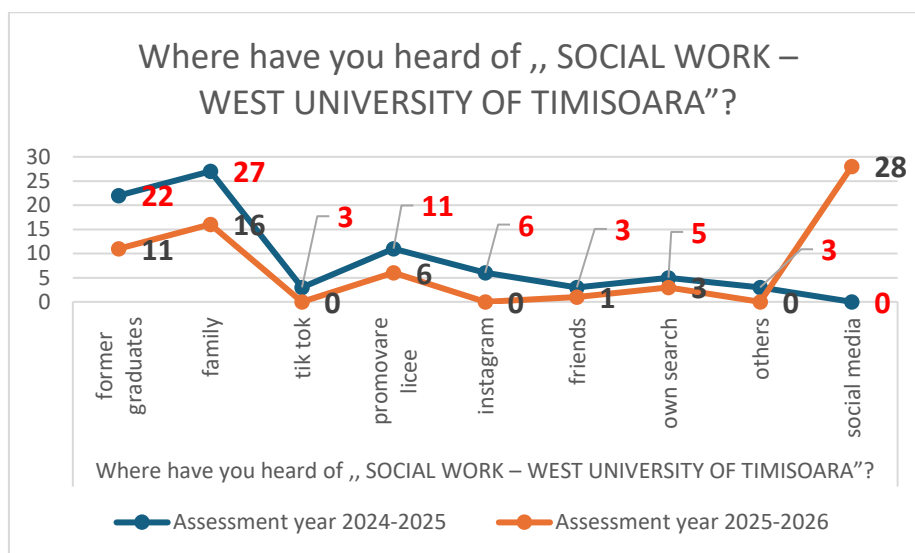
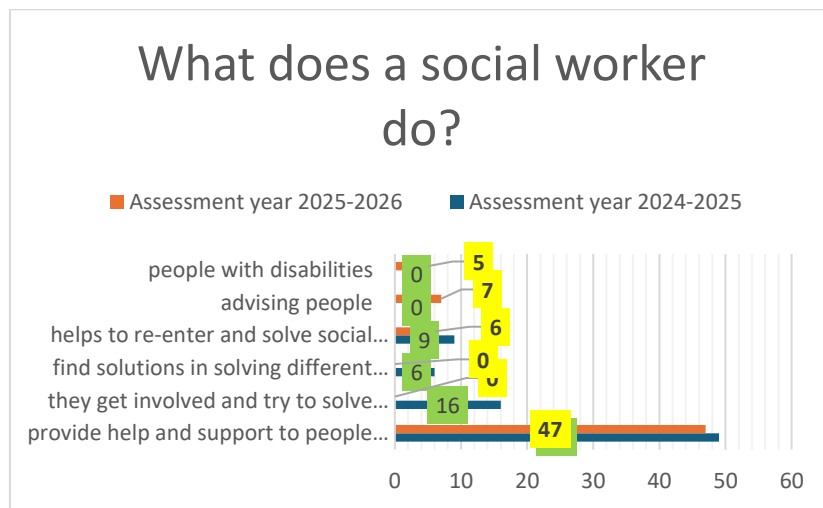


Fig. 5

In the initial assessment, respondents were asked „What a social worker does, and both cohorts had close answers, 49 students and 47 said that the role of the social worker is to provide support to people in difficult situations. A perception focused on the needs of the beneficiary and on overcoming the vulnerability situations is observed, an idea that remains present as intensely in both generations. An idea that appears in cohort 2024, but not in cohort 2025, is that the social worker solves community problems. Cohort 2025 links the social work assistant profession to specific work tasks, such as: „the social worker works with people with disabilities”, „helps to social reintegration” and advises people.

To question „What do you understand by the person in difficulty”, cohort 2024, respectively, 57 respondents indicated that it is „the person in difficulty is facing social problems, economy or personal”. Cohort 2025 did not want to answer this question, namely 65 people, with only 8 answers being similar to that of the 2024 cohort. We can see a drastic decrease in the level of social awareness, but also in the understanding of the terminology in the field of social work.

**Fig. 6**

To question „In which institutions can the social worker” profess, the main answer of the cohort 2024, is the school, respectively 24 respondents, then mayoralties, 16 answers, placement centers, 12 participants and prisons 11 respondents. A realistic, yet succinct knowledge of the 2024 cohort is observed. Cohort 2025 brings news, but the first two three places are also occupied by educational institution, town hall and placement centers, then hospital institutions and public institutions are added, being slightly more general answers. It can be seen that the social worker has gained an important role in educational institutions in the last two years.

Regarding the involvement in volunteering activities, the results of the quantitative analysis show that 21 respondents from the 2024 cohort were involved in volunteering activities and 24 did not volunteer. Instead, 35 students want to participate in volunteering activities in the future. In the 2025 cohort, there are several students who participated in volunteering activities, respectively, 26, and 16 did not participate. At the same time, 23 respondents want to volunteer.

**Fig. 7**

At the same time, the respondents' volunteering was done in general in hospital institutions, educational institutions and in recreational mode, 20% each, followed by nasaemnt centers, centers for people with disabilities and in non-governmental organizations in the percentage of 15% and 10%.

It can be seen that the differences exist between generations, even if there is a year difference, but the cohorts 2024-2025 have similarities and differences. The study presents in a quantitative and objective way the differences that are consistent, but also the similarities, achieving an objective profile of the student at social work from the contemporary period in Romania.

Conclusions

Otovescu & Otovescu (2019) reported a phenomenon that is more and more present in the past years, but which is growing in the current period: accelerated depopulation, more specifically, the decline of birth rates and the ageing of the population. In this regard, the links between the article and the current one explain the importance of the study on student cohorts to observe trends. It is clearly observed that there is a motivation for the study of social assistance, but human resources are shrinking. The values and principles of the profession are needed to be studied in order to observe how they stabilize and how they are transimposed into a constantly changing, shrinking demographic society.

Goian (2014) publishes an article focused on how educators and learners identify their needs on the area of individual and personal development, but also on the sphere of psychosocial well-being. The current study and the study of the author are similar, both centered on the profile of people coming from the educational sphere. Also, the profile of students in social work and observing whether they chose the profession after vocation, is related to the study of the author Goian (2010), which provided an overview of how social workers relate to language in the field. Thus, the

students through the undertaken volunteering manage to form skills and abilities and to build a professional identity.

Coman et al., (2025) publishes a study focused on the identity and social belonging of young people. Similarities with the current study appear with the shaping of the professional identity. Just as young people in the study of authors develop their identity through belonging to an online community and a culture of music, social work students develop their identity through civic engagement in volunteering.

Bularca et al., (2022) also looked at how universities in Europe are emphasising the need for sustainability in social networks, online platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and how information reaches students and potential students during the Covid-19 pandemic. As can be seen from the study, most of the students in the 2025 cohort were informed from the social networks of the department or faculty, thus it is confirmed that universities must be more oriented to the sphere of online, visual communication, through social networks, because young generations spend more and more time online.

Bătrânu-Pințea & Coman (2023) focused on how young students form behaviors, habits, values through volunteering experiences. The study is noted for its debated theories, Bandura's Theory, which emphasizes the imitation model of children from adults. Thus, the similarities with the present study are diverse and ample, because, it is confirmed that modelling learning can exist, just as the students from the social assistance specialization perform voluntary actions and become examples for the next generations.

The research assumptions have been validated. The first hypothesis „Students in both cohorts are aged between 18 and 19, indicating a direct transition from high school to university.” clearly shows that the age of students enrolled in the social work specialization falls between 18-19 years, especially those in the 2024 cohort. As for the 2025 cohort, there are also people over the age of 30. It can be seen very clearly that especially the students from the 2024 cohort followed a direct educational route, immediately making the transition from pre-university to university education. At the same time, with the passing of an academic year, the trend is maintained in 2025, but new and diversified age profiles also appear. This denotes that the social assistance specialization is sought also by those who want to pursue university studies at an older age, but also by those who want to rephrase themselves.

The second research hypothesis called „Students in both cohorts has predominantly female” validated because the results show that in the 2024 study cohort, 75 students out of 80 declared themselves female gender, and in the 2025 cohort, 58 students said they are female gender out of the total of 65 students who completed the initial assessment. An overwhelming proportion of the students enrolled in the social assistance specialization are women. It can be said that most specialists who practice as social workers are also female. The gender profile of the students enrolled in social assistance is unbalanced, because the male side is very little present. At the same time, it is assumed that women are more focused on the vocational professions centered on empathy, care and support, given the low number of enrolled male people.

The third hypothesis entitled „Both cohorts of students have prior experience in volunteer activities.” is validated because, both from the 2024 cohort and from the students enrolled in 2025, there are people who have been volunteering. In the 2024 cohort, 21 of the students were involved in volunteering experiences and 35 want to participate during the faculty. In the 2025 cohort, the number of students with experience in volunteering activities increased, respectively 26, and 23 express their desire to participate during the faculty. To better understand the specificity of volunteering activities, they were carried out in hospital, educational institutions, but also through recreational activities, followed by placement centers, centers for disabled people and various non-governmental organizations.

It can be clearly seen that involvement in volunteering activities is a feature easily observed in students enrolled in social assistance. Both cohorts of students have indicated an increased interest in volunteering activities in the social field, both in the past and in the future. This means that in parallel with academic activities, they manifest intrinsic desires and motivations to contribute to the good of society. At the same time, it is clear that personal values are in line with the values of the social worker profession. The areas in which they have already carried out voluntary activities are vast, both general and specific, giving them experience towards social intervention, both at micro, mezo and macro level.

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