



## Formation of professional competence for future social educators based on an integrated approach

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### Abstract

The objective of this study is to assess the efficacy of a comprehensive strategy for developing the professional abilities of social educators. Additionally, it seeks to identify the problems encountered by high schools in this regard and examine the process of cultivating professional competencies. The research comprised a sample of 253 individuals from L. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, located in Astana, Kazakhstan. The study compares the diagnostic results on a quantitative and qualitative level. The assessment standards of Fisher and the descriptive statistics were acquired. The study's data was gathered by requesting questions from teachers and students, testing, interviews, and evaluations from experts who fit this profile. The findings indicated that future social educators will have problems with their lack of high-level professional competence. Additionally, the majority of employers have requirements that are related to how well students develop their skills as well as their motivation to engage in extracurricular activities, work on themselves, and engage in future professional endeavors. The study revealed that employing an integrated strategy for the training of prospective social teachers yielded the most significant impact on the development of their professional abilities. The study's findings can be used to improve vocational training for social educators.

**Keywords:** Effectiveness, Future social educators, Integrated approach, Professional competence, Teaching,

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### **Contribution of this paper to the literature**

This study contributes to the existing literature by assessing the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach to forming the professional competencies of social educators, the challenges faced by high schools, and how the process of forming professional competencies works.

## **1. Introduction**

In Kazakhstan, the issue of providing the population with qualified specialists in the field of social security has become particularly important. The appointment of social educators is to provide competent social and pedagogical assistance to various groups of the population. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that an authentic social worker must integrate professional expertise with personal attributes (Aadnanes, 2017; Birger & Nadan, 2022; Butler-Warke & Bolger, 2021). When choosing social work as a future sphere, young people should have the fullest possible understanding of this profession and decide not only whether this type of activity suits their interests but also whether they comply with the interests and requirements of the profession (Al-Makhamreh, Alnabulsi, & Asfour, 2016). Ethical regulation of the choice of the profession of a social worker becomes necessary, which can prevent the negative consequences of an erroneous choice. Since choosing a career is an important step in anyone's life, it should be done consciously, intentionally, and with motivation.

The requirements for the development of a personnel infrastructure adequate to modern social technologies in social protection institutions form the state order for the higher education system of social education in terms of a qualitative result: the professional competence of graduates as conductors of social policy, capable of organizing the process of social support for the population, effectively solving a range of social problems, and having a humanistic orientation for the individual. All this actualizes the problem at a university in the aspect of social education: designing advanced content and technologies as the main didactic components that meet the prospective needs of the social and personal development of the student (Li et al., 2022; Nawab & Sharar, 2022; Nilsson & Lund, 2022). In this regard, it must be emphasized that the integrated approach improves students' ability to learn practical skills and helps them develop a unified perspective of reality (Gamage, Dehideniya, & Ekanayake, 2021). Integration exists when students can connect what they study in one area with related content in another. When students can combine knowledge from different subjects rather than learn in isolation, the quality of their learning outcomes improves. We especially note the fact that the creation of integrated approaches to prepare aspiring social work educators in Kazakhstan is at the stage of formation, and at the moment they are only beginning to be introduced into the educational process. Therefore, to confirm their effectiveness, it is advisable to conduct appropriate experiments and studies.

At the same time, the major educational programs of the universities we analyzed were not oriented towards the development of professional competence as a whole. They include knowledge and skills, but psychological attitudes, personal qualities, and professional experience are absent.

Thus, the emergence of new services and new specialties, as well as the modernization of domestic education, sparked the interest of researchers in the issue of theory based on the training of specialists capable of creating and implementing social technologies (Lee et al., 2018). However, research on instructional design at the university with the qualitative outcome of forming professional competencies in students has not been carried out in our country, which leads to the emergence of several contradictions:

- Strengthening the status of educational renewal content as a guaranteed factor for the achievement of quality results and the traditional university training system for social work specialists.
- The great potential of integrative approaches and the scientific and methodological support for them are insufficient for the university training of social work specialists.

These inconsistencies give rise to the study's main question, which is: What integrated approaches can universities employ to train social work specialists?

**RQ:** How effective is a comprehensive approach to ensuring that social work professionals receive professional training?

The hypothesis is that using an integrated approach to training social work professionals' sets up favorable conditions for the efficiency of forming professional competencies.

## **2. Literature Review**

In modern society, the need to train high-quality specialists is becoming increasingly clear, meeting the requirements of state and world standards. One of the progressive trends in the development of global social practice is its focus on the timely identification and effective solution of problems arising from a particular client, family, or social problem in general. In this context, a social work specialist is seen as a resource for dealing with issues about the individual and the environment, a source of real change, a carrier of activity that organizes people, associations, and institutions, and a rebuilders of some social ties (Abulhul, 2021; Afomachukwu, 2021; Kam, 2020; Saxena & Chandrapal, 2022). In this regard, the role of social education as a creative and stabilizing potential for the development of social states is increasing, requiring new research methods as well as the strengthening of cultural and intellectual functions (Aksoy & Ablak, 2019; Çal & Demirkaya, 2020; Fallah, Mohabbati-Kalejahi, Alavi, & Zahed, 2022). Social educators must understand the questions and problems directly related to multi-level tasks in this professional area from the principles and normative foundations of the organization of the social support system as a whole, the technologies for managing the social service, and their links to the methods of managing interaction with client systems and self-management techniques (Cabiati, 2016; Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2019; Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021). Professional competence is one of its indicators and is defined as a complex character that contains the requirements for a social pedagogue and the specifics of his activity, an organic combination of personal qualities, a wide education, comprehensive preparedness, erudition, and deep expertise (Andersson & Köpsén, 2018; Antera, 2021; Malik, Soenarto, & Sudarsono, 2018). In our opinion, the competent specialist must have a high general cultural background and a

high level of social and personal, general scientific, pedagogical, and socio-pedagogical competencies, which require the student to master the technologies for implementing social and pedagogical activities on a high level.

Let us consider how an innovative understanding of learning outcomes affects the process of training social pedagogues at the university. First of all, we noticed the particularity of the social educator's activities and the particularity of the content of the ability. A career as a social teacher involves understanding the global issues of our time, mastering worldviews and methodological principles in all areas of social practice, and forming a methodological culture for future specialists. At the same time, on the one hand, the versatility of the profession implies comprehensive, systematic training; on the other hand, it requires a differentiated approach that must take into account specific specialization and modern context.

According to the theory of the comprehensive approach, students learn the most when they acquire knowledge and skills in several different disciplines simultaneously (Bonner, Warren, & Jiang, 2018; Bourke et al., 2022; Guimarães, Pohl, Bina, & Varanda, 2019). In this regard, there is a pressing need to create a thorough strategy to train future social teachers using innovative approaches. It should be admitted that in Kazakhstan, interactive teaching technologies are still much less developed than in European countries, but it is clear that the future lies behind them. We urgently need to work on the development of specific interactive teaching technologies; otherwise, the lost time will turn into lost opportunities. This situation actualizes the tasks of a comprehensive justification and creation of educational and scientific models and programs of the educational process, focused on achieving modern educational standards in Kazakhstan, as well as the development of new interactive teaching technologies that would take into account the specific features of education in higher education.

We are most interested in works devoted to the professional development of future social educators. However, the existing research does not well reflect the specific situation of the activities of future social educators.

To improve professional competence for future social educators, an urgent requirement is the development of innovative approaches to their education, which is dictated by the need to combine various interdisciplinary knowledge and skills to analyze and design their activities, act systematically in a professional situation, make decisions in non-standard conditions, and have the ability for continuous professional growth. This is also required by the professional sphere of a modern person, which is constantly changing.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Method

The work uses an experimental research method in which the experimenter intervenes in the activity and functioning of the object being tested to create a situation and a condition. In this study, diagnostic data were compared quantitatively and qualitatively (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020; Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, & Kingstone, 2018). Qualitative research, as the process of studying a particular problem, involves not only the existence of special (qualitative) data but also specific methods of collection, processing, and analysis. Therefore, in the future, a broader term will be used to denote qualitative research: qualitative methods, or qualitative methods as a combination of different strategies (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022; Chigbu, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

#### 3.2. Research Sample Formation

The study involved 253 people at L. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Astana, Kazakhstan); 87% of the subjects were female, with an average age of 21 and 22 years. Between 133 students in the experimental group and 120 students in the control group, a random selection was made. In the control group, the process of forming professional competence took place, taking into account the requirements of traditional training, and the EG used the integrated approach to training for forming professional competence for future social educators.

#### 3.3. Research Approach

The three stages of the pedagogical experiment were ascertaining, forming, and generalizing. Adopting an integrated teaching approach requires designing learning activities that enable students to make connections between different learning activities and between their academic and extracurricular experiences. It helps them understand how ideas and abilities are relevant and useful in a variety of situations.

To solve the first task of the research determination phase, the expert evaluation method (a method that allows obtaining the necessary information from a competent person or an expert) is used. 75 heads and deputy heads of educational and social institutions in Pavlodar and the Pavlodar Region took part in the survey as experts.

We asked experts and employers to answer these questions:

1. In your opinion, what qualities do social work professionals have that are necessary to successfully perform their job and duties?
2. What qualities do you consider unacceptable for a social worker?
3. What professional qualities, skills, and knowledge are needed for social teachers?

According to 92% of respondents, students and future social teachers must be prepared to engage in social activities, including working with minors to prevent deviant behavior and crimes (89%); implementing various strategies for the social protection of children of different categories in trying circumstances (72%); implementing techniques for raising children; and giving legal advice to parents and students. What's more, 87% of prospective employers give social workers low marks for their knowledge and skill levels. They draw attention to the fact that universities do not pay enough attention to basic social education, social safety nets, and child protection.

The expectations and needs of the majority of employers (81%) are connected to students' improvement of qualities (purposefulness, responsibility, communication, activity, tolerance) (52%); with the development of motivation for activities in the social field, for self-improvement, a value attitude towards future professional activities (64%), etc.

#### 3.4. Instruments for the Collection and Processing of Statistical Data

During the study, the following methods were used: teaching observations, a survey of students (future social teachers), modeling of pedagogical situations, the method of expert assessment in the process of performing

professional tasks, and the method of statistical processing of experimental data. When selecting a diagnostic tool, its approval, validity, and reliability are considered.

### 3.4.1. Teaching Observation

Teaching observation is the direct perception and understanding of the teaching process under natural conditions. Observation requires the researcher to accurately fix the facts and conduct an objective pedagogical analysis (Caratiquit & Pablo, 2021; Kraus, 2023). Observations in pedagogical research can be aimed at achieving various goals. It can be used as a source of information for building hypotheses, testing the data obtained by other methods, or extracting additional information about the object under study (Abdulahaman et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2018). The researchers created a program of educational observation in preparation to address some very complicated issues in order to collect the information required for the study and avoid missing any crucial facts or information about the topic under study: the thorough examination of the research subject under numerous contexts and circumstances; the creation of a classification scheme that complied with the study's goals for facts and phenomena.

### 3.4.2. A Survey of Students

Surveys are one of the most widely used methods of obtaining more information about a topic from respondents. Participants in a survey are given specific questions whose answers allow the researcher to collect the necessary data for the study's goals (Filges, Sonne-Schmidt, & Nielsen, 2018; Hennessy, Tanner-Smith, Finch, Sathe, & Kugley, 2018). One of the characteristics of the survey is its general nature, which results from the specificity of the tasks it addresses (Abirin, 2023; Mattos-Vela, Evaristo-Chiyong, & Siquero-Vera, 2023).

During the survey, the following requirements were met:

The questions and the questionnaire itself were adequate for the objectives of the study.

Questions are presented in a format that is easy for respondents to understand.

During the survey, ethical standards of communication were observed.

Ethical standards of communication were observed, and the characteristics and competencies of both respondents and interviewers were taken into account.

The results were compared with information obtained using other methods (observation and analysis of documents) because they describe the state of the phenomenon studied from an objective point of view rather than the subjective statements of the respondents. Distortion was also taken into account, which has to do with the specificity of the representations of competence in the minds of the respondents.

### 3.4.3. The Method of Expert Assessment

Peer review is a study conducted to determine the parameters of processes, types of work, and items that are not subject to direct measurement (Glonti & Hren, 2018; Sileyew, 2020). The program is carried out based on the professional experience of specialists with competence in the field. Expert evaluation allows the study to: carefully analyze the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the object under study; obtain an objective conclusion for making a further decision regarding the subject of assessment; and obtain a forecast of the further development or change of a process or subject. To obtain an expert's estimate, the method was based on the individual opinion of the expert, who provided their opinion independently of others.

The process of expert assessment included setting goals for the upcoming study. This was the phase of determination on which the correctness of the expert assessment and the reliability and accuracy of the results depended: organizational and methodological support of the survey; setting a problem and presenting questions to experts; information support for the work of experts. The main type of survey is a questionnaire. The questions were formulated for experts, providing detailed descriptions of the subjects studied, among other things. Before making a final decision, the experts studied all the alternatives and considered the evaluation objects from different angles. In order to obtain the most reliable results, preliminary informational material describing the assessed objects was prepared. Taking the data into account, the experts chose the most appropriate assessment method and carried out the necessary calculations. After that, the data that was collected during the survey was processed. Based on the study's findings, specific conclusions were drawn. The conclusions are accompanied by information on the experts' backgrounds as professionals and copies of relevant documents, as required by the standard.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The data were checked for normality before performing an inferential statistical analysis to determine whether to use parametric or nonparametric tests. It examined the data distribution to determine whether or not it was normal.

## 4. Results

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the results of the professional competency development of teachers in the control group and the experimental group.

**Table 1.** Future social teachers' levels of professional competence development.

Levels	EG (n = 133)		CG (n = 120)	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
1	2	3	4	5
High	0	0	0	0
Average	32	24.6	36	27.7
Low	101	75.4	84	72.3
General indicator	133	100	120	100

Comparative data are depicted in Figure 1.

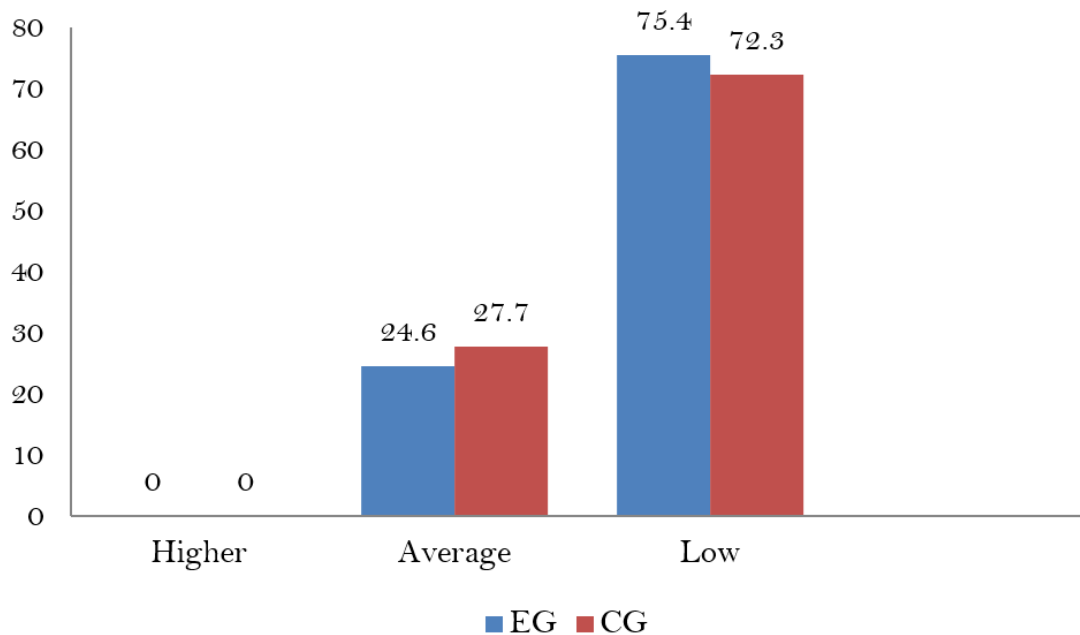


Figure 1. Future social teachers' levels of professional competence development.

Therefore, the results of the determination stage indicate that future social teachers must first develop their professional competence. Second, most first-year students (72% in CG and 76% in EG) had little development in this area.

Monitoring the main motives for choosing the profession of a social pedagogue by students, the satisfaction of graduates with educational services, and identifying the causes and negative trends in reducing the motivation of future specialists, a program of comprehensive measures is adopted for the efficiency of the formation of the competencies necessary for a social pedagogue. The content component is the backbone of the professional training system for social teachers and includes the development of educational and program materials (curriculum, teaching aids, and recommendations). When drawing up programs for the socio-pedagogical training of students (Table 2), the idea of interdisciplinary, constantly updated knowledge and the need for its connection with general scientific and general professional training. Integrated curricula and programs are the primary mechanisms for ensuring the integrity of the educational process by meeting the national education standards for the level of teacher training in society.

Table 2. The content of the programs for training social educators.

Component	Content
Invariant component	A mandatory and necessary theoretical knowledge that provides fundamental training for students in a particular discipline. The selection of the content of the material for the invariant part of the program and the determination of its volume are carried out based on the logic of the subject as an academic discipline and branch of science and the tasks of training a social teacher. The order and proportion of the various parts of the course can be varied within a certain range to create more favorable conditions for the implementation of interdisciplinary communication and subject professional orientation.
Variable component	This part of the program is more movable and flexible and is formed based on the specifics of the future social teacher's specialization. Designed to address the following issues: (1) Differentiation of socio-pedagogical knowledge depending on the nature of specialization, orientation, and interests of students. (2) Ensure the relationship of socio-pedagogical knowledge to the general sciences and general professional disciplines by establishing and implementing continuous interdisciplinary linkages. (3) Improvement of the student's motivation to study the relevant disciplines and activities in the direction of the student's specialization.
Operational and activity components	It focuses on the choice of teaching methods and is closely related to the use of a differentiated approach. External differentiation is defined as an educational system in which the content of education is differentiated. Its essence lies in the specialization of future specialists according to their interests, inclinations, and abilities to maximize their development. It is reflected in the variability of courses and programs, as well as in-depth professional training and the development of variable professional courses and electives. The division of learning between individual students or their groups forms internal differentiation, which involves varying the forms, methods, and conditions of learning.
Resultant-reflexive component	It includes a system for assessing educational outcomes.

The technological component of the approaches developed by the authors also includes active learning methods (methods of situations, business games, and training), which develop social activity and form independent work skills.

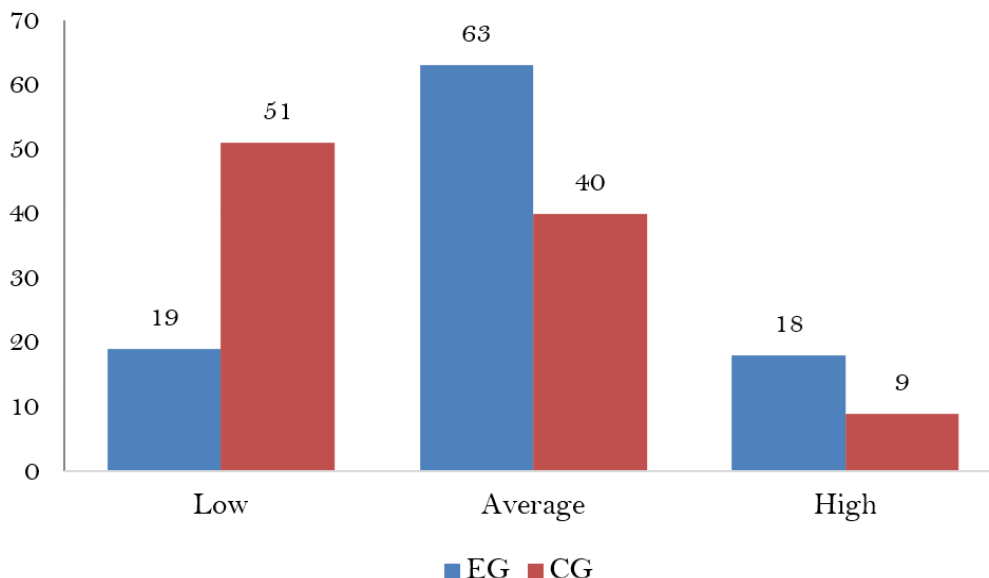
In the generalization phase, repeated diagnostics were performed. For this, the same methods were used as in the identification phase.

Table 3 and Figure 2 present the student distribution according to professional competence levels.

**Table 3.** Student distribution according to professional competence levels.

Levels	EG (n = 133)		CG (n = 120)	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
1	2	3	4	5
High	26	18	10	9
Average	80	63	44	40
Low	27	19	66	51
General indicator	133	100	120	100

The average level increased in the EG by 39% and in the CG by 12%. In contrast, in EG and CG, the proportion of respondents with a high level was 18% and 9%, respectively. Consequently, there was a 57% reduction in students with lower levels of competence in EG and a 21% reduction in CG.



**Figure 2.** Student distribution according to professional competence levels.

The significant excess in the proportion of subjects with fully developed professional competence in EG compared to CG is important evidence for the validity of the proposed integrated approach and favorable conditions.

We created hypotheses:

*Null hypothesis H0:* The levels of professional competence formation among students from the CG and the EG are not significantly different.

*Alternative hypothesis H1:* The levels of professional competence formation among students from the CG and the EG are significantly different.

To determine the results of the study in the CG and the EG (checking the significance of differences as a result of training in the CG and the EG),  $\varphi^*$  - Fisher's criterion was used by the standard scheme.

For CG and EG, the experimental value of the Fisher criterion ( $\varphi^*$ ) was calculated using the angular transformation of the Fisher criterion ( $\varphi$ ). In addition, according to the table of critical values of Fisher's test for various values of the standard significance levels ( $\alpha = 0.05, \alpha = 0.01$ ), the tabulated values corresponding to these significance levels are adopted.

Table 4 shows the calculated information and results.

**Table 4.** The calculation information and results of the EG and the CG.

Sample	Sample size, pers.	Sufficient level of competence, pers.	Group share, %	$\varphi$ exp.	$\varphi^*$ exp.	$\varphi^*$ cr. (For a given significance level $\alpha$ )	
CG	120	56	49	1.55	2.45	$\alpha = 0.05$	$\alpha = 0.01$
EG	133	98	81	2.24		1.64	2.31

As can be seen from Table 4,  $\varphi^*_{exp.} = 2.45 > \varphi^*_{cr.} = 2.31$ , so it appears possible to reject  $H_0$  and apply an alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) about the existence of a significant excess in the experimental group of individuals who had sufficient professional competence for studying under the integrated approach and favorable conditions created by us over the proportion of individuals in the control group who also had professional competence in teaching within the study's parameters.

### 5. Discussion

The objective of the study was to ascertain the efficacy of an integrated approach in cultivating professional competences among social educators while also examining the obstacles encountered by high schools and the mechanisms involved in the development of those competencies. We discuss the results of our research questions in this section. In the survey of future social teachers, we found that the indicators of students' professional ability development level are low, which may damage the formation of other important qualities. This is due to several problems, in particular: not all types of student activities have an incentive for a high result in mastering knowledge and teachings, and not all types of educational activities bring positive results in mastering the content of the training course (Coman, Țiru, Meseșan-Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020). The results of numerous studies

also support this position (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Kim, Raza, & Seidman, 2019). Concerning the challenges faced by high schools, we found that there is great potential for integrative approaches, but the scientific and methodological support for them is insufficient for university training, as is the representation of the developed methods and technologies for their development in the high school (Zhumash et al., 2021).

In this regard, it was to complete the following tasks: consider methods for developing professional competencies, pinpoint their characteristics, and establish the precepts upon which university students' development of professional competencies is predicated. This process requires the existence of approaches that ensure its organization and allow the study of the structure of professional activity to increase its effectiveness. Hence, we developed a comprehensive program of measures aimed at increasing the efficiency of professional competency formation. In the university educational process, the primary task is not to acquire skills, abilities, and knowledge but to integrate them during training to resolve professional problems. The inferences support previous work by Li (2022) and Doherty and Stephens (2021). Studies that are currently available also show strategies for university students to develop their professional competence (Adams & Blair, 2019; Guraya & Chen, 2019). There is evidence that a variety of innovative student teaching methods are highly effective in developing professional competencies (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Lin, Huang, & Lin, 2022; Naz & Murad, 2017). Our research also shows that the formation of the competencies needed by social educators is highly effective in the context of an integrated approach and the enabling conditions created in the classroom. Due to the student's participation in various forms of individually focused practice, there is a correlation between individual opportunities and the desire for self-development when this program is implemented.

Therefore, the data of this study show that an integrated training approach can not only improve the effectiveness of professional competence formation but also create favorable conditions for high-quality professional training of social work professionals. Recent research shows that competent specialists are defined by general cultural and professional competencies (Krpálek et al., 2021; Škrinjarić, 2022).

Thus, the integrated approach has proven its effectiveness as a tool to ensure that social work specialists are professionally trained to prepare mobile, proactive, and effective independent solutions to professional problems in any situation.

## 6. Conclusion

The insufficient development of the scientific and methodological basis for the enhancement of the professional competence of social educators is the primary problem with the study's applicability. The author's initiative to enhance the efficacy of competency development encompassed a complete set of measures, primarily focusing on the creation and refinement of educational and programmatic resources such as curriculum, instructional materials, and guidelines. The main means of teaching the subject of the socio-educational cycle is a complex of progressively more complex tasks and assignments. The final analysis of the data obtained from the experimental validation allows us to assert that an integrated approach and favorable conditions for the university training of social educators are most appropriate. The implementation of the concept of socio-pedagogical training of social educators at the university and the experimental verification of the program of training showed their expediency in the educational professional environment; the content and the technological components of the program were efficacious. The complex of innovative and traditional teaching methods within the framework of an integrated approach developed based on the author's concept had a positive impact on the level of competence of social educators.

## 7. Limitations and Additional Future Directions

The research carried out does not exhaust all aspects of the problem of the current study.

We acknowledge that this study has limitations.

These restrictions include (1) the study of professional disciplines based on the performance of invariant, variable, and targeted creative tasks, taking into account the subjective experience of students; (2) the organization of educational activities based on the stimulation of professional and personal achievements in the form of a pedagogical portfolio; and (3) the focus of active creative learning in higher education on mastering the values of future professional activities.

The prospects for further development of this problem are to explore the possibilities:

- A set of practice-oriented training tasks for independent work, including electronic support.
- Development of didactic modules for the content of academic disciplines and educational practices aimed at developing the professional competencies of bachelors.

In future investigations, the aforementioned points can be considered.

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