Journal of Management Practices, Humanities and Social Sciences

Vol 10 Issue 3 pp. 367-379

https://doi.org/10.3152/jmphss-10.3.3

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

From Structured Learning to Adaptive Practice: Understanding Competency Development in Community Resource Mobilization among Social Work Students in Vietnam

Dang Thi Lan Anh[1], Nguyen Trung Hai[2]*

[1, 2]Faculty of Social Work, University of Labour and Social Affairs, Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract— Competency development is central to social work education, particularly in practice areas that require adaptation to complex community settings. This study examined community resource mobilization competencies among 120 undergraduate social work students at the University of Labour and Social Affairs (ULSA), Vietnam. Using data from a cross-sectional survey, we used descriptive statistics and multiple regression to assess cognitive competence, procedural competence, adaptive professional practice, and contextual learning conditions. Students performed relatively well on knowledge and structured practice tasks but had greater difficulty when implementation required negotiation, flexibility, and responses to changing community conditions. Practice context received the highest descriptive rating. In the multivariate model, however, individual factors were the only domain independently associated with adaptive professional practice (β = .405, p < .001). Although practice context was rated highly, favourable conditions alone did not distinguish students' adaptive professional practice once the other factors were considered. Students' readiness to engage with and use available learning opportunities therefore appears important. The Competency Transition Framework brings these dimensions together to explain how structured competence, adaptive practice, and learning conditions are related, without treating competency development as a fixed sequence. For social work training institutions in Vietnam, the results point to the need to strengthen student readiness and improve the quality of practice-based learning.

Index Terms— Social work field education, Community resource mobilization, Competency development, Adaptive professional practice, Contextual learning

Received: 15 February 2026; **Accepted:** 8 April 2026; **Published:** 28 May 2026

Introduction

In many low- and middle-income countries, including Vietnam, social workers are expected to do more than provide interventions and support to individuals and groups. They also need competencies for working effectively with communities, including the ability to identify community resources, build partnerships, engage relevant stakeholders, and mobilize locally available resources (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006; Kenny, 2010; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2022). This has become particularly relevant in Vietnam following the recent transition to a two-tier local government structure, which has increased the importance of commune- and ward-level communities in local governance and service provision. Social work graduates are increasingly expected to connect and mobilize resources across state agencies, socio-political organizations, and informal community networks (Aikawa et al., 2025; Hanifi & Karsligil, 2019; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2022). To meet these demands, social workers must adapt to changing social conditions and respond effectively across diverse community contexts.

*Corresponding Author: haint79@ulsa.edu.vn

© 2026 The Author(s). All rights reserved.

Competency-based education reflects these changing expectations of professional practice. Across higher education generally, and within social work education specifically, competency-based curricula have been introduced to help students integrate disciplinary knowledge with professional practice. This approach strengthens the connections among knowledge, skills, professional values, and field learning, helping students become better prepared for professional practice after graduation (Gasker, 2023; Wayne et al., 2010).

In practice, however, competency development does not always follow a straightforward path. Strong academic performance does not automatically translate into effective professional practice, which also requires adaptability, collaboration, and sustained engagement in changing community environments (Wang et al., 2019). Previous studies have highlighted the importance of field education, supervision, and experiential learning in developing professional competence (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Healy, 2022; Leila & Khan, 2025). Less attention has been given to how students move beyond cognitive understanding and procedural competence toward adaptive professional practice across different community contexts. Community resource mobilization brings this into sharp focus: effective practice there depends less on what students know than on how they engage with communities, respond to changing circumstances, and translate their competencies into action in real-world settings.

The University of Labour and Social Affairs (ULSA), one of Vietnam's long-established institutions for social work education and currently under the Ministry of Home Affairs, provides a relevant setting in which to examine this issue. Since the government introduced the national plan for the development of social work as a profession in 2010 (Decision 32/2010/QĐ-TTg), formally recognizing social work as a profession and calling for the expansion of service networks to the commune level (UNICEF Vietnam, 2014), social work programs in Vietnam, including the program at ULSA, have gradually adopted competency-based approaches while expanding opportunities for field education and community engagement.

Questions nevertheless remain about how students develop competencies across different stages of their education and how educational and practice environments shape this process. The present study examines the development of community resource mobilization competencies among social work students at ULSA, focusing on cognitive competence, procedural competence, adaptive professional practice, and related contextual conditions. To examine this process, the study considers competency development as a theoretically ordered pathway while allowing for the role of context. Rather than viewing competency development simply as a linear progression from knowledge acquisition to professional practice, the study examines differences and associations among these components using cross-sectional data, rather than changes observed over time. The study therefore provides empirical evidence from a social work education system that may help inform the design of more practice-oriented learning environments.

Guided by the Competency Transition Framework introduced in Section 2.4, the study addresses two research questions. RQ1: What levels of cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice do social work students at ULSA demonstrate in community resource mobilization, and where does the largest gap between structured competence and adaptive practice emerge? RQ2: Among individual characteristics, practice context, supervisory support, and institutional conditions, which contextual factor is most strongly associated with students' adaptive professional practice? Correspondingly, the study tests one directional hypothesis: H1: Practice context is associated with adaptive professional practice after accounting for individual characteristics, supervisory support, and institutional conditions.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Competency development in social work education

Competency-based education has become a central approach in social work training worldwide, built around developing the knowledge, skills, and professional values that effective practice requires. It has given curriculum design, competency assessment, and professional accreditation a common foundation across many social work education systems (Kirst-Ashman, 2000; Wayne et al., 2010). Competency development is rarely that tidy in practice, though, especially in areas of work that involve complex situations and diverse social contexts. Professional competence does not develop in a straight line, and doing well academically is no guarantee of effective practice. A student can have a firm grasp of theory in the classroom and still struggle in real-world situations that call for flexibility, contextual judgment, and the ability to deal with multiple stakeholders at once (Reamer, 2013; Wang et al., 2019).

Cleak and Smith (2012) and Mishna et al. (2020) treat professional competence as something flexible and tied to context, describing field education as more than a place to apply classroom knowledge: it is where competence is actually developed, through experience, guidance, supervision, and direct exposure to practice. Healy (2022) makes a related argument: social work competence has to be understood within the social, institutional, and community contexts in which practice happens, since competency development is shaped as much by how students experience their learning and practice environments as by what they are taught.

Community resource mobilization brings this into sharp focus, since the work depends so heavily on community participation, collaboration with stakeholders, and responding to local conditions as they change. Competency-based curricula give students a solid cognitive and procedural base, but comparatively few studies have looked at how that base actually turns into adaptive practice within a given educational and practice setting. Understanding that transition better matters for building stronger practice-oriented learning environments in social work education.

Adaptive competence in community resource mobilization

Community resource mobilization places particular demands on competency development because it does not follow a fixed set of procedures. Professional knowledge and the ability to follow established procedures matter, but effective practice comes down to how social work students handle complex situations and adjust their approach as conditions on the ground change.

The concept of adaptive expertise captures this. Such competence develops through students' engagement with real-world problems, not just classroom instruction, and matters most when a problem has no ready-made solution. Groenier et al. (2025), reviewing work-based learning in higher education, found that this process rests on two things together: learners' procedural foundations and what the practice environment actually offers them, including feedback, opportunities for autonomy, and task complexity. In community resource mobilization, this plays out as students adjusting strategies, negotiating with stakeholders, and matching available resources to what a particular community actually needs, instead of applying a fixed procedure regardless of context (Taylor & Roberts, 2019).

Vietnamese social workers typically operate with limited resources, across institutions that differ in how they are organized and run. Identifying resources or drafting an intervention plan is only part of the job. Practitioners also have to track changes within the community, work collaboratively on problems, and revise plans as circumstances shift (Giri et al., 2025; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006; Kenny, 2010). Vietnamese social work students show a similar pattern in their own practice skills. They do better on tasks that are clearly structured and procedural, while tasks demanding flexibility and negotiation remain difficult for many of them (Duy et al., 2021; Naureen et al., 2025). Individual factors play a role here too. Chen et al. (2026), studying social work practice educators in China, found that self-efficacy was closely tied to practitioners' willingness to take on unexpected or context-dependent tasks, a result this study revisits when examining individual factors. Participation in community activities and reflective learning gives students practice in engaging with and responding to complex situations. Over time, these experiences can build their confidence in professional decision-making (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Wang et al., 2019). Some of the variation in adaptive competence across students may come from individual characteristics, but learning environments and practice opportunities also need to be considered. This matters particularly in community resource mobilization, where students have to deal with situations that may change while the work is being carried out.

Context and competency development in social work education

Social work is an applied profession, so how students develop competence depends as much on their field practice environments as on what happens in the classroom. Competency-based curricula tend to foreground knowledge and skills, but professional competence also grows out of students' interaction with educational settings, practice agencies, and the institutional conditions specific to each one (Wayne et al., 2010). Countries where social work is still professionalizing make this especially visible. In Vietnam, hospital social work education illustrates the point: workplace guidance and collaboration between universities and practice agencies have played an important part in building students' practice competencies (Pham Tien et al., 2023). Research on Vietnamese social work education more broadly shows a similar unevenness. Curricular indigenization has progressed at different rates across institutions, reflecting differences in universities' resources and partnership networks (Lan et al., 2025).

Field education shows the weight of the learning environment most clearly. Students there work with real situations, and their professional decisions are shaped by the conditions of the practice agency, the character of the community, the supervision they receive, and the resources at hand. Cleak and Smith (2012) argue that this is where students build professional judgment and adaptability, learning to carry theoretical knowledge from the classroom into actual practice. Wang et al. (2019) make a related point: what competency-based education produces depends on the curriculum, yes, but also on the quality of the settings, both agencies and communities, where students actually apply what they have learned.

Community resource mobilization makes the role of context even more important. Students have to work directly with community members, coordinate across stakeholders, and respond as social and institutional conditions shift. A growing number of studies examine how educational institutions, communities, and practice agencies work together to build professional competence. Reviews by Isokuortti et al. (2024) and Julkunen et al. (2024) describe a close, two-way relationship between these settings, where the quality of a partnership matters more than the simple fact that a partnership exists. For ULSA students, opportunities to take part in community activities, support from field supervisors, and access to practice resources are therefore connected with how they develop and apply professional competencies and build relationships with communities.

Knowledge and skills give individual students a foundation, but that foundation only goes so far in explaining how professional competence actually develops. Learning environments, practice conditions, and the opportunities students can actually access also need to be considered. In community resource mobilization, examining students' competencies in relation to these specific conditions may help explain why students in the very same training program end up applying their competencies differently once they are in their own practice contexts.

A Conceptual framework for understanding competency development in community resource mobilization

Competence in community resource mobilization is not limited to what students know. It also involves the learning and practice experiences available to them in community settings. Understanding the underlying concepts and being able to carry out structured professional tasks are necessary foundations, but students also need opportunities to work in actual practice settings and learn from community situations.

This study proposes the Competency Transition Framework, built around three closely related components. Cognitive competence covers students' understanding of community needs, resource identification, planning, intervention-related concepts, and potential challenges. Procedural competence concerns whether students can specify activities, identify resources, develop plans, and carry out structured professional tasks. Adaptive professional practice concerns how students use this knowledge and these skills when conditions are less predictable, for instance when stakeholder relationships change, available resources differ from what was expected, or practice situations require students to adjust their original plans.

The framework also includes four groups of contextual conditions: individual characteristics, practice context, supervisory support, and institutional conditions. These form part of the environment in which students develop and apply their competencies and may shape the relationships among the three components. Effective community resource mobilization and competent professional performance are identified as the intended practice outcomes.

This structure draws on work in social work and adult learning that views professional competence as developing through experience, action, and reflection, rather than through instruction alone (Occhiuto et al., 2024; Reid et al., 2024). The contribution of the present study is more specific. It brings cognitive competence, procedural competence, contextual conditions, and adaptive professional practice into one analytical framework and applies it to undergraduate social work students in Vietnam, where these relationships have received limited empirical attention. The Competency Transition Framework does not replace existing perspectives on competency-based education and adaptive expertise. It applies and extends them to a specific area of social work practice and education (Groenier et al., 2025; Wayne et al., 2010).

Methodology

Research design

With a clear focus on these competency dimensions, the study used a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine competency development in community resource mobilization through three closely related components: cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice. This design allowed the study to assess students' knowledge and practice skills, while also examining the relationships between the competency components and contextual conditions within the same group of ULSA students. As the data were collected at a single point in time, the study did not seek to determine how students' competencies develop over time. Examining such a developmental process would require a longitudinal design.

The study was based on the Competency Transition Framework presented in the previous section, with three conceptually related components: cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice. As shown in Figure 1, the framework focuses on these components in relation to contextual conditions such as the practice environment, supervision, institutional support, and learning opportunities. With the cross-sectional design used here, the analysis focuses on differences and relationships among the components at the time of the survey rather than changes in competency over time.

In addition, the study used a quantitative survey to assess the competency components and contextual factors within this specific group of students. The survey data allowed the research team to compare cognitive competence, structured professional skills, and adaptive practice, and to identify gaps among these components. The analysis provides empirical evidence and a basis for considering the Competency Transition Framework in the context of community resource mobilization among social work students in Vietnam.

Participants and data collection

The study involved 120 undergraduate social work students at the University of Labour and Social Affairs (ULSA), Vietnam. Participants were third- and fourth-year students who had completed most of the core social work courses and had practice experience related to community social work through the Community Development Practice module. These students were selected in line with the study objectives because they had acquired the professional knowledge and practice experience needed to examine cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice in community resource mobilization.

A questionnaire survey was conducted within the Community Development Practice module to examine students' community resource mobilization practice. The questionnaire covered students' knowledge, resource mobilization skills, and factors related to the implementation of resource mobilization activities. The sample consisted of 120 students from the D17 and D18 cohorts in the Faculty of Social Work, including 67 D17 students in their third year and 53 D18 students in their fourth year. All had completed the Community Development Practice module and participated voluntarily in the survey. The number of eligible students who were invited but did not participate was not fully recorded. A formal response rate could therefore not be calculated, and the sample was not treated as a census of all eligible students. Purposive sampling was used, with eligibility based on completion of the relevant module and related practice experience. No a priori sample size calculation was conducted because the study focused on students who met these practice-based criteria rather than on estimating population parameters through probability sampling.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire assessing students' knowledge, practice skills, learning and practice conditions, and outcomes related to community resource mobilization. The questionnaire was developed based on competency requirements in social work

education in Vietnam and adjusted to the specific characteristics of community resource mobilization practice. Before the main survey, social work educators reviewed the questionnaire, and it was piloted with a small group of students to check its clarity and relevance to the study context. Participants had different experiences of field education, community activities, and learning environments. Differences in practice opportunities, supervision, and community settings provided the contextual information used in examining the Competency Transition Framework. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. Participant information was kept confidential and anonymous throughout data collection and analysis. Of the 120 participants, 85 (70.8%) were female and 35 (29.2%) were male. Third-year students accounted for 55.8% of the sample (*n* = 67), while fourth-year students accounted for 44.2% (n = 53). In terms of overall academic performance, 86 students (71.7%) were classified as good or excellent, 28 (23.3%) as fair, and 6 (5.0%) as average or below. Performance in the community resource mobilization practicum showed a different distribution: 54 students (45.0%) were rated good or excellent, 56 (46.7%) were rated as fair, and 10 (8.3%) were rated as average or below. Compared with overall academic performance, community resource mobilization practicum performance was more widely distributed across the three categories. This provides an initial descriptive indication of the competency gap examined further.

Measures and Competency Dimensions

The measures used in this study were developed based on the Competency Transition Framework presented in the previous section. Three competency components were considered: cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice. Contextual conditions related to students' learning and practice were measured separately. Cognitive competence was assessed using knowledge items scored as correct or incorrect. The other measures used five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated higher levels of competence or more favourable contextual conditions. The questionnaire was developed with reference to competency requirements for undergraduate social work education in Vietnam, literature on competency-based education and community resource mobilization practice (T. H. Nguyen & Dao, 2020), and the learning outcomes related to community resource mobilization. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with the results reported in Table I.

Cognitive competence refers to students' understanding of community resource mobilization. It was assessed through four areas: identifying community resource needs, planning resource mobilization, understanding the implementation of mobilization activities, and anticipating potential challenges. These areas covered students' understanding of the main tasks involved in community resource mobilization. Procedural competence was measured through students' ability to carry out structured professional tasks. Four skill areas were included: activity specification, resource identification, planning, and implementation. This component focused on students' ability to perform specific tasks in community resource mobilization, whereas cognitive competence focused on their knowledge and understanding. Contextual conditions were measured separately in four areas: individual characteristics, practice context, supervisory support, and institutional conditions. These measures described the learning and practice environments of the students and were examined in relation to adaptive professional practice. Given the study design, these contextual conditions were not treated as causes of competency transition over time. Adaptive professional practice refers to students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills across practice situations of varying complexity, including situations involving changes in community conditions, available resources, or stakeholder relationships. The focus here was on how flexibly students applied what they had learned to community resource mobilization practice.

Cronbach's alpha was reported separately for each subscale rather than as a single coefficient for the whole instrument. As shown in Table I, the nine Likert-type subscales had alpha coefficients ranging from .750 to .909, all above the .70 threshold. These coefficients were used to assess the internal consistency of the measures of procedural competence, contextual conditions, and adaptive professional practice. Cognitive competence was measured using four knowledge items scored as correct or incorrect and was therefore not included among the Likert-type subscales in Table I. Exploratory factor analysis was also conducted on the Likert-type subscales to examine whether the groups of measures were empirically distinguishable. The factor analysis did not produce a structure as clear as the internal-consistency results. It was therefore not used as evidence to confirm the structure of the Competency Transition Framework. This result is reported as a measurement limitation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 22. The analysis was conducted in four stages, focusing on cognitive competence, procedural competence, adaptive professional practice, and contextual conditions. In the first stage, descriptive statistics were used to examine students' cognitive competence across different areas of community resource mobilization. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used according to the characteristics of the variables and measures.

Table I
Internal Consistency Reliability of Measurement Sub-scales (*N* = 120)

Dimension	Sub-scale	Items	Cronbach's α
Procedural competence	Activity specification	5	.817
Procedural competence	Resource identification	4	.755
Procedural competence	Planning	5	.784
Procedural competence	Implementation	5	.750
Contextual conditions	Individual factors	8	.901
Contextual conditions	Practice context	5	.909
Contextual conditions	Supervisor factors	6	.870
Contextual conditions	Institutional factors	5	.853
Adaptive professional practice	Practice outcomes	4	.855

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data.

Note. Cognitive competence was assessed using knowledge-check items and was therefore not included in the reliability analysis of the Likert-based subscales

In the second stage, the analysis focused on procedural competence and adaptive professional practice. Means and standard deviations were used to describe and compare students' scores across the skill areas. This comparison was used to examine differences between students' ability to perform structured tasks and their ability to apply these skills in practice. In the third stage, four groups of contextual conditions were examined: individual characteristics, practice context, supervisory support, and institutional conditions. Descriptive statistics were used to report the levels of these factors within the study sample. Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the contextual factors and adaptive professional practice. The model included individual characteristics, practice context, supervisory support, and institutional conditions. The analysis identified which factors were independently associated with adaptive professional practice when the other factors were included in the model. The results were interpreted as statistical associations at the time of the survey and were not used to establish causal relationships or changes in competency over time.

Results

Knowledge distribution and cognitive readiness for resource mobilization

The results in Table II show that students' knowledge varied across different areas of community resource mobilization.

Table II
Students' Knowledge across Resource Mobilization Domains (*N* = 120)

Domain	% Correct
Identifying resource needs	72.5
Planning resource mobilization	83.3
Implementing mobilization activities	60.8
Anticipating challenges	38.3

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data.

Students had the highest percentage of correct responses for planning resource mobilization (83.3%), followed by identifying resource needs (72.5%). The percentage was lower for implementing resource mobilization activities (60.8%) and lowest for anticipating potential challenges (38.3%). The difference between planning and anticipating challenges was therefore nearly 45 percentage points.

These differences show that third- and fourth-year social work students at ULSA performed better in areas that were more structured and clearly defined, but had greater difficulty with areas that required them to anticipate and deal with situations that could not be determined in advance. This represents a notable competency gap, as community practice often involves changes in local conditions, available resources, and stakeholder participation. Along with knowledge and planning skills, social work education therefore needs to prepare students with the information and skills needed to identify potential difficulties and adapt their responses to different practice contexts.

From structured t to adaptive practice: Evidence of a skill gap

The practical skills of ULSA social work students showed a pattern similar to that found for knowledge. As shown in Table III, scores were lower for areas requiring greater adaptation than for more clearly structured tasks.

Table III
Practical skills in resource mobilization (*N* = 120)

Skill domain	Mean	SD
Activity specification	4.11	0.73
Resource identification	3.68	0.70
Planning	3.66	0.88
Implementation	3.19	0.78
Overall score	3.66	—

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data.

Students had the highest score for activity specification (Mean = 4.11), reflecting a relatively good ability to define tasks and organize intervention activities. Resource identification (Mean = 3.68) and planning (Mean = 3.66) received very similar scores, while implementation had the lowest score (Mean = 3.19).

The difference between activity specification and implementation was approximately 0.9 points. ULSA social work students therefore performed better in identifying and organizing activities but experienced greater difficulty when moving to actual implementation. At this stage, students need to coordinate with different stakeholders, such as local authorities, village Party secretaries, village heads, and local mass organizations. They also need knowledge and skills in negotiation and in dealing with problems that arise under actual practice conditions. Resource identification and planning, by comparison, received almost the same scores (3.68 and 3.66), showing a similar level of performance in these two areas. Among the four skill domains examined, implementation remained the area in which social work students had the lowest score.

Contextual conditions associated with competency development

The analysis presented in Table IV shows that the gap between students' knowledge and practice performance is tied to the conditions of their learning and practice environments as much as to individual competence.

Table IV
Factors influencing resource mobilization practice (*N* = 120)

Factor group	Mean	SD
Individual factors	3.32	0.78
Practice context	4.17	0.87
Supervisor factors	3.68	0.80
Institutional factors	3.59	0.78

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data.

The results show that practice context had the highest mean score (Mean = 4.17), while individual factors had the lowest (Mean = 3.32), with a difference of 0.85 points between the two groups. At the descriptive level, social work students at ULSA rated practice context higher than individual factors. However, these findings are based on descriptive statistics from cross-sectional data, and the difference should not be interpreted as evidence of an effect or a causal relationship between the factors.

Supervisor and institutional factors had mean scores of 3.68 and 3.59, respectively. The practice environment, supervisory support, institutional conditions, and individual factors were therefore reflected at different levels in students' community practice experiences. When all four groups of factors were entered simultaneously into the regression model in below, the results differed from the ranking based on the mean scores reported in Table IV.

Factors associated with practice Outcomes: Evidence from Regression Analysis

To examine the relationships between the groups of factors and adaptive professional practice more closely, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The results are presented in Table V.

The results in Table V show that H1 was not supported. This hypothesis proposed that practice context would be associated with adaptive professional practice when individual factors, supervisory support, and institutional conditions were considered simultaneously. However, when all four groups of factors were included in the model, practice context had a negative coefficient and was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.097$, $p = .261$).

Table V
Regression analysis of factors associated with practice outcomes (N = 120)

Variables	B	SE	β	p	95% CI	VIF
Individual factors	0.391	0.083	0.405	< .001	[0.227, 0.555]	1.03
Practice context	-0.085	0.075	-0.097	.261	[-0.234, 0.064]	1.03
Supervisor factors	0.076	0.081	0.080	.353	[-0.085, 0.237]	1.03
Institutional factors	0.118	0.084	0.120	.164	[-0.049, 0.285]	1.03

Model fit. R^2 = .173, adjusted R^2 = .145, F(4, 115) = 6.033, p < .001. VIF (variance inflation factor) values for all four predictors were below 1.04, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity among predictors (VIF < 5; see Table IV).
Note. β = standardized coefficient; SE = standard error of B; N = 120

Among the four groups of factors, only individual factors were significantly associated with adaptive professional practice (B = 0.391, SE = 0.083, β = 0.405, p < .001). Practice context (B = −0.085, SE = 0.075, β = −0.097, p = .261), supervisory support (B = 0.076, SE = 0.081, β = 0.080, p = .353), and institutional conditions (B = 0.118, SE = 0.084, β = 0.120, p = .164) were not statistically significant in the model. This differs from the descriptive results in Table IV, where practice context had the highest mean score among the four groups of factors.

The regression model was statistically significant, with R^2 = .173, adjusted R^2 = .145, F(4, 115) = 6.033, p < .001. The four groups of factors explained approximately 17.3% of the variance in adaptive professional practice, decreasing to 14.5% based on the adjusted R^2.

The regression results also show that the ranking found in the descriptive statistics was not fully reflected when the factors were considered together. Although practice context received the highest rating from ULSA social work students in Table IV, it was not independently or significantly associated with adaptive professional practice in the regression model. Individual factors, in contrast, were the only group showing a statistically significant association.

These results do not mean that practice context, supervisory support, or institutional conditions have no role in social work students' practice. In this sample, when individual factors were included in the model, the other three groups of factors did not independently explain additional variation in adaptive professional practice at a statistically significant level.

Interpreting competency development as a contextual learning process

Across these results, social work students' competencies split into three layers:

• Layer 1 – Cognitive competence: Social work students demonstrated higher levels of knowledge in more clearly structured areas, particularly planning and identifying resource needs (Table II).

• Layer 2 – Procedural competence: Social work students performed better on structured tasks that they could manage more directly, with activity specification receiving the highest score (Table III).

• Layer 3 – Adaptive professional practice: Performance at this layer was lower for tasks that depended more heavily on actual practice conditions, as shown by implementation receiving the lowest score (Table III).

The clearest gap was between procedural competence and adaptive professional practice. Scores declined as students moved from structured tasks to activities requiring greater flexibility and the ability to respond to specific conditions in practice settings. However, these three competency layers were measured among the same group of students at a single point in time. The results therefore reflect differences among competency components and do not establish that students' progress sequentially from one competency layer to another over time.

As described above, practice context had the highest mean score among the four groups of factors examined. When the four groups were entered simultaneously into the regression model in Table V, however, only individual factors were significantly associated with adaptive professional practice. The descriptive and regression results therefore show different aspects of the data. Students rated practice context highly, while differences in adaptive professional practice within this sample were more clearly associated with individual factors.

The development of students' community resource mobilization competencies therefore needs attention in two areas. On the one hand, students' readiness and individual competence need to be strengthened as they participate in practice. On the other hand, practice environments, supervision, and support from educational institutions remain important conditions to consider when organizing student practice, even though their independent associations with adaptive professional practice were not statistically significant in this sample.

Discussion

Understanding the competency gap in community resource mobilization

Here, the competency gap among social work students was found to involve more than the gap between knowledge and practice; it is also tied to how well they make use of opportunities available in their practice environments. Although social work students rated their practice context relatively positively, differences in adaptive professional practice were more clearly associated with individual factors. Even within the same practice environment and with similar opportunities, students may therefore achieve different outcomes depending on their own readiness

and ability to engage in practice. This pattern was also evident across the competency components examined in the study. Students performed relatively well in knowledge-related areas and structured tasks, particularly planning and organizing activities. Their performance was lower when they moved to implementation, negotiation with relevant stakeholders, and dealing with changes in actual community conditions. Students' main difficulty therefore appeared less related to acquiring knowledge and more to using their knowledge and skills in practice situations that were less predictable. Among the students surveyed, knowing what needed to be done and being able to carry it out effectively in practice were not demonstrated at the same level. This issue has also been discussed in social work education research. Wang et al. (2019) identified difficulties in transferring classroom learning to complex practice situations, while Cleak and Smith (2012) emphasized the role of practice experience in developing professional competence. Research on field education in Nordic countries by Kuusisto et al. (2024) also indicated that what students actually do during placement may be more important to their competence and professional identity than the duration or setting of the placement. This is also consistent with Wayne et al. (2010), who views professional competence as developing through experience, reflection, and engagement in practice. Malka and Huss (2025) similarly found that the professional identity of final-year students continues to develop rather than being completed through formal education.

In the Vietnamese context, community resource mobilization is of practical importance for social work students. Resources available for social services remain limited, while many community-based support activities require the participation of local authorities, social organizations, families, and community members. Social workers therefore have to go beyond identifying needs and developing plans: they must locate, connect, and mobilize resources already available within communities. This is increasingly relevant as social work in Vietnam continues to develop its legal framework, service networks, and professional education. For ULSA, one of the early institutions to offer undergraduate social work education in Vietnam, the results also point to the need to continue connecting what students learn with the situations and conditions they actually encounter in community practice.

The ULSA findings add another aspect to the existing literature. Students were educated within the same program, but they did not all translate practice opportunities into adaptive professional practice to the same degree. This does not reduce the importance of field education. It means that both the opportunities provided by the practice environment and students' ability to make use of those opportunities need to be considered. Pattaranukrom (2025) raised a similar issue in Thailand, where practicum quality and institutional support were important in preparing students for professional practice. In this study, the competency gap therefore cannot be considered solely in terms of the curriculum, practice conditions, or individual competence. It needs to be understood in relation to both the student and the environment in which practice takes place.

Contextual conditions shaping competency transition

The three components of the Competency Transition Framework (cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice) are theoretically related, but this does not mean that students automatically develop from one component to another in a fixed sequence. The framework is used to examine how students' knowledge and skills are expressed in practice under different learning and practice conditions. This approach is consistent with studies that view professional competence as developing through a combination of knowledge, practice experience, reflection, and learning environments (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Wayne et al., 2010). In this process, students' readiness, initiative, self-efficacy, and prior experience also need to be considered. These characteristics may help students engage more actively in practice and deal with unfamiliar situations. Chen et al. (2026) also reported an association between self-efficacy and engagement in adaptive, non-routine tasks. At the same time, students' confidence and competence can continue to develop through practice experience and guidance Gasker, 2023; Wayne et al., 2010 not examine this process over time, but the results show that student readiness needs attention alongside the provision of practice opportunities.

Community resource mobilization, particularly in the Vietnamese context, illustrates why this matters. Resource mobilization takes place in conditions where available resources, community needs, and stakeholder participation may change. Social work students therefore cannot rely only on the procedures they have learned; they also need to negotiate, adjust their plans, and address problems that arise in practice (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006; Kenny, 2010). In Vietnam, practice settings may also differ in available resources, organizational arrangements, and coordination among local authorities, organizations, and communities. For ULSA students, community practice is therefore more than a chance to apply what they have already learned; it is also where they learn to use and adjust their knowledge and skills under different practice conditions. Supervision and support from educational institutions also shape how this process is organized. Supervisors can help students analyze situations, reflect on what they have done, and adjust their responses. However, the quality of supervision depends partly on supervisors' preparation and the conditions of the practice setting. Pascoe (2025) found that practice educators may take on supervisory responsibilities without being fully prepared for this role. In addition, connections among the curriculum, practice agencies, and community organizations affect the types and quality of practice opportunities available to students (Gasker, 2023; Wang et al., 2019). Although these factors did not show statistically significant independent associations in the present study, they remain conditions to consider when organizing student practice.

The Competency Transition Framework is therefore more appropriately used as an analytical framework than as a model describing stages of competency development over time. An important function of the framework is to distinguish what students know, what they can do in structured tasks, and how they use these competencies when practice conditions change. For social work education at ULSA, this means giving students

knowledge and practice opportunities and, just as importantly, preparing them to make use of those opportunities across different community contexts. Studies in other settings have similarly identified difficulties in moving from formal preparation to professional practice in specific situations (Williams & Lee, 2025; Yao & Flynn, 2025).

Implications for social work education and professional practice

Based on the analysis above, students need greater attention to their readiness for adaptive professional practice. Individual factors were the only group independently associated with adaptive professional practice. Practice education therefore needs to weigh the opportunities available to students alongside how well prepared they are to make use of those opportunities. This preparation can begin before field placement by providing students with relevant information about community practice and the situations they may encounter. Activities can also strengthen self-efficacy, initiative, reflective ability, and confidence in unfamiliar situations. McGinn et al. (2025) similarly found that peer-led learning and assessed conversations helped students develop greater confidence in applying evidence-based practice beyond lecture-based learning alone. The curriculum also needs to address the gap between structured tasks and implementation in actual practice. Students performed better in knowledge-based areas and activities with relatively clear procedures but experienced greater difficulty with implementation, negotiation, and adjustment to changing conditions. Community-based projects, case simulations, reflective activities, and problem-solving exercises can give students opportunities to make decisions and respond to situations that cannot be addressed simply by following learned procedures. These activities can be incorporated both before and during field placement to help students move from classroom knowledge to direct work with communities. In addition, social work students could develop a practical handbook of common situations encountered in community practice and appropriate ways to respond.

Field education remains an important part of social work training, but simply increasing its duration or the number of practice activities may not be enough to address the competency gap. Greater attention needs to be given to what students actually do and learn during field practice. The quality of practice settings, supervision, and students' meaningful participation in community activities affect the situations they encounter and their opportunities to test, adjust, and develop their competencies. Vietnam illustrates the stakes directly: limitations in the diversity of practice settings, supervisory capacity, and partnerships with communities have been reported across social work and community development education there (Pham & Truong, 2024; Pham Tien et al., 2023). Partnerships between educational institutions and communities are therefore important for maintaining diverse and meaningful practice opportunities. The disruption of social work field placements in Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that differences in university–community partnerships affected the ability to maintain field learning (T. D. Q. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Strong partnerships with local stakeholders and community members can do more than increase the number of available practice settings. They can also expose students to different communities, stakeholders, and practice situations. For ULSA, this means preparing students more effectively for situations requiring adaptation while continuing to improve the quality of the environments in which they undertake field practice.

These educational implications also need to be considered in relation to the continuing development of regulations on social work practice in Vietnam. Decision No. 112/QĐ-TTg (2021), Decree No. 110/2024/NĐ-CP, and Circular No. 29/2026/TT-BYT reflect the increasing specification of the legal and professional framework for social work. Under Decree No. 110/2024/NĐ-CP, professional practice is one of the requirements for social work practice registration, while Circular No. 29/2026/TT-BYT provides more specific requirements for professional practice and includes resource mobilization and resource connection among the areas of social work practice. At present, however, recognized practice settings are defined within units and facilities that provide social work services. This is directly relevant to the focus of the present study. Community resource mobilization requires social workers to work directly with local stakeholders, identify and connect resources, negotiate participation, and respond to changes in community conditions. Students in this study also experienced greater difficulty in these areas when moving from structured tasks to implementation. Community-based practice can therefore provide a valuable environment for developing competencies that may be difficult to develop fully when practice is mainly undertaken within service-providing facilities. As Vietnam continues to develop guidance for professional social work practice, these findings provide additional grounds for more clearly considering the place of community-based practice within professional practice arrangements. This may also strengthen the connection between university education, community practice, and the professional competencies expected of social workers after graduation.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted with social work students at ULSA only. The results therefore reflect the curriculum and field practice environment of this institution and cannot be generalized to other social work programs in Vietnam. Future studies could include students from different universities and practice settings to examine whether similar patterns are found elsewhere.

Second, the data were collected at one point in time. The study therefore cannot determine changes in students' competencies over time or establish causal relationships among the factors examined. The differences in cognitive competence, procedural competence, and adaptive professional practice were observed within the same group of students at the time of the survey. They do not mean that individual students develop sequentially through these three components. Future research could follow the same students across different stages of their education and field practice to examine the Competency Transition Framework over time.

Third, most measures were based on students' self-reports. Cognitive competence was assessed through knowledge questions, but procedural competence, adaptive professional practice, and contextual conditions were measured within the same questionnaire. The results may therefore be affected by common method variance and social desirability, including the associations reported in the regression model (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Future studies could combine student self-reports with independent assessments by lecturers, field supervisors, or direct observation of students' practice.

There were also limitations related to the sample and measurement. A formal response rate could not be calculated because the total number of eligible students invited to participate was not fully recorded. Although the Likert-based subscales showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .750–.909; Table I), exploratory factor analysis did not clearly reproduce the proposed structure of the components. The Competency Transition Framework is therefore used in this study mainly as a conceptual and analytical framework rather than as an established measurement model. Future studies with larger samples from multiple institutions could use confirmatory factor analysis or structural equation modelling to examine the structure of the framework and the relationships among its competency components across different practice settings.

Conclusion

This study examined community resource mobilization competencies among social work students in Vietnam. The results show that students performed relatively well in knowledge-based areas and clearly structured professional tasks, but experienced greater difficulty when moving to actual implementation, particularly in activities requiring negotiation and adjustment to changing community conditions. Although practice context received the highest rating among the groups of factors examined, it was not independently associated with adaptive professional practice in the regression model. Individual factors were the only group showing a statistically significant association. H1 was therefore not supported.

Community resource mobilization competence cannot be reduced to what students have learned or the opportunities available in their practice environments. Students' readiness and practice conditions need to be considered together. The Competency Transition Framework used in this study helps distinguish what students know, what they can do in structured tasks, and how they apply these competencies when practice conditions change. It does not assume that competency development follows a fixed sequence.

For social work education, students need better preparation before entering field practice, together with continued improvement in the quality of field learning, supervision, and community-based learning opportunities. As Vietnam continues to develop its legal framework and professional practice requirements for social work, community-based practice also deserves attention as an environment where students can learn to apply their knowledge and skills across diverse and changing practice situations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the social work students who participated in this study and the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Labour and Social Affairs (ULSA) for supporting the research. The authors also thank colleagues who provided comments during the study's development.

Informed consent

Participation was voluntary. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to decline or withdraw before providing written informed consent. Responses were anonymized and used only for research purposes.

Funding

This study received partial support from the University of Labour and Social Affairs (ULSA), Vietnam, mainly for data collection and administrative activities related to the research.

References

Aikawa, M., Han, M., Nguyen, T. T., Dinh, L., & Bui, M. T. (2025). Improving field education for social work in Vietnam: Intern supervisors' perspectives of the current state and potential solutions. *International Social Work*, *68*(1), 142–157. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728241288016

Chen, H., Shardlow, S. M., & Zhang, S. (2026). Developing 'self-efficacy'as an outcome measure in capacity building among social work practice educators in China. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *56*(4), 1959–1980. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf250

Cleak, H., & Smith, D. (2012). Student satisfaction with models of field placement supervision. *Australian Social Work*, *65*(2), 243–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2020.1790661

Duy, C. N., et al. (2021). Factors affecting the quality culture of Dong Thap University. *Dong Thap University Journal of Science*, *10*(2), 77–84. https://doi.org/10.52714/dthu.10.2.2021.857

Gasker, J. (2023). *Generalist social work practice*. Sage Publications.

Giri, M., Khatri, G. S., & Maharjan, M. M. (2025). Fusion Of Hindu, Buddhist, and folk religious culture of Dapha Khal musical performance of Newars of Kirtipur. *International Journal of Religion, 6*(1), 675–688.

Groenier, M., Khaled, A., Kamphorst, J., Tankink, T., Endedijk, M., Fluit, C., & Kuijer-Siebelink, W. (2025). Adaptive expertise development during work-based learning in higher education: A realist review. *Vocations and Learning*, *18*(1), 11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-025-09366-5

Hanifi, K., & Karsligil, M. E. (2019). Contactless vital signs monitoring using Doppler radar sensor. *Journal of Advances in Technology and Engineering Research*, *5*(2), 72–78.

Healy, K. (2022). *Social work theories in context: Creating frameworks for practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ife, J. W., & Tesoriero, F. (2006). *Community development: Community-based alternatives in an age of globalisation*. Pearson Education.

Isokuortti, N., Julkunen, I., Jäppinen, M., Pasanen, K., & Nikula, I. (2024). Features and outcomes of community-academic partnerships in social work: A scoping review. *European Journal of Social Work*, *27*(6), 1178–1200. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2024.2309526

Julkunen, I., Joubert, L., Fouché, C., Webber, M., Short, M., Whitaker, L., & Metteri, A. (2024). Practice research partnerships in social work: Addressing impact and credible evidence. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *34*(6), 652–663. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315241229680

Kenny, S. (2010). *Developing communities for the future*. Deakin University.

Kirst-Ashman, K. K. (2000). Human behavior, communities, organizations, and groups in the macro social environment: An empowerment approach.

Kuusisto, K., Cleak, H., Roulston, A., & Korkiamäki, R. (2024). Learning activities during practice placements: Developing professional competence and social work identity of social work students. *Nordic Social Work Research*, *14*(2), 239–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2022.2072942

Lan, N. T. T., Hugman, R., & Giang, T. T. H. (2025). Social work education in Vietnam: The development, challenges and ongoing effort to indigenization in the past two decades. *Social Work Education*, *44*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2360056

Leila, M. A. E., & Khan, S. A. (2025). How employer branding impacts sustainable performance through brand image and perception, and the moderating role of employee engagement. *Journal of Administrative and Business Studies*, *11*(4), 223–235.

Malka, M., & Huss, E. (2025). "What is it like to be (come) a social worker?" professional-identity formation from final-year social work students' perspectives-photovoice-based study. *Social Work Education*, *44*(6), 1635–1661. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2417731

McGinn, T., Pascoe, K. M., & Burns, P. (2025). Teaching social work students about evidence-based practice using peer-led learning and assessed conversations. *Social Work Education*, *44*(6), 1519–1534. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2409182

Mishna, F., Sanders, J., & Solomon, R. (2020). Social work field education in the digital era. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *48*(3), 201–210.

Naureen, N., Monir, M., Nuha, T., & Shadman, A. Y. (2025). Educational inequality in rural and urban Bangladesh amid Covid 19: A multilevel ecological analysis through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)*, *23*(2), 273–287.

Nguyen, H. T., Cohen, E., Văn Đỗ, T., Nguyễn, D. H. T., Ngô, T. M. T., Văn Kiều, T., Thị, K. D. L., Đặng, M. L. T., Le, T. T., & Bui, M. T. (2022). Social work field education in Vietnam: Challenges and recommendations for a better model. *International Social Work*, *65*(6), 1216–1231.

Nguyen, T. H., & Dao, M. T. (2020). *Social work with communities*. Labour; Social Affairs Publishing House.

Nguyen, T. D. Q., & Nguyen, T. P. L. (2024). Developing social work education in Vietnam: The student field practicum during the pandemic. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *25*(1), 111–124.

Occhiuto, K., Tarshis, S., Todd, S., & Gheorghe, R. (2024). Reflecting on reflection in clinical social work: Unsettling a key social work strategy. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *54*(6), 2642–2660. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae052

Pascoe, K. M. (2025). 'I don't think they look at this as an issue'. Exploring the training and development needs of practice educators in social work field education. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *55*(5), 2038–2055. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf032

Pattaranukrom, P. (2025). Competency development for social work students for working as professional social workers: Insights from Thailand. *Multidisciplinary Science Journal*, *7*(9), 2025429.

Pham, T. H. B., & Truong, T. L. (2024). Social work practicum among students at Trade Union University. *Journal of Trade Union Science Research*, *33*, 77–85.

Pham Tien, N., Hung, N., Tran, S. G., Dung, N., Le, V., Tran, T. K. H., Nguyen, K. O., Vu, T. T. M., Nguyen, T. P., Nguyen Xuan, L., et al. (2023). Hospital social work education in Vietnam: Achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. *Social Work Education*, *42*(8), 1510–1525. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2039115

Podsakoff, P. M., Podsakoff, N. P., Williams, L. J., Huang, C., & Yang, J. (2024). Common method bias: It's bad, it's complex, it's widespread, and it's not easy to fix. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *11*(2024), 17–61. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-110721-040030

Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social work in a digital age: Ethical and risk management challenges. *Social Work*, *58*(2), 163–172.

Reid, K., Woodman, E., Trost, W., & Prammar, K. (2024). Beyond a commitment of teaching critical reflection: A scoping review of social work education literature. *Social Work Education*, *43*(9), 2824–2846. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2292140

Taylor, J., & Roberts, A. (2019). Project management in human services.

UNICEF Vietnam. (2014). *Review of national plan to develop professional social work: Decision 32/2010/qđ-ttg concerning national plan 32 to develop professional social work*. https://shorturl.at/SUJO2

Wang, Y., Liu, Z., Qiao, D., & Zhang, H. (2019). Transfer is not enough: A case study from a western-style MSW program in Beijing. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *29*(7), 832–842. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518820132

Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *46*(3), 327–339.

Williams, J. M., & Lee, E. (2025). A systematic review of cultural competence educational techniques in social work education. *International Social Work*, *68*(3), 397–414. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728241269769

Yao, H.-Y., & Flynn, C. (2025). International graduates of social work in Australia: A longitudinal study of those who struggle to develop professional identity. *International Social Work*, *68*(4), 635–648.