



Funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Children and Youth
(ESWOCHY Programme)

Shaping Social Work Students' Professional Identity:
ESWOCHY Programme Case

Mateja Todorovski

Supervisor: prof. dr. Daiva Penkauskienė

ISCTE, 2025



RĪGA STRADIŅŠ
UNIVERSITY



iscte
INSTITUTO
UNIVERSITÁRIO
DE LISBOA

Abstract

This thesis explores the development of professional identity among social work students participating in the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY). Against the backdrop of increasing global mobility, intercultural complexity, and digital transformation, this study investigates how international, interdisciplinary, and transnational learning experiences shape students' evolving sense of self as social work professionals.

Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and using qualitative methodology, this research draws on semi-structured interviews with ESWOCHY students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. The study is guided by a conceptual framework that considers cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of identity, and it is thematically anchored in two of the programme's core pillars: humanistic perspective and intercultural communication.

The findings reveal that students' professional identity formation is influenced by their prior experiences, educational and intercultural exposure, values, and aspirations. Experiential learning, reflexive practice, and peer interaction in diverse contexts emerge as significant contributors to their identity development. However, the transnational character of the programme also introduces challenges, including ambiguity in role definition, fragmented institutional expectations, and varied national interpretations of social work practice.

This research contributes to the understanding of identity formation in international social work education, offering insights for educators and programme designers to better support students' professional growth. It highlights the importance of intentional pedagogical strategies and context-sensitive curriculum design to foster confident, ethically grounded, and culturally competent social work professionals.

Keywords: students professional identity, social work education, ESWOCHY, intercultural learning, humanistic perspective, transnational study programmes

Table of contents

I. Introduction and problem area	6
I.1 Background and context	6
I.2 Research problem and justification.....	8
I.3 Research question and objectives	9
II. Literature review and conceptual foundations	11
II.1 Theoretical foundations of professional identity formation.....	11
II.1.1 Understanding identity and professional identity.....	11
II.1.2 The development of professional identity in higher education	14
II.1.3 Peculiarities of professional identity in social work.....	18
II.2 Factors shaping of professional identity in international social work education	22
II.2.1 Educational and experiential influences on professional identity shaping	22
II.2.2 Cultural, emotional and institutional contexts in shaping professional identity.....	25
II.2.3 Transnational learning environments in professional identity negotiation	26
III. Analytical framework	30
III.1 Purpose and role of the analytical framework	30
III.2 Connection to conceptual framework	30
III.3 Analytical categories	31
III.3.1 Values and ethical orientation	31
III.3.2 Professional roles and responsibilities.....	31
III.3.3 Learning and educational experiences.....	32
III.3.4 Institutional and programme influences (ESWOCHY)	32
III.3.5 Cultural and transnational context	32
III.3.6 Reflexivity and self-understanding	33
III.3.7 Aspirations and future professional direction	33
III.4 Integration of analytical framework with coding process	33
III.5 Analytical framework as interpretive lens	34
IV. Methodology	35
IV.1 Research Design	35
IV.2 Data collection methods	36
IV.2.1 Sampling technique and selection process.....	36
IV.2.2 Ethical considerations	37
IV.2.3 Data collection process	38
IV.2.4 Design of the interview questions	39
IV.3 Data analysis	39
IV.4 Limitations of the study	42

V. Findings and analysis.....	44
V.1 Values and ethical orientation	44
V.1.1 Anchoring empathy and human sensitivity in lived experience	45
V.1.2 Respect, open-mindedness, and cultural humility in a shared space	46
V.1.3 Striving for balance: Self-awareness, boundaries and mental health	46
V.2 Professional roles and responsibilities.....	47
V.2.1 Learning to differentiate and define the professional role	48
V.2.2 Negotiating role expectations across contexts	49
V.2.3 Rethinking authority, collaboration and boundaries	49
V.3 Learning and educational experiences	50
V.3.1 From disorientation to orientation: Learning the landscape	50
V.3.2 Experiential learning as a trigger for confidence	51
V.3.3 Learning through others: Peers, pedagogy and perspective	52
V.4 Institutional and programme influences (ESWOCHY)	53
V.5 Cultural and transnational context.....	54
V.6 Reflexivity and self-understanding	56
V.7 Aspiration and future professional direction.....	58
VI. Discussion	60
VI.1 Interpretation of findings in relation to research questions.....	60
VI.1.1 The meaning of professional identity as understood by ESWOCHY students	61
VI.1.2 Students' experience-based interpretation of professional identity.....	61
VI.1.3 Programme-specific contributors to identity formation	62
VI.1.4 Significant learning experiences shaping professional identity.....	63
VI.2 Theoretical reflections.....	64
VI.3 Implications for practice and programme development.....	65
VI.4 Limitations and considerations.....	66
VII. Conclusions	67
Appendix B. Sample transcript excerpt with applied codes	68
Screenshot: MAXQDA-coded transcript segment (P14)	69

Student identity P14

it's a little bit hard to identify yourself, like you're just like, it's just a sentence

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 28

it's a little bit hard to identify yourself, like you're just like, it's just a sentence, because like, in our country, it's not that much developed, it's not that much famous.

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Professional recognition struggle Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 28

in European countries as well, like, it's not the most famous field

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Professional recognition struggle Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 29

we need to kind of prove ourselves, that what we are doing, we need to explain ourselves.

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Role specific clarity/conflict Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 29

I can maybe identify myself as more, more like someone who tries to work with individuals

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 30

I can maybe identify myself as more, more like someone who tries to work with individuals, that level

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Specialisation uncertainty Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 30

So I can't say that there's one identification for social workers.

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Role specific clarity/conflict Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 31

there's one identification for social workers

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 31

we always try to kind of prove ourselves, we always try to explain ourselves,

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 31

we always try to kind of prove ourselves, we always try to explain ourselves, that what we're really doing, because it's kind of a field that like, it has a connection with other fields.

.....	69
References.....	70

I. Introduction and problem area

“Because your role is not really defined, people don’t know your identity... When you say ‘a lawyer’, they know, ‘a doctor’, they know. But for us, whilst our role is not really defined, our identity is really difficult.”
— Participant P11

This statement, shared by a student in the ESWOCHY programme, encapsulates the ambiguity and struggle many social work students experience when attempting to articulate their professional identity. Unlike professions with clearly defined public roles, social work, especially in international, intercultural and digital contexts, lacks a universally recognised profile. This ambiguity becomes even more pronounced in transnational programmes such as ESWOCHY, where students navigate diverse academic systems, cultural expectations and field realities. Understanding this challenge through broader academic and global lenses reveals the intricate nature of shaping professional identity in the context of international social work education.

I.1 Background and context

Relevance of the topic. In a globalised and rapidly evolving professional world, social workers face increasingly complex challenges that cross national, cultural and digital boundaries. Recent estimates show that more than 281 million people are international migrants (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021) and that inequalities affecting children and youth have been deepened by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Wiles, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2022). In light of these dynamics, the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (Ioakimidis & Sookraj, 2021) emphasise the urgent need for social workers to develop intercultural competence, digital skills and the capacity to respond to human rights issues in diverse contexts.

Professional identity development, rooted in values of social justice and adaptability, has become central to the preparation of future social workers in this rapidly evolving environment. However, despite its recognised importance, recent research highlights that professional identity in social work is often inconsistently defined, under-researched and lacks systematic measurement across international contexts (Moorhead et al., 2025). Therefore, internationalisation of social work education is increasingly seen as an important pathway for fostering critical reflection and contextual understanding among students (Zhao & Moen, 2023).

In response to these global demands, the ESWOCHY programme (European Joint master’s in social work with Children and Youth) was established. It aims to prepare professionals who are not only skilled in traditional social work methods but also equipped to lead within international, intercultural and digital contexts. The programme is built upon three foundational pillars: a humanistic perspective, intercultural communication and digital social work.

Research on the topic. The concept of professional identity has been widely explored across various fields of social work research. In the literature (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017; Moorhead et al., 2025; Webb, 2025), identity is discussed as multifaceted, fluid and shaped by individual values, social interactions and institutional settings. Recent scoping reviews highlight that, although professional identity is recognised as critical to the development of social workers, it remains inconsistently defined and lacks systematic approaches to support its formation, particularly in international contexts (Moorhead et al., 2025). Wiles (2024) observed that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have brought renewed attention to the importance of professional identity, especially in relation to resilience and adaptability in social work practice.

Several studies have further illuminated the complexities faced by international social work students. Yao and Flynn (2024) conducted a longitudinal study demonstrating that international graduates often struggle to develop a coherent professional identity due to intersecting barriers related to cultural adaptation, employment challenges and institutional expectations. Similarly, Zhao and Moen (2023) illustrated how even short-term transnational learning experiences foster critical reflection and reposition students' professional learning trajectories.

Moreover, already in 2014, Tan proposed a multi-dimensional model of professional identity development. He emphasised the role of experiential learning, role models and self-efficacy, while highlighting that educational systems often inadequately address these dimensions in a coherent framework. This recognition reinforces the notion that professional identity formation is not automatic but requires intentional educational support.

Building on these insights, the ESWOCHY programme presents an ideal context for examining the development of professional identity among social work students. The programme unites students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds and engages them in a learning journey across four European countries, each offering distinct academic traditions, nationally specific welfare systems, and culturally embedded social work approaches.

Through this immersive experience, students not only acquire knowledge and competencies but also begin to shape their professional identity—an evolving process grounded in intercultural dialogue, experiential learning, and exposure to diverse pedagogical and professional norms within unique academic settings. These structural features include embedded academic mobility, layered institutional diversity and a digitally supported curriculum. Together, they require students to engage in continuous negotiation of their professional self-understanding. These experiences align with the programme's overarching goal: to prepare highly skilled professionals to lead in international, intercultural, and comparative social work with children and youth. For an overview of the ESWOCHY programme structure, intended outcomes and its theoretical pillars in relation to identity development, see Figure 1.1.

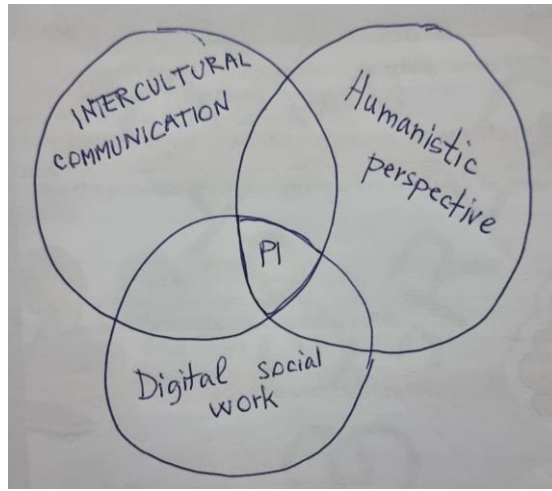


Figure 1.1: The ESWOCHY identity shaping structure

Novelty of the topic. Yet, despite these rich conditions for development, little is known about how such international and intercultural environments contribute to the shaping of social work students' professional identity. This gap underscores the need to explore how the interplay of these experiences, together with the programme's goal, contributes to students' evolving sense of self as future professionals.

This study contributes to the field by examining how students in a transnational joint degree programme, experience the formation of their professional identity. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on national educational contexts or domestic social work training, this research offers insights into professional identity development within a uniquely mobile, intercultural, and digitally integrated learning environment.

1.2 Research problem and justification

Although professional identity development is acknowledged as a key outcome of higher education in social work, it is rarely the explicit focus of programme design or empirical investigation. While much of the existing research addresses national contexts (Trede, 2012; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), limited attention has been paid to how professional identity is shaped within complex international joint degree programmes such as ESWOCHY, where students navigate additional layers of cultural, institutional and pedagogical diversity.

Several studies emphasise the role of reflective practice, competency development, and values education in supporting social work students. However, how these elements interact and shape professional identity in intercultural and transnational learning environments remains underexplored. In programmes like ESWOCHY, failure to address professional identity formation explicitly may result in fragmented development, limiting students' preparedness for diverse real-world contexts.

As noted by Trede (2012), professional identity is often assumed to form incidentally through course participation, rather than through intentional pedagogical strategies. Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) further argue that professional identity formation is a relational, socially constructed process that plays a crucial role in graduate employability and professional readiness. Without explicit attention to this developmental process, students may rely on hidden or informal curricula which may undermine or contradict the achievement of formal learning and the cultivation of desired professional values or roles. This concern is particularly relevant in the case of ESWOCHY, where the programme stated aim is to prepare students to lead in complex international and intercultural contexts, requiring a cohesive and reflective professional identity. Given that ESWOCHY students are educated across four countries and engage with diverse educational systems and setting, different languages and professional cultures, they are uniquely positioned to develop a rich and multifaceted professional identity. However, this process can also be confusing or fragmented without appropriate educational support and critical reflection.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of ESWOCHY students, with a focus on how they come to understand, shape and articulate their professional identities. The findings aim to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical improvements in international social work education. They may inform curriculum design, support services for students and pedagogical innovations in transnational programmes.

I.3 Research question and objectives

At the heart of this study lies an interest in how social work students participating in the ESWOCHY programme come to shape their professional identity. This focus emerges from the intersection of theoretical insights into identity formation and the unique educational, intercultural, and practical dimensions of the ESWOCHY learning experience. Professional identity is understood as a dynamic and relational construct that integrates personal values, role-based expectations, and group belonging within the evolving landscape of international social work. This study does not approach professional identity as a fixed role label or a checklist of competencies, but rather as an evolving internalisation of professional norms, values and orientations shaped through interaction with people, places and pedagogical systems. Rather than treating the research question and objectives as separate technical elements, they are integral to guiding the exploration of how students engage with knowledge, navigate experiences and begin to imagine themselves as future professionals in the field of social work.

The study is guided by the following research question:

How do social work students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and shape their professional identity?

To address this research question, the study pursues two overarching objectives.

First, to review and analyse theoretical perspectives related to professional identity development within the context of international social work education. This objective is operationalised through the following sub-objectives:

- To clarify key concepts of identity and professional identity and to explore theoretical models and frameworks of their development.
- To examine the peculiarities of professional identity development in social work and in international educational settings.

Second, to investigate how ESWOCHY students experience and construct their professional identity through their lived experience. This objective is operationalised through the following sub-objectives:

- To explore the key contributors to the professional identity development of an international group of social work students during their participation in the programme.
- To identify the experiences and contexts with the most significant impact in this process.
- To analyse how the learning journey across multiple countries and institutional systems shapes the way students perceive their future role in the profession and their readiness to enact it.

By focusing on these aspects, the study seeks to highlight the interplay between students lived experiences and the structural and cultural elements of the programme that influence their professional identity formation. The research is grounded in a qualitative research design and draws on content analysis of semi-structured interviews with ESWOCHY students as its primary methodological approach. It aims to generate insights that can inform both theory and practice in international social work education.

II. Literature review and conceptual foundations

This literature review explores how professional identity is conceptualised and developed, with a particular focus on the field of social work and the context of internationalised higher education settings. It reviews psychological, sociological and educational dimensions of identity formation, offering a multidimensional understanding of how individuals integrate personal values with professional roles. Special attention is given to the unique dynamics of identity formation in transnational programmes, which incorporate humanistic, intercultural and digital learning elements. By exploring these dimensions, the review provides the conceptual and analytical foundation for the empirical chapters that follow, which investigate how international group of social work students navigate and shape their professional identities in multiple international educational settings.

II.1 Theoretical foundations of professional identity formation

This section explores the theoretical foundation for understanding how professional identity is developed, particularly within the context of international social work education. In line with the first objective of this study, it begins by examining core perspectives on identity from psychological and sociological perspectives. This is followed by exploring how professional identity develops within the context of higher education settings, particularly within international based programmes. Finally, the section concludes by addressing the specific characteristics and challenges of professional identity formation in the field of social work.

II.1.1 Understanding identity and professional identity

A thorough understanding of identity, in both its personal and social dimensions, provides the conceptual groundwork for analysing how professional identity takes shape. As a foundational process in human development, identity formation encompasses how individuals perceive themselves and how they are seen within society. It is a dynamic and evolving concept, increasingly relevant in today's globalised and digitalised world where individuals navigate multiple cultural, social and professional spaces. Before exploring disciplinary approaches, it is helpful to return to the origins of the concept of identity itself, as this etymological and sociological grounding reveals key tensions that remain relevant in professional identity formation.

Historically, the evolution of the term *identity* begins with its Latin root *idem*, meaning “the same”. First recorded between 1560-70, it originally referred to the notion of being the same person over time (Orde, 2016, p. 6). This foundational idea of sameness was later expanded by Bulei and Dinu (2013), who approached identity discussion from a sociological perspective, emphasizing its dual structure: being similar and being different. This dual nature is reflected through *sameness*, meaning social similarity and *difference* meaning personal uniqueness. We are similar to others by belonging to certain social categories

such as nationality, gender or profession, yet we are unique as individuals in our personal attributes and experiences. Thus, even uniqueness becomes a shared condition as we are identical in our uniqueness throughout our lives. This paradox of being alike in our difference reflects the duality at the core of identity, linking back to its Latin origin while expanding to encompass the dynamic interplay between sameness and uniqueness. This duality echoes through both psychological and sociological theories of identity, which explain how individuals navigate the tension between internal coherence and social positioning.

Scholars widely agree that no single definition or theory fully captures complexity of identity formation (Sokol, 2009; Burke & Stets, 2023; Orde, 2016; Moorhead, 2019; Harwood, 2020). Namely, identity is shaped by numerous interacting influences including individual personality traits, family influences, social environments, cultural context and historical settings. These multidimensional factors highlight the need for an interdisciplinary approach to understand how identity is developed within specific societal and institutional roles. The two notable perspectives are psychological and sociological which differ in emphasis, but together they offer a richer understanding of how identity is both constructed and performed. Moreover, they clarify how individuals shape understanding of their professional roles as professional identity can be seen as a specific expression of broader identity formation processes.

From a psychological perspective, one of the major early theorists of identity formation was Erik Erikson. His *Psychosocial Development Theory* has conceptualised identity formation as a life-long process shaped through the successful resolution of series of psychosocial crises. His eight-stage model assumes that each stage has both, a successful and unsuccessful outcome, e.g. trust versus mistrust, initiative versus guilt, intimacy versus isolation (Sokol, 2009; Syed & McLean, 2017). Particularly relevant for resolving the tension between identity and role confusion is stage 5, where adolescents begin to explore personal values and societal roles. Successful navigation of this stage supports the formation of a coherent self-concept and the ability to commit to a career path. This leads to the ability to integrate personal beliefs with emerging societal roles, laying the foundation for developing a stable professional identity. Erikson further argues, if a person is unable to consolidate their identity, a person will experience an identity crisis with long-term psychological impacts (Weiten, 2014, as cited in Moorhead, 2017). Namely, for a productive adult life, successful resolution of all stages is essential for establishing a coherent and stable sense of self (Sokol, 2009).

However, identity is not formed in isolation. Sociological perspectives complement this by focusing on social structures and interactions. Burke and Stets (2023) in their revised edition of *Identity Theory* explain how identities are formed, maintained and altered through ongoing social interactions and structural positioning. They emphasize that identity is not static but dynamic, continuously shaped through social

interactions and role expectations. Individuals internalise social meanings associated with their role they occupy in society, which in turn guides their emotions and behaviours.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1971) adds another layer to discussion by examining how group membership and categorisation shape identity. Individuals categorise themselves and others into groups (e.g., medical or educational professions), fostering a sense of belonging and differentiation from out-groups (Harwood, 2020). This sense of in-group belonging can significantly impact professional identity development, as students begin to identify with the norms and values of their future profession.

By linking both theories, we gain deeper understanding of professional identity, which is deeply embedded in social roles, group norms and institutional expectations. In the context of students developing their professional identity, this means that they gradually internalize professional norms and expectations. They do so by observing the behaviour of colleagues and by seeking validation from both their peers and society as they shape their emerging professional identity.

Therefore, scholars such as Stets and Burke (2000) propose an integrative approach that combines psychological and sociological perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of identity as shaped by both individual role-based processes and group-level dynamics. This multifaceted understanding is especially relevant in the realm of professional identity, where personal, social and professional roles intersect and evolve. In particular, within international education settings, where students navigate multiple identity domains simultaneously: national, academic, cultural and professional.

These intersecting influences amplify the complexity of professional identity formation, making integrative theoretical approaches especially valuable. In the context of social work, professional identity can be broadly understood as the integration of personal values, theoretical knowledge, ethical principles and role-based practices that collectively shape how individuals perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as members of the profession.

To summarise, this section has introduced key theoretical perspectives on identity and professional identity, highlighting their evolving, multidimensional nature. By examining both psychological and sociological approaches, it established how individual meaning-making and social structures jointly influence professional identity formation. Together, these perspectives provide a conceptual lens through which professional identity can be understood as a dynamic process, a view that will guide the exploration of identity development among ESWOCHY students in the chapters that follow.

II.1.2 The development of professional identity in higher education

Higher education represents a pivotal period in the formation of professional identity, serving as a developmental bridge where personal growth, academic engagement and the acquisition of professional values merge. For many students, university years coincide with emerging adulthood, a stage characterized by identity exploration, value negotiation and increasing autonomy (Sokol, 2009). Within this period, students begin to engage seriously with questions of who they are and who they aspire to become in professional contexts.

Therefore, academic settings function not only as spaces for disciplinary training but also as vital arenas for identity exploration. As Moorhead et al. (2025) observe, this process is dynamic and relational, shaped by continuous engagement with cultural, institutional and interpersonal factors. Universities are thus not merely knowledge institutions but transformative spaces that actively shape how students see themselves in relation to their future professions.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the formation of professional identity within higher education is both an individual and a collective process. Students bring personal histories, values and aspirations, but these are shaped—and often reshaped—through their experiences of curriculum, pedagogy, social interactions and reflective practice. As He et. al (2022) highlights, tensions between personal and professional identities are particularly evident in performance-oriented educational settings, where external validation may overshadow personal values. Navigating these tensions requires intentional support through mentoring, reflection and experiential learning opportunities.

These identity negotiations are further shaped through students' interactions with the curriculum, field-based experiences and relational supports such as mentorship and supervision—each of which plays a vital role in shaping professional self-understanding.

Curriculum design and pedagogical strategies serve as foundational structures for professional identity formation. Contemporary educational approaches increasingly recognize the need to cultivate reflective, resilient and ethically grounded professionals. As such, they act as scaffolding for students' identity formation, offering structured opportunities for reflection, value clarification and role exploration, which goes beyond only transmission of disciplinary knowledge and skills.

In culturally diverse and transnational settings, identity development is also shaped by processes of cross-cultural negotiation and resistance to dominant norms. Zhao and Moen (2023) found that international social work students often engage in identity repositioning, challenging Western-centric professional models and integrating their own cultural values. This highlights the importance of inclusive curricula and culturally responsive pedagogies that support pluralistic understandings of professionalism.

Importantly, identity-conscious curricula integrate real-world tensions, ethical dilemmas and cultural complexity to support students' development as critically aware professionals. As highlighted in studies across disciplines from teacher education to pharmacy and social work (e.g., Johnson et al., 2023; Tham et

al., 2021) it is through engagement with authentic, often emotionally challenging situations that students begin to internalize professional norms while critically evaluating their own responses and values.

Whether this development is supported or hindered depends on how pedagogically engaged students are. One pedagogical approach that supports complexity of identity development is transformative learning. The theory, as outlined by several scholars (Mezirow, 2000; Ukpokodu, 2009; Demiri, 2023) fosters identity development through disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection and intercultural field adaptation. Students are challenged to rethink existing frames of reference, leading to deeper reflection and redefinition of one's beliefs and self-concept. Moreover, students' understanding of roles in multicultural and professional contexts deepens as these insights become internalised. These transformative identity shifts are fostered through emotional, social and intellectual adaptation, a process in which dialogue and cross-cultural transitions deepen identity engagement. Such insights are especially relevant to international social work education, where identity tensions are often intensified by cross-cultural norms and the negotiation of multiple professional norms.

In response to these tensions, structured reflection becomes a critical pedagogical strategy for helping students make sense of their evolving professional identities. As emphasized by Jackson and Tomlinson (2021), pedagogies that within the curriculum embed reflection, self-authorship and identity negotiation enable students to reconcile their personal beliefs with institutional and professional expectations. However, reflective space does not arise spontaneously but must be intentionally designed into learning experiences, such as reflective journals, narrative assignments, group discussions and supervision sessions.

Building on reflective foundations, curriculum and pedagogical strategies can further shape professional identity by offering structured opportunities for experiential and emotionally resonant learning. O'Doherty et al. (2021) underscore the role of longitudinal integrated clerkships in medicine as profound spaces for identity emergence, supported by mentorship, community inclusion and sustained exposure. In a similar vein, Kourgiantakis et al. (2018) emphasize that emotionally safe feedback and relational supervision during simulated practice help social work students navigate the emotional labour of professional identity. Extending these insights, Johnson et al. (2023) go further by proposing a deliberate shift in curriculum design. This shift intentionally guides identity formation through purposeful educator presence, dialogical engagement and emotionally safe learning environments. By embedding identity work within the pedagogical process, educators can support students not only in becoming competent professionals, but in shaping identities that are congruent with their personal values and resilient in the face of professional challenges.

These pedagogical foundations are seen vividly within practice-based learning environments, where students begin to live out and test their professional identities in real-world contexts. Practice-based learning environments such as clinical placements, internships and simulations serve as crucial spaces for

students to explore, negotiate and internalize their emerging professional identities. Unlike theoretical instruction, these settings immerse students in the lived realities of their chosen fields, providing embodied opportunities to test, reflect on and revise their self-perception in relation to professional norms, responsibilities and emotional demands.

Field placements, in particular, have been identified as the “signature pedagogy” of many professional programs, enabling students to experience firsthand the complexities and contradictions of professional practice (Juren et al., 2022). In medicine, O’Doherty et al. (2021) found that longitudinal integrated clerkships offer sustained, situated encounters where students form meaningful relationships with patients and mentors, deepening both clinical competence and professional identity. Similarly, in social work and pharmacy education, simulations and real-world practice are key venues for handling ethical challenges, emotional labour and the pressures of accountability (Johnson et al., 2023).

These field-based experiences are not merely functional, but they are emotionally and socially charged. Students often encounter dilemmas that provoke internal conflict, forcing them to navigate their values with institutional expectations and professional standards. According to Tham et al. (2021), early-career social workers frequently face emotionally demanding situations, such as high caseloads or child protection duties, which challenge their self-concept and test their emotional resilience. Such encounters often prompt deeper reflection and adaptive learning, contributing to the evolution of a more grounded, integrated professional identity.

Simulated environments also play an increasingly important role in professional identity formation. They provide emotionally safe spaces for risk-taking, failure and feedback which are crucial ingredients in the identity development building. Kourgiantakis et al. (2018) emphasize that simulations offer social work students a platform to explore professional roles and interpersonal dynamics while receiving emotionally attuned supervision. These controlled environments help students build confidence and emotional intelligence before entering more unpredictable real-world contexts.

What emerges through these experiential pathways is not simply skill acquisition, but a deeper sense of becoming. As students are challenged to act, reflect and adapt in professional contexts, they engage through ongoing development that refines both their capabilities and their self-concept. Learning through practice thus functions as a transformative space where theoretical knowledge is translated into lived professional identity, reinforced by feedback, emotion and ethical reflection. These learning experiences are often situated within interpersonal relationships where mentorship, supervision and professional role models play a crucial role in shaping how students interpret and internalise their emerging identities.

The relational dimension of learning represents the social fabric through which professional identity is continuously shaped and therefore deserves closer attention. While curriculum and field-based learning establish cognitive and technical competencies, it is through mentorship, exposure to role models and social

integration that students begin to make sense of what it truly means to belong to a professional community. These social processes enable students to internalize professional values, navigate complex relational dynamics, and cultivate a sense of self that aligns with their chosen field.

Mentoring and supervision provide students with relational spaces where emotional labour, ethical uncertainty and self-doubt can be processed with guidance. As previously shown in the context of simulated practice, emotionally attuned supervision fosters a sense of psychological safety and supports students' emotional resilience (Kourgiantakis et al., 2018). This is particularly vital in fields like social work, where the emotional demands of the profession are high. Role models—whether clinical tutors, academic supervisors, or field mentors—play a pivotal role in shaping how students envision and enact professional behaviour. These figures show students what is important, appropriate and considered excellent in the profession. This influence is particularly evident in longitudinal clerkships, where students are exposed to consistent, ethically grounded role models who shape not only clinical competence but broader professional identity (O'Doherty et al., 2021). Such modelling gives students tangible examples of how to integrate values, practice and self-awareness.

Socialization into professional communities further strengthens identity formation by immersing students in disciplinary language, rituals and expectations. As Wheeler (2017) highlights, professional identity evolves through relational process where students engage with supervisors, peers and field. Practice environments to articulate their roles, values and theoretical perspectives. Namely, as already noted, academic settings are not only spaces for technical training but also vital arenas for identity exploration and value negotiation. Triutami and Mbato (2021) reinforce this view, noting that identity construction unfolds through continual interactions within educational environments and practice contexts—where students learn to position themselves, manage expectations and gradually feel a sense of professional belonging.

Thus, professional identity does not develop in isolation; it is co-constructed within dynamic interpersonal relationships. Through structured mentoring, informal modelling, and engagement in communities of practice, students are supported in reconciling their evolving professional selves with the realities and responsibilities of their future roles. This socially mediated identity work is foundational to fostering professionals who are not only competent but also self-aware, values-driven, and ethically grounded.

The interplay of cultural, institutional and social environments in higher education makes professional identity development a lifelong, context-responsive trajectory. The concept of transitioning identities, as explored in the appreciative inquiry by academic professionals, illustrates how individuals continually reconstruct their professional selves through changes in role, context and institutional norms.

To summarise, the development of professional identity in higher education is a multifaceted and dynamic process, shaped by curriculum design, field-based learning and relational supports such as mentorship and

supervision. Within this framework, universities function as catalysts for professional growth, offering guided opportunities for reflection, values clarification and real-world application. When educational environments are reflective, relational and responsive to both individual development and disciplinary context, they create fertile ground for students to integrate personal meaning with professional purpose. This process is further enriched through pedagogies that promote ethical reflection, cultural responsiveness and inclusive identity formation.

II.1.3 Peculiarities of professional identity in social work

Building on the understanding of how professional identity develops within educational settings, this section focuses on the distinctive complexities that shape professional identity in social work. Shaped by emotional intensity, ethical tension and the negotiation of contested knowledge, social work stands apart from more bounded professions. Unlike these, which are defined by rigid and well-established boundaries, social work often operates within the practical realm where knowledge-in-action is diverse, context-specific and deeply shaped by ethical and relational considerations (Daly, McCulloch & Smith, 2024).

In his independent review of social work education, Croisdale-Appleby (2014) emphasises the need to reimagine how future practitioners are trained. He places the dual responsibility to both enable and protect at the heart of social work, calling for education that bridges theory and practice. Such integration is essential not only for preparing practitioners, but for cultivating reflective professionals who are ethically grounded and socially responsive.

As previously noted, Holter (2018) highlights that identity construction requires more than exposure. It demands reflective, structured pedagogical support across both classroom and field settings. This view is echoed by others who frame identity formation as a lifelong, developmental process (Kegan, 1984; Akman et al., 2020), shaped by both educational and life experiences (Bulei & Dinu, 2013).

Despite its importance, professional identity formation remains inconsistently addressed in higher education curricula. Trede's (2012) review of 192 articles found that only 20 directly engaged with professional identity formation at the intersection of education and practice. He warns that when identity development is left to emerge incidentally—without intentional scaffolding—it risks reinforcing stereotypes or superficial role adoption. This concern is particularly troubling in social work, where ethical sensitivity, emotional resilience and role clarity are essential for readiness to practice.

The following text explores the conceptual, emotional, relational and contextual conditions that make professional identity formation in social work uniquely complex—and the pedagogical responses required to support it.

One of the most persistent challenges in professional identity formation among social work students is the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding what the term professional identity actually means. Despite its prominence in policy and curriculum rhetoric, the term remains elusive and inconsistently defined across educational and professional settings (Moorhead et al., 2025; Daly et al., 2024).

Research underscores that even at the point of graduation, many social work students struggle to articulate what constitutes a professional identity. Wiles (2017) found that final-year social work students consistently struggled to define the term. Upon reviewing literature across teaching, nursing and social work, he attributed this confusion to a common mistake of mixing professional identity with the more behaviourally oriented concept of professionalism. This conflation, also noted by Croisdale-Appleby (2014), stems from a tendency to frame identity in terms of external competencies and ethical codes, rather than internalised roles, values and self-understanding. Yet, this lack of conceptual clarity is alarming, given that a strong professional identity is the key for navigating ethical challenges and working effectively in complex, value-led environments.

This confusion is further compounded by the influence of informal learning processes that shapes students' experiences in higher educational settings. Without intentional pedagogical support, students are often influenced by hidden curricula or unspoken norms that may run counter to the desired profession's outcomes (Haidet & Stein, 2006; Lempp & Seale, 2004; Monrouxe, 2010). These unspoken norms can reinforce superficial, performative behaviours rather than promote reflective identity development, potentially leading to fragmented or shallow professional self-concepts. Trede (2012) and Tan (2014) argue that identity development should be a deliberate and central goal of professional education, rather than a by-product of technical training.

Despite these challenges, the empirical base on this topic remains underdeveloped. Much of what is known comes from small-scale or self-reported studies, indicating the need for more robust longitudinal research to track how identity evolves across educational and practice settings. The lack of conceptual clarity surrounding professional identity is not merely a theoretical gap; it has direct implications to how students interpret their roles, resolve value conflicts and engage with professional communities. In a field such as social work, where ethical, emotional and relational complexity is a constant, a weak or ambiguous professional identity formation can leave students unprepared for the demands of practice.

To address these challenges, social work education must move beyond relying solely on standardised behaviours or externally imposed ethical codes. Instead, curricula should foster critical reflection on what it means to be a social worker and embed identity formation into pedagogical design from the earliest stages of training. The lack of conceptual clarity forms the backdrop against which students must navigate the emotional and ethical complexities of professional practice.

In the context of social work, these challenges are particularly acute. As Tham et al. (2023) point out, newly qualified social workers often enter the field with ethically demanding responsibilities—such as child protection—without having developed a stable professional identity. This makes identity formation during university studies not only a developmental concern but a practical and ethical necessity. Early career professionals are frequently exposed to trauma, high-stakes decision-making and conflicting institutional demands. All these conditions require a strong internalised value base and role clarity (Björktomta & Tham, 2024).

Professional identity development in social work emerges at the intersection of emotional labour, ethical complexity and blurred professional boundaries. These demands challenge educational programs to move beyond technical skill acquisition and ensure to support students to integrate personal values, social expectations and disciplinary responsibilities in ways that feel sustainable and authentic. Emotionally charged experiences—such as dealing with client suffering, systemic injustice, or burnout—can either deepen reflective identity work or destabilise students' emerging sense of professional self if left unsupported (Akmane et al., 2020).

Canavan (2009) argues that identity is continually shaped by how social workers confront emotionally complex and morally ambiguous situations. Practitioner-educator perspectives stress that students must learn not just what to do but to remain grounded in who they are becoming through practice. In this light, emotional preparedness and value integration must be deliberately cultivated through pedagogies that centre reflection, supportive supervision and spaces where personal and professional selves can be safely explored.

This concern is particularly relevant to the present study. As Tham et al. (2023) note, 'newly graduated social workers often begin their careers with the most difficult work tasks, such as in child welfare', managing highly demanding and ethically sensitive cases. Strengthening professional identity formation during university studies is therefore not only beneficial but crucial for preparing students to meet these challenges with ethical clarity and professional resilience. When identity formation is left implicit, students may internalise fragmented or contradictory messages about what it means to act ethically and responsibly in diverse practice settings. To manage these challenges effectively, students must be supported by intentional pedagogical approaches that integrate reflection, supervision and guided identity exploration.

A growing body of research highlights how these pedagogical and supervisory structures can actively support identity development in social work education. Holter (2018), drawing on symbolic interactionism, argues that professional identity does not passively emerge from exposure alone, but must be actively developed through reflective dialogue, structured supervision and a curriculum that explicitly supports identity construction across classroom and field settings. Further supporting the necessity of integrating professional identity formation into study programmes, Akmane, Mārtinsone and Krieķe (2020) draw on Kegan's (1984) theory of identity as a lifelong developmental process, beginning before formal education

and continuing throughout one's professional life. This view is echoed by Bulei and Dinu (2013), who argue that education is just one of many influences in the identity formation process. They claim identity is 'a constant process of combining elements from the past with the present ones' (p. 257) shaped through the gradual assumption of roles over time.

Supervision and pedagogical scaffolding are not supplementary but central to professional identity development in social work education. Kourgiantakis et al. (2018) demonstrate how structured feedback, modelling and guided reflection during practicum placements can significantly influence how students internalise professional norms and roles. Similarly, Bogo et al. (2006) highlight that the supervisory relationship plays a pivotal role in helping students link their personal values with professional expectations, particularly in emotionally demanding contexts.

As previously noted by Trede (2012), leaving identity formation to chance risks reinforcing stereotypes and hindering critical development. His work continues to challenge the notion that identity construction can be left to the workplace alone, stressing that pedagogical design must play a central role in fostering ethical and professionally grounded students (citing West & Chur-Hansen, 2004).

This includes redefining the roles of both educators and students in creating specific, identity supportive learning environments. While knowledge acquisition and the competency development remain crucial, Trede stresses that professional preparation must go beyond technical skills. It must cultivate interpersonal intelligence about how to work in a team, how to communicate with others, learn through observations and socialize into workplace culture. These relational capabilities are especially critical in social work, where professional effectiveness depends as much on interpersonal understanding as on procedural knowledge.

Building on his earlier observations, Wiles (2017) highlights that students must begin developing their professional identity during their studies through reflective writing, critical thinking and guided self-reflection. Tan (2014) argues even more forcefully that aligning professional identity development with the desired attributes of the professional-in-practice must become an explicit priority in education programmes. Intentional, relational pedagogy thus becomes a cornerstone for helping students translate who they are into who they are becoming as social workers.

Bringing together the insights, it becomes evident that professional identity development in social work is shaped by a distinctive interplay of emotional labour, ethical complexity and evolving professional boundaries. These conditions require students to navigate personal values, emotional responses and social expectations within the highly contextual realities of field-based learning. Without adequate pedagogical support, such as structured reflection or emotionally safe learning environments, students risk internalising fragmented or superficial understandings of what it means to act professionally.

In light of these challenges, higher education institutions must take a more deliberate and structured role in addressing the complexities and confusion surrounding professional identity among social work students. Prioritising the development of a clear and robust professional identity ensures that graduates are not only work-ready but also equipped to navigate ethical and professional challenges they will face in practice. As Tomlinson & Jackson (2021) observe, ‘the identities a graduate develops on the point of graduation are notional and only emergent in the sense that they contain facets that meet an employer’s demands of the type of person they wish to recruit (including purported skill sets and behavioural competences)’.

This chapter has traced how professional identity is conceptualised and shaped across multiple layers: from general theories of identity, through the educational dynamics of higher education, to the profession-specific demands of social work. Identity has been seen as dynamic and relational, formed through ongoing negotiation between internal values and external expectations. The role of higher education in this process was discussed in the light of offering structured opportunities for reflection, values integration and experiential learning. These dynamics were observed through the lens of social work, where they are intensified by the ethical, emotional and systemic challenges inherent to the profession.

II.2 Factors shaping of professional identity in international social work education

This section reviews empirical evidence on the key factors that influence professional identity development in social work education with the focus on international programmes. It synthesises existing findings related to educational, emotional, cultural and institutional dynamics that shape how social work students construct a professional sense of self. Particular attention is given to studies conducted within transnational programmes, where students must navigate diverse pedagogical approaches, cultural norms, intercultural interactions and varied institutional expectations. The discussion is structured around three dimensions: educational and experiential contributors, cultural and institutional contexts and the broader impact of transnational learning environments. Together, these dimensions provide a conceptual foundation for interpreting professional identity formation in internationally situated social work education and identify areas where further research is needed. Moreover, particular focus is on professional identity formation in Erasmus Mundus programmes such ESWOCHY is.

II.2.1 Educational and experiential influences on professional identity shaping

Professional identity development within social work education is a dynamic and layered experience, shaped by interplay of pedagogical design, learning experiences, reflective opportunities and institutional factors. Moreover, it is influenced by prior beliefs, values and emotional orientations of students who do not enter studies without prior experience. Rather, they bring with them personal histories, social values and emotional orientations that may or may not align with the professional expectations promoted within

their programmes. As research increasingly shows, the educational environment plays a decisive role in reinforcing or these preconceptions. Namely, when expectations are met with limited support, inconsistent messaging, or emotionally unsafe learning environments, the process of professional identity formation can become disrupted, fragmented, or even reversed.

Longitudinal studies, such as Terum and Heggen's (2016) investigation of social work students in Norway, demonstrate that although some elements of identification with the profession are present early, significant shifts occur during education. Notably, interactions with supportive teachers, confidence in supervisors and constructive peer relations were associated with stronger professional identification at the end of the programme. This finding challenges the assumptions that professional identity is already predetermined upon study entry. Instead, underscores the transformative potential of education.

However, the transformation journey is not without challenges. Demiri (2019) documents how students frequently encounter internal conflict when attempting to align their personal identity with the profession's expectations. These tensions are particularly notable during field placements, where the often-idealised classroom portrayals of social work clash with complex realities. This can cause emotional distress and at times disengagement from the identity-building process. Similar concerns were raised by Wiles (2017), who found that students often navigate contradictory messages arising from classroom learning, institutional discourse and field placements. She argues that these mismatches contribute to confusion about the values, behaviours and attitudes expected of future professionals. Without intentional pedagogical approach to identity formation, many students are left without clear direction, relying instead on personal intuition or fragmented experiences to shape their understanding of what it means to be a social worker.

Such disruptions can be addressed through careful planning of curriculum design and presenting clear pedagogical intention. Moorhead et al. (2019) argue that rather than assuming identity will develop organically, educators must intentionally design opportunities that promote professional self-awareness and role clarity. Their study of an Australian university's curriculum reform found that courses explicitly integrating critical reflection, personal-professional exploration and social work's ethical dimensions enhanced students' ability to articulate and embody their professional identity across diverse practice.

One of the most consistently cited practices for fostering professional identity is reflective writing. A Swedish study by Björktomta and Tham (2024) provides empirical evidence of how this practice, embedded in a five-semester course on personal and professional development, enabled students to trace and internalise their evolving role as social workers. The process was particularly effective when students were supported in linking classroom knowledge with field experiences and were encouraged to reflect critically on power, ethics and identity dilemmas. Notably, students who reviewed their own writing across semesters reported a deeper metacognitive awareness of their development and a stronger sense of professional self.

Two other practices that cannot be overstated are supervision and experiential learning. Supervision, both academic and field-based, plays an important role in facilitating developmental process. It is through high-quality supervision that students learn to integrate theoretical frameworks with real-life social work encounters, develop relational and ethical judgement and confront the emotional demands of the profession. Multiple studies (e.g., Moorhead et al., 2019; Rishel et al., 2020) highlight the importance of trained supervisors who provide regular, critical and emotionally attuned feedback. Terum and Heggen (2016) likewise found that students who reported high levels of trust in their supervisors' competence and who experienced supervision as supportive demonstrated stronger identification with the social work profession. Conversely, placements lacking adequate supervision or situated in interdisciplinary teams without strong social work role models, were associated with identity confusion or role diffusion. These findings point to the need for pedagogically structured field placements that include intentional, reflective supervision aligned with the values and methods of the profession.

In addition to formal instruction, field placements and supervision, students are also influenced by the hidden curriculum. As found by Lairio, Puukari, and Kouvo (2013), students often absorb unspoken norms and expectations through their everyday academic and social experiences, which not always operate in harmony with formal curricula. Unresolved tensions can hinder authentic engagement with the profession and delay the development of a coherent and resilient professional identity. Moreover, when professional identity is shaped through passive internalisation of institutional culture rather than through intentional pedagogy, students may internalise contradictory or harmful ideas about what it means to be a professional. This may include a prioritisation of procedural conformity over critical judgement, emotional suppression, or depersonalised practice. Traits that directly conflict with the relational and ethical ethos of social work.

These studies collectively underscore the importance of educational and experiential environments in fostering authentic professional identity development within social work programmes. Moreover, studies confirmed that educational and experiential contributors do not operate in isolation but are deeply interconnected with emotional safety, institutional norms and the learning culture. In particular, supervision emerged as a relational and pedagogical bridge between theoretical instruction and practical experience, reinforcing identity through guided reflection and feedback (Terum & Heggen, 2016; Moorhead et al., 2019; Rishel et al., 2020). Insights provided, form a conceptual framework to explore how ESWOCHY students describe and make sense of the educational and experiential dimensions that have shaped their professional identity throughout the programme.

II.2.2 Cultural, emotional and institutional contexts in shaping professional identity

In cross-border or transnational programmes, students may face additional challenges in shaping their professional identity due to cultural dissonance, fragmented academic pathways and shifting expectations across universities and countries. Several studies suggest that the emotional and cultural experience of being a student is inseparable from institutional structures, interpersonal relationships and the wider societal understanding of what it means to be a “professional.”

Wiles (2017), drawing on a qualitative study of social work students in England, observed that identity formation is often complicated by institutional messages about “fitness to practise,” which can provoke emotional distress when students experience dissonance between personal values and professional norms. Similarly, Lairio et al. (2013) found that university students frequently reflect on identity within the wider context of life transitions and institutional belonging. Their study suggests that when relational support from university staff or peers is weak, coherent identity shaping may be undermined.

Based on studies focused on the experience of international students, interplay between institutional and emotional factors appears even more prominent. Yao and Flynn’s (2024) longitudinal research with international graduates of Australian social work programmes found that students’ sense of professional identity was deeply affected by visa restrictions, lack of professional networks and perceived discrimination. Together, they contributed to emotional distress and delayed identification with the profession. Particularly when students were denied meaningful field placements or lacked access to supportive supervision, institutional pressures were intensified by emotional experiences of isolation and reduced confidence. Similarly, Triutami and Mbato (2021), examining Indonesian EFL pre-service teachers, concluded that both “contentment” (supportive relationships, institutional recognition) and “impediments” (disempowering supervision, peer neglect, lack of teaching resources) played a critical role in how students redefined their professional self-understanding across time.

How institutional trust, recognition of the profession and openness to reflect on mistakes shape professional judgment and practitioners’ professional self-image, is further highlighted in a cross-national study by Sicora and Lu (2020). Social workers in Italy, where institutionalisation of social work is longer-standing and social workers in China, where the profession lacks status or organisational support, were compared. The latter tended to attribute errors to external systemic issues, whereas the first encouraged reflective learning and identity growth.

In an Asian context, Higashida’s (2022) pilot study of Japanese social workers deployed in other countries underlined the importance of reciprocal learning and humility in intercultural encounters. Identity negotiation was found to be most productive when social workers engaged in dialogic reflection with local stakeholders, recognising the risk of imposing hegemonic cultural norms. The study emphasized the role of “global” perspectives, which combine global standards with sensitivity to local cultural realities.

These findings are echoed even earlier. Rees and Monrouxe (2018), offer transferable insights for social work in the analysis of professional identity in medicine. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the hidden curriculum often shapes identity in subtle yet powerful ways. In intercultural contexts, these unspoken expectations may become even more fragmented. Rees and Monrouxe propose that identity formation is influenced not only by official curricula but also by hidden norms and structural expectations. When institutional contexts demand emotional suppression or hierarchical conformity, identity development may be shaped less by authentic professional reflection and more by a need to “fit in”. Thus, this in turn, can reinforce exclusion for those with culturally diverse backgrounds.

Putting together the findings from both chapters explored so far, it becomes evident that professional identity formation is not solely shaped by what students are formally taught, but also by what they experience emotionally and culturally within institutional frameworks. Identity development, particularly in transnational programmes, is embedded in a constant negotiation between self and across complex academic traditions, implicit professional expectations and shifting social norms. As students try to navigate unfamiliar systems and diverse professional imaginaries, their identity work becomes increasingly multi-layered. More so in programmes like ESWOCHY, where students perceive and navigate through experiences across four different countries and as such negotiate their roles through four cultural, emotional and institutional influences. Therefore, examined body of research provides a conceptual and critical basis when exploring key factors shaping the formation of professional identity of students in ESWOCHY programme.

II.2.3 Transnational learning environments in professional identity negotiation

Empirical studies examining international and intercultural social work education increasingly point to the significance of, and the need to develop, transnational learning environments. Namely, such environments support a transformative process that significantly influences the shaping of students’ professional identity. Exposure to diverse educational systems, professional discourses and cultural frameworks, creates conditions in which identity must be actively negotiated rather than passively acquired. In the context of rapid societal changes, global migration and the digitalisation of social services, the ability to critically form and continuously reshape a professional self is more crucial than ever (Stephenson & Cox, 2025; Karjagdi Çolak et al., 2025). While much of the literature concentrates on short-term exchanges, single-country transitions, or post-graduation adaptation, comparatively little attention has been paid to the sustained identity work that occurs within multi-country, multi-year joint degree programmes. These contexts involve repeated transitions across institutional and national borders, each of which presents both opportunities for reflection and challenges to the coherence of professional identity development.

A study of a short-term exchange programme between Norway and China, conducted by Zhao and Moen (2023), introduced the concept of *transnational learning positions*, where students undergo a process of dislocation and critical reflection. It means students are removed from familiar settings and reoriented through encounters with alternative welfare models, teaching practices and cultural values. With other words, learning positions involve physical and intellectual movement.

Similarly, the Urban Diversities course (2017) revealed how brief yet immersive encounters with intercultural teams, urban youth services and field-based tasks led students to reflect on their assumptions and the contextual boundaries of their professional role. Even in short-term modules, structured intercultural dialogue and guided reflection appeared to be key contributors to transformative identity development.

In contrast, Naumiuk (2021), reporting on the full two-year ADVANCES programme, noted that identity shifts in transnational contexts are often intensified by cumulative mobility. As students move between national systems, they are met with different beliefs and values. Furthermore, they witness different practices about how social work should be done, often without adequate institutional scaffolding. This results in a learning environment where identity becomes less a matter of knowledge acquisition and more a matter of adaptive negotiation.

While adaptive negotiation can foster growth and reflection, it can also lead to professional insecurity when students are not adequately supported. Yao & Flynn (2024) in their longitudinal study of international social work graduates in Australia, found that many participants struggled to form a coherent professional identity even six months after completing their degree. Despite fulfilling academic requirements, they often hesitated to identify as social workers. The study identified multiple contributing factors, including limited exposure to real-world practice, lack of consistent supervisory support and structural barriers such as temporary visa status and high-stakes English language testing. These obstacles not only delayed professional confidence but also undermined students' sense of belonging within the profession. The findings point to the importance of sustained and culturally responsive institutional support in facilitating identity development, particularly for students navigating new systems and expectations in transnational or cross-cultural contexts.

Similar challenges are evident in Lietaert's (2017) study on transnational social work practice within return counselling programmes. Namely, practitioners who were often trained across borders, reported fragmented knowledge and conflicting expectations about their professional roles. The findings highlight that in transnational environments, professional identity may become blurred due to inconsistent role definitions, divergent institutional logics and limited opportunities for reflective integration.

A more programme-specific account of such tensions is found in the study, previously mentioned in the context of number of mobilities. *Minding the GAPS* study (Naumiuk, 2021) focuses on the experiences of

international students during their semester in Poland as part of the Erasmus Mundus ADVANCES programme. Participants described feeling marginalised and emotionally strained, particularly due to language barriers, culturally unfamiliar academic expectations and a perceived outsider status in the classroom and institutional culture. While the programme promoted intercultural competence, students' experiences suggest that temporary immersion in a new academic environment without sufficient scaffolding can destabilise developing professional identities. The transnational design of the programme, though offering rich exposure, also placed students in situations where they had to navigate shifting institutional norms with limited relational and pedagogical continuity. These findings emphasise that mobility itself is not uniformly developmental; without structural support, it may heighten uncertainty, delay integration, or reinforce a fragmented sense of professional belonging.

These findings contrast with earlier comparative studies such as Hackett et al. (2003), which focused on national programmes and found that professional identity pathways are more linear, shaped primarily by internal motivation, national policy and localised field experience. The complexity observed in transnational programmes suggests a shift toward more fluid, contested and reflexive identity development. The literature on transnational programmes points to identity development as a more fluid, shaped by tension and reflexive process. Fluidity arises from repeated exposure to diverse systems; tension emerges when students must reconcile conflicting models of practice; and reflexivity is fostered through continuous negotiation of their evolving professional roles.

Building on these insights, Deardorff's (2006) widely cited study on intercultural competence provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how students navigate identity in internationalised education. Her Pyramid and Process Models conceptualise intercultural competence as a developmental process rooted in attitudes such as openness, curiosity and respect, along with the skills to listen, observe and adapt across cultural contexts. The internal outcome—an informed shift in one's frame of reference—enhances the external ability to act and communicate appropriately in diverse settings. This framing resonates strongly with the identity development of students in transnational programmes, where cultural negotiation, perspective-taking and relational competence are central to constructing a professional self in a global context.

Summing up on the existing studies, they offer valuable insights into how students experience identity development in different educational and cultural settings. However, most focus on isolated moments within international programmes or single-country context. What remains underexplored is how identity evolves across the full span of multi-country, joint-degree programmes like ESWOCHY. As such, the findings presented in this section provide a critical empirical foundation for the present study, which examines how students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and make meaning of their professional identity across four distinct academic, cultural and institutional environments.

To visualise the complexity outlined above, the following conceptual framework (Figure 2.1) integrates four core domains identified in the literature: educational experiences, institutional structures, cultural engagement, and emotional adjustment. These domains reflect the multiple forces shaping professional identity in joint transnational programmes like ESWOCHY. Educational experiences encompass intercultural learning, fieldwork, and digital competence. Institutional structures include academic mobility and programme-level support. Cultural engagement involves navigating diverse norms and reciprocal social interactions. Emotional adjustment addresses the affective and psychological processes of culture shock, role ambiguity, and belonging. Together, these domains provide an analytical lens for understanding how students negotiate and construct professional identity across distinct national and institutional contexts.

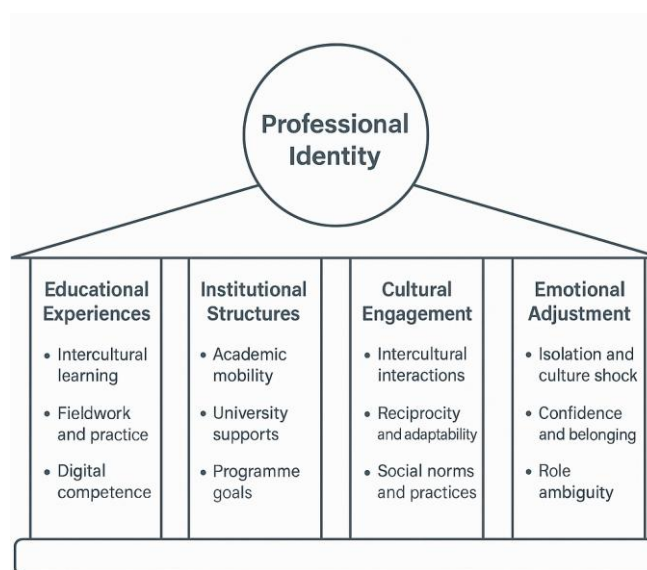


Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework for Professional Identity Formation in Transnational Social Work Education

This conceptual framework will also inform the structure of the analysis chapter, where the four domains guide the interpretation of participants' narratives about identity development in the ESWOCHY programme.

III. Analytical framework

In this chapter, the analytical framework guiding the interpretation of collected data is presented. It establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundations used to structure the qualitative content analysis and explains how the seven analytical dimensions emerged and were developed through an iterative process involving the literature, the conceptual framework and the inductive coding of semi-structured interview data. The framework serves as a coherent interpretive lens through which the perceptions and experiences of ESWOCHY students are analysed, in alignment with the sub-questions and the inductive, interpretive methodology guiding this study.

III.1 Purpose and role of the analytical framework

The analytical framework serves as the interpretive scaffold bridging theoretical insights and empirical analysis. While the coding process was inductively driven, it was informed by a clearly defined conceptual framework that views professional identity as a dynamic, relational and contextually embedded construct. The analytical framework thus ensures that data interpretation is systematically grounded in the study's epistemological stance and its central research objective: to explore how ESWOCHY students construct meaning and develop a sense of professional identity across diverse learning contexts and environments.

III.2 Connection to conceptual framework

The analytical framework builds directly on the conceptual framework established in Chapter 2. In particular, professional identity is conceptualised as a multifaceted process involving the integration of personal values and ethical orientations, professional role understanding and enactment, learning experiences (both formal and informal), cultural and transnational influences, institutional structures and educational design, reflexive self-awareness, future aspirations and professional orientation.

These elements form the foundation of seven analytical categories used to group and interpret the data. These categories were not imposed but they rather emerged through iterative analysis and were continuously validated against the conceptual framework and the raw data through quote-code matrices. Their development aligns with the interpretive and inductive nature of the research design, fulfilling the requirement that the analytical framework be logically connected to both theory and method.

The development of analytical categories was grounded in a systematic and iterative process of thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. Sixteen anonymised interviews were inductively coded using MAXQDA. Emerging codes were reviewed and refined through constant comparison and axial coding to ensure interpretive coherence. These were progressively grouped into higher-level themes, supported by analytic memos, quote-code matrices and MAXQDA visual tools to

ensure transparency, consistency and traceability. The resulting analytical categories were then aligned with the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, supporting logical coherence between theoretical constructs and empirical findings in relation to the study's sub-questions.

III.3 Analytical categories

The analytical categories provide a structure for making sense of how students describe and interpret their professional identity development. These categories emerged through an iterative process of inductive coding, guided by the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 and grounded in the empirical data. Each captures a distinct but interrelated aspect of identity development, including cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions and reflects key theoretical constructs such as value alignment, role performance, reflexivity and cultural negotiation. Together, they provide a structured lens for answering the research sub-questions, particularly how students perceive, interpret and shape their professional identity within the ESWOCHY programme. While analytically distinct, the categories often intersect, reflecting the complex and overlapping nature of professional identity formation. This includes potential interactions not only between individual reflection and institutional structures, but also with relational dynamics such as peer interaction, educator modelling and alumni influence.

III.3.1 Values and ethical orientation

This category addresses research questions 1 and 2, as it explores the values students associate with professional identity and how they interpret these values through their own experience. It reflects how students articulate the core values, ethical commitments and moral motivations guiding their practice. It includes themes such as empathy, dignity, social justice, client-centredness and moral tension. It is grounded in the humanistic pillar of the ESWOCHY programme and draws on literature conceptualising identity as rooted in value internalisation and ethical reflection.

This category also invites consideration of how such values may not develop in isolation, but rather emerge and evolve through intercultural encounters, peer dialogue, and exposure to diverse professional role models.

III.3.2 Professional roles and responsibilities

This category contributes to research questions 1, 2, and 3, addressing how students define professional identity through roles and how ESWOCHY supports their evolving sense of professional responsibility. It captures students' understanding of their evolving professional roles, boundaries and responsibilities. Themes include role clarity or confusion, perceived duties, interpersonal dynamics and development of

professional skills. These understandings may take shape through comparison with peers, modelling after educators, and reflection on roles enacted by alumni or supervisors. The category reflects the sociological dimension of identity formation as role enactment, as well as students' negotiation of what it means to "act professionally" across varied contexts.

III.3.3 Learning and educational experiences

Research questions 3 and 4 are addressed in this category, focusing on how specific ESWOCHY learning experiences contribute to students' identity formation. This category encompasses the influence of coursework, supervision, practical placements and pedagogical interactions on identity development. Emphasis is placed on theory–practice integration, experiential learning and transformative moments. It reflects educational literature that identifies higher education as a site of identity shaping and acknowledges the formative potential of emotionally resonant learning.

III.3.4 Institutional and programme influences (ESWOCHY)

This category informs research questions 3 and 4, by highlighting which aspects of the programme's institutional structure support or hinder identity development. It captures the specific structural, pedagogical and logistical aspects of the ESWOCHY programme that students identified as shaping their professional identity. Themes include the coherence of the curriculum, organisation of mobilities, access to quality fieldwork, coordination across universities and perceived gaps in support. While the focus is on institutional design, the category also allows exploration of how such structures may be interpreted and navigated through relational dynamics—for example, through support from peers or guidance from staff—highlighting the interplay between formal systems and lived experience. This reflects how institutional design and programme delivery mediate the learning environment and identity formation.

III.3.5 Cultural and transnational context

This category relates closely to research questions 2, 3, and 4. It explores how identity is interpreted and shaped through cultural and transnational experiences within the programme. It focuses on how intercultural encounters, peer diversity and mobility across national systems shape students' understanding of social work and themselves as future professionals. The category also allows consideration of the relational dimensions of intercultural learning, including how students may come to understand themselves and the profession differently through dialogue, comparison and mutual exchange within a multicultural cohort. It includes themes such as cultural humility, intercultural comparisons, learning from peers and renegotiation of normative assumptions. It reflects the intercultural pillar of ESWOCHY programme and transnational perspectives on professional identity.

III.3.6 Reflexivity and self-understanding

This category informs research questions 1 and 2, by illuminating how students interpret and give meaning to their evolving professional identity through self-reflection. This analytical dimension explores students' reflective processes, including moments of self-doubt, identity conflict, value clarification and personal growth. In addition, such reflective processes may be prompted by external stimuli such as feedback, emotionally challenging situations or intercultural encounters that lead to deeper internal engagement. The category allows for an exploration of how participants narrate their identity journey and make meaning of their development. This aligns with psychological theories of identity as self-authorship and highlights the importance of internal dialogue in identity shaping.

III.3.7 Aspirations and future professional direction

This category addresses research question 2, with particular emphasis on question 4. Namely, the category explores how students project their professional identity into the future based on their experiences in the ESWOCHY programme. This final category captures how students envision their future roles, areas of specialisation and contribution to the profession. It includes expressions of motivation, uncertainty, imagined futures and professional goals. This forward-looking dimension completes the identity trajectory and reflects how students position themselves within and beyond the programme.

Together, these seven analytical categories offer a structured yet flexible lens through which students' narratives are interpreted. While conceptually distinct, the categories often overlap, reflecting the complexity of professional identity formation in the ESWOCHY programme. Specifically, students navigate joint degree programme through four countries, which makes ESWOCHY not merely international but transnational in nature. Furthermore, they engage in intercultural academic environments, participate in multicultural peer groups and experience international mobility. These categories form the basis for organising and interpreting the findings presented in the next chapter.

III.4 Integration of analytical framework with coding process

The categories presented above were developed through a rigorous and iterative coding process. Open codes were first generated through inductive reading of transcripts, following principles of content analysis. These codes were then grouped into categories based on conceptual similarity and alignment with the literature.

The categorised codebook reflects the full structure of the analysis, illustrating how empirical data were interpreted through the conceptual lenses defined here. Memos written during coding supported the emergence of theoretical insights and ensured analytic consistency.

III.5 Analytical framework as interpretive lens

The analytical framework operates as a lens through which students' experiences and narratives are interpreted. It allows for a coherent yet flexible approach to data analysis, where each dimension highlights a particular aspect of identity development. The categories are not seen as discrete or mutually exclusive; instead, they intersect and overlap, reflecting the complexity of identity as a lived, fluid and evolving process.

By using this framework, the analysis honours the multidimensionality of professional identity and remains true to both the participants' perspectives and the theoretical framing of the study. It provides the necessary interpretive structure to explore the sub-questions, particularly how students make sense of professional identity and how this identity is shaped across the ESWOCHY learning journey.

In sum, this analytical framework ensures that data interpretation remains consistent with the study's overall research approach, its conceptual foundations, the conceptualisation of identity and the empirical objectives. It provides a solid foundation for the subsequent chapters where findings are presented and interpreted.

IV. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used to explore how social work students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and shape their professional identity. It outlines the qualitative research design, theoretical framework, participant recruitment, data collection and analytical procedures. Each element is aligned with the aim of the study to understand ESWOCHY students lived experiences and meaning-making process within a multi-country, joint master's program. Finally, ethical considerations related to the study are discussed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the researcher's dual role as a peer and investigator.

IV.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and shape their professional identity as future social workers. The research aims to gain in-depth insights into students' experiences, beliefs, and understandings of the social work profession. It also investigates how these elements evolve throughout students' participation in a transnational joint-degree programme that spans four countries and involves academic, institutional and cultural transitions.

The study is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that knowledge and meaning are constructed through personal experiences and social interactions. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring professional identity development as this is a subjective, evolving and context-dependent process that cannot be meaningfully captured through standardised or statistical measures. This design is operationalised through the analytical framework presented in Chapter 3, which offers a structured yet flexible lens for interpreting participants' narratives in line with the research questions and conceptual foundations of the study.

The research is guided by the question: How do social work students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and shape their professional identity?

This is explored through the following sub-questions:

1. What meaning do ESWOCHY students assign to the concept of professional identity?
2. How do ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity based on their own experience?
3. What contributes to the professional identity of social work students being part of the ESWOCHY programme?
4. Which experiences within the ESWOCHY programme contribute most significantly to their professional identity development?

These sub-questions also served as anchors for interpreting the data and guided the development of the seven analytical categories outlined in Chapter 3. Each category was linked to one or more sub-questions to ensure analytical coherence. In parallel, each sub-objective was formulated to correspond directly to one

or more research sub-questions. This alignment ensured that the study's conceptual and empirical aims were fully integrated into the methodological design. It also guided the construction of the interview guide, which was structured to capture participants' insights across the theoretical, experiential and contextual dimensions of identity formation.

The interpretive nature of the study called for a method that would allow participants to narrate and reflect on their identity development in their own terms. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were selected, as they enabled participants to reflect on and articulate their evolving professional identities in ways that could not be captured through predefined categories. This approach supported the study's interpretive orientation and allowed for the emergence of themes grounded in participants' own language and lived experience.

Accordingly, the interview questions were formulated to encourage open reflection, allowing participants to guide the conversation based on what they found meaningful. This flexibility helped surface individual insights while maintaining a coherent structure aligned with the study's objectives.

The study focuses on ESWOCHY students from different year groups, ensuring perspectives from various stages of the academic journey. Furthermore, it incorporates variation in students' prior educational background and gender. This diversity is expected to highlight different perspectives and developmental stages in the professional identity trajectory, enabling a richer analysis of the processes shaping professional identity.

A detailed explanation of the sampling and data collection process follows in the next section.

IV.2 Data collection methods

This section presents the procedures used for selecting participants and collecting data. It outlines the sampling strategy, the recruitment process and the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection.

IV.2.1 Sampling technique and selection process

The study uses a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who can offer diverse perspectives on professional identity formation within the ESWOCHY programme. A total of 16 students were interviewed. Eight second-year students from Cohort 3 and eight first-year students from Cohort 4. The sample was structured to ensure variation across cohort, prior educational background, gender and region of origin.

To provide a transparent yet anonymised overview, Table 4.2 summarises participants by cohort (C3 or C4), social work background (Yes/No) and region of origin (Europe, Africa, Other). These categories were selected for their analytical relevance and their ability to preserve participant anonymity in a small, internationalised sample.

Table 4.2*Participant Matrix by Cohort, Social Work Background, and Region of Origin*

Participant Code	Cohort	Social Work Background	Region of Origin
P1	3	Yes	Africa
P2	3	Yes	Africa
P3	4	No	Europe
P4	3	No	Europe
P5	4	Yes	Europe
P6	4	Yes	Other
P7	4	No	Other
P8	4	No	Other
P9	4	Yes	Africa
P10	3	Yes	Africa
P11	3	Yes	Africa
P12	4	No	Europe
P13	3	No	Africa
P14	4	Yes	Other
P15	3	No	Europe
P16	3	No	Other

Educational background is categorised simply as either social work or non-social work, allowing the study to capture experience-related differences, particularly in relation to prior academic preparation. Gender and specific country information were intentionally excluded to minimise the risk of deductive disclosure. The final distribution includes six participants from Europe, five from Africa and five from other world regions, with an even split between those with and without a background in social work.

Participants were initially invited to take part in the study via a Google Form, which included a brief description of the research purpose, ethical considerations and a section where they indicated their preferred method of contact (e.g. WhatsApp, email). The form link was distributed via WhatsApp groups used by Cohort 3 and Cohort 4 students. Based on expressed interest, the researcher contacted each participant individually to schedule the interview. Throughout this process, purposive sampling was applied to ensure representation across key criteria (academic cohort, prior educational background and gender). Once data was sufficiently rich and the required sampling structure had been met, individuals who had expressed willingness but were no longer needed were contacted with a message thanking them for their interest and explaining that the sampling requirements had been fulfilled.

IV.2.2 Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with key ethical principles in social science research, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Students were first invited to express their willingness to participate through a Google Form, which included a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, interview format and ethical safeguards. The invitation to express willingness to participate with the link to access Google Forms was sent to WhatsApp groups of both cohorts. In the Google Form future participants could express their wish about the way they wanted to be contacted. The researcher then got in touch with them and scheduled the interview.

Informed consent was obtained in two steps. First, students provided initial consent by completing the Google Form. Second, at the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the study's purpose, data handling procedures, and participants' rights. When the Zoom recording began, participants were asked to confirm their consent by clicking "OK" on the platform's notification. The researcher clarified that this action constituted formal agreement to participate under the stated conditions. When the interview was finished, the audio-recording was automatically saved in the personal Zoom cloud and later downloaded to a personal computer where only accessible with a face recognition to unlock the computer and further locked by a password. Participants were informed that the recording will be deleted after August 1st, 2025. To protect anonymity, no names or personally identifying information were used when recording underwent transcription process. Each participant was assigned a simple code (e.g., P1, P2) used to trace data. Although the researcher was familiar with some of the participants due to shared programme membership, care was taken to ensure that identities could not be inferred from any details presented in the findings.

All data was handled with strict confidentiality. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected personal computer, accessible only to the researcher. Identifiable details were excluded from the transcripts, and raw data will be securely deleted after the completion of the thesis.

Finally, the researcher acknowledges the dual role as both a peer and a researcher. While this positioning may have facilitated rapport and open discussion, it also introduced potential ethical and interpretive challenges. Being aware of this, the researcher maintained a reflective stance throughout the process and emphasized voluntary participation, neutrality, and confidentiality at all stages.

IV.2.3 Data collection process

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore students' experiences while maintaining thematic consistency. This method was chosen because it allowed for in-depth exploration of personal perceptions while also ensuring a level of comparability across participants. All interviews were conducted online using communication platform Zoom, making participation accessible regardless of the students' current country of residence. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and followed a pre-prepared interview guide (see Appendix A). With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

IV.2.4 Design of the interview questions

The semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure alignment between the research objectives, the theoretical framework and the aim of capturing students' reflections on their lived experiences and perceptions of professional identity development within the ESWOCHY programme. The guide was constructed through a multi-step process that began with mapping each research objective to relevant theoretical themes identified in the literature review—such as identity negotiation, institutional influences, emotional and cultural factors and future professional orientation.

For each objective, thematic clusters were formulated and open-ended questions were developed to explore students' understandings, experiences and reflections in depth. The guide includes opening questions to establish rapport, core questions linked to each of the four research objectives and closing prompts to allow for additional insights and reflections. The wording was carefully chosen to be accessible to a linguistically diverse group and to avoid leading or overly technical phrasing.

The initial draft of the interview guide was piloted with one peer from the ESWOCHY programme who is not included in the final sample. Based on the feedback, minor adjustments were made to improve clarity, question sequencing and flow. The final version of the interview guide was structured around the four research objectives, with each section addressing a specific aspect of professional identity development. The questions addressed how students experienced the shaping of their professional identity across educational, cultural and institutional contexts, as well as how they envisioned their future role in the social work profession. The guide also included questions designed to generate constructive feedback and recommendations for improving identity formation within the ESWOCHY programme.

Final version of the interview guide for a semi-structure interview was used consistently across all interviews, with flexibility for follow-up questions or prompts depending on participants' responses and the natural progression of the conversation. This format was chosen to support the study's interpretive and inductive approach. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix B.

IV.3 Data analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis, guided by the analytical framework developed in Chapter 3. This framework provided the structure through which open codes were grouped, interpreted, and connected to the study's conceptual foundations and research questions. This approach was chosen for its suitability to social work research, where attention to participants lived experiences and meaning making is fundamental.

The analysis followed an inductive and interpretive logic, where categories and themes were not predefined but allowed to emerge through engagement with the data. As Bryman (2012) emphasises, this approach allows for context-sensitive interpretation and minimises researcher-imposed bias, enabling the researcher to remain open to insights grounded in participants' narratives.

All interviews were transcribed using the AI-based transcription tool TurboScribe. This tool was chosen for its speed and accuracy in generating verbatim transcripts, which were then reviewed for errors and corrected manually by the researcher. As part of the anonymisation process, the transcripts were also reviewed for any potentially identifiable information. Personal details such as names, countries, job titles, workplaces and university names were replaced with neutral descriptors to safeguard participants' confidentiality. The final, anonymised transcripts were then imported into MAXQDA 2024, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to support the systematic organization, coding and interpretation of the data.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase process for thematic analysis, which includes: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. These phases were applied iteratively and reflexively, in alignment with the study's inductive and interpretive design. The analytic process unfolded as follows:

1. Familiarisation with the data

All sixteen interviews were transcribed using the AI-based transcription tool TurboScribe. This tool was chosen for its speed and accuracy in generating verbatim transcripts, which were then reviewed for errors and corrected manually by the researcher. As part of the anonymisation process, the transcripts were also reviewed for any potentially identifiable information. Personal details such as names, countries, job titles, workplaces and university names were replaced with neutral descriptors in line with ethical protocols.

To immerse fully in the data, the researcher read the transcripts multiple times, making initial notes on patterns, expressions and variations in how students spoke about professional identity. This stage laid the foundation for meaningful interpretation in the coding process.

2. Initial coding (open coding/micro coding)

Open coding was conducted on a purposively selected sample of four interviews, two from Cohort 3 and two from Cohort 4. Within each cohort, one participant came from a professional background in social work and one from a non-social work background. This sampling aimed to ensure early coding reflected a diversity of perspectives and experience.

Each transcripts was read closely and segmented into small, meaningful units of data. These units were assigned short descriptive labels (codes) that captured the essence of what was being said. Where possible, *in vivo* codes (participants' own words) or close paraphrases were used. The focus at this stage was on remaining grounded in the data, generating codes that closely reflected the participants' language and lived experience, without introducing theoretical abstraction. Examples of such provisional codes include "confusion about curriculum" or "confidence gain."

3. Formation of thematic domains

After coding the initial interviews, the complete descriptive code list was reviewed and organised into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. Codes expressing similar ideas were grouped into descriptive categories. For example, codes like “*confidence gain*,” “*role clarity*,” and “*emotional readiness*” were clustered into a broader category such as “*Clarifying the Professional Self*.” Redundant or overlapping codes were merged and new distinctions were introduced if needed.

These descriptive categories were then interpreted to identify overarching thematic domains—patterns of meaning that responded to the research questions. These were later refined into the seven analytical categories described in Chapter 3, each capturing a distinct but interrelated aspect of professional identity development. MAXQDA’s visualisation tools (e.g. Code matrix browser) supported this interpretative step by highlighting code patterns and overlaps across participants. To ensure that the coding framework remained grounded and representative, the initial codebook was treated as provisional. As subsequent interviews were analysed, emerging insights prompted the researcher to return to earlier transcripts, reassessing and adjusting previously applied codes. This recursive process allowed for refinement of both codes and categories, enhancing consistency and analytical depth across the dataset.

4. Theme refinement

Following this ongoing review of codes and categories, the next stage involved refining the thematic domains to ensure internal coherence and analytical clarity. Emerging themes were reviewed for consistency and distinctiveness. The researcher ensured that each theme was sufficiently supported by the data and represented a clearly articulated pattern rather than isolated observations. This process involved cross-checking coded material, reviewing memos and reflecting on whether themes accurately captured participants’ lived experiences and theoretical relevance.

5. Contextualisation and presentation of themes

Each theme was defined with attention to its conceptual boundaries and internal structure. Definitions captured not only what the theme was about but also how it contributed to understanding students’ professional identity formation in the context of the ESWOCHY programme. Themes were named to reflect both their content and analytic relevance (e.g., “From insecurity to confidence”, “Negotiating professional belonging”, “Intercultural learning as identity expansion”).

Theme definitions were refined through dialogue with existing literature and the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 3. Memos recorded during analysis were used to trace the evolution of thematic meanings.

6. Producing the Report

Coded excerpts were linked to an anonymised participant ID (e.g. P1, P2), to ensure confidentiality while enabling contextual comparison. Illustrative quotations were selected to represent each theme in the

Findings chapter and to amplify participants' voices in alignment with the study's humanistic and interpretive orientation.

Consistent with Bryman's emphasis on transparency, coding decisions were documented throughout the process with memos. The process involved constant comparison—moving back and forth between the raw data and emerging themes—enabled a nuanced interpretation of how ESWOCHY students construct their professional identity. Reflexive insights from the researcher's own experience are also integrated into the findings chapter, where relevant, to deepen interpretive understanding while maintaining transparency and analytical distance.

Ultimately, the method's balance between structure and interpretive openness provided an analytical framework that supported both thematic coherence and sensitivity to the complexities of individual narratives. This method allowed the researcher to remain both systematic and responsive to the complexity of students' identity development, offering an empirically grounded lens through which to explore.

IV.4 Limitations of the study

This study aimed to explore how social work students in the ESWOCHY programme shape their professional identity. While careful attention was given to methodological rigour and ethical practice, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the research is based on a small purposive sample of sixteen participants drawn from two ESWOCHY cohorts. Although the sample was deliberately structured to include variation in gender, educational background and year of study, the findings cannot be generalised to all social work students or to the wider population of international degree programmes. The emphasis was on depth rather than breadth, and as such, the results offer contextual insights rather than universal claims.

Second, the researcher's dual role as both a peer and a member of the ESWOCHY community may have influenced the research process. This positionality potentially shaped both the responses given by participants and the interpretation of data during analysis. While familiarity may have facilitated openness and rapport, it also introduced a risk of bias. The researcher sought to mitigate this by maintaining a reflective stance throughout, making analytic memos and adhering to principles of neutrality and confidentiality.

Third, all interviews were conducted in English, which is not the first language for most participants. Although participants were fluent enough to engage meaningfully, linguistic limitations may have influenced how clearly or fully they expressed certain ideas, particularly around abstract concepts such as identity.

Fourth, data collection was conducted via online interviews using Zoom. While this approach enabled participation across geographical locations, it may have limited the development of interpersonal connection or the expression of more nuanced, emotionally charged experiences. Non-verbal cues were

sometimes difficult to interpret, and occasional technical disruptions may have affected the flow of conversation.

Fifth, although the sample included students from multiple cultural backgrounds, the diversity of perspectives was still constrained by who chose to participate and by the linguistic, technological and time-zone factors that may have affected accessibility. Certain voices—such as those less comfortable speaking in English or those with less availability—may be underrepresented.

Finally, the interpretive nature of qualitative content analysis means that the themes identified are shaped by the researcher's own lens. While measures such as code audit trails, MAXQDA tools, and thematic cross-checks were used to ensure consistency, the analysis remains subjective to some extent. The findings reflect one possible reading of the data, shaped by the research context and purpose.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insights into the professional identity formation of ESWOCHY students and offers a foundation for further research in transnational social work education.

Additionally, while the analytical framework was grounded in both theory and data, the categorisation of themes ultimately reflects interpretive choices made by the researcher. This reinforces the need for critical reflexivity and transparency throughout the analytical process, particularly given the researcher's dual role as a peer and participant in the ESWOCHY programme. For example, during the analysis of themes related to emotional resilience and role confusion, my own familiarity with similar experiences prompted a deeper exploration of these patterns in the data. At the same time, it required conscious distancing to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' own words rather than my assumptions. Maintaining analytic memos helped me remain aware of these dynamics and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

V. Findings and analysis

This chapter is structured thematically rather than by individual research questions. The researcher's decision reflects the nature of qualitative analysis, where meaning emerges organically from participants' narratives. As Bryman (2012) explains, “the researcher often organizes the findings in terms of themes or categories that emerge from the data, not in relation to each research question in turn” (*Social Research Methods*, 4th ed., Chapter 24).

Thematic organization was particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows for a more integrated and authentic representation of how ESWOCHY students construct and express their professional identity through lived experience. It also offers a closer alignment with the main research question — *How do social work students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and shape their professional identity?* — by reflecting the complexity and non-linear nature of identity development itself.

Furthermore, because professional identity is inherently shaped through lived experience, it is important to note that research question 2 — “*How do ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity based on their own experience?*” — intersects with multiple thematic areas. Personal reflections on boundaries, emotional regulation, peer learning, and confidence often emerged across diverse contexts, making RQ2 especially prominent. Rather than indicating redundancy, this thematic recurrence reflects the complex, experiential nature of identity development. The findings are therefore structured to honour the richness of these interconnections, even when they do not align with a single research question in isolation.

V.1 Values and ethical orientation

This category explores how ESWOCHY students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds articulate and deepen their professional values.

While some enter the programme with well-established ethical convictions grounded in prior training and field experience, others arrive with intuitive value orientations shaped by personal history or adjacent professional practice. As their learning progresses, values such as empathy, cultural humility and client-centredness become more explicit, tested and internalised.

This process reflects the dynamic interplay of personal and professional identity described by Erikson (Sokol, 2009), in which students internalise societal role expectations through reflective engagement. It also aligns with Burke and Stets' (2023) notion that values become stabilised through repeated social interactions and role enactments.

Across all four cohorts, three sub-themes recur: anchoring empathy and human sensitivity in lived experience, cultivating respect and openness in intercultural dialogue and navigating emotional balance and professional boundaries.

V.1.1 Anchoring empathy and human sensitivity in lived experience

Addressing RQ2 – “How do ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity based on their own experience?”, narratives below reveal interpretations of professional identity through the lens of personal transformation — rooted in lived experiences, emotional challenges, and growing ethical awareness.

P5 reflected, “I studied social work at bachelor’s level and worked with children in shelters” (P5), suggesting how practice grounded his early identity in empathy and responsibility. Another participant described a values-based foundation in social work as “a helping profession” (P10). She explained, “our main focus is the welfare of vulnerable populations like children, persons with disability, older people, etc. And what we do is to support these people, to empower them to be able to live on their own, to be able to live independently” (P10). signalling a deeply anchored orientation toward service. Such expressions indicate that empathy in social work is not simply an emotional response, but a guiding principle for action and advocacy.

Others described how values such as empathy, dignity, and respect shaped their future aspirations.

P15, for example, envisioned working with elderly individuals in rural areas, stressing values of connection and independence. Likewise, P1 added: “That’s a value I take with me in every role I play” (P1), referring to youth empowerment as a central tenet of his professional self.

Some students highlighted the importance of non-directive support as an expression of empathy. As P8 explained, “giving space, not just answers” (P8) was a practice grounded in respect for autonomy. This notion of empathy as relational space-making—rather than directive intervention—resonates with the humanistic pillar of the ESWOCHY programme, which places high value on recognising and responding to the dignity and uniqueness of each individual.

Students’ narratives revealed that for many, empathy had already begun forming prior to their master’s studies and was further articulated and expanded through practical experiences. Across diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, students consistently described empathy as a foundational professional value, often emerging from deeply personal or field-based experience. Rather than emerging in abstract, empathy was frequently embodied and shaped through encounters with human vulnerability, echoing Erikson’s perspective on identity formation as intrinsically linked to life-stage experiences and value exploration (Sokol, 2009).

Importantly, insights into students’ shared narratives show that empathy is not experienced as passive sentimentality. Rather, it is often seen as an intentional, ethical orientation. This aligns with Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformative learning, in which critical reflection—often prompted by disorienting dilemmas—becomes a catalyst for refining values and developing new ways of seeing. Within this frame, empathy emerges as a consciously chosen professional stance, cultivated through reflective engagement with diverse social realities.

Finally, these reflections suggest that empathy is not an isolated personal trait but deeply embedded in professional identity development. As students navigate intercultural settings and ethically complex

scenarios, empathy becomes both a compass and a commitment—an element of identity shaped by experience, reflection, and shared values.

V.1.2 Respect, open-mindedness, and cultural humility in a shared space

Research question 4: “Which experiences within the ESWOCHY programme contribute most significantly to their professional identity development?” is addressed by participants.

P15 described how the programme helped her recognise that social work differs across countries, and that responding to clients requires adapting to cultural and systemic contexts — a process that deepened her understanding of the profession as a vehicle for mutual understanding across cultures. For her, respect becomes a practice of curiosity and cultural adjustment. She further shared what we can see as a transformation stating, “I now see myself more as someone who guides than someone who fixes” (P5) — a shift rooted in humility and respect for diverse realities.

Students with prior training echo this evolution. P2 shared, “I try to observe more before I act, especially in intercultural situations” (P2). She linked growing patience and open-mindedness to her maturing identity. Learning as a formative influence on the evolving professional identity was emphasised by P13: “One highlight for me about this journey so far is learning from my colleagues... so yeah, I would say it has even made me, it has even widened my, you know, international thinking” (P13). These reflections underscore how humility, respect and intercultural awareness are cultivated not only through formal content but also through relational exchange among students.

These reflections underscore how humility, respect, and intercultural awareness are cultivated not only through formal content but also through relational exchange among students. This supports the intercultural competence development described by Deardorff (2006), where openness and reflective interaction are key attitudes in navigating diverse perspectives — especially in transnational learning environments.

V.1.3 Striving for balance: Self-awareness, boundaries and mental health

This sub-category emerged through addressing RQ2, “How do ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity based on their own experience?”. Data revealed that students interpret professional identity through the lens of personal transformation — rooted in lived experiences, emotional challenges, and growing ethical awareness.

P15 described herself as “a very empathetic person” who “takes other people’s emotions too deeply” and brings all those feelings home “like a burden for a few days” (P15). She linked this challenge to a learning moment during a simulation class, which helped her become aware of the need to emotionally separate from clients and protect her own wellbeing.

Students with social work backgrounds also recognised the emotional demands of the role, though from a different angle. P11 reflected that service is the most important value, describing it as “being available to give out your best in any role” (P11). Her framing reveals both a strong internal commitment and the potential for overextension.

A more balanced perspective was expressed by P2: “Even though I sometimes doubt myself, I think I know who I am and what I stand for” (P2). This quote captures the emotional tension and demonstrates the resilience involved in maintaining a values-based identity.

One participant reflected: “I’m always practising, practising, practising... cases, cases, cases. I do not even have time to sit down and say, what can I do? I need to take care of myself as a social worker to avoid burnout” (P6). Another participant contrasted this: “And now watching people, I’m not practising, I’m now looking at people practising and I’m seeing so many errors, which we don’t see when we’re practising.” She concluded: “I see how important it is for me to sit down and reflect on my practise” (P12). Participants shared that this were realisations they got through the space created through role-plays and many other simulation exercises during the programme.

P8 recounted how study visits revealed “it’s really easy to get burnt out,” and described reflecting on how that “would happen to me,” concluding that “it’s really important to take care of yourself” (P8) — highlighting a growing awareness of emotional limits as part of professional insight.

P7 captured this inner tension through the metaphor of a slack line: “The first image that came to my mind was a slack line... it’s keeping this balance of what can I do, what I cannot... what is my fault, what is not” (P7). His reflection conveys the mental balancing act involved in sustaining empathy without self-blame, and in staying grounded while navigating professional responsibility and personal wellbeing.

These personal accounts reflect how students interpret professional identity through lived emotional experiences, ethical dilemmas, and increasing self-awareness. The emotional dimension of social work and the need for ethical self-care is a recurring concern. As explored by Bogo et al. (2006), emotional self-regulation is not only a personal skill but a professional competency shaped by reflection and supervision. Erikson’s psychosocial model (Sokol, 2009), particularly the identity versus role confusion stage, illuminates this inner struggle—where individuals must navigate between external demands and internal values to build a coherent sense of self. In professional terms, this translates into balancing care for others with care for self, a principle also highlighted by Akmane et al. (2020). Emotional regulation, in this view, is not separate from professional ethics, but deeply embedded within it.

V.2 Professional roles and responsibilities

This category explores how ESWOCHY students interpret and develop their understanding of the professional roles and responsibilities expected of a social worker. While this theme primarily addresses RQ2, it also connects to RQ1 and RQ3, reflecting the integrated nature of students’ identity development.

Participants with extensive field experience and formal social work training and the ones who just begin with adjacent or informal roles are united in a shared journey of negotiating expectations, clarifying boundaries and redefining the meaning of professionalism in diverse contexts. Across all four groups, three sub-themes recur: learning to differentiate and define the professional role, negotiating role expectations across contexts and rethinking authority, collaboration and boundaries.

V.2.1 Learning to differentiate and define the professional role

Shared insights are bringing answers to research question 2, »How do ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity based on their own experience?«.

P2 framed professional identity as a process of internalising ethical structures and expectations. She described it as “the balances I have to have as a social worker... all the patterns that I have to follow as a certain package of the rules... to shape myself in the box to fit a social worker” (P2). Her metaphor suggests that professional identity involves not only values but also adapting to institutional norms and continually negotiating one’s fit within the role.

P1 highlighted alignment between personal values and professional conduct, noting that clarity of role comes from applying one's principles in diverse situations.

P10, reflecting on transnational experiences, emphasised that social workers must know their role well enough to educate others and withstand external misunderstanding or doubt. She explained, “you have to know very well the role that you play as a professional so that you can also educate people” (P10), adding that confidence in one’s professional identity is necessary to avoid being confused or discouraged by others.

P11 noted that exposure to unfamiliar systems and peer dialogue helped refine her understanding of role expectations, especially in contexts where social work is perceived differently.

P6 captured this evolving understanding through the image of a tree: “The reason why I picked a tree is because professional development is a continuous growth. It starts from the roots... it grows, it creates a lot of branches” (P6). Her metaphor evokes the idea of identity as natural, rooted, and constantly branching — shaped by exposure to new roles, learning environments, and lived experience.

These reflections illustrate how ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity as a gradual, reflective, and contextually embedded process. Rather than adopting a fixed or idealised notion of social work, students describe professional identity as something negotiated and internalised through practice, peer dialogue, and exposure to diverse systems. This shift reflects what Mezirow (2000) describes as *transformative learning*, wherein individuals move from received knowledge to critically constructed meaning through experience. P2’s metaphor of “shaping oneself in the box” resonates with Burke and Stets’ (2023) *Identity Theory*, which frames professional identity as a negotiated alignment between internal

meanings and external role expectations. Overall, students' accounts affirm that professional role clarity emerges through situated learning and ongoing reflective practice.

V.2.2 Negotiating role expectations across contexts

Continuing to address research question 2, P11 spoke of encountering specialised professional pathways for the first time: "Back in our country, social work is general... but here, you can specialise" (P11). Her observation marked a shift in how she understood the role — not as a universal set of tasks, but as something shaped by context.

P10 added that the lack of public understanding about social work in both global and European settings revealed the importance of advocacy in establishing professional legitimacy.

P14 reflected on differences between Germany and Lithuania, noting that in Germany "social work online doesn't work" due to strict documentation expectations, whereas in Lithuania, online practice is more accepted: "You have to change according to the client, and the culture and everything" (P14). His experience highlights how role expectations are embedded in local systems and must be constantly adapted. P6 described her initial discomfort with the programme's early focus, noting that she had expected more emphasis on working with children. This mismatch between expectation and experience prompted her to reflect on her assumptions about what social work should involve. Over time, she came to value broader exposure, explaining: "I learned to be open, to respect different perspectives, and to work on cultural sensitivity" (P6).

These reflections show that ESWOCHY students interpret professional identity not as fixed but as constantly negotiated in relation to the institutional, cultural, and social environments they encounter. Instead of applying a static understanding of the social work role, they learn to adapt and reflect on how their identity fits within different systems. This perspective aligns with Triutami and Mbato's (2021) sociological view of identity formation, which sees professional identity as developing through interaction with context-specific institutional, cultural, and relational norms. In transnational programmes like ESWOCHY, where norms and systems vary, this negotiation becomes a core component of identity development. Kegan's (1982) theory of identity as a lifelong developmental process further supports this view, emphasising the importance of navigating and integrating conflicting demands to construct a mature and adaptive professional identity. Students' experiences in multiple settings thus become key drivers of reflective learning and professional self-concept transformation.

V.2.3 Rethinking authority, collaboration and boundaries

P5 reflected that she now sees herself "more as someone who guides than someone who fixes" (P5). This role shift was described as both empowering and unsettling, prompting reflection on how authority is enacted without dominating others.

P14 recalled a role-play exercise where she realised that collaboration sometimes required a firm stance: “Sometimes it’s not always that we can be collaborative. Sometimes you need to say, ‘We’re here, we’re gonna stay and you guys need to listen to us’” (P14). Her reflection highlighted that relational practice also involves advocating for the legitimacy of one’s role, and balancing humility with professional assertion.

P8 spoke of initial hesitation, especially around confidence in public speaking and professional presence: “Sometimes I’m not really confident in myself as a social worker... I need to do better” (P8). With time, she came to see collaboration as central to professional integrity: “To be a good social work professional, you have to be really collaborative — not only with your clients, but with your colleagues, with the community... even with the politics” (P8).

These reflections reveal how students interpret professional identity as a dynamic negotiation of authority, responsibility, and relational engagement. The idea of the social worker as an unquestioned expert gives way to a more nuanced identity — one based on listening, facilitating, and co-constructing solutions with others. This transition reflects Trede’s (2012) concept of *relational professionalism*, where interpersonal intelligence, dialogical competence, and ethical self-awareness become central to professional development. Wheeler’s (2017) emphasis on communities of practice further supports this interpretation, suggesting that professional identity is co-constructed through participation in collaborative, reflexive environments. Within this view, professional boundaries are not barriers but ethical frameworks that sustain trust, responsiveness, and mutual accountability.

V.3 Learning and educational experiences

This section explores how specific features of the ESWOCHY programme — including experiential learning, international mobility, and intercultural classrooms — contribute to shaping students’ professional identity. While research questions 3 and 4 are distinct in scope, with RQ3 focusing on broader contributing factors and RQ4 emphasising specific experiences, participants often spoke in concrete, experiential terms. As a result, many of their reflections on what contributes to their identity were embedded in descriptions of specific learning moments. These experiential accounts can be understood as carriers of broader contributing conditions, such as peer influence, emotional engagement, intercultural adaptation, and institutional structure. Therefore, although the findings are primarily structured around RQ4, they also implicitly respond to RQ3 by illustrating the conditions under which identity development occurred.

V.3.1 From disorientation to orientation: Learning the landscape

P4, who entered the programme without a prior degree in social work, described his initial disorientation, recalling that he felt “totally unaware of what is a social worker” (P4). He identified classroom presentations

on social work theory as key turning points that helped him begin to see himself as part of the professional community.

P7 shared how the programme challenged his assumptions about the field. Initially surprised by the expectations he encountered, he reflected: “Now that I’m entering the field of social work here by the ESWOCHY, I feel like... there is this possibility to be more, to be approaching the client... which in my home country is inexistent” (P7). As his understanding developed, he began to conceptualise social work as a flexible and multidisciplinary field: “I think that social work is a little bit of a conjunction of humanity sciences put into practice... a little bit of anthropology, a little bit of sociology, a little bit of psychology” (P7).

Expanding on his perspective P2 noted, “The programme helped me realise there are many ways of doing social work” (P2), reflecting a shift from a nationally bound understanding to a broader, comparative global outlook.

These accounts illustrate how early experiences in the ESWOCHY programme — particularly those involving theoretical exposure, reflection-based learning, and cross-national dialogue — play a critical role in professional identity development. Mezirow’s (2000) concept of *disorienting dilemmas* helps explain how initial confusion becomes a catalyst for deeper reflection and transformation. The students’ transitions from uncertainty to clarity reflect identity construction as a process facilitated by intentional curricular design. As Johnson et al. (2023) argue, identity-conscious curricula that include structured reflection, narrative inquiry, and integrative assignments can help students connect personal meaning with professional purpose. The ESWOCHY programme, in this view, functions as both an educational space and a reflective landscape for emerging professional identities.

V.3.2 Experiential learning as a trigger for confidence

P12 described an early mediation simulation where she initially felt overwhelmed: “At first I was like, ‘This is not for me’... everything was a mess, uncontrolled” (P12). However, with repeated practice and constructive feedback, her confidence grew: “Now I think I could actually do a pretty good job” (P12). Her experience illustrates how confronting emotional intensity and ambiguity through experiential learning can serve as a turning point in developing professional confidence.

P13 reflected on a volunteering experience involving a non-verbal child in crisis: “I was really proud of myself that I was able to, you know, not put my emotions of fear, because I acted out of fear. I was able to stay calm... if I put my emotions out there, it will make your situation worse. It was the first time I felt like I was actually applying what I’d learned in class” (P13). Her account demonstrates how emotional regulation, learned in theory, became a felt and embodied component of professional practice, reinforcing her sense of readiness and identity.

P9 highlighted the importance of ongoing fieldwork combined with reflection: “We go to the field, we come back and we discuss that in the fieldwork class with utmost confidentiality... your fieldwork supervisor also looks at what you are doing and helps provide skills for you” (P9). This integration of experience and structured dialogue allowed her to build skills incrementally and with increasing confidence.

These accounts underscore that experiential learning — particularly simulations, role plays, and supervised fieldwork — significantly contributes to professional identity development by translating theory into embodied practice. For many students, such experiences were emotionally challenging yet ultimately empowering, helping them confront doubts, manage emotional reactions, and internalise a sense of professional competence.

Kourgiantakis et al. (2018) emphasise that simulations and reflective supervision provide safe yet authentic settings for exploring roles and boundaries. Similarly, Tham et al. (2021) note that early exposure to professional ambiguity can foster stronger identity formation when accompanied by reflective support. Björktomta and Tham (2024) further argue that emotionally resonant moments — when processed through reflection — are key to internalising professional identity. Within ESWOCHY, these active learning environments allowed students to move from passive learners to confident actors, grounding their emerging identity in action, self-awareness, and situated ethical judgment.

V.3.3 Learning through others: Peers, pedagogy and perspective

P4 highlighted that “variety of identities, personal backgrounds and also geographical backgrounds probably have had an impact on my development and professional identity” (P4). Observing how others approached learning and practice initially led him to self-doubt, but later became a catalyst for confidence and belonging. He began to see his contributions not as inferior, but as differently informed — part of a shared journey.

P6 echoed this process of transformation through exposure to new content and perspectives, noting: “I learned to be open, to respect different perspectives, and to work on cultural sensitivity” (P6). Her reflection illustrates how curricular and peer interactions helped broaden her understanding of the profession and shaped a more reflexive, inclusive identity.

P14 spoke to the role of teachers in shaping professional vision: “They really made me reflect on what kind of social worker I want to be” (P14). He credited teacher approachability and reflective guidance with helping him clarify his ethical orientation and future goals.

In contrast, P5 expressed frustration when prior experience was not recognised: “It felt like we had to start from zero, like our past didn’t count” (P5). This experience disrupted his sense of identity continuity and weakened his professional confidence.

These accounts show that interaction with others — peers, teachers, and the broader academic environment — significantly contributes to students’ evolving professional identity. Learning occurred not only through

formal instruction but also through relational experiences that affirmed, challenged, or redefined students' sense of self as future practitioners. Wheeler's (2017) model of socialisation into professional identity supports this interpretation, emphasising the role of interaction with peers, supervisors, and learning environments in shaping professional development. Zhao and Moen's (2023) notion of *transnational learning positions* further explains how cultural and pedagogical diversity prompts critical reflection and identity repositioning. At the same time, Rees and Monrouxe (2018) remind us that hidden curricular messages — including recognition (or lack thereof) of prior knowledge — can deeply affect how students feel seen and valued within professional training. Across the ESWOCHY experience, relational dynamics functioned as both reflective mirrors and developmental scaffolds for identity construction.

V.4 Institutional and programme influences (ESWOCHY)

This category directly aligns with research question 4 where students shared perceptions which experiences within the ESWOCHY programme contributed to their professional identity development.

P4, who entered the programme without prior social work training, recalled being “totally unaware of what a social worker is” (P4) and described how engaging with presentations and theoretical discussions helped him begin identifying with the role.

P11, already trained in social work, voiced frustration with structural limitations: “We were told to find internships by ourselves... it wasn't easy” (P11), pointing to a lack of coordinated institutional support that challenged her professional development.

P2 similarly noted initial challenges in aligning his thesis topic with his professional interests: “It was really tough at the beginning... my topic was changed... it took me time to understand what the topic is all about” (P2). Yet he ultimately acknowledged that conducting comparative international research “has really shaped my understanding” (P2), reinforcing his professional direction.

P9 highlighted the emotional and academic strain caused by frequent relocation within the joint degree structure: “The problem is that when you are moving from one country to another, the systems are different, the teachers are different, the expectations are different... and you don't get enough time to adjust before it changes again” (P9).

P10 expressed concern that some learning tasks felt disconnected from professional practice, contributing to a sense of misalignment between institutional expectations and real-world preparation.

P3 articulated a deeper identity conflict, stating: “I'm an artist. That's my professional identity... these roles which don't represent me, that's a problem for me” (P3). His comment underscores the tension between institutional definitions of professional identity and individual self-concept.

Despite these tensions, some students described turning points of institutional clarity. P6 remarked that “the second semester brought clarity,” suggesting a delayed but eventual sense of direction. P9 reflected positively on the comparative nature of the programme: “Comparing these countries... has really shaped

my understanding. Now when I merge it with what I have experienced back home I can tell you that I am a more better social worker than somebody coming from my home country” (P9).

These accounts illustrate that institutional and programme structures played a dual role in shaping professional identity — as both enablers and obstacles. On one hand, ESWOCHY provided a unique context for intercultural comparison, mobility, and identity exploration. On the other, fragmented institutional coordination and inconsistent academic expectations created emotional and pedagogical strain. As Yao and Flynn (2024) argue, professional identity in transnational settings is not formed by curriculum alone, but also by emotional belonging and institutional coherence. When those are lacking, as seen in internship placement or thesis supervision, students may struggle to establish a stable identity. Naumiuk (2021) warns that mobility without pedagogical continuity can destabilise identity formation, while Lairio et al. (2013) emphasise the importance of institutional belonging in transitions. Rees and Monrouxe (2018) further highlight how hidden curricula — including unspoken norms around legitimacy and role expectations — can marginalise students whose self-concept does not match institutional models. Finally, Stephenson and Cox (2025) argue that without deliberate structural scaffolding, international programmes risk leaving students with fragmented rather than integrated professional identities. In the ESWOCHY context, institutions thus became sites of identity negotiation — where students were not only educated, but also compelled to define, assert, and sometimes reconstruct what it means to be a social worker in an unstable and shifting transnational landscape.

V.5 Cultural and transnational context

Another category where research question 4 was strongly explored.

P9 captured the value of everyday cultural exchange, stating: “We reflect, we talk about it, we share cultural experiences and all these things make you understand what you're studying” (P9). Her reflection highlights how peer interaction and cultural diversity were not simply contextual elements, but central to the way professional knowledge was constructed and made meaningful.

Another participant described early classroom discomfort: “Sometimes I'm in these classes, and I just want to say things which might not be understood... and then I feel, oh, did I really say that?” This moment of hesitation reveals how subtle cultural dynamics influenced confidence and academic voice.

P9 further articulated the contextual nature of professional practice: “Some things are explained based on availability of resources and cultural perspective...” She reflected that she now understands the importance of “domesticating social work [and] indigenising social work,” recognising how cultural and material conditions shape ethical and practical decisions.

P3 added: “My perception of social work is — it depends on the country, the type of education you're getting from the universities.” His observation underscores how transnational comparison led to a more localised and nuanced understanding of the profession.

P6 reflected on the emotional impact of intercultural learning: “Before, I am a very judgemental person... I tend to be reactive. Joining this programme made me realise I have a lot of things to improve on” (P6). Her statement indicates a personal and behavioural shift rooted in exposure to diversity and critical self-reflection.

P7 addressed the institutional responsibility in maintaining the programme’s intercultural integrity: “The majority of professors are aware of the necessity of openness and the diversity discussion but when they are not, it makes it hard. Because that’s like the brilliant part of the course — if we lose that, there is their fault” (P7).

Finally, P9 offered a summary of this transformation: “Now, I am a global social worker... I don't think I’m going to work in my cultural context ever again” (P9). This statement reflects the deep internalisation of a transnational identity and a shift away from locally anchored frameworks toward a global professional perspective.

These reflections show that the cultural and transnational context of the ESWOCHY programme was not merely a backdrop but a transformative arena in which professional identity was constructed, challenged, and redefined. Students consistently framed intercultural encounters — whether through classroom interaction, peer exchange, or institutional engagement — as key to developing openness, adaptability, and ethical clarity. Deardorff’s (2006) model of intercultural competence is particularly relevant here, as it emphasises the development of empathy, reflexivity, and flexibility through lived experience.

Students’ accounts also align with Zhao and Moen’s (2023) concept of *transnational learning positions*, in which identity is reoriented in response to diverse, and sometimes conflicting, educational and cultural systems.

However, not all encounters were empowering. As Rees and Monrouxe (2018) note, subtle exclusions shaped by hidden curricula — including norms of participation, authority, and communication — can inhibit students’ confidence and sense of legitimacy. These moments were felt deeply, even when not explicitly discriminatory, and contributed to the emotional labour of identity work in transnational settings. In line with Triutami and Mbato’s (2021) argument, identity development in international education requires both cultural inclusion and institutional recognition. When present, these factors facilitated profound self-reflection and transformation.

As Higashida (2022) suggests, identity negotiation becomes most generative when cultural difference is approached as a dialogic space for mutual learning. The ESWOCHY experience, for many students, fostered precisely this kind of dialogic transformation.

Ultimately, the cultural and transnational aspects of the programme not only influenced but anchored the process of professional identity development. For participants like P9, this resulted in a redefinition of self as a “global social worker,” capable of navigating complexity with critical reflexivity and intercultural competence.

To acknowledge the researcher's possible interpretive presence in relation to these dynamics, a short reflexive vignette is included below.

Reflexive vignette: Navigating between the lines

As a student in the ESWOCHY programme myself, I often found that reading participants' reflections on cultural clashes or feelings of being "the outsider" brought up my own memories — moments when I struggled to express a professional identity across unfamiliar institutional systems. In one interview, a participant from a non-European background described feeling dismissed when their national context was excluded from classroom examples. I initially read their comment as frustration with curriculum design, but as I sat with the transcript, I realised I was also recalling a moment when my own perspective was brushed aside in a group task — and how I stayed silent. That awareness helped me re-read their words not only as critique, but as an attempt to assert presence in a space that was not always designed with them in mind. These moments reminded me that interpretation is never neutral. My own experiences, silences, and sensitivities shaped which phrases I paused on, which tensions I recognised, and how I came to see cultural identity as both personal and professionally negotiated.

These moments of recognition deepened my sensitivity to how identity is constructed through difference and reminded me that interpretation is always shaped by the context in which we read and respond.

V.6 Reflexivity and self-understanding

This section addresses research questions 1 and 2 by exploring how ESWOCHY students define the meaning of professional identity and how their understanding is shaped through personal experiences, emotional challenges, and reflective engagement.

P15 reflected on her evolving understanding of identity, stating: "At first, I saw identity as rules — a box to fit into. Now, it feels more like a lighthouse — something to grow toward, something that guides me" (P15). Her shift captures a move from rigid role conformity to a more aspirational and internalised view of identity.

P5 described behavioural and conceptual changes, noting she had learned to "slow down and really think before reacting" and that "how you do it, and how it aligns with your values" mattered more than formal definitions of professionalism (P5).

P3 illustrated the relational nature of identity: "Professional identity development... it's like a mosaic of life. You are not separate from life, you are not separate from people... it's all interconnected" (P3). His metaphor suggests identity is formed through dynamic interaction between self and context.

P10 described how a simulation became a moment of self-awareness: "Simulation showed me I need to pause — it revealed how I act, think, and feel" (P10).

P15 also spoke about the emotional challenges of client work, stating: “It was difficult detaching from clients’ pain,” highlighting how emotional over-identification prompted the need for boundaries and reflection.

P4 expressed uncertainty and growth, admitting: “Sometimes I also question myself if I belong in this field,” and later noting that presenting in a theory class made them “feel like I’m becoming a part of the profession” (P4).

P6 shared an internal turning point: “I have a lot of things to improve on... I have to start within myself” (P6), while P1 explained how the programme helped her “redefine some of my own practices” (P1).

P13 reflected on value internalisation: “I knew the values before, but ESWOCHY helped me prioritise them... surface knowledge became deep conviction” (P13). Similarly, P2 stated: “Professional identity is knowing your values and your boundaries” and added that he had “become more patient, especially when people don’t communicate the way I expect” (P2).

P10 addressed the experience of professional invisibility: “We talk about professional identity because we’re not recognised... clients don’t know we exist... we need to advertise the profession” (P10), highlighting how identity work also involves public legitimacy and advocacy.

He also offered a vivid metaphor for reflexivity: “Smoke rising... from the ground it’s dark, but it gets clearer as it goes higher” (P10), expressing the non-linear, layered nature of coming to know oneself in a professional role.

These accounts demonstrate that ESWOCHY students assign meaning to professional identity as a relational, evolving, and value-based process — rather than as a fixed role or externally imposed standard. Students interpreted identity as something clarified over time, often through discomfort, ethical tension, and personal transformation. Rather than acquiring identity through instruction alone, they constructed it through ongoing negotiation between inner values, outer expectations, and cultural experiences.

This perspective is supported by Kegan’s (1984) model of identity as a developmental process shaped by emotional and cognitive disequilibrium. Students’ reflections resonate with Burke and Stets’ (2023) identity theory, which frames identity as dynamic and constantly revised in response to social roles and context. Reflexivity — both in thought and practice — became a key mechanism for navigating identity transformation.

Jackson and Tomlinson (2023) argue that effective pedagogies help students align internal values with professional norms, and in ESWOCHY, these reflective spaces allowed that alignment to unfold gradually. Reflexivity was often triggered by emotional intensity, intercultural tension, or ambiguous professional boundaries — aligning with Akman et al. (2020), who found that such encounters catalyse transformation when students experience friction between past and emerging selves.

Ultimately, students did not describe reflexivity as a linear learning outcome, but as an unfolding stance of self-awareness. It became a quiet yet profound force in shaping what kind of social worker they envisioned becoming — not in abstract terms, but through lived, relational, and value-driven engagement.

V.7 Aspiration and future professional direction

This section addresses research questions 1 and 2 by examining how ESWOCHY students articulate their future aspirations in social work, revealing how their understanding of professional identity is shaped by past experiences, present reflections, and imagined roles.

P8 described a visit to a family crisis centre as a moment of clarity: “I started picturing myself working there... it wasn’t just what they did, it was how they were” (P8). She added, “Social work isn’t nine to five. It’s action-oriented and needed” (P8), indicating how frontline work influenced her vision of belonging in the profession.

P6 reflected on reconnecting with her original motivations: “I knew I wanted to work with children affected by trafficking... but during the first semester, I started to feel like I had forgotten why I was here” (P6). Returning to this focus through coursework and placement helped realign her internal sense of purpose.

P9 articulated aspirations beyond direct practice: “I want to become a professor... to prove that policymakers should be implementers too” (P9). Her experience managing community-based projects contributed to this vision of herself in a systemic and leadership role.

P8 acknowledged ongoing uncertainty: “I feel like I’m halfway to becoming a social worker” (P8), while P13 said she was “somewhere at a seven” (P13) out of ten in terms of clarity. She was still choosing between working more broadly with children or specialising in disability support.

P13 also emphasised values-based continuity over fixed roles: “I don’t know what tomorrow holds, but I want to keep working with children with disabilities” (P13). P3 similarly stated: “Now I think more about what kind of impact I want to make... not just where I’ll work, but how I want to show up” (P3).

One student expressed the importance of emotional sustainability in their future role, stating they hoped to work in an environment with strong emotional support and supervision. P15 described her ideal role metaphorically: “steady, guiding, and clear — like a lighthouse” (P15).

These forward-looking reflections illustrate how students assign meaning to professional identity not as a static endpoint, but as a values-driven, evolving process. Aspirations were shaped by experiential learning and emotionally resonant encounters, not merely by theoretical knowledge. This understanding aligns with Kegan’s (1984) theory of identity as an evolving meaning-making process, in which future orientation is formed through the integration of past experience, present reflection, and imagined possibilities.

Field placements, volunteering, and meaningful conversations played a key role in helping students visualise their future selves. These experiences are consistent with Björktomta and Tham’s (2024) findings that emotionally grounded practice helps students articulate future identities. Students who reconnected

with their original goals experienced what Mezirow (2000) terms *perspective transformation* — a reassessment of values and intentions sparked by educational experiences.

Several participants imagined systemic or academic roles, reflecting what Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) describe as *emergent professional identities*, where students project themselves into future leadership or advocacy positions while integrating reflection and critical agency.

At the same time, ambiguity was common. Drawing on Erikson's psychosocial model (Sokol, 2009), such uncertainty reflects a normative stage in identity development — a period of role exploration preceding long-term commitment. These students were not directionless, but rather navigating complex options in search of ethical clarity and role alignment.

The emphasis on values over job titles supports Akman et al.'s (2020) argument that professional identity is sustained by clarity of values, purpose, and emotional resilience — not by rigid career paths.

Finally, several reflections demonstrate aspirational positioning as described by Triutami and Mbato (2021) — the process by which students construct future-oriented identities rooted in both internal conviction and imagined practice environments. P15's metaphor of the lighthouse encapsulates this dual focus on emotional stability and professional clarity.

Overall, the students' narratives suggest that projecting into the future is itself a form of identity work. As Jackson and Tomlinson (2023) note, identity formation is not a final state but a continuous process of becoming — particularly salient at points of transition such as graduation or entry into the profession. Through this lens, students' aspirations reflect not just where they want to go, but who they are becoming.

VI. Discussion

This chapter synthesises the key findings of the study in relation to the research sub-questions and conceptual framework. While the previous chapter presented participants' voices and thematic patterns in detail, this discussion is organised around the study's four research questions to ensure analytical clarity and alignment with the study's aims.

This structure reflects a common approach in qualitative research, where findings are presented thematically to foreground participant narratives and emergent meaning, while the discussion re-engages explicitly with the research questions to interpret the data through theoretical and conceptual lenses (Bryman, 2012). The ESWOCHY Thesis Handbook similarly supports flexible structuring, encouraging coherence between analysis and research objectives. Organising the discussion by research question enables a systematic exploration of how the themes interconnect to answer each question and deepen understanding of professional identity development.

The interpretations offered here draw on the analytical framework introduced in Chapter 3 and extend the thematic insights into broader conceptual and practical implications. In doing so, this chapter bridges the inductive nature of qualitative analysis with the deductive purpose of answering the research questions, ensuring both scientific rigour and narrative richness.

VI.1 Interpretation of findings in relation to research questions

This section offers a focused interpretation of the findings in light of existing literature, theoretical perspectives, and the specific features of the ESWOCHY programme. While the preceding chapter presented the voices of students thematically, this discussion interprets their experiences through the lens of the study's four research sub-questions, which explore how ESWOCHY students define, experience, and shape their professional identity. These interpretations are guided by the analytical framework developed in Chapter 3, which identifies seven interrelated dimensions of identity formation: values and ethical orientation, professional roles and responsibilities, learning and educational experiences, institutional and programme influences, cultural and transnational context, reflexivity and self-understanding, and future professional aspirations. These dimensions emerged inductively from the data and are conceptually grounded in a view of professional identity as a dynamic, relational, and contextually embedded process. The framework integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, anchored in two pillars (out of three) of the ESWOCHY programme: a humanistic perspective and intercultural communication.

Since interpretive reflections and literature have already been partially integrated into the findings, this section avoids repetition and instead highlights key points of synthesis across sub-questions. It aims to consolidate theoretical insights, extend conceptual implications, and illuminate the complex pathways through which students in transnational programmes come to see themselves as future professionals.

VI.1.1 The meaning of professional identity as understood by ESWOCHY students

The findings suggest that ESWOCHY students perceive professional identity as a fluid, evolving construct anchored in personal values and ethical commitments. Participants described it not as a fixed title or job description, but as a developing sense of who they are becoming in the profession. Core values such as dignity, empathy, and justice emerged repeatedly as central components of this identity. Some students linked professional identity to internal coherence and a sense of direction, while others described it in terms of recognition and legitimacy within the professional field. Metaphors like “a lighthouse,” “a mosaic,” and “a smoke” illustrated the deeply personal and dynamic ways in which students conceptualised identity — as something assembled over time, informed by experience, and shaped through interaction.

This understanding resonates with existing literature on identity in social work and higher education. It supports earlier work by Moorhead et al. (2025) and Wiles (2024), who describe professional identity in social work as inherently developmental and context-sensitive. Students' emphasis on value alignment and ethical orientation reflects Trede's (2012) observation that identity is increasingly tied to personal purpose and reflexive positioning, especially in international contexts. Moreover, the multiplicity of interpretations within your cohort echoes the findings of Zhao and Moen (2023), who found that transnational students often redefine identity as they navigate between academic cultures and personal histories.

The findings align well with Erikson's and Burke & Stets' theories, but also suggest that professional identity, especially in this transnational programme, may be more metaphorically and emotionally constructed than these frameworks capture. The richness of students' symbolic language (e.g., ‘lighthouse,’ ‘mosaic’) indicates a need for identity models that foreground narrative, cultural plurality, and personal meaning-making as core dimensions.

VI.1.2 Students' experience-based interpretation of professional identity

Students' interpretations of professional identity are shaped primarily through lived experience, emotional engagement, and moments of reflection. Rather than viewing identity as an abstract or pre-defined status, participants described it as something that unfolds through trial, challenge, and self-awareness. Experiences such as role-plays, simulation exercises, and intercultural group work were cited as transformative, not simply because of the content, but because they triggered internal shifts in how students saw themselves. Emotional thresholds — moments of discomfort, uncertainty, or vulnerability — were frequently mentioned as turning points that led to increased self-clarity, value realignment, or professional confidence. In this way, identity was described as something actively constructed through doing, feeling, and reflecting.

These findings are in line with earlier research highlighting the role of experiential learning in shaping professional identity. Trede (2012) emphasises that reflection and emotional engagement are often stronger drivers of identity formation than formal instruction, particularly in applied fields like social work. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is especially relevant here: students' accounts echo his concept of “disorienting dilemmas,” where emotionally charged or unexpected experiences provoke a reassessment

of one's assumptions and values. Similar patterns were observed in Wiles' (2024) post-pandemic study, where emotionally resonant moments — often unplanned — created opportunities for critical identity shifts among social work students. The data also supports Moorhead et al.'s (2025) call for pedagogical environments that foster structured reflection and self-exploration.

While Mezirow's transformative learning theory offers a compelling frame for understanding critical learning moments, the findings suggest that in intercultural programmes like ESWOCHY, transformation is often emotional first and cognitive second — a nuance less explored in Mezirow's original work. This highlights the value of integrating emotional and relational dimensions more explicitly into transformative learning frameworks.

VI.1.3 Programme-specific contributors to identity formation

The ESWOCHY programme contributed to students' professional identity development in multiple, and at times conflicting, ways. Many participants described the programme's international and intercultural design as a distinctive enabler of identity shaping. Learning in diverse cohorts, being exposed to different national social work systems, and engaging with varied pedagogical styles across countries encouraged critical reflection, value clarification, and adaptation to new professional norms. At the same time, however, participants expressed frustration with fragmented coordination across institutions, inconsistent academic expectations, and limited continuity in supervision. These structural challenges often disrupted the coherence of students' professional trajectories, leading some to question their roles or experience delays in confidence-building. While the programme's richness provided fertile ground for growth, it also required students to navigate significant uncertainty — an emotional and cognitive load they had to manage largely on their own.

This duality — opportunity and fragmentation — is consistent with findings in the literature on international joint degree programmes. Yao and Flynn (2024) note that transnational students often face structural discontinuities that require emotional resilience and identity negotiation. Zhao and Moen (2023) similarly highlight that the richness of international learning can be undermined by disjointed institutional practices, leading to confusion about expectations and roles. The findings from this study support these insights, demonstrating that while ESWOCHY offers a high degree of cultural and academic diversity, it does not always provide an integrated learning pathway. This structural complexity can complicate identity development, especially for students from non-social work backgrounds who lack an initial grounding in the profession. These gaps indicate that programme design in transnational education must intentionally scaffold identity formation — rather than assuming it will occur naturally.

The findings also prompt a rethinking of how professional identity theories account for institutional complexity. While the conceptual framework applied in this study considered emotional, cognitive, and

behavioural dimensions of identity, it did not fully anticipate the influence of structural inconsistency as a mediating factor. Students were required to shape their identities not only through reflection and interpersonal learning but also by adapting to variable and at times contradictory academic environments. This suggests a need to expand existing theories to better capture the interplay between institutional systems and identity development. In transnational programmes such as ESWOCHY, professional identity emerges not solely from personal growth or values alignment, but also through students' active negotiation of educational contexts that can support, complicate, or even fragment their evolving sense of professional self.

VI.1.4 Significant learning experiences shaping professional identity

The findings suggest that certain learning experiences within the ESWOCHY programme play a particularly strong role in catalysing students' professional identity development. These experiences are not necessarily the most formally structured, but rather those that combine emotional resonance, practical engagement, and intercultural challenge. Students frequently referred to moments where they were invited to take on a professional role, reflect publicly, or adapt to unfamiliar social and cultural dynamics. Activities such as collaborative assignments, site visits, role-plays, and simulations gained meaning not only for their content but because they required students to test and refine their self-concept in relation to real or imagined professional settings. Importantly, it was not the experience alone that shaped identity, but the *combination of doing, feeling, and reflecting* — often in the presence of peers and across cultural contexts. These moments helped students articulate what kind of social workers they hoped to become and gave them confidence in their evolving professional self.

When viewed against existing research in international education, these findings support a growing emphasis on the importance of embodied and context-rich learning. While much of the social work education literature has focused on the cognitive and ethical aspects of identity, recent studies in global education point to the significance of interpersonal and affective dimensions. For instance, Harrison and Zander (2023) emphasise the transformative potential of discomfort in intercultural classrooms, noting that identity work often occurs at the intersection of vulnerability and growth. Similarly, Macfarlane and Rawolle (2021) argue that agency in professional formation is strengthened when students are challenged to position themselves within complex social dynamics, rather than passively consume knowledge. The findings from this study extend these insights by showing that in ESWOCHY, emotionally charged, reflective, and interactional experiences hold the greatest potential for identity transformation. These moments do not simply reinforce theoretical learning; they enable students to embody and internalise their emerging roles.

Reflecting on the conceptual framework used in this study, the findings confirm that professional identity development in international social work education is best understood through a multidimensional lens. The framework's inclusion of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions provided a useful structure for interpreting how students learn through action, reflection, and interpersonal engagement. However, what emerges from these findings is the need to strengthen the temporal and relational aspects of the framework. Identity did not shift in isolated moments, but through accumulative, interpersonal, and sometimes contradictory experiences that unfolded across countries and classrooms. This suggests that any model of professional identity in transnational programmes must be sensitive not only to the internal development of students, but to the *sequence and quality of interactions* they encounter. Future conceptualisations would benefit from explicitly integrating time, dialogue, and cultural mediation as key variables in the identity development process.

VI.2 Theoretical reflections

The findings of this study broadly affirm the value of understanding professional identity as a multidimensional and dynamic construct. The conceptual framework, which brought together emotional, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions, proved to be a valuable foundation for interpreting students' identity development in the ESWOCHY programme. It captured how students internalised values, re-evaluated roles, and acted upon their evolving self-perception throughout the learning process. The inclusion of reflexivity as a cross-cutting element was particularly useful in explaining how students moved from passive absorption to active sense-making in moments of uncertainty, challenge, or disorientation. Overall, the framework helped clarify identity as a process shaped by interaction with others, with knowledge, and with professional expectations — not as a linear outcome of training.

However, the findings also reveal key limitations in the existing theoretical lens, particularly when applied in the context of transnational joint degree programmes. Most of the identity theories drawn upon in this study, including Erikson, Burke & Stets, and Mezirow, offer models that centre on internal processes and individual meaning-making. While these perspectives were helpful in analysing personal growth and role integration, they do not fully account for the structural, institutional, and cultural pressures experienced by students navigating fragmented academic systems and shifting pedagogical expectations. The need to constantly adapt across countries and contexts introduced forms of identity work that were more relational, collective, and systemic than most traditional models anticipate. In this regard, the findings suggest that identity in international education must be approached not only as a psychological or sociological construct, but also as a structurally mediated and institutionally negotiated experience.

This reflection points toward the need for a more ecological and temporal understanding of professional identity formation. In ESWOCHY, identity was not shaped in a single moment or setting, but through

cumulative exposure to multiple discourses, feedback loops, and intercultural interactions over time. Students constructed meaning across fragmented experiences and found coherence not in curriculum alone, but in interpersonal dialogue, emotional regulation, and their ability to synthesise learning across settings. Future frameworks should therefore consider how professional identity is shaped through the rhythm of programme transitions, the quality of institutional coordination, and the availability of guided reflection. In doing so, they would better reflect the complex reality of identity formation in globalised, mobile, and interculturally rich social work education contexts.

VI.3 Implications for practice and programme development

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for the design and delivery of international social work education programmes, particularly those structured as joint degrees like ESWOCHY. First, students' identity development was strongest when opportunities for structured reflection and feedback were embedded across learning settings. This suggests that reflective processes — whether in the form of facilitated discussions, personal writing, or simulation debriefs — should not be left to individual initiative but intentionally designed as core pedagogical components. Programmes should make space for students to process their emotional responses, value conflicts, and role uncertainty as part of identity development, not as parallel or optional activities.

Second, the data highlights the need to recognise and manage institutional fragmentation. Variations in academic expectations, supervision quality, and curriculum structure across partner universities created confusion for many students and disrupted the continuity of their professional growth. To support a more coherent identity trajectory, programme designers should work toward greater pedagogical alignment and communication across institutions. This could include joint curriculum planning, shared rubrics for reflective assessment, and consistent mentorship mechanisms to help students make sense of their progress across countries and semesters.

Third, the findings reveal the importance of peer-based and intercultural learning in shaping professional identity. Students repeatedly pointed to the transformative impact of dialogue and collaboration with peers from different backgrounds. This highlights the potential for programmes to actively facilitate peer engagement beyond group work, for example through intercultural mentoring pairs, peer-led reflection groups, or student-led seminars where perspectives are exchanged in a structured yet informal setting. Such initiatives can foster both deeper intercultural competence and stronger professional role clarity.

Finally, the study underscores the particular needs of students entering the programme from non-social work backgrounds. These students often face steeper learning curves in terms of understanding professional norms, language, and ethical frameworks. To support their integration and identity formation, ESWOCHY

and similar programmes could offer preparatory modules or early mentorship opportunities that introduce key concepts and role expectations in social work. Acknowledging and responding to these diverse starting points can enhance students' confidence, emotional safety, and overall readiness to shape their professional identity in alignment with programme goals.

VI.4 Limitations and considerations

While this study provides meaningful insights into the development of professional identity among ESWOCHY students, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative inquiry based on semi-structured interviews, the findings reflect subjective interpretations that are contextually situated. The perspectives captured in this study may not represent the full range of experiences within the programme, particularly those of students who may have been less confident in articulating their reflections or who chose not to participate. Although efforts were made to include students from different cohorts, cultural regions, and educational backgrounds, the sample remains limited in its representativeness.

Second, the study's temporal scope focuses on students currently enrolled in the programme and therefore captures a snapshot of identity formation in progress. Professional identity, however, is an evolving construct that often becomes clearer post-graduation or in early professional practice. Alumni voices were not included in this study, which limits the ability to assess how the ESWOCHY experience shapes identity in the long term or in professional contexts outside the academic environment. Future research may benefit from a longitudinal approach, following students beyond graduation to explore how identity stabilises, shifts, or is reinterpreted once they enter the field.

Third, the researcher's dual role as a peer and insider within the ESWOCHY programme introduces potential interpretive bias. While reflexive strategies were employed throughout the research process, including memo-writing and careful audit trails during analysis, the possibility remains that existing familiarity with participants or shared experiences may have influenced the framing or emphasis of certain themes. This insider perspective, while offering depth and contextual sensitivity, also requires ongoing critical self-awareness in both data interpretation and presentation of findings.

Finally, the conceptual framework guiding this study, while useful for organising the analysis, may have constrained the interpretation by foregrounding certain dimensions of identity (e.g. emotional, cognitive, behavioural) over others, such as political, structural, or professional recognition aspects. The dynamic and relational nature of identity formation in international education settings may require broader conceptual models that account for power relations, institutional infrastructures, and the socio-political context in which learning takes place.

These limitations do not undermine the value of the study but rather offer direction for further research and underline the complexity of capturing identity as it unfolds within a diverse, mobile, and emotionally charged educational environment.

VII. Conclusions

This study set out to explore how social work students in the ESWOCHY programme perceive and shape their professional identity within a transnational educational context. Using a thematically grounded and theoretically engaged analytical model, the research illuminated the complex, emotionally nuanced, and relational nature of identity formation in international social work education.

What emerged is a portrait of professional identity not as a static endpoint, but as a multidimensional and evolving process. Students did not merely acquire a set of competencies; they engaged in personal transformations shaped by intercultural learning, emotional thresholds, and reflective encounters. Identity formation appeared as a mosaic of experiences negotiated across institutional, national, and interpersonal boundaries.

The findings suggest that transnational programmes such as ESWOCHY can serve as powerful catalysts for identity development, provided that their pedagogical and structural elements support continuity, reflection, and intercultural engagement. This research contributes to a growing body of literature that understands professional identity as an outcome of interactional and contextual processes, particularly in globalised educational environments.

While this study focused on students currently enrolled in the ESWOCHY programme, future research may explore how these identity trajectories stabilise or shift following graduation. The findings also point to the need for more comprehensive theoretical models that incorporate emotional, cognitive, structural, and institutional dimensions of professional identity formation.

In conclusion, this thesis affirms that professional identity in social work is not something students simply acquire through instruction. Rather, it is constructed through experience, negotiation, and reflection, shaped by the learning environments they encounter and the relationships they build. In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding these dynamics is essential for designing educational programmes that truly prepare students for ethical, reflective, and culturally responsive practice.

Appendix B. Sample transcript excerpt with applied codes

This appendix presents a sample of coded transcript data from participant P14, demonstrating the application of thematic coding using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to inductive thematic analysis. The table shows selected meaning-rich data segments with applied subcodes and corresponding analytical categories, as defined in Chapter 3. Coding was conducted using MAXQDA software as seen in the screenshot.

Transcript excerpt	Applied code	Analytical category
it's a little bit hard to identify yourself, like you're just like, it's just a sentence	Identity reflection / integration / transformation	Reflexivity and self-understanding
it's a little bit hard to identify yourself, like you're just like, it's just a sentence, because like, in our country, it's not that much developed, it's not that much famous.	Professional recognition struggle	Professional roles and responsibilities
in European countries as well, like, it's not the most famous field	Professional recognition struggle	Professional roles and responsibilities
we need to kind of prove ourselves, that what we are doing, we need to explain ourselves.	Role specific clarity/conflict	Professional roles and responsibilities
I can maybe identify myself as more, more like someone who tries to work with individuals	Identity reflection / integration / transformation	Reflexivity and self-understanding
I can maybe identify myself as more, more like someone who tries to work with individuals, that level	Specialisation uncertainty	Professional roles and responsibilities
So I can't say that there's one identification for social workers.	Role specific clarity/conflict	Professional roles and responsibilities
there's one identification for social workers	Identity reflection / integration / transformation	Reflexivity and self-understanding
we always try to kind of prove ourselves, we always try to explain ourselves,	Identity reflection / integration / transformation	Reflexivity and self-understanding
we always try to kind of prove ourselves, we always try to explain ourselves, that what we're really doing, because it's kind of a field that like, it has a connection with other fields.	Professional recognition struggle	Professional roles and responsibilities

Screenshot: MAXQDA-coded transcript segment (P14)

Student identity P14

it's a little bit hard to identify yourself, like you're just like, it's just a sentence

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 28

it's a little bit hard to identify yourself, like you're just like, it's just a sentence, because like, in our country, it's not that much developed, it's not that much famous.

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Professional recognition struggle Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 28

in European countries as well, like, it's not the most famous field

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Professional recognition struggle Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 28

we need to kind of prove ourselves, that what we are doing, we need to explain ourselves.

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Role specific clarity/conflict Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 28

I can maybe identify myself as more, more like someone who tries to work with individuals

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 30

I can maybe identify myself as more, more like someone who tries to work with individuals, that level

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Specialisation uncertainty Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 30

So I can't say that there's one identification for social workers.

Code: ■ Professional roles and responsibilities > Role specific clarity/conflict Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 31

there's one identification for social workers

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 31

we always try to kind of prove ourselves, we always try to explain ourselves,

Code: ■ Reflexivity and Self-Understanding > Identity reflection / integration / transformation Weight score: 0
P14, Pos. 31

we always try to kind of prove ourselves, we always try to explain ourselves, that what we're really doing, because it's kind of a field that like, it has a connection with other fields.

Screenshot from MAXQDA showing coded segments in the Document Browser view.

References

- Akmane, E., Mārtinsone, K., & Kriekē, Z. (2020). Instruments for Measuring the Professional Identity of Psychological Help Providers: Rapid Literature Review. *Education. Innovation. Diversity*, 1(1), 6-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17770/eid2020.1.5335>
- Ben Shlomo, S., Levy, D., & Itzhaky, H. (2012). Development of professional identity among social work students: Contributing factors. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 31(2), 240–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2013.733305>
- Björktomta, S.-B., & Tham, P. (2024). Building professional identity during social work education: The role of reflective writing as a tool. *Social Work Education*, 43(9), 2847–2864. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2297778>
- Bogo, M., & McKnight, K. (2006). Clinical supervision in social work: A review of the research literature. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 24(1–2), 49–67. https://doi.org/10.1300/J001v24n01_04
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Bulei, I., & Dinu, G. (2013). From identity to professional identity – A multidisciplinary approach. In *Proceedings of the 7th International Management Conference: New Management for the New Economy* (pp. 249–258). Bucharest, Romania: Faculty of Management, Academy of Economic Studies. <https://conference.management.ase.ro/archives/2013/pdf/29.pdf>
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2023). *Identity theory* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Canavan, M. (2009). Professional identity formation and voluntary sector social work. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 9(1), 6–23.
- Cinoğlu, H., & Arıkan, Y. (2012). Self, identity and identity formation: From the perspectives of three major theories. *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 9(2), 1114-1131.
- Çolak, M. K., Puig I Planella, K., & Vrettou, A. (2025). Reconstructing professional identity through collaboration in pluralistic approaches. *European Journal of Teacher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2025.245463>
- Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2014). *Re-visioning social work education: An independent review*. Published by David Croisdale-Appleby.
- Daly, M., McCulloch, T., & Smith, M. (2024). The place of knowledge in constructing social work identity: Validating vagueness. *British Journal of Social Work*, 54(3), 958–975.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Fox, M. (2017). The international field placement: A reconciliation of identity. *Social Work Education*, 36(5), 495–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1280014>

Hackett, S., Kuronen, M., Matthies, A.-L., & Kresal, B. (2003). The motivation, professional development and identity of social work students in four European countries. *European Journal of Social Work*, 6(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369145032000144421>

Harwood, J. (2020). Social identity theory. In J. van den Bulck (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of media psychology*. Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0153>

He, W., Tian, G.-X., Li, Q., Liu, L., & Zhou, J. (2022). Examining the Relationships between Student Teacher Professional Identity Tensions and Motivation for Teaching: Mediating Role of Emotional Labor Strategies in China. *Sustainability*, 14(19), 12727. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141912727>

Higashida, M. (2022). Exploring how international social workers perceive culturally relevant practices: A case study of Japanese social workers' experiences in other Asian countries. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 31(3), 347–354. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12526>

Holter, Janet. (2018). Development of Professional Identity in Social Work Education. Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository. <https://sophia.stkate.edu/dsw/32>
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad212>

Juren, E., Sobočan, A. M., & Jurček, A. (2022). Pogledi na strokovno identiteto in njeno oblikovanje v času izobraževanja na Fakulteti za socialno delo Univerze v Ljubljani. *Socialno delo*, 61(4), 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.51741/sd.2022.61.4.301-315>

Kasperuniene, U., & Zydziunaite, V. (2019). A systematic literature review on professional identity construction in social media. *SAGE Open*, 9(1), 21582440198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019828847>

Kegan, R. (1982). *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Harvard University Press.

Lairio, M., Puukari, S., & Kouvo, A. (2013). Studying at university as part of student life and identity construction. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 57(2), 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2011.621973>

Lempp, H., & Seale, C. (2004). The hidden curriculum in undergraduate medical education: Qualitative study of medical students' perceptions of teaching. *BMJ*, 329(7469), 770–773. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7469.770>

Levy, D., Ben Shlomo, S., & Itzhaky, H. (2014). The 'Building Blocks' of Professional Identity among Social Work Graduates. *Social Work Education*, 33(6), 744–759.

Lietaert, I. (2017). Transnational knowledge in social work programs: Challenges and strategies within assisted voluntary return and reintegration support. *Transnational Social Review*, 7(2), 158–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1316661>

McAuliffe, M., & Triandafyllidou, A. (Eds.). (2021). *World Migration Report 2022*. International Organization for Migration (IOM). <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int>

Moorhead, B. J. (2017). *The lived experience of professional identity: A year-long study with newly qualified social workers* (Doctoral dissertation). Charles Sturt University, Australia.

Moorhead, B., Bell, K., Jones-Mutton, T., Boetto, H., & Bailey, R. (2019). Preparation for practice: Embedding the development of professional identity within social work curriculum. *Social Work Education*, 38(8), 983–995. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1595570>

Moorhead, B., Otani, K., Bowles, W., Baginsky, M., Bell, K., Ivory, N., Mackenzie, H., & Savaya, R. (2025). Toward a definition of professional identity for social work: Findings from a scoping review. *British Journal of Social Work*, 55(2), 877–896. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae197>

Naumiuk, A. (2021). *Identity formation and school experience among university students in a teacher training program: A four-wave longitudinal study during the teaching practicum*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354877344>

O'Doherty, D., Culhane, A., O'Doherty, J., Harney, S., Glynn, L., McKeague, H., & Kelly, D. (2021). Medical students and clinical placements – A qualitative study of the continuum of professional identity formation. *Education for Primary Care*, 32(4), 202–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14739879.2021.1879684>

Orde, H. V. (2016). *Perspectives on identity: An overview of identity concepts from psychoanalysis, sociology, and psychology*. Semantic Scholar. Retrieved from

Rees, C. E., & Monrouxe, L. V. (2018). Who are you and who do you want to be? Key considerations in developing professional identities in medicine. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 209(5), 202–203. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja18.00118>

Schrooten, M., Evans, F., Kloppenburg, R., Csoba, J., & Kinosh, S. (2024). An argument for transnational learning in social work programmes: Experiences from the Erasmus+ ‘Urban Diversities’ course. *Social Work Education*, 43(6), 1650–1669. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2215796>

Sicora, A., Lu, W., & Lei, J. (2020). Exploring mistakes and errors of professional judgement in social work in China and Italy: The impact of culture, organization and education. *Journal of Social Work*, 20(6), 702–720. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320919879>

Sokol, J. T. (2009). Identity development throughout the lifetime: An examination of Eriksonian theory. *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 1(2), Article 14. <https://epublications.marquette.edu/gjcp/vol1/iss2/14>

Stephenson, R., & Cox, C. (2025). Professional identity formation strategies in undergraduate public health programs. *Pedagogy in Health Promotion*, 11(1), 7–17.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/23733799241254065>

Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237. [http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-2725%28200009%2963%3A3%3C224%3AITASIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V)

[2725%28200009%2963%3A3%3C224%3AITASIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-2725%28200009%2963%3A3%3C224%3AITASIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V)

Tajfel, H., Billig, M. G., Bundy, R. P., & Flament, C. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1(2), 149–178.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420010202>

Terum, L. I., & Heggen, K. (2016). Identification with the social work profession: The impact of education. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46(4), 839–854. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv026>

Tomlinson, M., & Jackson, D. (2021). Professional identity formation in contemporary higher education graduates: Influences of learning and work transitions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(4), 885–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1659763>

Trede, F. (2012). Developing professional identity in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(3), 365–384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.521237>

Triutami, C. S., & Mbato, C. L. (2021). EFL undergraduate students' professional identity construction: A sociocultural perspective. *Journal of English Education and Teaching*, 5(1), 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.33369/jeet.5.1.1-15>

Ukpokodu, O. N. (2009). Pedagogies that foster transformative learning in a multicultural education course: A reflection. *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*, 4(1), Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.9741/2161-2978.1003>

West, L., & Chur-Hansen, A. (2004). Developing pre-professional identity in undergraduates through work-integrated learning. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 5(2), 1–10.

Wheeler, J. M. (2017). *How do social work students develop their professional identity?* [Doctoral thesis, University of Plymouth]. University of Plymouth Research Repository.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/9323>

Wiles, F., & Vicary, S. (2019). Picturing social work, puzzles and passion: Exploring and developing transnational professional identities. *Social Work Education*, 38(1), 47–62.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2018.1523053>

Willis, T. Y., Wick, D., Han, T. M., Rivera, J., & Doran, J. K. (2019). “If I did it over there, I can do it here”: U.S. Latinx social work students in Costa Rican service placements deepening their professional identity and skills. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 55(4), 710–723.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1611513>

World Economic Forum. (2022). *Global Risks Report 2022*.

<https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2022/>

Yao, H.-Y. (2020). Constructing a conceptual framework for professional identity development in international social work students: A meta-ethnographic review. *Qualitative Social Work*, 19(4), 928–949.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325020912831>

Yao, H.-Y., & Flynn, C. (2024). International graduates of social work in Australia: A longitudinal study of those who struggle to develop professional identity. *International Social Work*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728241279001>

Zhao, Y., & Moen, H. B. (2023). Shaping transnational learning positions and understanding social work in context: Students' experiences of a short-term exchange program. *Social Work Education*, 42(8), 1494–1509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2039114>