

Student agency for professionalism and work-integrated education and learning in Norwegian social work education

Anne Katrine Folkman¹, Heidi Lie Eriksen², Evelyn Sandøy Ottesen³, Kristina Areskoug Josefsson⁴

¹Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger, Norway, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0966-4014>

²Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger Norway, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9072-8078>

³Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger Norway, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6783-2581>

⁴Department of Health Sciences, University West, Trollhättan, Sweden, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7669-4702>

Corresponding author: Anne Katrine Folkman, anne.k.folkman@uis.no

Abstract

This study has applied a narrative approach to review how work-integrated education (WIE) and work-integrated learning (WIL) can support student agency for professionalism for students in social work education. A narrative review is based on the intention of reaching beyond a systematic review to bring in the practice perspective from university lecturers in social work education programs and work-integrated learning research. A narrative approach allows broad searches for research literature and to include and synthesize various national and international studies dealing with the chosen topic. Narrative reviews do not aim to be inclusive of all literature, but to address phenomenon of interest. The findings show how the meaning of student agency in WIL/WIE in social work education in Norway can correspond both with the purpose of social work as a field of study, with learning outcomes in education and development of professionalism. WIL involves complex learning and fostering self-regulation that bridges the gap between theory and practice while simultaneously shaping personal and professional identity. WIL perspective considers higher education as a place of professional development. The professionalizing approach to learning is grounded in students developing both valuable self-monitoring and professional self-constructive ability. Student activity in WIE/WIL is based on engagement and participation in discussions and activities of importance to the community. In line with central principles of WIL this invites to a rethinking of how professionalism is taught and learnt in higher education of social work.

Keywords: Professionalism, Social work, Social worker, Work-integrated learning, Work-integrated education, Work-life relevance.

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Introduction

Issues within the social work profession are greatly influenced by the contexts in which they are located as well as the wider community. This also point to how social work qualifying education is a conflicted policy area (Joubert, 2021). Both internationally and in Norway there is a need for closer cooperation between professional social work education programs and the practice field to educate candidates that better respond to the need for work-related skills (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2017; 2019; 2021; 2024). When it comes to developing professional identity, social work students struggle to relate to the concept (Smith et al., 2022). The concept of professional identity is both difficult to understand, and students struggle to develop their own professional identity. The concept of professional identity is defined as the professional's sense of belonging to a particular profession and the professional's sense of responsibility towards the profession and society (Eriksen, 2024). There is research showing that students in higher education in Norway struggle with learning from academic texts, try to find easier ways of finding knowledge (Lystad, 2025). Exploring student agency is of high relevance as students in social work education must be motivated to learn and to develop a professional identity. The agency concept in this text focuses on students' motivation for learning and positioning in learning situations (Eriksen & Gradovski, 2022; Eriksen, 2024). To develop agency is especially important for students when learning processes become frustrating and difficult. Another important aspect of students' learning is to develop abilities in critical thinking both as students and in their future profession. Critical thinking is described as an interactional, active and relational process. This process that engages learners with socio-cultural aspects that together make up professional agency, socially responsible and action-oriented professionals (Trede & Jackson, 2021). The epistemological premises of learning according to Billett (2025) are individuals' moment-by-moment meaningmaking (i.e., microgenesis) based upon their ontogenesis (i.e., development across the individuals' life course). That is shaped of what they know, can do, and value. In addition, there is the provision of experiences intended to achieve institutional goals. The process of this integration is central in developing professional agency (Trede & Jackson, 2021).

In the social work context (Van Vliet et al., 2025), professionalism has two central contradictions, firstly on regulation and authenticity and secondly tensions around expertise. This is based on the high levels of uncertainty embedded in the social work profession, which both social workers and social work lectures must handle (Van Vliet et al., 2025). To learn how to deal with professional uncertainty, students' agency is essential. Having agency can imply that students do not give up when learning becomes frustrating and difficult (Matusov et al., 2016). In addition, providing them with learning opportunities of theoretical knowledge and through authentic work experience is necessary to achieve satisfying professional development. Further, Work-integrated learning (WIL) can support students' agency by providing authentic learning experiences. WIL encompasses reflection, embedded in intentional learning activities where theoretical knowledge is applied in practice settings (Lundh Snis et al., 2025). On a more general level in higher education, there is a call for research of WIL pedagogy that affords development of employability skills and strengthens student's agency (Van Vliet et al., 2025).

The bachelor program in social work in Norway is both a practice-oriented professional education and an academic discipline, encompassing practical application, education, and research, with the interplay between theory and practice at its core (Halås, 2022). There is a well-known dichotomy between practice and theory within social work education, but these two elements should be seen as mutually complementary (Levin, 2021). The process of learning and developing professional knowledge involves more than students acquiring insights from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and law; it requires integrating these perspectives into a coherent whole (Halås, 2022). However, studies indicate that social work students experience that their studies do not adequately prepare them for what awaits them in practice field (Tham & Lynch, 2019; Voll et al., 2022). This is problematic as, educating reflexive, socially responsible and action-oriented future professionals who can contribute to innovation in practice, is a responsibility of higher education (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2023–2024). More studies pinpoint a need for more knowledge about social work students' readiness for practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Joubert, 2021).

The demand for more student-active learning forms is relevant in a professional context, and a motivation for further development of work-integrated education- and learning (WIE and WIL). That is both in general (Thon et al., 2024), and in social work (Folkman et al., 2025a, b). Work-integrated education (WIE) is about organising learning activities in higher education in a way that meets the requirements for professional qualifications and are based on integrating theory and practice through authentic work tasks. WIE and WIL are related to each other but are based on different approaches to

knowledge production (Billett, 2024). There is a major difference between conceptually and procedurally experiences to achieve intended goals, which is an institutional factor (WIE), compared to the personal factor of learning in everyday interactions and activities (WIL) (Billett, 2024). Educational quality is built on academic teaching (Lundh Snis et al., 2025). An overarching goal of higher education is to accommodate work-life relevance of education. This involves assessments of the design and implementation of curricula, and the selection of specific pedagogical practices that help students integrate experiences from practice. Such structured choices are essential to WIE, which enables students' WIL. WIL is based on the epistemology of "learning from experience" in which reflections and the student's role as an active learner has a fundamental function. The learning outcomes of students' training experiences in the practice field should preferably be connected to the development of a professional identity. However, promoting WIL can both collide with a university culture anchored in traditional educational models, and challenge the established mindset about the relationship between students and teachers. Methodological issues of teaching and learning need to be developed and implemented to promote deep learning and autonomy in students (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Ferns et al., 2025). The constructivist philosophy of learning in WIL focuses on the learner and his or her continuous construction of understanding (Fenton, 2025). Student activity in WIL is based on engagement and participation in discussions and activities that are important to the community (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). Studies underline the need of more knowledge about authentic learning experiences which encompasses the development of students' professional identity through WIL (Trede & Jackson, 2021).

Work-integrated learning

WIL is described as a strategic approach to equip students with required capabilities for a long working life (Billett, 2024). There are four key components of WIL qualities; authentic workplace experience, curricula integration, teaching skills that promote employability and reflection (Fenton, 2025). WIL is aiming to strengthen students' employability and fostering professional identity (Jackson, 2015). A core in WIL is inclusion of authentic learning experiences which encompasses the development of students' professional identity. The process of developing a professional identity as a social worker is complex (Smith et al., 2022), and it involves integrating theoretical knowledge, practical approaches and skills, as well as values of both professional and personal kinds (Smith et al., 2022; Wiles, 2013; Wheeler, 2017). WIL include three parts: students, education and practice (Billett, 2024). The concept of students' agency in WIL is linked to descriptions of students' individual development, which involve students learning and the capacity to take decisions toward core objects of the profession while immersed in problematic or uncertain environments (Garraway & Friedrich-Nel, 2025). Student agency is an important prerequisite for productive WIL experiences. Agency is also described as both an aspect and a skill when it comes to employability (Trede & Jackson, 2021).

The overall purpose of Norwegian social work education is to train qualified professionals who can assist individuals, families, or groups in preventing, reducing, and coping with social and health problems (Regulations on national guidelines for social work education, 2019). International Federation of Social Workers (2019) describe that international policy development and political analysis, as well as advocacy and political interventions, are considered part of social work practice. A social worker is expected to be a confident and competent expert who determines clinical interventions, while also remaining in a state of constant learning, humility, and viewing the client-as-expert (Regulation on the National Curriculum for Social Work Education, 2019; Van Vliet et al., 2025). This representation can be seen as an expression of idealization (Van Vliet et al., 2025).

In this article the following will be reviewed: *How can WIE and WIL support student agency for professionalism for students in Norwegian social work education?*

Method

A narrative synthesis of literature uses an interpretative lens through theory to inform the literature analysis (Sukhera, 2022). The choice to conduct a narrative review was based on the intention of reaching beyond a systematic review, but also to bring in the practice perspective from the university authors lecturers in social work education programs and work-integrated learning research. Narrative reviews do not aim to be inclusive of all literature, but addressing the phenomenon

influenced by the authors' different interests and search for literature. Therefore, inclusion and exclusion criteria were subject of discussion among the authors during the search and identification process of relevant literature.

In this study theories of WIL and the concept of student agency (Matusov et al., 2016; Trede & Jackson, 2021, Billett, 2024) are used. The WIL research field is rapidly expanding and a lack of definitions in often cited articles can provide a challenge for researchers (Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2024; Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2025). The researchers' and authors' backgrounds as teachers and researchers in higher education for social work and WIL influenced both the choice of research focus, the theoretical framework and the studies analysed. The interpretative process of narrative reviews combines the research group's theoretical premise with the selected theories to enable a synthesis of the included literature.

The narrative review underwent the steps recommended by Sukhera (2022). The process started with the research group establishing their interpretative theoretical position and pre-understanding of the theories. Thereafter a non-comprehensive literature search was conducted to capture and identify dominant themes. This literature search process was conducted separately by the authors to get an overview of the variety of pre-understanding of the themes of the research question. The databases primarily searched in were Scopus and Academic Search Premier using search words combining social work education, student agency, work-integrated education and work-integrated learning (in both English and Norwegian). The intention was to find scientific peer-reviewed publications responding to the research question, and to provide a knowledge synthesis, but the searches were conducted in non-systematic ways (Sukhera, 2022). From these searches and reading of preliminary findings, the search process continued by manually checking reference lists and finding additional literature of interest. Literature of interest was screened by abstract, and if considered relevant read in full-text. This was a continuous reading process, which led to 45 publications being included in the preliminary reflections in the analysis process. Thereafter literature and preliminary reflections were shared in the research group. In this step drafts of the manuscripts were used as a base for discussion and further development of the narrative analysis. This was an iterative process, which was ongoing until the research group reached a consensus of the findings shed light on the research question (Sukhera, 2022). The final number of included publications in the analysis was 36.

The research group brought in several perspectives and complementing competencies that influenced interpretation and narrative analysis. The research group consisted of the first and last author, who is sociologist and researcher, with experience in co-production and leadership in various services and in higher education, and a senior researcher in work-integrated learning with experience from co-production research in social work contexts. The third author is a social worker with extensive experience in teaching in social work education, and the second is an associate professor, with main interests including social work education, supervision, ethical and intercultural aspects of social work practice.

Reflexivity in the analytical process encompassed methodological reflections as well as contextual and professional reflections, where the research groups pre-understanding was seen as an asset. The reflection process of the data and the analysis was conducted both individually and in online and physical meetings among the researchers throughout the research process. This process was iterative as the researcher process included learning together of both the concept being studied and the personal, interpersonal, methodological and contextual factors which influenced the researchers' understandings. This learning process followed suggestions for reflexivity in qualitative research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Findings

How can WIE and WIL support student agency for professionalism for students in Norwegian social work education?

The findings and discussion in the next section are presented in the following themes: 1) Student agency in social work education, 2) Social work students are insufficiently prepared for practice and 3) Collaboration between education and practice to improve students' preparedness for practice.

Student agency in social work education

Social workers report a gap between what they learn in education during their professional training and the expectations they encounter when they start working in the welfare system (Tham & Lynch, 2019; Voll et al., 2022). Van Vliet et al. (2025) problematize an idealized representation of social work in education. The everyday life of social workers is

characterized by unpredictability and complexity in practice (Van Vliet et al., 2025). Other studies indicate that translation into sustained, practice-based training seems to be limited in higher social work education (von Knobelsdorff-Brenkenhoff, 2025; Joubert, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019). Students' engagement in their own learning processes is promoted by facilitating authentic and meaningful work tasks in a real-world context (Jackson, 2015). They should also acquire a theoretical conceptual framework that helps to specify and legitimise professional knowledge contributions, skills and procedures (Jacobs & Van Schalkwyk, 2022; Trede & Jackson, 2021). Research describes student agency as an important prerequisite for students' productive WIL experiences (Billett, 2011, 2024; Luk & Chan, 2024; Trede & Jackson, 2021).

Agency can be understood as self-efficacy; a belief that one is able to make a difference (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). Agency as an employability skill is presented as something more than observable behaviour and self-initiated actions, it includes forethought, awareness and intention which requires supportive conditions (Billett, 2024; Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Trede & Jackson, 2021). In field placements for social work students, there is a strong focus on supportive conditions, and this may negatively influence the students' learning outcomes (Eriksen & Søndena, 2023; Ferns et al., 2025). Further, the development of agency means students being active and taking ownership in their own learning processes (Matusov et al., 2016). Student activity, as reflections, needs to resonate and be perceived as relevant to the learners, and a pedagogy of deliberateness that embraces both students' individual and social learning. Critical thinking is an example, that involves questioning, being curious, and not accepting the way things are without having thought about them (Trede & Jackson, 2021). Student-active learning is therefore highlighted as a prerequisite for agency.

WIL supports students' agency (Ferns et al., 2025), but there is a need to gain more knowledge of how this agency can be strengthened within WIL. Trede et al. (2021) pinpoint a need for more knowledge about the relationship between students as learners and their engagement with field instructors who supervise them during field placement periods, and also about organisational structures and norms in the practice field. Eriksen and Gradovski (2022) discuss how social work students may have difficulties accepting demands from field instructors in field placements. They also explore resistance among social work students in supervision in practice as both an opportunity and a barrier for learning in practice. Resistance can arise because supervision is personal, aimed at achieving greater self-insight. If supervision is not perceived as useful for students, they may express resistance. Students' resistance can be explained as taking responsibility for learning in practice and hence be a symptom of agency, or alternatively as a protest against the field instructors' focus or demands. In this context, student agency can be understood as a form of protest or opposition. Resistance shown by students may occur when they are asked to take active steps to change conditions in practice (Eriksen & Gradovski, 2022). Eriksen & Gradovski (2022) explain resistance from students as including for instance avoidance and discomfort when they are expected to take on more responsibility or work more effectively. Still, by allowing students to express their objections and arguments, they can become aware of what their objections are about and possibly develop agency further (Eriksen & Gradovski, 2022).

Trede & Jackson (2021) introduce the concept "deliberate professionals", which builds on critical practice theory and draws on three pedagogical concepts and processes: Critical consciousness-raising, autonomy, self-directed learning and critical learning. Autonomous and self-directed learning emphasises that learners bring their values, experiences and interests into situated learning. Critical thinking and learning are described as consisting of an interactional, active and relational process that engages learners with socio-cultural aspects that together make up learner agency (Trede & Jackson, 2021).

Joubert (2021) underlines how issues within the social work profession in England are greatly influenced by the regimes in which they are located as well as the wider community. This also point to how social work qualifying education is a conflicted policy area in Norway (Eriksen, 2024). Social work is specifically aimed at complex problem areas, and this makes it particularly challenging to define social work target groups and interventions (Vindegg, 2021a; Stichweh, 2008). Clarifying the knowledge base in a profession that places great emphasis on interpersonal relationships and complex problem areas may also present methodological challenges (Eriksen & Gradovski, 2022; Eriksen, 2024; Vindegg, 2021b). Folkman et al. (2025a; 2025b) point to the need to clarify what characterizes social work as an academic and practical discipline. Both in everyday language and in education, several terms are used to describe the core competencies of social workers and social work. Social work, i.e. what social workers do, is often equated with social workers in their role as a "profession."

If neither the field, the profession, nor the educators in the programme are perceived by students as clearly articulating the core competencies of social work, it becomes difficult for students to develop a coherent professional identity (Bråten et

al., 2022) and specifying the theoretical contribution of social workers in the professional field (Hannan et al., 2023). As described above, there are uncertainties around social work competence at several levels regarding how students come to reconcile and construct meaning, capacities, and dispositions from experiences encountered in both settings, requires student-activity and engagement in learning activities (Folkman et al., 2025a; b)

Social work students are insufficiently prepared for practice

Research shows a discrepancy between what social workers report that they learn during their professional training in higher education, and the expectations they encounter when they start working in the welfare system (Voll et al., 2022). Students express ambivalence about the role of theory in their education (Joubert, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019). Both national and international studies show that social workers' professional decisions mainly are based on their own or their colleagues' experience-based knowledge sources or pragmatic approaches (Finne et al., 2022; Hannan et al., 2023; Voll et al., 2022). Too much emphasis on professional judgement and not enough formalized and evidence-based work procedures is problematic both in education and in practice (Finne et al., 2022; Samsonsen & Turney, 2017; Sletten et al., 2025).

Academic emphasis on critical thinking and reflection in social work and higher education, has partly been driven by scepticism about the value of competence-evidence based approaches to practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Joubert, 2021; Vindegg, 2021a). Finne et al. (2022) challenge clearer emphasis on research and scientific thinking as part of critical approaches to practice in social work education and in social work practice. To strengthening scientific thinking and research methods, as well as critical approaches to competence-evidence in education, it is necessary to teach students how to interpret and use research in practice. In order to work in a knowledge-based manner (Regulation on the National Curriculum for Social Work Education, 2019), it is essential that social workers and child welfare workers have the competence to critically assess the best available research, in conjunction with clinical expertise and the preferences and context of the service users (Finne et al., 2022).

Educating reflexive, socially responsible and action-oriented future professionals who can contribute to innovation in practice, is a responsibility of higher education (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, (2023–2024)). This sets higher education lectures and their competence in focus, as well as their pedagogical choices. Studies indicate a need for better competence for social work lectures if they are supposed to be able to teach in accordance with the principles of WIL (Forslund Frykedal & Zimmerman Nilsson, 2025; Joubert, 2021; Trede & Jackson, 2021). Also, Lundh Snis et al. (2025) underline a need of collegial understanding and practice in line with the main principles of WIL, designing work integrated education (WIE) to support WIL. To ensure collegial understanding, competence development of WIL and ability to establish and maintain close collaboration with the practice field can be challenging, considering the global trend of financial cuts, increase of precarious employment described as stress in higher education (Oliveira et al., 2025).

Collaboration between education and practice to improve students' preparedness for practice

Theoretical knowledge has traditionally been described as the university's responsibility, while practical training has been understood to be the responsibility of the workplace (Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2024). Norwegian debates on education policy have been characterised by polarisation when it comes to what knowledge that matter the most – theoretical knowledge or practical understanding (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2023–2024)); Levin (2021). Practical understanding has been manifested in 'doing' (Jacobs & Van Schalkwyk, 2022; Wolff & Winberg, 2022). Still, practical understanding cannot be reduced to simply "doing" if the goal is to make professional education more relevant to working life (Luk & Chan, 2024). There is a need to support authentic instances of practice integrated into higher education and encourage the practice of applying and transferring theoretical skills and knowledge in a real-world setting (Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2024).

Billett (2009; 2011; 2024) points out several factors that can influence close cooperation between university lecturers, students, education and working life. Both university lectures and field instructors in the field of practice should contribute to make higher education more student-active, professionally oriented, practice-oriented and relevant to students. An important prerequisite for WIL is to provide students with an opportunity to integrate academic learning with real world experience to develop self-monitoring and professional self-constructive ability (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). This demand for authenticity can be discussed from the perspective of what the students versus the university lecturers considers

to be authentic work life experiences (O'Neill, 2024). The understanding of authenticity can be additionally challenging in a human-centered profession, such as social work.

Social workers face particular challenges in relation to bearing the pain of others (Killén & Christiansen, 1998) and, not least, in relation to enduring their own pain, anxiety, and inadequacy in their work. Empathetic relationships are important for social work students to trust their field instructors (Mendonça et al., 2024). Support from field instructors is important for social work students learning outcomes (Coohey & French, 2017). For students, it can be challenging to shift from a performance based to an involvement-based culture and to understand their personal contribution to the learning process (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). Authenticity in practice is therefore dependent on field instruction of students in practice (Eriksen & Søndena, 2023). This is based on an understanding of that becoming a professional involves the need to develop a collective professional identity emphasizing adaptable, critically thinking, and innovative social workers in the welfare state. Eriksen & Søndena (2023) claim that the supervision of social workers has moved more in the direction of individual "self-development" projects. In reflection of this claim, it is possible that the role of supervisors can become passive, and field instructors may end up under-communicating their own field of expertise and their own profession-specific competence. This can in turn lead to other important subject areas and areas of knowledge being pushed into the background. An overly narrow focus on the needs and expectations of individual students and emotional support can be detrimental to the transfer of subject and professional knowledge. It may also lead to a strong individual professional identity and a weaker professional identity. Inadequate communication in the supervision of students on collective professional identity formation and action competence can mean that newly qualified social work students are unprepared for the complexity that awaits them in the future and that learning outcomes in their education may not be achieved (Eriksen & Søndena, 2023). A characteristic of the role of professionals is that it involves various qualities in the way people act or perform tasks ("performative aspects") (Folkman, 2020).

Eriksen & Søndena (2023) question the somewhat one-sided emphasis on emotional and psychological support as a mantra in the supervision of social work students in field placements, and whether it leads to an underestimation of social workers' expertise and professional knowledge base. Having the opportunity to work closely with a practice field, may for students in social work, not be the most authentic learning experience a student in higher education can have (Fenton, 2025). This challenges a fundamental principle of WIL, as the practice field is the main partner. This risk of lack of value of practice training is a serious concern, considering the often-strong focus on practice knowledge in social work education. Empirical studies dealing with social work students' practical training periods are also almost non-existent in Norway (Eriksen, 2024).

A weak professional identity challenges descriptions of the student role in WIL as meaning-makers and knowledge developers, with a bridging role in establishing connections through experiences from different learning contexts (Billett, 2009; Billett, 2024; Somerville et al., 2019). Bruno et al. (2018) demand more research on practice and the value of peer reflection as opposed to the more often used self-reflection.

Student activity

A complex and turbulent political landscape forms a background, where both the education and social work students strive to become ready for practice and to practice (Joubert, 2021; Eriksen, 2024). Supporting this shift is an important but challenging task for the social work university lectures. The challenge lies not only in a pedagogical shift, but also in the way students' learning is assessed.

Professional identity should strengthen a sense of purpose. It becomes a lens to be used to make sense of experiences and practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). Joubert (2021) underlines how an understanding of organizational culture and organizational life can enable a better understanding of oneself in a profession's culture, and by the professional community (Joubert, 2021). The affective demands of professionalism shape and are shaped by encounters with uncertainty. Van Vliet et al. (2025) underline the importance of social work training that encourage social workers to perform a level of certainty and competence, and the ways uncertainty is structured into professional practice. Bruno & Dell'Aversana (2018) present WIL devices and strategies to favour professional identity development by stimulating student's reflective practice. If students experience involvement, it promotes co-responsibility of the learning environment. Further, if the learning environment is represented as a collective, a productive and evaluating process where the students

play an active and productive role, this seems to influence the quality of learning outcomes for the students. New learning of conceptions, that form a personal epistemology, also support the learning for students' professional practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018).

Implications

What field instructors (supervisors) in social work education emphasize in their own supervisory work has been little studied. Further, how they interpret their own supervisory work, shape their own role, what they emphasize, and what consequences different approaches to the role may have for students' learning during the practical training period (Eriksen & Gradovski, 2022).

Social work lectures and managers of social work programs in higher education should assess their pedagogical options, and how they can support authenticity and student agency in their social work programs. As this is a collegial endeavour, the first step may be to map current pedagogical practices and highlight good examples within social work programs. There is need for shared intention of WIL, with clear expectations and shared understanding of how the desired learning outcomes are enhanced through authentic WIL experiences (Fenton, 2025). Previous research has shown the value of WIL to promote students' agency and enhancement of student outcomes (Ferns et al., 2025), but there is need for more knowledge in the context of social work education.

Discussion

Social work students need to possess resilience based on certain attributes to become ready to practice as qualified social workers. Students report that space for personal growth and development is important for becoming prepared for the realities of the challenging social work settings in which they will work. Devices that sustain a learning environment that foster professional development by including emotional and relational ways of knowing, and that cultivates reflection in social work practice, play a mediating role (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Van Vliet et al., 2025). Continuous integration between experience and reflection and the perception of the learning environment can support professional identity development and students, in making personal sense of the experience (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018).

Collective, reflective action-oriented and future-looking role of peer reflection can help students become prepared for practice in the future and understanding the complexity of practice from more than their own perspective (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Ferns et al., 2025; Trede & Jackson, 2021). In addition, field instructors need to practice critical symmetry in the supervisory relationship with students to create good learning environments for students during field placements (Eriksen, 2024). WIL is about meeting the needs of society in a broader sense (Sunnemark et al., 2024), which also correspond with the aim of social work (Joubert, 2021). Policy development and political analysis, as well as advocacy and political interventions, are considered part of social work practice (International Federation of Social Workers, 2026).

The findings from this study provide a basis for further studies concerning student agency in WIE/WIL, especially in the social work context. A narrative approach allows broad searches for research literature and to include and synthesise various national and international studies dealing with the chosen topic. Although studies of both social work and WIE/WIL emphasise the importance of individual and contextual differentiation, a synthesis of the literature can be helpful in teaching and learning about the topic by delivering a general overview. However, the wide variation in studies in terms of context and methodological approaches limits transferral of the findings to the unique Norwegian social work education context. As an interdisciplinary field of research, studies of WIE/WIL may nevertheless have a certain transfer value with important contributions to further understanding of student agency and professionalism for students of social work education, and across different local variations of social work, both nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

Policy development and political analysis, as well as advocacy and political interventions, are considered as key/core elements in social work practice both in Norway (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019; 2026) and internationally (International Federation of Social Workers, 2026). The meaning of student agency in WIL/WIE in social work education in Norway should correspond both with the purpose of social work as a field of study, with learning outcomes in education and development of professionalism. Studies highlight the need for better integration between theory and practice, but also clarification of key objectives and methodical approaches in social work. Both national and international research literature emphasized a need to clarify both towards students' and professionals' expectations, when operating in a zone of complexity and uncertainty. There is also a need for clarifying different roles and areas of responsibility between higher education of social work, students and the practice field concerning how professional practices in social work have been and continues to be organized. Student activity in WIE/WIL is based on engagement and participation in discussions and activities of importance to the community. In line with central principles of WIL this invites to a rethinking of how professionalism is taught in higher education of social work and further research in the field.

Limitations of the study

The choice of having a narrative review approach with a non-systematic literature search, can be seen as a limitation. The choice to conduct the study as presented was based on the intention of reaching beyond a systematic review and to bring in the practice perspective from university lecturers in social work education programs and work-integrated learning research. Subjective perspectives are fundamentally intertwined in the qualitative research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Therefore, considering the contextual knowledge of the authors regarding the explored setting and of the explored concepts, the collaborative and interpretative process brought the narrative analysis forward in deeper way than possible in a systematic review (Sukhera, 2022). This study can instead form a basis for a more comprehensive and systematic form of review, which may be necessary to provide a systematic understanding of student agency in WIE/WIL in the social work context globally.

In the analytical process the researchers' and authors' backgrounds influenced the interpretative analytical process. The research group continuously reflected on the findings and how they were to be understood, both from the practice perspective as university lecturers and from a work-integrated learning research perspective. The subjectivity of the reflexivity process was embraced, and experienced as valuable in the analytical process, which is also described by Olmos-Vega et al (2023). If the analysis had been undertaken by a group with another pre-understanding there may have been other nuances that would have been brought forward, than what was found in the Norwegian context of social work education.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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