THE DIGITAL COMPETENCE OF FUTURE SOCIAL WORKERS: SELF-ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: In 2022, a study was conducted to evaluate the digital competence of fourth-year students pursuing degrees in "Social Activities" at the University "Neofit Rilski" of Blagoevgrad, both in full-time and part-time study modes. The research encompassed a cohort of 30 students and aimed to gauge their digital proficiency based on self-assessment. This assessment relied on the Digital Competence Self-Assessment Matrix, aligned with the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DIGCOMP), which encompasses five core domains: Information and Data literacy, Communication and Collaboration, Digital content creation, Safety/security, and Problem solving.
Results from the self-assessment revealed that 55% of the students considered themselves proficient at a core level in the first area of competence (Information and Data literacy), while 30% rated themselves at a cross-functional level, and 15% assessed themselves as functional. Notably, 90% of the students could store and retrieve digital files, use search engines, and apply filters when searching for information. However, only 25% used cloud services to store data.
In the second area of competence (Digital content creation), a mere 15% of respondents rated themselves as professionally competent, underscoring its significance in their future professional practice. The study indicated the necessity for students to acquire skills in content creation, programming, and multimedia element integration, especially in the context of social media.
In the third area (Communication and Collaboration), all students exhibited proficiency in basic digital communication tools like mobile phones and email. However, only 25% considered themselves functionally adept in online communication, highlighting the importance of digital communication skills in social work.
Concerning the fourth area (Problem solving), 55% of students assessed their proficiency as core, while 35% rated themselves as cross-functional, and only 10% as functional. This underlines the need for further development of problem-solving skills related to digital technologies.
The fifth and final area (Safety/security) revealed that most students understood the importance of online privacy but had limited skills in shaping their digital identity and monitoring their online footprint. Enhancing digital competence emerged as a crucial need for future social workers to navigate online risks and protect clients from abuse.
The study underscores the necessity of integrating digital competence into social work curricula. It advocates for additional lectures, seminars, workshops, and internships to expand students' digital skillset. In the digital age, social workers must improve their digital competencies to effectively communicate, advocate for marginalized groups, and provide efficient social services. Developing these competencies within the educational framework is essential for the application of information and communication technologies in addressing the challenges of digital social work, ultimately promoting social equality and safeguarding clients in an increasingly digital world.
Keywords: self assessment, digital competence, students, framework, self-assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, a study was carried out with the subject "Self-assessment of the digital competence of students studying in the specialty "Social Activities", fourth year, full-time and part-time studies, at the University "Neofit Rilski" of Blagoevgrad. The research contingent is 30 students.
The purpose of the ascertaining research is to establish the level of digital competence of the students based on their self-assessment. The Self-Assessment Card is based on the Digital Competence Self-Assessment Matrix, as the digital skills assessment tool is part of Europass (europass.cedefop.europa.eu/resources/digital-competences): a curriculum vitae developed according to the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, also known as DIGCOMP, outlining five main areas: Information and Data literacy, Communication and Collaboration, Digital content creation, Safety/security and Problem solving (https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/digcomp-framework-developing-and-understanding-digital-competence-europe?search) .
The five core digital competencies are assessed in three levels of psroficiency: core, cross - functional and functional, including knowledge, skills and attitudes in the five domains. In recent years, a number of studies have analyzed and compared the European Framework of digital competence to different national frameworks (Hazar, E., 2019, Perez-Escoda, A., 2014, Nedungadi, P. P., Menon, R., Gutjahr, G., Erickson, L., & Raman, R., 2018). In other research efforts, investigators have sought to establish the extent of the connection between digital competence and

different factors like computational thinking (Juškeviciene, A., & Dagiene, V., 2018) or awareness of online safety (Nyikes, Z., 2018). Some have delved into pedagogical methods tied to digital competence or crafted instruments to appraise educators' digital proficiencies (Lázaro-Cantabrana, J., Usart-Rodríguez, M., & Gisbert-Cervera, M., 2019). The rationale for selecting the DigComp framework in this study is as follows:

1). It is a framework that was developed based on a review of other known digital competence frameworks

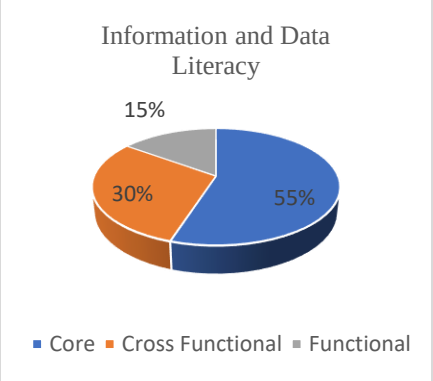
2). The DigComp framework has been widely adopted to conceptually detail the understanding of digital competence for higher education.

When analyzing the results summarized in Figure 1. in the first area of competence (Information and Data literacy), it is evident that 55% of students self-assess their knowledge and skills at a core level, 30% self-assess themselves as cross-functional level and 15% are self-assessed at a functional level. A deeper analysis shows that 90% of students can store files or content (eg text, photos, music, video, web pages) and download them again after they have been saved once. 90% of students can use different search engines to find information. Approximately 60% use filters when searching and 30% can compare different sources in order to compare the reliability of the information they are looking for and about 30% can classify information methodically, using files and folders, to be able to find it easier when needed. 2/3 (66%) of the surveyed students can store information found on the Internet in various formats and only 25% of them can use cloud services to store information.

For students, the knowledge and skills they need to have in their future professional duties related to digital processing are relevant in relation to recording, processing, storing, sharing and managing data. In addition, in their future work with clients, they will often have to explain digital data and information to social service users, as well as provide them with assistance related to their specific cases - rights and options.

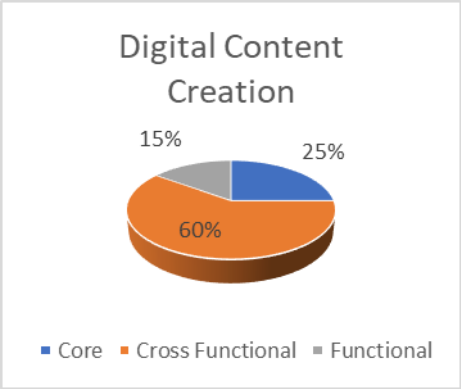
The ability to handle digital information is paramount for students to be able to fulfill their future professional duties, to evaluate and manage digital information, to make judgments related to the deficits and resources of social service users.

Figure 1. Self-assessment of digital competence in the first competence area: Information and Data literacy.



In the second area of competence (the competence - Digital content creation) it is about creating and editing new digital content using different digital tools, applying and changing settings of different types of software and applications, using editors to create a blog or web pages based on ready-made templates (e.g. WordPress), knowledge of using copyrighted content, programming and working with several programming languages. Widespread use of social media requires knowledge of using combinations of multimedia elements to create Digital content. Content creation in DigComp refers to word processing skills, skills in using different types of software and applications, for example Microsoft Office to create new content in different formats such as text, numbers, images, having skills in working with Power Point, also skills to work on platforms such as My Space, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Instagram, Friendster, Facebook, YouTube, etc., which feature a variety of digital content such as audio, video, images and text for sharing articles and videos, related to job search/offering, etc. For this area of competence, only 15% of respondents rate their skills at a professional (functional) level, and it is essential for their future practice.

Figure 2. Self-assessment of digital competence in the second competence area: Digital content creation.

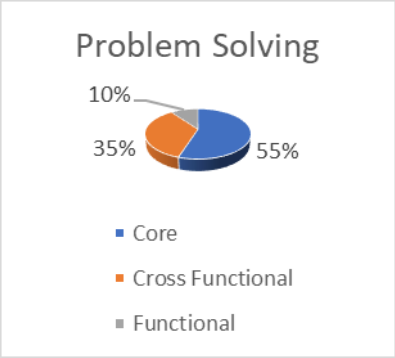


From the analysis of the results, in the third area of competence - Communication and Collaboration, it is evident that all students (100%) can communicate using a mobile phone, e-mail or chat, 100% can share files and content using simple digital tools, while 80% know that certain communication rules apply when using digital tools. 25% of students define their level of online communication as Functional (professional) 65% - cross functional and 10% of the students define their level of proficiency as core. For the field of social work, knowledge of online communication is one of the most important goals for developing digital competence. Digital tools such as emails, sms, social media, blogs, video blogs, photo blogs, video conferencing, etc. serve for online communications with service users and colleagues and it is important for future social workers to know what appropriate digital communication means in a particular context. Social workers need to be aware of the capabilities of different digital tools, as each digital tool has advantages and disadvantages, to ensure that the communication process is beneficial to service users.

Figure 3. Self-assessment of digital competence in the third competence area: Communication and Collaboration.

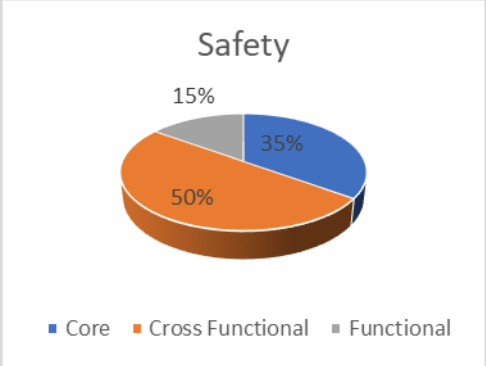
In the fourth area of competence (the competence – Problem solving) it is about solving technical and technological problems related to the use of digital technologies. From the analysis of the results in the fourth area of competence, it is clear that 55% of the students define their level of proficiency as core, 35% define it as cross functional and only 10% of the respondents - as functional.

Figure 4. Self-assessment of digital competence in the fourth competence area: Problem solving.



The fifth area of competence (competence - Safety) is related to knowledge of the problems (threats) related to safety and security, the possibilities and limitations when using information and communication technologies in the field of social work.

Figure 5. Self-assessment of digital competence in the fifth competence area: Safety.



The majority (90%) of students are aware that they should not disclose personal information online, but only 9% of them can shape their own online identity and monitor their digital footprint, about 16% of respondents can activate filters for spam emails, more than half (60%) of respondents use information and communication technologies wisely to avoid health problems (physical and mental) and about 59% of them are informed regarding the impact of digital technologies on daily life, online consumption and the environment. From the analysis of the results in the fifth area of competence, it is clear that 50% of the students define their level of proficiency as Cross Functional, 35% define it as core and only 15% of the respondents - as functional.

The results of the conducted research draw attention to the need to take steps to integrate digital competence in the curricula and in the teaching process, and on the other hand, this is related to the inclusion of additional lectures, seminars, workshops, internships to expand the perimeter of action towards its construction. In today's digital society, social workers are professionally obliged to improve their digital competence, as information and communication technologies are used in the provision of social services, case management and numerous administrative tasks.

Social work is a communication-oriented profession and to this end, social workers need to expand their digital skills related to digital communication in order to be able to effectively carry out technology-based communication as well as advocate for marginalized groups by promoting social equality through various digital tools. Through technology-mediated access to services, social workers can protect their clients from online risks and related abuse.

All this search for opportunities to develop digital competence within the educational environment to provide working knowledge of the application of information and communication technologies in solving problems in the context of digital social work. In work terms, this means on the one hand.

2. CONCLUSION

The self-assessment study conducted among fourth-year students specializing in "Social Activities" at the University “Neofit Rilski” of Blagoevgrad in 2022 has illuminated the pressing need for digital competence development in the

field of social work. The findings underscore several key takeaways that hold significance for both higher education institutions and the profession of social work as a whole.

Firstly, the study reveals that while a substantial portion of students displayed a cross functional understanding of digital tools, there exists a significant gap in their proficiency across various digital competence areas. This gap, particularly evident in content creation, problem solving, and digital security, highlights the need for a more comprehensive and targeted approach to digital skill development in social work education.

Secondly, the results emphasize the vital role that digital competence plays in the future practice of social workers. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, social workers must be equipped not only to navigate it effectively but also to leverage digital tools to provide efficient and client-centered services. Whether it involves online communication, content creation, or data management, digital competence has become an integral part of the social work profession.

The study underscores the importance of integrating digital competence into social work curricula additionally. To bridge the gap and ensure that future social workers are well-prepared for the digital challenges they will encounter, educational institutions must consider augmenting their programs with dedicated coursework, workshops, and practical experiences focused on digital skills development.

In conclusion, the self-assessment study illuminates the evolving landscape of social work, where digital competence is no longer a supplementary skill but a fundamental requirement. To uphold the values of social equality and safeguard the well-being of clients in the digital age, it is imperative for both educators and students to embrace the call for enhanced digital competence development. By doing so, the social work profession can effectively adapt to the digital era while continuing to provide meaningful and impactful services to individuals and communities in need.

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