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Beyond Digital Tools: Reconstructing Social Work Education in China in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract: Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is changing how knowledge is accessed, professional documents are produced, and decisions are supported. For social work education, its significance goes beyond adding a classroom tool: it can generate case summaries, assessments, intervention plans, policy briefs, and simulated dialogue—tasks traditionally used to develop and evaluate professional reasoning. Focusing on undergraduate social work education in China, this paper argues that prohibition, generic digital literacy, and isolated tool demonstrations are insufficient. It proposes four competency domains: functional AI literacy, critical epistemic judgment, practice integration, and ethical-relational accountability. Three connected reforms follow: progressive AI learning outcomes across the curriculum, teaching and assessment that make reasoning visible, and ethical governance linking classroom and field education. The guiding principle is "human in command": GenAI may assist information processing, comparison, and drafting, but interpretation, professional decisions, and relational responsibility must remain human. The framework helps programs respond to technological change while preserving dignity, justice, competence, and human relationships.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence; Social work education; Curriculum reform; Professional competence

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1. Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) gives students instant access to fluent explanations, summaries, plans, and written products. Unlike earlier technologies that mainly stored or transmitted information, GenAI directly produces language and apparently reasoned responses. This matters because social work learning is often demonstrated through case analysis, psychosocial assessment, reflective writing, service planning, policy analysis, and documentation. When a machine can generate plausible versions of these outputs, a finished document no longer transparently represents a student's understanding.

The response cannot be limited to detecting misconduct. GenAI is entering professional environments and may influence documentation, information retrieval, communication, program design, and research.

Social work scholars have examined both its opportunities and ethical risks [1,2]. An exploratory study found GenAI useful for teaching-related tasks while emphasizing that it should augment rather than replace human expertise [3,4] and advocates a human-centered approach combining innovation with privacy, transparency, inclusion, and regulation.

The issue is increasingly relevant in China. The Ministry of Education and eight other departments have called for deeper integration of artificial intelligence with teaching and greater emphasis on higher-order thinking, judgment [5], and practical capability. However, general AI literacy does not automatically meet the needs of a relational and value-based profession. Social work programs must interpret technology through commitments to human dignity, social justice, confidentiality, professional competence, and the importance of human relationships.

Recent Chinese research has begun to examine GenAI in concrete social work service settings. Drawing on a case study, literature analysis, and semi-structured interviews, Hou and Wang identified potential uses in demand identification, decision support, process management, and capacity building [6], while stressing that AI cannot replace deep empathy or assume ethical responsibility. These emerging applications create a corresponding educational need: undergraduate programs should prepare students not only to use AI tools, but also to judge their limits and retain professional accountability. If programs respond only through course-level discretion, teachers may adopt conflicting approaches, leaving students with inconsistent expectations about acceptable use, professional risk, and responsibility.

This paper argues that GenAI does not simply add a digital tool to social work education; it changes the competencies future social workers need. Curriculum content, teaching methods, assessment, and ethical governance must therefore be reconsidered together. The paper first analyzes the new demands created by GenAI, then identifies limitations in common educational responses, proposes a four-domain competency framework, and outlines a concise reform pathway for undergraduate social work programs in China.

2. New demands on social work education

2.1. From obtaining information to judging information

GenAI makes explanations and synthesized responses instantly available, but fluency is not evidence of truth. Large language models generate responses from patterns in data rather than professional understanding or moral responsibility. Outputs may contain fabricated references, factual errors, hidden assumptions, or inappropriate generalizations. Research on large language models in education therefore stresses fact-checking, critical thinking, and continuous human oversight [7].

For social work students, verification is contextual as well as factual. An intervention suitable for one population or policy environment may be inappropriate elsewhere. A seemingly neutral case summary may omit structural inequality or reproduce stereotypes. Students must ask what evidence supports an output, whose perspective it represents, what context it assumes, and what consequences may follow. Strong disciplinary knowledge is therefore essential: students need practice theory, policy, research, and ethics to recognize misleading answers. AI literacy without disciplinary literacy may produce fluent users who cannot evaluate what they receive.

2.2. From written products to visible professional reasoning

Writing in social work education is not only a means of presenting conclusions; it is also a process through which students form professional judgment. Preparing an assessment requires selecting relevant information, distinguishing observation from inference, considering alternative explanations, and justifying action. Reflective

writing requires attention to emotion, positionality, uncertainty, and the influence of self on practice.

GenAI can produce polished work while bypassing parts of this learning process. Reimer argued that social work curricula and assessments must be reconsidered because many professional activities are text-based [8]. If students outsource analysis and organization, apparent productivity may conceal underdeveloped judgment—a form of "cognitive debt" in AI-integrated education [9]. Assessment should therefore make reasoning visible by requiring students to show how they defined the problem, checked sources, used or rejected AI outputs, and justified the final decision.

2.3. From efficiency to accountable sociotechnical practice

GenAI is often presented as a productivity tool, but it operates within organizations, policies, data systems, professional relationships, and unequal social structures. An AI-assisted case note raises questions about accuracy, data storage, consent, access, bias, and responsibility. These concerns are acute because social workers often engage with people experiencing vulnerability, stigma, or unequal institutional power. Reamer identified privacy, informed consent, surveillance, transparency, bias, and accountability as major ethical issues in AI-supported social work.

Efficiency is therefore not the ultimate measure of good practice. Professional work may require patience, dialogue, uncertainty, and relationship building. The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training emphasize that technology-mediated education should not replace face-to-face dialogue and practice learning [10]. The educational question is not whether AI is simply beneficial or harmful, but which tasks it may support, under what conditions, and which responsibilities must remain human. This paper adopts a human-in-command principle: AI may assist exploration, comparison, organization, and drafting, while humans retain authority and accountability for interpretation, ethical decisions, and professional relationships.

3. Limitations of existing educational responses

The first limitation is prohibition without preparation. Restrictions are understandable where educators face plagiarism, fabricated citations, or uncertainty about assessment validity. Cotton *et al.* showed that ChatGPT intensifies established academic-integrity concerns [11]. Yet a blanket ban may drive use underground and leave students unprepared for post-graduation practice. It also treats all assistance as equivalent, although generating an assignment differs from comparing formulations, checking accessibility, or critiquing bias. Rules should reflect learning outcomes and risk levels.

The second limitation is instrumental training without critical literacy. Prompt writing and summarization may improve outputs without improving students' ability to evaluate evidence or recognize injustice. A polished response can still violate confidentiality, reproduce deficit views, or recommend an intervention based on invented information. Education must therefore ask not only how a tool completes a task, but also how it frames people and problems, which knowledge it privileges, and who bears the consequences.

The third limitation is fragmented teaching and product-based assessment. AI may appear in a one-off workshop without progression into practice or field education, while conventional assignments reward products GenAI can imitate, including generic essays, case plans, policy summaries, and project proposals. If an assignment can be completed without contextual judgment, it is poorly aligned with the competence it claims to measure. AI outcomes should be mapped across the program, and assessment should combine written products with evidence of process, dialogue, and direct performance.

Finally, ethical principles are often separated from technological decisions. Students may learn confidentiality and informed consent in an ethics course but fail to apply them when entering information into a conversational AI system. The Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice emphasize competence, privacy, informed consent, documentation, and risk management [12]. These requirements should shape whether a tool is used, what information is entered, how outputs are reviewed, and whether the activity is appropriate—not merely how problems are addressed afterward.

4. A four-domain competency framework

To address these limitations, this paper proposes four interdependent domains of GenAI competence. The framework is a conceptual proposal that requires future empirical validation in Chinese educational settings.

4.1. Functional AI literacy

Functional literacy means understanding and operating GenAI at a level appropriate to professional use. Students do not need to become computer scientists, but they should understand that outputs are probabilistic, shaped by training data and system design, and not equivalent to verified knowledge. They should recognize hallucination, inconsistency, outdated information, and sensitivity to prompts.

Students should be able to construct clear prompts, provide only appropriate non-confidential context, compare outputs, request alternative perspectives, and disclose AI use. Equally important is knowing when not to use a tool. A public GenAI platform should not receive identifiable client information unless an approved system and explicit data-governance arrangement permit it. Competence is demonstrated through controlled and transparent use rather than speed.

4.2. Critical epistemic judgment

Critical epistemic judgment is the ability to evaluate what should count as credible professional knowledge. It includes checking factual claims and references, determining whether advice fits the legal and cultural context, identifying missing perspectives, and examining bias. Students should learn to separate plausible language from supported analysis.

A useful method is the “double reading” of AI output. Students first examine whether a response is clear and potentially useful. They then read as critical social workers, asking whose interests it serves, what evidence is absent, what power relations are obscured, and what harm could result. The aim is not to prove that AI is always wrong, but to cultivate disciplined skepticism and evidence-based revision.

4.3. Practice integration

Practice integration is the ability to use AI selectively within authentic workflows while preserving human responsibility. With fictional or appropriately de-identified material, students may compare interview questions, identify missing assessment domains, improve the accessibility of public information, brainstorm group activities, construct stakeholder maps, or generate alternative policy arguments.

In every activity, students should complete tasks that AI cannot legitimately undertake alone: interpreting local context, setting priorities, incorporating service-user perspectives, justifying ethical choices, and accepting responsibility for decisions. They must distinguish low-risk classroom simulation from high-risk uses involving real client data, clinical advice, or consequential judgments. Field education is crucial because

appropriate use is shaped by organizational policy and supervision. Stone found limited guidance and uneven awareness among practice educators [13], suggesting that universities cannot assume placement agencies will independently provide coherent preparation.

4.4. Ethical-relational accountability

Ethical-relational accountability places social work values at the center of technological practice. Students should be able to identify who may be affected by AI use, explain professional obligations, and remain responsible for outcomes. This domain includes confidentiality, informed consent, transparency, fairness, accessibility, authorship, and meaningful human involvement.

The relational dimension distinguishes social work from purely technical applications. Even an accurate output may weaken trust if automation is undisclosed or if a service user feels reduced to data. Students should learn to explain the role of technology plainly and recognize digital inequality in access, language coverage, and platform quality. Most importantly, a practitioner cannot defend a harmful decision by saying that a system recommended it. Human actors must understand the basis of a decision, review the evidence, and remain answerable for action.

5. Reform pathways

5.1. Embedding progressive outcomes across the curriculum

Programs should begin with curriculum mapping rather than purchasing a platform or adding a stand-alone elective. In introductory study, students can learn basic concepts, privacy rules, disclosure norms, and verification. Methods and research courses can use AI outputs as objects of critique. Practice courses can incorporate controlled case simulations, while field education and capstone work can require integrated judgment under realistic constraints.

This progression prevents AI education from becoming the responsibility of a single enthusiastic teacher. It also keeps technical content connected to disciplinary learning. A common introductory module may establish a baseline, but competence should be reinforced across courses and assessed at increasing levels of complexity.

5.2. Using scenario-based learning and process-visible assessment

Scenario-based activities permit experimentation without exposing real client information. Educators can develop fictional or composite cases from Chinese community, family, school, medical, disability, aging, and child-welfare contexts. Students can ask GenAI to produce an assessment or plan and compare it with policy, research, local resources, and social work values. They may test how gender, disability, rural residence, or family structure affects recommendations, or compare an AI summary with a transcript to identify lost ambiguity and emotional meaning.

Assessment instructions should specify whether AI is prohibited, permitted with disclosure, required for critique, or limited to defined functions. Strong assessment combines products with visible process. Students may submit brief source trails, AI-use statements, prompt excerpts, or revision rationales; defend decisions orally; or respond to a changed case condition. Rubrics should reward source accuracy, contextual specificity, ethical reasoning, recognition of uncertainty, and the quality of human revision. The goal is not surveillance but accountable demonstration of learning.

5.3. Connecting ethical governance, field education, and faculty development

Universities should establish clear, risk-based rules concerning approved tools, prohibited data, consent, documentation, and supervision. Low-risk activities using fictional information may be permitted with disclosure. Activities involving research data or unpublished organizational information require additional safeguards. Uses involving identifiable client data, automated eligibility or risk judgments, or unsupervised clinical advice should be prohibited unless a formally approved system and governance process exist.

Field agencies should receive the same guidance as students. Before placement, students should learn to distinguish fictional, de-identified, sensitive, and identifiable data. Supervision should include discussion of how technology shapes attention, workload, documentation, and relationships. If an agency uses an AI-supported system, students should examine its purpose, data arrangements, and human review process rather than treating organizational adoption as evidence of safety.

Faculty development should focus on professional scenarios rather than technical novelty. Educators can collaboratively critique outputs, redesign existing assignments, and develop shared fictional cases and disclosure templates. Institutions must provide time and support because consistent reform cannot depend on individual teachers continuously resolving new technical and ethical questions alone. Policies should also be reviewed regularly as tools, regulations, and evidence change.

6. Conclusion

Generative artificial intelligence creates a pedagogical, professional, and ethical challenge for social work education. It may support explanation, simulation, comparison, and drafting, but it can also conceal weak reasoning, fabricate evidence, reproduce bias, expose sensitive information, and substitute fluent text for professional judgment. Neither unconditional adoption nor blanket prohibition is sufficient.

This paper has proposed four connected competencies: functional AI literacy, critical epistemic judgment, practice integration, and ethical-relational accountability. These domains shift attention from merely operating a tool to evaluating, limiting, disclosing, and accepting responsibility for its use. For undergraduate social work programs in China, they should be implemented through progressive curriculum mapping, scenario-based learning, process-visible assessment, coordinated field education, faculty development, and proportional-risk governance.

The goal is not to train social workers to compete with machines in generating text. It is to cultivate professionals who can use technological resources without surrendering evidence, context, ethics, or relationships. In an AI-mediated environment, accountable human judgment and commitment to dignity, justice, participation, and care remain the distinctive foundations of social work.

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Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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