

Perceptions, Attitudes, Learning, and Challenges of Social Work Undergraduates in Cultivation of International Talent: A Survey of Five Universities in Guangzhou, China

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, China's Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area proposed the establishment of an international education demonstration area. As the core city of the Greater Bay Area, major universities in Guangzhou have initiated initiatives to cultivate international talent. This study aims to evaluate the knowledge, attitudes, and internationalized learning of undergraduate social work students, as well as the challenges they encounter in cultivating international talents within their majors at Guangzhou universities. In this study, 291 online questionnaire data from undergraduate students from five universities in Guangzhou were collected through a questionnaire survey. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, the chi-square test, and one-way ANOVA. The results showed that students value most is to master professional knowledge in international social work. Most of the students (86.6%) believed that it was necessary to cultivate international talents in social work, but 19.3% of the students believed that the prospect was not optimistic, and 24.1% of the students held a wait-and-see attitude. The gender of the students had a significant effect on attitudes. There were significant differences in students' internationalization learning among universities. Challenges faced by students are centered on the unfulfilled demand for internationalized learning. Although most universities have put forward the goal of cultivating international talent, there is still a gap between the goal and its achievement. It is recommended that universities increase resources for social work majors and improve the internationalization level of teachers to achieve the goal of cultivating international social work talents.

Keywords: Social work education; Social work undergraduates; International talent cultivation

1. Introduction

In February 2019, the Chinese government issued an important policy document, the Outline of the Plan for the Development of the Greater Bay Area of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, proposing to create an international education demonstration zone in the Greater Bay Area and to increase the supply of international talents in the Greater Bay Area (CPGPC, 2019). As one of the core cities of the Greater Bay Area, Guangzhou plays a crucial role in cultivating and delivering international talent to the region. In 2021, Guangzhou also issued the Implementation Plan for the Creation of a Special Zone for International Talents in Nansha New District of Guangzhou (CNN, 2021), which proposes that the Nansha District of Guangzhou will be fully established as a special

zone for international talents with global influence by 2035. For this reason, major universities in Guangzhou have begun to pay attention to the cultivation of international talent. Certain universities in Guangzhou have also tried to offer "internationalized" training for social work students, but the results are not satisfactory. Not only have these universities failed to achieve the goal of international talent cultivation, but also the proportion of students trained to engage in social work-related occupations after graduation is very low (Chen Youhua & Wan Yingjie, 2023), and the tendency of marginalization of the discipline is becoming more and more obvious (Liu Meng, 2017). Therefore, this paper aims to present social work undergraduates' perceptions, attitudes towards internationalization cultivation, students' internationalization learning, and the challenges they face. The goal of the study is to provide some decision-making basis for colleges and universities in the cultivation of international talents in social work and to prompt the social work education community to discuss this topic.

2. Literature

Research on international talent development has been carried out in a wide range of disciplines, including Chinese language studies (Xing Xin & Gong Yuan, 2020), international trade (ZHENG Xue-ping & WANG Lan, 2019), food science (Yang et al., 2020), control science and engineering (Yang et al., 2020), architecture (Weigong et al., 2017), and economics (Kong, 2017b). By contrast, work in the field of social work remains relatively scarce.

The literature that does exist tends to stress the significance of internationalization in social work education, but most discussions concentrate on particular pedagogical approaches. For example, some scholars have employed computer simulations (such as SimChild) (Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2023) or virtual reality (VR) technologies (Rambaree et al., 2023) to strengthen students' decision-making and empathy in cross-cultural contexts, while others have sought to expand transnational learning opportunities through online platforms and internationalized curricula (Bye et al., 2006). Experiential models, such as overseas semesters, have also shown positive effects by broadening students' knowledge of global contexts and reinforcing the values and skills required for international social work practice (Das & Rösner, 2023). Even so, these contributions are largely confined to questions of teaching design and do not address students' overall experiences of international cultivation systematically.

As a result, the existing body of research mainly reflects the perspective of educational provision, with far less attention paid to students' perceptions, learning processes, and the difficulties they encounter. Within China, in particular, very little is known about how undergraduate social work students interpret and respond to the goals of international talent cultivation. To fill this gap, the present study examines students from five universities in Guangzhou, focusing on their perceptions, learning, and practical challenges in international cultivation, to contribute evidence to discussions on the internationalization of social work education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design

This paper adopts a quantitative research method, which is conducted through a questionnaire. The questionnaire of this study is the student questionnaire part of the researcher's study "International Talent Cultivation of Social Work Undergraduates in Guangzhou, China", and a part of it was selected for analysis and discussion according to the needs of this study.

3.2. Study Population and Sampling Method

In this study, a sample of undergraduate students majoring in social work from five universities in Guangzhou was selected through a combination of stratified sampling and convenience sampling. The sample size of the study was calculated by G*Power software. The required sample size for the chi-square test was calculated in G*Power with an effect size of 0.35, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, and 4 degrees of freedom, yielding a minimum of 98 participants. For the one-way ANOVA, using an effect size of 0.40, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, and five groups, the required sample size was determined to be at least 80. The rationale for selecting a large effect size is that Ranking (2018) noted that the average effect size of educational interventions is approximately $d=0.40$. The final number of student samples obtained in this study was 291, which met the sample size requirement for this study.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study collects data through questionnaires. The data were collected online, i.e., the QR code and link of the questionnaire were generated through the platform of "Questionnaire Star". Then, the link was disseminated to the students via the WeChat group, where they were invited to complete the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the 53 items constituting the overall scale of the student questionnaire was 0.939, the KMO value was 0.904, and the chi-square value of the Bartlett's Sphericity Test was 10230.615 ($p < 0.05$). Consequently, the data are considered reliable and valid. Five sections of the questionnaire were selected for analysis according to the requirements of this study: The following factors were considered in the study: 1) demographic characteristics; 2) perceptions of the goals of international talent cultivation; 3) attitudes towards the cultivation of international talent; 4) students' internationalization learning performance; 5) universities' practices in international talent cultivation. Finally, the collected data were subjected to descriptive statistics, the chi-square test, and one-way ANOVA using SPSS 26.0.

4. Results

4.1. Students' Perceptions of the Goals of International Talent Cultivation

The following analysis is presented from the students' perspective. Regarding the overall mean scores of agreements with the objectives, all items received ratings above 4.0, suggesting that students generally expressed strong endorsement of the objectives of international talent cultivation for social work undergraduates. The highest levels of agreement were observed for mastering international social work professional knowledge ($M = 4.37$), becoming a genuinely internationalized Chinese professional ($M = 4.30$), and developing an international vision and sentiment ($M = 4.29$), indicating the strongest consensus among respondents. Slightly lower mean scores were recorded for the ability to manage information on specific matters ($M = 4.08$) and mastery of international rules and practices ($M = 4.09$). The detailed results are presented in Figure 1.

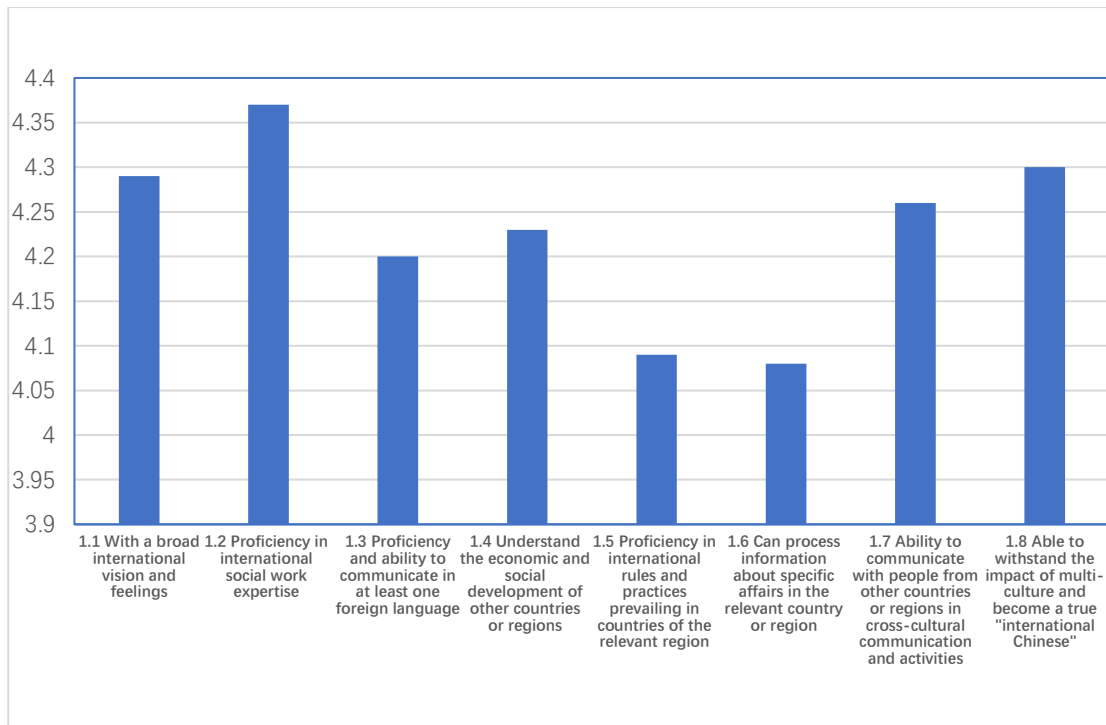


Figure 1: Students' perception of talent cultivation objectives

4.2. Students' Attitudes toward International Talent Cultivation

Social work students demonstrated a clear positive cognitive orientation toward the necessity of self-assessment against internationalization standards. Survey results show that 51.9% of respondents considered such measures necessary, while 7.9% regarded them as extremely important. Together, 59.8% of students expressed recognition of the importance of internationalization standards, reflecting a prevailing consensus among the student body. In contrast, only 17.5% of students perceived these measures as unnecessary or entirely unnecessary, and 22.7% reported uncertainty, suggesting that a notable proportion still hold ambiguous views regarding the applicability of internationalization standards.

Similarly, students' attitudes toward the cultivation of international talent were overwhelmingly favourable. A total of 86.6% acknowledged its necessity, with 64.6% rating it as necessary and 22% as necessary. By comparison, negative views were negligible, with just 0.3% of students considering such cultivation entirely unnecessary and 2.1% viewing it as unnecessary. Approximately 11% of respondents expressed uncertainty, indicating some lingering ambiguity regarding the specific benefits of internationalized personnel training.

Students also conveyed an optimistic outlook regarding the future of international talent cultivation. Nearly half (48.8%) reported optimism, and 7.9% strong optimism, amounting to 56.7% in total. Only 0.7% of students expressed a highly pessimistic view, and 18.6% reported a lack of optimism. Meanwhile, 24.1% indicated uncertainty about prospects, reflecting a degree of cautious or wait-and-see attitudes toward the effectiveness of international talent cultivation. A detailed summary of these findings is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' attitudes

		Frequency	Percent
1. Do you think it is necessary to measure yourself against international standards?	A. Completely Unnecessary	8	2.7
	B. Unnecessary	43	14.8
	C. Neutral	66	22.7
	D. Necessary	151	51.9
	E. Very Necessary	23	7.9
2. What is your attitude towards the current prospect of professional development of international talents?	A. Completely Pessimistic	2	0.7
	B. Pessimistic	54	18.6
	C. Neutral	70	24.1
	D. Optimistic	142	48.8
	E. Very Optimistic	23	7.9
3. Do you think it is necessary to cultivate international talents for social work?	A. Completely Unnecessary	1	0.3
	B. Unnecessary	6	2.1
	C. Neutral	32	11
	D. Necessary	188	64.6
	E. Very Necessary	64	22

Note: N=291.

In addition, according to the results of the chi-square test (refer to Table 2), it is known that there is some inconsistency in the attitudes of students of different genders, grades, and places of origin towards the necessity of cultivating international talents. There appears to be a notable distinction in the perceptions of students of different genders regarding the importance of cultivating international talents in social work ($\chi^2=4.486$, $p=0.034$). Female students agreed significantly more than male students on the necessity of internationalization training. Among the students of different grades, there is a decreasing trend of students' agreement on the necessity of internationalization cultivation as the grade rises, but the chi-square test did not reach a significant level ($\chi^2=4.781$, $p=0.189$). The students of urban and city origins are closer to each other in terms of agreement on internationalization cultivation, with 89.1% and 89.7% of them believing that it is necessary, respectively; and the students of rural origins have a comparatively low level of agreement, with at 81.6%, but not at a statistically significant level ($\chi^2=3.508$, $p=0.173$).

Table 2: Comparison of attitudes of students

			Attitude		Total	χ^2	p
			Unnecessary	Necessary			
Gender	A. Male	Count	14	52	66	4.486	0.034
		%	21.2	78.8	100		
	B. Female	Count	25	200	225		
		%	11.1	88.9	100		
Grade	A. Freshman	Count	3	44	47	4.781	0.189
		%	6.4	93.6	100		
	B. Sophomore	Count	9	75	84		
		%	10.7	89.3	100		
	C. Junior	Count	12	69	81		
		%	14.8	85.2	100		
	D. Senior	Count	15	64	79		
		%	19.0	81.0	100		
Place of Birth	A. Urban	Count	11	90	101	3.508	0.173
		%	10.9	89.1	100		
	B. Town	Count	9	78	87		
		%	10.3	89.7	100		
	C. Rural	Count	19	84	103		
		%	18.4	81.6	100		

Note: N=291. χ^2 is the chi-square value. The larger the value, the stronger the correlation between variables; the p-value is used to judge the statistical significance of this correlation. $p < 0.05$, indicating that there is a correlation between the two category groups, and there are significant differences.

4.3. Students' Internationalized Learning at University

Indicators of students' internationalized learning performance demonstrated varying degrees of differentiation. A detailed summary of these findings is presented in Table 3. The highest mean scores were observed for possessing a broad international vision and sentiment ($M = 3.71$) and for understanding the internationalization orientation of their majors ($M = 3.69$), suggesting relatively strong performance at the cognitive level of internationalization. Mid-range scores were recorded for international ethics and rules ($M = 3.46$), foreign language communication ability ($M = 3.54$), and knowledge of overseas employment ($M = 3.52$). In contrast, the lowest ratings were found for the utilization of foreign language materials ($M = 3.11$) and participation in international exchange activities ($M = 2.86$), reflecting a marked gap between students' cognitive awareness and their practical engagement. The standard deviations of the items ranged from 0.931 to 1.303, indicating considerable variability in students' responses. Notably, participation in international exchange activities exhibited the largest dispersion ($SD = 1.303$), highlighting pronounced inequality in students' access to international exchange opportunities.

Table 3: Students' performance in internationalized learning

	Percentage (%)					M	SD
	Str.D	D	N	A	SA		
3.1 Understand the international development direction of the major	2.1	11.7	16.5	54.3	15.5	3.69	0.939
3.2 Ability to communicate proficiently in a foreign language (English)	1.7	15.1	28.5	37.1	17.5	3.54	1.004
3.3 Understand the employment status of students in foreign/overseas universities of this major	3.1	16.5	21.3	44.0	15.1	3.52	1.035
3.4 Regular use of foreign language teaching materials or auxiliary materials	7.6	27.1	23.0	31.6	10.7	3.11	1.144
3.5 Often use a library database to search and read foreign original books, periodicals, etc	5.2	23.4	18.2	39.9	13.4	3.33	1.127
3.6 Often discuss and communicate with classmates about the development of the major abroad	6.5	20.6	22.0	36.8	14.1	3.31	1.143
3.7 Familiar with the international ethics and rules of the social work profession	3.8	18.6	20.3	42.6	14.8	3.46	1.07
3.8 Have a high international vision and feelings	2.4	10.3	16.2	55.7	15.5	3.71	0.931
3.9 Often participated in foreign exchange activities (student exchange programs, study abroad, international conferences, international internships, etc.)	15.8	31.6	16.5	22.7	13.4	2.86	1.303

Note: N=291. Str.D = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Meanwhile, the results of one-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference between students from different universities in terms of international learning ($F=6.23$, $p<0.001$). It seems that University 2 performed the best ($M=3.80$), which was significantly higher than the other universities. University 5 scored the lowest ($M=3.11$). A detailed summary of these findings is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: University differences in terms of international learning

	U	N	M	SD	F	p
Students' international learning	U1	63	3.34	0.94	6.23	0.000
	U2	64	3.80	0.56		
	U3	44	3.36	0.82		
	U4	44	3.41	0.76		
	U5	76	3.11	0.93		

Note: N=291. U=University; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. The F value reflects the inter-group variation and intra-group variation. $p < 0.05$, there is a statistically significant.

4.4. Challenges Faced by Students

From the data of the university's international cultivation measures, students tended to be dissatisfied with some of the measures implemented by the university (refer to Table 5). For example, the entries related to organizing international cultural activities ($M=3.04$), hiring foreign teachers ($M=3.07$), and providing opportunities for international exchanges ($M=3.09$) received scores slightly above 3 points. The standard deviation of the entries ranged from 0.921 to 1.267, with a large overall degree of dispersion, especially in the ratings of hiring foreign teachers ($SD=1.267$) and providing exchange opportunities ($SD=1.259$).

It seems that, based on the internationalized curriculum and instruction data, students rated the university's offerings of all-English courses ($M=2.94$) and transnational distance courses ($M=2.99$), as well as expatriate instruction ($M=2.73$), as exceeding the theoretical median of 3 points. The standard deviations for each entry ranged from 1.07 to 1.276, with a large overall dispersion, with the highest standard deviations for the all-English courses and foreign instructor-led courses, and a clear divergence in student ratings of these course offerings.

Table 5: Measures, curriculum, and teaching practices

	Percentage (%)					M	SD
	Str.D	D	N	A	SA		
1. Students receive training in foreign multiculturalism.	5.5	19.6	29.2	32.3	13.4	3.29	1.094
2. Foreign teachers are invited to give lectures.	12.7	23.4	24.1	24.4	15.5	3.07	1.267
3. The library provides foreign-language materials related to your major.	1.7	6.9	20.3	47.4	23.7	3.85	0.921
4. Various international cultural activities are regularly organized.	10.3	25.4	28.9	21.0	14.4	3.04	1.207
5. Opportunities are provided to communicate with international students.	12.0	23.7	22.7	26.5	15.1	3.09	1.259
6. All-English courses related to your major are available.	13.7	30.2	16.8	26.5	12.7	2.94	1.276

7. International courses related to your major are offered.	10.7	25.1	20.3	28.5	15.5	3.13	1.253
8. Transnational and multicultural learning courses are provided.	10.3	26.5	23.0	26.5	13.7	3.07	1.221
9. International distance or online courses are available to students.	13.4	26.8	19.6	27.8	12.4	2.99	1.258
10. Foreign language textbooks or supplementary materials are used.	9.6	24.7	19.6	33.0	13.1	3.15	1.211
11. Courses related to your major are taught by foreign teachers.	16.8	33.3	21.6	16.2	12.0	2.73	1.258
12. Teachers are engaged in the international forefront of the discipline.	4.1	19.6	24.1	37.8	14.4	3.39	1.081
13. Teachers raise international academic issues for discussion with students.	4.1	14.8	21.6	41.9	17.5	3.54	1.07

Note: N=291. Str.D = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree;

M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

5. Discussion

Regarding cultivation goals, this study shows that students' views on the cultivation goals of international talents are basically the same as those of Chinese universities. These goals include equipping graduates with intercultural competencies, global perspectives, and effective cross-cultural skills (Wei, 2023). The three goals on which students rated highly: international expertise, internationalized Chinese, and international perspectives, are also consistent with Knight's (2012) interpretation of global competencies as a mixture of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. Goals are the direction of talent cultivation, and figuring out students' goal expectations is beneficial for universities to grasp the direction of cultivation as a whole. Additionally, the data suggest that most students believe it is necessary to hold themselves to internationalized standards and to cultivate international talents in the social work profession. However, it is important to note that nearly half of them do not hold a positive view of this. This finding aligns with the study by Ma (2024); there is a consensus on the internationalization of higher education, but their visions of internationalization and their views on internationalization strategies are quite different.

The data suggested that there might be potential for enhancing the support provided to students in the area of internationalized learning. It appears that there may be fewer opportunities to participate in international learning programs and international exchange activities, a lack of intercultural experiences, and significant inequalities in access to opportunities (SD=1.303). It has been observed that similar challenges have been encountered in other regions as well. For instance, some students in Europe have expressed a sentiment that institutional opportunities do not fully meet their expectations for in-depth intercultural experiences (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019).. Many students aspire to acquire the opportunities or communication skills essential for navigating a multicultural environment. However, there is a lack of such opportunities (D'Orazzi & Marangell, 2025).

Moreover, there is room for improvement in terms of students' evaluations of university programs and teaching by foreign teachers. This was mainly in the case of the all-English courses and the transnational distance courses. This finding is consistent with previous research, where

international perspectives and research in many courses were found to be rather weak or not properly integrated into the design of the courses (Alexiadou et al. 2021). However, the results of the evaluation of foreign teachers appear to show some inconsistencies with previous research. Höckel (2024) stated that foreign teachers may be able to have a positive impact on students' academic performance. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of the situation and to consider the underlying causes.

6. Conclusion

In summary, although most colleges and universities have put forward the goal of cultivating international talents, and students also believe that it is necessary to cultivate international talents in social work, there is still a gap between the reality and the goal. It seems that the internationalization learning needs of social work undergraduates have not been fully met, and many students are not optimistic about achieving the goal of international talent cultivation. This study suggests that universities might consider allocating additional resources to social work majors and exploring ways to enhance the internationalization of faculty members. This could contribute to the goal of cultivating international talent. In the future, it might be beneficial to consider conducting research from the perspective of teachers to form data on teacher-student pairs. This could serve to verify the current research results. Additionally, further insights into the underlying causes of the challenges could be beneficial for universities as they consider targeted improvements.

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