

COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

<https://doi.org/10.28925/2617-5266/2025.107>

DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL IMAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Pleskanov Dmytro,

ORCID: 0009-0002-3811-5033

Postgraduate student of the Social Work Department
Donbas State Pedagogical University (Dnipro, Ukraine)
Diplec@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Investigating professional image-building for future social workers is one of many inquiries into the university educational environment. The methodological assumption of this work is treated as one among the thoroughly integrated pedagogical processes, aiming to integrate the educational, developmental, and formative aspects of instruction through teaching within the framework of learning. The social needs, on the one hand, and the weak theoretical and methodological bases for social professional training, on the other hand, are significant research sources. The professional image of the future social worker is conceptualized as a multi-layered construct comprising four closely interdependent components: cognitive: regarding knowledge concerning ontological-philosophical-humanistic-legal-ethical issues of social work; communicative: has practical skills of interpersonal interaction with, developing empathy and trust with the others; emotional-value: a humanistic value system plus emotional stability, tolerance, and social accountability; reflexive-behavioural: modelling the understanding of professional roles, understanding the process of self-evaluation to project an image, self-image maintenance, and behavioural adjustment. Moreover, the methods should cover attainment at three interrelated levels: organizational and methodical directing the

development of syllabus, manual, training module, and e-course; content nurturing of professional identity in the framework of ethical principles along value-motivational dimensions of future specialists; and technology, which involves active implementation of modern methods and digital tools for engaging students in their professional activity. Thus, the technological classification of content falls into three major sections: practice-oriented training (business simulations and workshops on personal development); digital-communication (web platforms for professional self-presentation and the formation of a media identity in the context of the virtual world); and practical (volunteering and internship), which is very significant since it is at this level that knowledge is being applied, skills developed, and image-related competencies acquired within real social and professional environments. The experiment's findings provide compelling evidence of the methodological support's great efficiency in shaping the professional image of prospective social workers during university training programs, making it a topic of significant importance and sound scientific merit.

Keywords: *educational environment; methodology; professional development; professional image; social work competences; social work education.*

© Pleskanov Dmytro, 2025

INTRODUCTION

New social issues arising from globalisation and digitalisation, as well as ongoing changes in social institutions, underscore the importance of social-sector professions fulfilling their tasks and building trust through positive professional images (Mospan, 2019; Mospan et al., 2022). Apart from having professional competencies, a good social worker should present themselves to the public as approachable, friendly, and ethically accountable for constructive engagement with clients, colleagues, and the community. Internal attributes and external ones are well nurtured within the university

training environment, where one develops within oneself: values, cultural communication skills, reflexivity, and self-presentation capacities. This institutional timeframe is the setting upon which the groundwork is laid for building a personal professional image, one that does not solely belong to the student but is the primary determinant of the public's overall perception of social work (Clearfield, 1977; Sacristan & Lalane, 2022).

Kosteva & Faichuk (2018) and Spirina & Liakh (2020) highlight the limitations of the methodology in creating a professional image for future social workers in Ukraine. Thus, a very urgent update is required regarding the theoretical underpinnings of methodological support for educational processes, in a manner that considers theory in relation to the integration of practical skill acquisition, specifically the ethical framework and digital self-presentation tools. This clearly indicates that this study is indeed valid in all practical implications. The quality of professional image for potential future social workers defines personal success in terms of the effectiveness of social assistance work and the public perception of social work as a whole.

Creating professional images for future social workers in their colleges and universities is a complex process, as it involves integrating analytical studies with theoretical education, practical competencies, and social and communicative competencies. The methodological underpinning of the entire process will include, and therefore be framed by, an organisational and methodological framework that encompasses both content and technological aspects,

thereby promoting a professional identity with a positive public perception.

In an ideal world, theoretical aspects would coalesce around generating a professional image through students' understanding of the relationship between social work, pedagogy, psychotherapy, and ethics within the profession. This was an attempt at an integrated educational approach, where theory-oriented and practice-oriented training were supposedly merged, as it favours conscious professionalism, as Shakhmatova calls it (Shakhmatova, 2011).

One, therefore, as per Davis and Gully (2012), understands that there exists an entire professional development package, including mentorship, supervision, and experiential learning, which can help shape a social work image. The process of image building, viewed through the lens of professional identity, would impact the image-making process (Davis & Gully, 2012).

In practical terms, simulations in realistic job-setting scenarios, where students are placed in realistic job situations using simulations, have been identified as an important point. "Social work performance usurps the public image," observed Smith (2012), who tagged some methodologies that might involve constructing an image with case studies, practical scenarios, role-play, internship with social service firms, and joint project assignments (Smith, 2012).

Additionally, it requires development of presentation skills and public engagement, which, according to Thompson (2017), suggests that constructing a reputation today depends heavily on

engaging service users and the broader society. Popovych (2013) also stated that professional culture fosters interaction with media, creating positive public perceptions of the social work profession, and connecting practice with training and ethical standards, thereby promoting public participation.

Awareness of personal (moral values), professional (competence), and societal dimensions (communication skills) will define a career image, leaving all three in need of methodological substantiation for practical research within university training (Tymoshenko & Kyryliuk, 2024). Spivak (2024) provides an academic foundation for conceptualizing the professional image, as well as promoting the integrative approach of merging psychological understandings with necessary pedagogical constructs into a systemic structuring of the theory dimension of the entire learning process. Reflective practice is maturing into awareness among graduate social work educators and practitioners of the competencies they need to develop a positive identity.

Therefore, the need to adopt a holistic approach to methodological support for shaping the images of future social workers would link methodological objectives to the training content: principles, methods, forms, and resources, all aimed at creating strong, positive identities for social workers in professional contexts as well as surrounding sociocultural cores. Although a few scattered reports mention certain aspects of training in this area, no comprehensive scientific model has yet succeeded in unifying theoretical insights, practical abilities,

ethical standards, and digital platforms to form a cohesive visual representation of these practitioners. Society is now calling upon highly trained personnel to fill this gap, as the inadequacy created by poorly framed preparation leads their hackers to seek other avenues. Inadequate preparatory frameworks necessitate further exploration in this area.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary focus of the research is to establish the scientific methodology for developing future social workers' professional images in university training. It also aims to clarify the procedural methodology of the structural components that would subsequently lead to the effective formation of a professional identity.

The objectives provided references to clarify the meaning of 'methodological support' in relation to professional image-building. They also identified the major structural elements of a future social worker's professional image and outlined the effective strategies and pathways for training students in a university. The inquiry was designed to test a methodological system for professional image formation among future social workers and to examine the conditions within the university training process.

The specific research objectives were:

1. Literature review on professional-image formation in pedagogy, social work, and psychology.

2. Revealing cognitive, emotional, value, communicative, and reflective structural components of professional image.

3. Investigating the effectiveness of innovative learning and teaching methods (business simulations, role play, personal growth training, debates, case studies, volunteer projects, practical work) in developing professional competencies.

4. Revealing principles for the successful adoption of digital tools for students' professional self-presentation (e-portfolios, video business cards, blogs).

5. Derivation of various methods of empirical verification of the proposed methodological system and digital adaptation thereof.

The present understanding of qualitative and theoretical methodology was adopted for this study:

1. *Theoretical modelling* serves as a methodology for developing an all-encompassing model of methodology for designing a professional image, which will incorporate all organizational, methodological, content, and technological aspects.

2. *The literature review* was carried out, analysing national and international literature on pedagogy, social work, and psychology.

3. *Structural-functional analysis* seeks to investigate the contents and functions of each component of the system of professional development.

4. *Structuring of data* from academic sources and research reports that relate to the formation of a professional image through a lens of content analysis and generalization.

The empirical phase of the research is a pedagogical experiment involving 64 first-year Bachelor's students enrolled in social work at Donbass State Pedagogical University, divided into two groups: a control group (32 students) and an experimental group (32 students). The experiment aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed system and methodology for developing professional images and competencies. In the experimental group, innovative educational forms – such as business simulations, role-plays, personal development training, debates, case studies, volunteer projects, and performance training – were employed to develop communicative, reflective, and media-centric competencies. Use of digital platforms for professional self-presentation (electronic portfolios, video business cards, blogs) helped equip students with the means to construct their digital media self.

Considerations in data collection included observations, asking questions, self-reflection, and analysing students' digital products. Self-questioning was done with feedback on how their self-evaluation compared with their observed behaviour characteristics during and after participation in activities. The collected data are considered internal proprietary information and are retained in the Department of Pedagogy of Higher Education, Donbass State Pedagogical University internal archive for analysis

upon request. The proposed techniques include psychodiagnostic methods, questionnaires, observation, expert evaluation, and self-evaluation, all aimed at monitoring the dynamics of the professional image's basic components: cognitive, emotional value, communicative, and reflective-behavioural. For the quantitative analysis of the obtained results, statistical methods were applied to calculate percentiles and means, as well as to perform before-and-after comparisons. This confirmed a positive dynamic of professional image formation among students of the experimental group, and thus, evidence for the effectiveness of the proposed methodological system.

The English version of the article was translated by AI and linguistically edited in accordance with international academic standards. AI technology, while acting autonomously and keeping a safe distance from content formulation and empirical results of the study, provided an additional door for further strengthening the scientific accuracy of presentation and the quality of research material.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Methodological support serves not only educational activities but also acts as instruments that facilitate students' own developmental journeys. This thereby enhances self-awareness concerning individual portrayals while honing presentation capacities, nurturing ethical accountability alongside advancements in societal maturity. The construct representing any given practitioner's identity emerges as a multifaceted

amalgamation interlinking cognitive, value-driven, and communicative behavioural characteristics, reflecting holistic presentations regarding specialist integrity perceived across the broader clientele community (refer to Fig. 1).

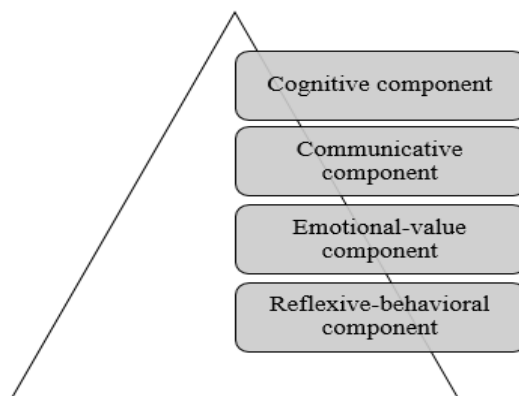


Figure 1. *Structure of the professional image of a social worker*

The cognitive aspect involves a framework of understanding regarding the nature and roles of social work, along with its philosophical-humanistic, legal, and ethical underpinnings. This aspect is crucial for enabling social workers to grasp their professional responsibilities, as well as the principles of social justice, tolerance, accountability, and confidentiality.

An extensive range of professional preparation and interpersonal skills falls under the umbrella of communication. Whereas communication attempts to empathise with the client or other professionals engaged in working with civil society organisations, it builds relationships based on trust through effective interpersonal skill development. The manner of communication is said to greatly affect social work practice, and it is viewed in this way by society regarding its social workers.

The emotional-values element can be understood to encompass a wide range of lay and humanitarian values, such as empathy for people, emotional strength and stability, and tolerance for diversity in character. Ultimately, the motivation to assist others or help those in need is to improve the welfare of others. Thus, the component lays the moral and psychological foundation of every social worker's identity, whose core responsibility is to deploy knowledge tempered with emotional intelligence related to social accountability for their actions. This reflective-behavioural aspect describes the mentality of being aware of professional roles and conducting self-evaluations concerning image-related behaviours. Reflexivity also involves projecting the self onto others through verbal or non-verbal sign systems, while allowing for adequate self-correction and personal growth. Reflexivity holds special significance for the professional development and identity.

Moreover, a social worker's professional image is multifaceted, encompassing intellectual, ethical, emotional, and behavioural traits. The development of this image should be viewed as part of broader professional growth occurring within an integrated educational system at universities that aims to foster personal maturity, social responsibility, and reflective capacities. Each element contributing to a social worker's professional image develops across three levels: methodological, content-based, and technological. We will examine these components in more detail at each specified level. Working on extensive teaching materials involves using a syllabus that describes the subject,

methodological guides, teaching manuals, case studies prepared by teachers, and exercise and simulation materials that present different scenarios for role-playing.

This means that, with respect to organisation and methodology, most efficiency will come from the harmonisation of instructional materials across educational fields linked to competency frameworks. This certainly facilitates joint knowledge transfer, but equally impedes students from analysing some critical societal problems like rational human beings, and prepares them with strategies to use that knowledge in a professionally conducive manner. The transition from methodology to the content level suggests that, in this pedagogical arrangement, it is ethical values that determine the decorum and subsequent integrity of future social workers. Rather than self-referential ways of discovering what they could ideally represent in terms of their roles or professions.

The final layer dedicated to forming a social worker's professional image within university training systems is termed the technological level. This encompasses various methodologies, including forms of instruction methods designed specifically around practical applications relevant to students' learning experiences, while promoting active engagement where students take initiative in their own career growth.

Effective methodologies utilised in crafting this professional image include:

- Business simulation games that replicate typical interactions between social workers and clients help develop skills related to ethical decision-making.

- Personal development workshops focused on enhancing confidence levels along with public speaking abilities.

- Debates or project tasks that foster analytical thinking along with teamwork cooperation.

- Digital platforms serve both as instruments for establishing one's position professionally while crafting an online presence reflective of their role within society.

The use of digital educational tools amplifies self-presentation opportunities while broadening avenues for networking among professionals – ultimately aiding in shaping media representations that are crucial within contemporary contexts surrounding social work practices (Devis & Hulli, 2012, 167–170).

Practical training plays a crucial role within this methodological framework, which aims to cultivate the ideal representation that aspiring social workers are expected to possess. It allows students hands-on experience through volunteer initiatives or internships, thereby refining their ethical standards while enhancing the communicative proficiency necessary for interacting professionally in real-world settings. Such practical engagements lend authenticity to a professional person, as they enable students to distinguish between client expectations and

societal norms, aligning accordingly with the actual stakeholder needs encountered during practice.

Thus emerges a sophisticated blend combining traditional education with modern innovations involving interactive learning formats supported by digital technologies, ensuring cohesiveness throughout any instructional design implemented – fostering knowledge acquisition alongside nurturing value-driven perspectives. This influences behaviour patterns throughout all aspects relating to cultivated trust within communities served by specialists engaged therein.

The experiment is aimed at understanding how an organizational and methodological approach, in combination with an orientation of contents, can raise the performance level in the processes of future image formation of practitioners. Social workers possess the theoretical understanding as well as the communicative effectiveness necessary in all aspects of their profession and work. Finally, this goes with only emotional awareness for adaptive responses to behavioural dynamics characteristic of such occupations. Emotional awareness is the buoyancy that comes with the accurate environmental assessment concerning how one should operate with the demands of the surrounding environment. Behaviour patterns express this in choosing other professions, that as making and executing long-term designs, and the overall level of success which one achieves. Identify different options for realizing one's chosen path. It is estimated with life indicators that are measured before and after

interventions. Such measurement consists quite often of a few estimations on clearly defined criteria, and that includes all stakeholders in every iteration as well. Rigorous research findings show that the increased awareness of emotions may lead to a shift in values, considering the more evident positive differences that exist between participants' post-experimental settings and test scores (see Fig. 2).

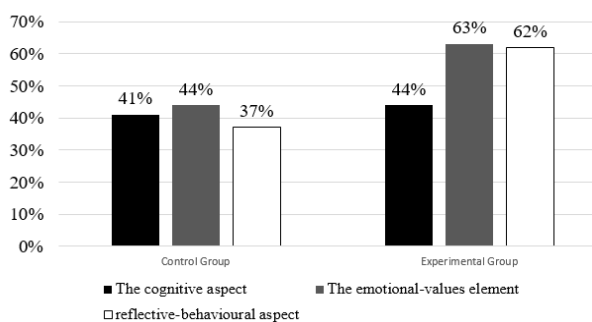


Figure 2. *Dynamics of levels of formation of professional image in the system of university training of social workers*

It enables one to visually demonstrate the differences in the development level of the assessed indicators among the studied groups. The control group shows somewhat average results with respect to the cognitive component (41%), emotional-value component (44%), and reflective-behavioural component (37%). This indicates that a professional image in students emerges as a common feature of traditional systems, where image teaching and practice are considered essential for social work. The graph illustrates that methodological support has been particularly in practical training sessions, e-modules, and social-communicative technologies. The positive divergence in experimental group indices

from the control further affirms the proposition that interactions within digital platforms and self-presentation tools continuously enhance students' levels of professional identity, awareness, and their practical involvement in the social work setting.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

The study provided a theoretically grounded, systematized, and empirically validated methodological support for the professional image development of future social workers in their university training. The professional image is described as a multidimensional construct containing cognitive, communicative, emotional value, and reflective-behavioural components. These components determine not only the level of professional readiness. However, it also reveals the ability of the future specialist to engage in ethical interactions and meaningfully represent themselves to society in their actual profession.

In a theoretical model of methodological support for the effective development of a professional image, three levels will be encompassed:

1. Organizational and methodological support, which presumes the design and integration of all educational and instructional materials that are to be included;
2. Support at the content level, conditioning the value-oriented worldview, humanistic orientation, and identity of future specialists;

3. Technological support, including the introduction of interactive learning methods in the process of teacher education, interactive learning methods, a practical format of learning, and digital devices for professional self-presentation.

Results from pedagogical experiments confirmed the effectiveness of the proposed system. Experimental students scored significantly higher than control group students on measures of cognitive awareness, communication competence, emotional resilience, and reflective self-regulation. Business simulations, personal development training, role-playing scenarios, project activities, volunteer assignments, internships, electronic portfolios, and video business cards have emerged as core experiences that facilitate the development of students' professional identity and media-based self-representation.

Data reveal that practice and digital self-representation form the crux of image-related competencies. Both real and simulated professional situations will prepare students to internalize the professional role, coordinate personal and ethical values, and empower them with their own sense of responsibility towards society and institutions for representing the profession. Thus, it should be viewed as a comprehensive, integrated pedagogical system for methodological support of professional image formation in its entirety, ensuring the integrity of vocational training, the maturity of professional identity, and societal recognition. It should also address the professional attractiveness of social work in modern society.

Finally, methodological support for establishing a professional image among future social workers within university education is not simply an integrated pedagogical approach linking educational aims with developmental purposes. It has also become a necessity for highly skilled and morally mature professionals working in a digitalized environment.

The prospect of research ready for the future involves a longitudinal field study on the dynamics of forming a professional image from a student's educational program to practice. This would also take into consideration the possible changes that digital tools of self-presentation and media communication have brought to the shaping of students' professional identities. Another promising area is the development of adaptive educational programs for individual trajectories in the professional development of future social workers.

REFERENCES

- Clearfield, S. M. (1977). Professional self-image of the social worker: Implications for social work education. *Journal of Education for Social Work, 13*(1), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220612.1977.10671409>
- Demchenko, O. (2024). Using digital educational resources in the training of social workers [Використання цифрових освітніх ресурсів у підготовці соціальних працівників]. *Innovative Pedagogy, 73*, 221–225.
- Devis, M., & Hulli, M. (2012). Professional development and image formation of a social worker [Професійний розвиток та формування іміджу соціального працівника]. *Social Pedagogy, 25*(1), 45–58.
- Kosteva, T., & Faichuk, E. (2018). The impact of modern pedagogical conditions on the information competence formation of social work graduate students. *The Modern*

Higher Education Review, (2). <https://doi.org/10.28925/2518-7635.2017.2.14>

- Mospan, N. (2019). From education to labour market. *Continuing Professional Education: Theory and Practice*, (1-2), 50–56. [https://doi.org/10.28925/1609-8595.2016\(1-2\)5055](https://doi.org/10.28925/1609-8595.2016(1-2)5055)
- Mospan, N. V., Ognevyyuk, V. O., & Sysoieva, S. S. (2022). Emergency higher education digital transformation: Ukraine's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Information Technologies and Learning Tools*, 89(3), 90–104. <https://doi.org/10.33407/itlt.v89i3.4827>
- Pleskanov, D. V., & Spivak, Ya. O. (2024). The professional image of future social workers as a scientific problem [Професійний імідж майбутніх соціальних працівників як наукова проблема]. *Innovative Pedagogy*, 72, 217–220.
- Popovych, A. (2013). Social work as an object of image [Соціальна робота як об'єкт іміджу]. *Scientific Bulletin of Uzhhorod National University. Series: Pedagogy. Social Work*, 29, 167–170.
- Sacristan, D., & Lalane, M. (2022). Field instruction: A relational model to promote a positive professional identity for social work students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 42(4), 303–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2022.2103228>
- Shakhmatova, T. V. (2011). Formation of the professional image of future specialists in a university environment [Формування професійного іміджу майбутніх фахівців в умовах ВНЗ]. *Science and Education*, Retrieved from https://scienceandeducation.pdpu.edu.ua/doc/2011/5_2011/17.pdf
- Smit, D. (2012). The Effectiveness of Social Work and Its Impact on the Perception of the Professional Image [Ефективність соціальної роботи та її вплив на сприйняття іміджу професіонала]. *Sociological Research*, 15(4), 541–555.
- Spirina, T., & Liakh, T. (2020). Social workers training in continuing education system. *The Modern Higher Education Review*, (4), 27–34. <https://doi.org/10.28925/2518-7635.2019.4.3>
- Tompson, N. (2017). Perception of the social worker's image among clients and society. *Journal of Social Work*, 30(2), 163–176.
- Tymoshenko, N. Ye., & Kuryliuk, O. V. (2024). Components of forming the professional image of a future social worker [Складові формування професійного іміджу майбутнього соціального працівника]. *Scientific Journal of the National Pedagogical University Named after M. P. Drahomanov. Series 11: Social Work. Social Pedagogy*, 72, 193–198.

МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНЕ ЗАБЕЗПЕЧЕННЯ ФОРМУВАННЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО ІМІДЖУ В СИСТЕМІ УНІВЕРСИТЕТСЬКОЇ ПІДГОТОВКИ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ ПРАЦІВНИКІВ

Дмитро Плесканов,

аспірант кафедри соціальної роботи

Донбаського державного педагогічного університету, Дніпро, Україна

Diplec@yahoo.com

У цій статті пропонується комплексне науково-методичне дослідження формування професійного іміджу майбутніх соціальних працівників у рамках університетської освіти. Методологічною основою цього є інтегрована педагогічна система, покликана поєднати освітні, розвивальні та формувальні аспекти навчального процесу. Значущість цього дослідження впливає з невідповідності між суспільним попитом на кваліфікованих та привабливих фахівців у соціальній сфері та недостатньою теоретичною та методологічною базою щодо їхньої підготовки. Професійний імідж майбутнього соціального працівника визначається як складний, багатовимірний конструкт, що складається з чотирьох взаємопов'язаних елементів: когнітивного, який охоплює знання про фундаментальні, філософсько-гуманістичні, правові та етичні аспекти соціальної роботи; комунікативного, що відображає навички міжособистісної взаємодії, емпатії та побудови довіри; емоційно-ціннісного, що втілює систему гуманістичних цінностей разом з емоційною стійкістю, толерантністю та соціальною відповідальністю; та рефлексивно-поведінковий, що включає розуміння професійних ролей, самооцінку щодо презентації іміджу, управління самосприйняттям та корекцію поведінки. Успіх у формуванні професійного іміджу залежить від застосування методологічної системи, яка об'єднує три взаємопов'язані рівні: організаційно-методичний, який зосереджений на створенні комплексних навчальних матеріалів, включаючи плани курсів, посібники, навчальні модулі та цифрові курси; контентний, спрямований на розвиток професійної ідентичності разом з етичними принципами та ціннісно-мотиваційними вимірами у майбутніх спеціалістів; та технологічний, що виконується за допомогою сучасних методів та цифрових інструментів, що підвищують залученість студентів до їхньої професійної діяльності. У структурі технологічного рівня є три категорії контенту: практичне навчання (що включає бізнес-симуляції та семінари з особистісного розвитку); цифрова комунікація (що включає онлайн-платформи для професійної самопрезентації та формування медіаідентичності у віртуальних контекстах); та практичний (що включає волонтерську роботу та

Pleskanov Dmytro. Developing professional image of social workers in university education.

стажування), який має першорядне значення, оскільки сприяє застосуванню знань, підвищенню кваліфікації та розвитку компетенцій, пов'язаних з іміджем, в автентичних соціально-професійних умовах. Результати експериментального дослідження підкреслюють значну ефективність запропонованої методологічної підтримки у формуванні професійного іміджу майбутніх соціальних працівників у рамках університетських навчальних програм. Це підкреслює як її практичну актуальність, так і наукову вірогідність.

Ключові слова: професійний імідж; соціальний працівник; методичне забезпечення; освітнє середовище; професійна підготовка; компетентність.

Received: 03.11.2025

Accepted: 19.11.2025