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# Social Value Changes and Social Work Education

## Examining the Student Base and Career Orientation of Social Work and Related Undergraduate Programs in Light of Social Value Changes

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### ABSTRACT

*The rapid pace of technological modernization, coupled with the economic and political impacts of the past 30 years, has significantly reshaped the value system of the domestic population. As a result, human-centred community values that have held significant dominance for centuries (e.g., solidarity, supportive relationships, community) are increasingly being overshadowed by the growing dominance of individualistic and materialistic values. The societal acceptance and expansion of an ideology that prioritizes material growth and personal interests influence the development of personality and the moral framework of value systems through social interactions. This shift thus affects the motivational orientation of career choices among the younger generation. This study examines the extent of change through comparative quantitative data analysis and proposes measures to address the declining interest in social work careers.*

**KEYWORDS:** social work, helping professions, higher education, undergraduate education, environmental influences, value systems, motivational dynamics

### ABSZTRAKT

#### **Változó társadalmi értékrend és szociális munka alapképzés.**

#### **A szociális munka és a kapcsolódó alapképzési programok hallgatói bázisának és pályorientációjának vizsgálata a társadalmi értékek változásainak fényében**

*A rapid ütemben fejlődő technológiai modernizáció, valamint az elmúlt 30 év gazdaságpolitikai hatása jelentős mértékben formálta át a hazai lakosság értékrendjét. Ennek következtében, az évszázadok során jelentős dominanciával bíró humán központú közösségi értékek fontossága (például szolidaritás, segítő kapcsolat, közösség) egyre inkább háttérbe szorulni látszik, az individualista és materialista értékrend növekvő dominanciájával szemben. Az anyagi gyarapodást és a személyes érdekeket előtérbe helyező ideológia elfogadottság társadalmi térnyerése, a környezeti interakciókon keresztül hatást gyakorol a személyiségfejlődés és az értékrend erkölcsi arculatának alakulására, befolyásolva ezzel a fiatal generáció pályaválasztásának motivációs irányultságát. A tanulmány összehasonlító kvantitatív adatelemzés mentén vizsgálja a változás*

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*mértékét, és intézkedéseket javasol a szociális munkás pályák iránti csökkenő érdeklődés kezelésére.*

*KULCSSZAVAK: szociális munka, segítő foglalkozások, felsőoktatás, alapképzés, környezeti hatások, értékek, motiváció*

### Introduction

Considering the entire population of the country, it is evident that, albeit to varying degrees and frequencies, individuals become part of various specialized human support services (e.g., healthcare, social services, education) from the moment they are born. Despite the fact that these advocacy services are delivered through personal interaction (patient/client–support professional) and are designed to represent and serve the interests of the service users, the social prestige of the helping professions remains very low. Due to its distinct historical development, the practice-oriented and professional social work established in Hungary represents a specific situation compared to other human-oriented helping professions. With its theoretical and professional foundations established, social work in Hungary, present for barely 34 years, is considered a very young field among human support professions.

The global social and economic transformations, along with the evolving value systems associated with them, are increasingly influencing the career choices of younger generations. Modernization, coupled with the rise of individualistic and materialistic values, has gradually marginalized the community-based and solidarity-driven values that once played a defining role in the helping professions. This trend is particularly concerning in the case of social work, a profession fundamentally built on empathy, social justice, communal responsibility, and humanitarian values.

The central question of the study is whether the changes in the social value system of the past decades – especially with regard to the rise of individualistic and materialistic ideologies – have uniformly influenced the workforce and student base of social work and similar helping professions. The study assumes that the declining interest in social work is closely linked to the transformation of social values, in particular the rise of individualism and materialism.

In the course of the research, we pay particular attention to determining whether the growing dominance of individualistic and materialistic values generally affects the camp of applicants for social work and similar human service programs, or whether these effects are primarily limited to social work. To this end, the study, using descriptive and comparative statistical analyses, examines the development of the number of participants in social work and other human assistance BA/BSc courses, as well as the labor market integration of graduates over the past 15 years.



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In addition, the study aims to reveal how the number of students actually admitted to social work and similar human assistance programs has changed over the past 15 years, and how the career orientation and placement of graduates has developed based on the available data. During the analysis, we used enrollment and career tracking statistics in order to get a more detailed picture of the number of social work students and the labor market integration of newly graduated students.

### **Studies leading to the research question**

Changing societal values and declining social support are contributing to an increasing lack of social acceptance of human support professions. The early findings of Keller (2009) and Ball (2001) are confirmed by the eclipse of community values in postmodern society, characterised by personal, self-centred individual interests (Temesváry 2018), subjective dreams, and the desire to fulfil one's existence, identity and quality of life (Bugovics 2012). In order to maintain personal existence, the population is increasingly moving away from the role of social responsibility. As with the development of capitalist tendencies, the economic boom and the experience of widespread social well-being in Hungary have contributed most to the change in social values (Molnár 2022). Available data show that today, the majority of the population in developed countries is dominated by a materialistic-individualistic mindset (Utasi 2018). As a result of the social and ideological changes of the last 30 years, a significant part of society is becoming increasingly indifferent to problems that do not directly affect them (Fülöp 2013, Szalai 2018: 74–76), distancing themselves from social and societal issues and expecting primarily state social policy to solve these problems (Huszár – Berger 2020).

### **Relevance of the research topic**

In the social sectors today, the greatest challenge is no longer the lack of material resources or infrastructure but the increasing number of qualified professionals leaving the field and the decreasing interest in social work (Ferge 2017). The shortage of professional workforce in the social sphere (e.g. the decrease in the recruitment base) significantly affects the operational efficiency of certain areas within the social sector, causing disruptions in the structural functioning of the social service system. According to statistical data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), among human-centred professions requiring a degree, social work has one of the lowest numbers of professional practitioners relative to the total population (Szoboszlai 2017). The extensive target group of the social institution system, the diversity of services, and the frequency of service utilization,



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along with the fact that those using social services are not a homogeneous group but rather encompass the entire society, fundamentally justify the research on this topic.

### **Occupations related to the characteristics of social work**

Among professional occupations that provide supportive activities, many professions share common characteristics with social work. Associated professions include those that offer qualitative activities along a shared humanistic perspective, performing supportive functions similar to those in social work, for the benefit of individuals, clients, patients, customers, and the community (Pintér 2019). Due to overlapping areas of collaboration, the number of related helping professions is significantly high (e.g., child protection specialist, family dynamics specialist, family therapist, community worker, social policy expert, sociologist, educator, legal assistant, social educator, psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse, doctor, physiotherapist, mental health counsellor, coach, advisor, pastor, mentor, supervisor, etc.). According to a study published by Mihály Fónai and colleagues (2001), surveyed social workers' subjective opinions indicate that, among human-centred associated helping professions requiring higher education, the roles of psychologist (67.50), nurse (67.50), social pedagogy (59.75), and pastor (59.50) most closely correlate with the practical characteristics of social work.

### **The golden age of social work higher education**

The establishment of higher social work education was essentially necessitated by the changing social and professional needs of the country during the period of regime change (Mrázik 2019). Before the regime change, a significant proportion of social sector employees worked without adequate vocational qualifications (Budai et al. 2006). The theoretical and practical foundations for the launch of social work education in Hungary were adapted from trends, models and practical experiences successfully applied in different countries, and adapted to the needs and specificities of the country. A particular challenge was to effectively integrate the specific requirements of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and international experiences, practices, and theories into the professional curriculum of social work in a way that aligns with the various guidelines of Hungarian social policy.



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Table 1. Number of graduates in the two most important basic social studies programs

<b>Trends in the number of graduates from the two most significant social higher education programs, 1989–2007</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Social work</b>	<b>Social pedagogy</b>	<b>In total/Years</b>
1989–1999	1980	1 482	<b>3 462</b>
2000	557	497	<b>1 054</b>
2001	464	826	<b>1 290</b>
2002	597	1 136	<b>1 715</b>
2003	707	1 180	<b>1 887</b>
2004	719	1 172	<b>1 891</b>
2005	777	1 180	<b>1 957</b>
2006	925	1 327	<b>2 252</b>
2007	1066	1 201	<b>2 267</b>
<b>In total</b>	<b>7792</b>	<b>10 001</b>	<b>17 793</b>

Source: Author’s own editing (2024), based on data from Felsőfokú szociális képzések Magyarországon (Higher education social work programs in Hungary, Balogh et al., 2015)

Table 1. shows that the period between 1989 and 2008 was characterised by a slow but steady increase in the number of students enrolled in bachelor’s degrees in social work and social pedagogy (Balogh et al. 2015). As a result, between 2008 and 2010, the number of students enrolled in different bachelor’s level social work courses at the higher education level was in excess of 10,000 students per cohort (Temesváry 2010, Balogh et al. 2015).

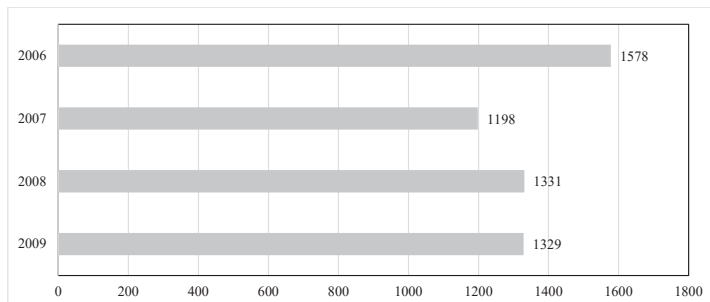
Compared to the period immediately following the regime change, by 2007, the number of individuals with qualifications in social work and social pedagogy had significantly increased. The statistical data collected by Péter Goldman, supported by Judit Mányai’s survey, indicate that at least 4,918 individuals held a bachelor’s degree in social work, and an additional 7,374 individuals had obtained college-level (BA/BSc) degrees in other social specializations by 2004 (Budai et al. 2006).<sup>2</sup> Significant discrepancies are observed between the OECD statistical data processed during data collection and the student numbers recorded in the study “The Status of Social Work Education in Contemporary Hungarian Higher Education” by Zsolt Temesváry (2010). According to the OECD graph summarizing student numbers between 2008 and 2023, the number of students enrolled in college-level BA/BSc undergraduate programs in social work was significantly higher in 2008 and 2009 than represented in Temesváry’s earlier study (see Figures 1–2).

<sup>2</sup> The aggregated results of Mányai’s research do not include the numerical data of students who graduated from the Wesselényi János Theological Seminary.



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Figure 1. Number of students enrolled in bachelor's degree in social work 2006–2009



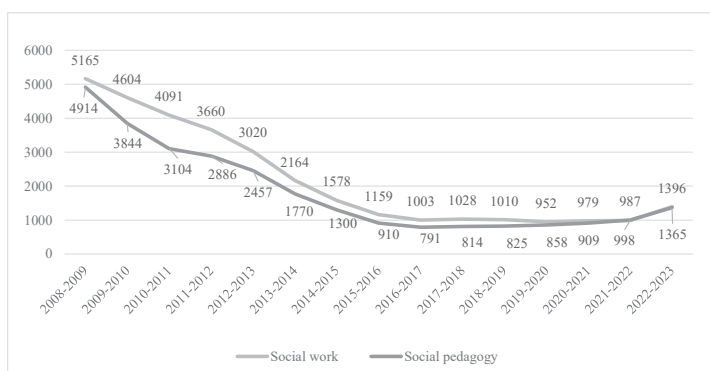
Source: Author's own editing (2024), based on data from A szociális szakképzések helyzete a mai magyar felsőoktatásban (The situation of social vocational education in contemporary hungarian higher education, Temesváry, 2010)

## The decline of higher education in social work

### SOCIAL WORK – SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

For the two most popular undergraduate programs in social work, the period between 2008 and 2020 was characterized by a declining trend in student enrolment. However, due to governmental intervention, there was a steady increase in student numbers starting in 2020 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of participants in the bachelor's degree in social work and social pedagogy



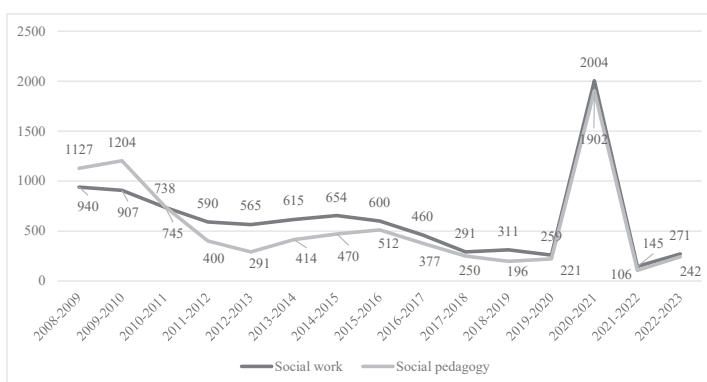
Source: Author's own editing (2024), based on statistical data from the International Standard Classification of Education [ISCE]



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The upward trend in student numbers was influenced by the language exam amnesty introduced in 2020, the abolition of the minimum score requirement in 2023, and the expansion of admission-related authorities for higher education institutions (Eduline 2021a, 2021b, 2022). In 2023, the number of applicants for the undergraduate social work program increased significantly by nearly 30-40%.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 3. Number of graduates in bachelor's degree in social work and social pedagogy



Source: Author's own editing, based on statistical data from the International Standard Classification of Education [ISCE]

The increase in student numbers was not primarily due to heightened interest or popularity of the field but rather to the relaxation of admission criteria, which also raised quality concerns regarding the suitability of the students. Although commitment to social work is not fundamentally determined by high school academic performance, a well-developed admission system could serve as a quality assurance mechanism, ensuring the maintenance of professional expectations related to the output requirements (SzocOkos 2023). Figure 3 shows the number of graduates in social work and social pedagogy. According to the Education Office, the increase in the number of graduates in the academic year 2020-2021 is due to the fact that, according to Article 6 of Government Decree 101/2020 (10.4.20) and Article 79(10) of the current Act LVIII of 2020, students who passed the final examination by 31 August 2020 are exempt from the language examination requirement, which was previously a prerequisite for awarding a diploma. The introduction of the language examination exemption has been particularly beneficial

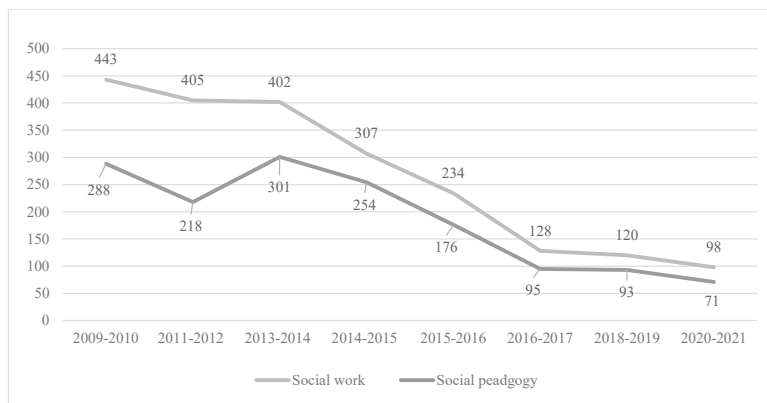
<sup>3</sup> The graph does not include the data of students admitted to the denominational social work specialization between the 2008 and 2023 academic years.



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for students of social work and social pedagogy, and they have been the main beneficiaries of this option (see Figures 3-6).

*Figure 4.* Evolution of the number of people with a recent Ba/BSc degree employed in the social sector



Source: Author's own editing, based on data from the Graduate Tracking System [DPR]

According to the statistical data from the Higher Education Analysis Department Information System [FIR] and the Administrative Databases Integration [AAE], over the course of 20 years, the annual number of students graduating with a bachelor's degree in social work and social pedagogy who found employment within their profession or in the social sector decreased to nearly one-fourth (see Figure 4).<sup>4</sup> When comparing the number of graduates in a given year to the number of social workers actually employed in their profession, it becomes evident that the early dropout/attrition rate is between 40-60% for both programs (Figures 3-4).<sup>5</sup> The data released by the AAE database show that between 2014 and 2021, 18.31% to 21.51% of those with a bachelor's degree in social pedagogy continued their studies in a master's program, while for those with a bachelor's degree in social work, this proportion ranged from 20.41% to 30.00% during the examined period.

<sup>4</sup> The AAE is a data integration module of the Graduate Career Tracking System. It anonymously links individual-level data from the Higher Education Information System with factual data from other governmental systems (National Tax and Customs Administration; National Health Insurance Fund Manager; Ministry of Economic Development). This integration reveals the labour market situation of graduates. The basic population of the 2023 research consists of individuals who obtained their final certificate between the academic years 2014/15 and 2020/21.

<sup>5</sup> The number of graduates with a BA/BSc in Social Work and Social Pedagogy is only the number of people entering the social sector in a given year. However, there is no information available on how long they stay in the profession after entering employment.

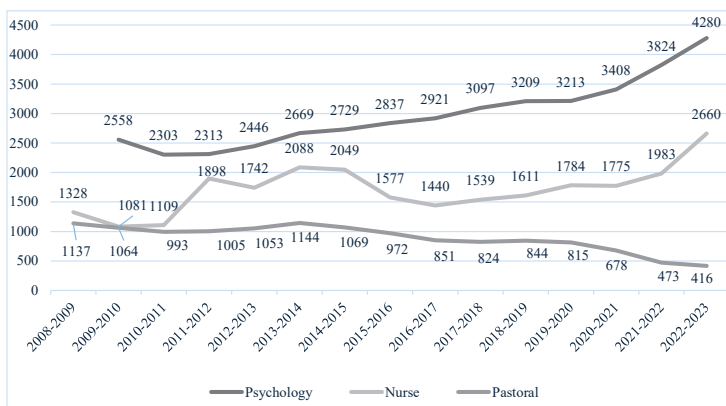


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**Training programs most identified with the characteristics of social work**

Based on the results of the study by Fónai and colleagues (2001), the research analysed data from three higher education specializations – psychology, nursing, and pastoral care – which have characteristics most similar to those of social work.

Figure 5. Number of students in the courses most closely identified with the Social Work feature



Source: Author’s own editing, based on statistical data from the International Standard Classification of Education [ISCÉ]

**Psychology Specialization**

Considering the statistical data from 2009 to 2023, the number of students enrolled in the psychology specialization has shown a steadily increasing trend. This is despite the fact that, among the studied programs, the entry score requirement for this program was the highest, with an average mandatory score of around 420 points over the past 15 years (Felvi 2008–2023). Unlike the data for social work programs, there has been no decline in student numbers for psychology programs (see Figure 5). In the 2008 academic year, the number of students was 2,558 which rose to 4,280 by 2023. This significant, nearly 90% increase indicates that the psychology specialization enjoys considerable popularity among human support professions.

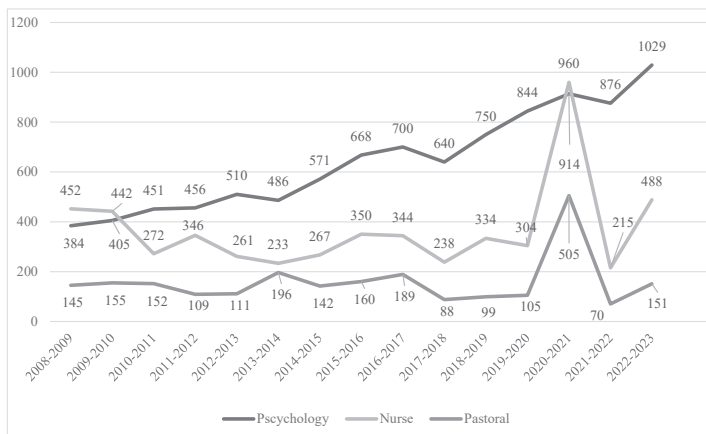
The data analysis shows that although there were minor fluctuations in the number of graduates in the psychology specialization, the overall trend was a continuous and significant increase in the number of graduates (see Figure 6). The comprehensive exit requirements necessary to complete a degree in psychology



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significantly contribute to the fact that, among the studied programs, psychology had the highest proportion of students continuing their studies in master's programs, ranging from 58.93% to 80.20% during the 2014–2021 period (AAE 2023). Following their advanced studies, these graduates often secured employment in their respective professions (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Number of graduates in the training most closely identified with the Social work characteristic



Source: Author's own editing, based on statistical data from the International Standard Classification of Education [ISC] Education

### Nursing Specialization

Between 2008 and 2023, the number of students enrolled in the nursing specialisation was more volatile than the number of psychology students. In 2008, 1328 students started their studies in nursing, and this number increased to 2088 in 2013. However, between 2014 and 2017, the number of students showed a downward trend, falling to 1440 students in 2017. From 2017 onwards, the number of students started to rise again, reaching 2,660 in 2023 (see Figure 5). The numerical results suggest that nursing education is popular and is a career model for young people. The number of nursing graduates fluctuated between 233 and 488 between 2008 and 2023 (see Figure 6).<sup>6</sup> Between 2014 and 2021, this field had the lowest

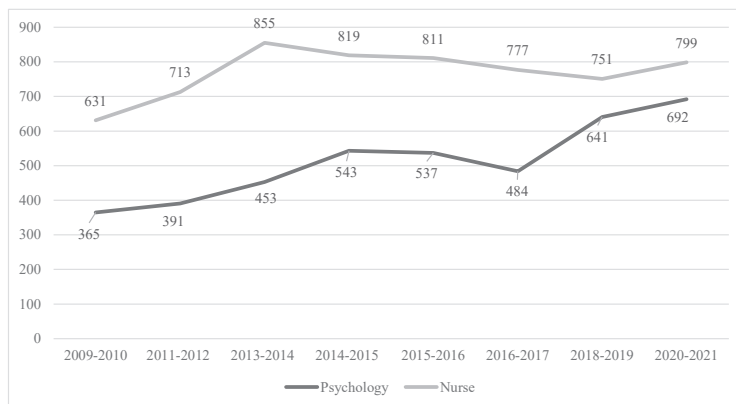
<sup>6</sup> An exception is the academic year 2020-2021, when students were exempted from the language examination requirement for the award of the diploma.



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propensity to obtain a Master's degree, ranging between 15.85% and 16.02% according to the 2023 dataset published by the AAE.

Figure 7. Number of new entrants to the profession (psychology and nurse) with a recent diploma



Source: Author's own editing, based on data from the Graduate Tracking System [DPR]

### Pastoral specialization

According to statistics from 2008 to 2014, the number of students studying a pastoral specialisation has increased, but with a fluctuating trend. However, a steady decrease was observed between 2015 and 2023. In the academic year 2008, 1137 students started their studies, but from 2015 onwards the enrolment base showed a steady decrease, falling to 416 students in 2023. The number of graduates in pastoral education has remained relatively low over the years. In 2008, 145 students graduated, and after minor fluctuations, this number dropped to 109 in 2011. Small increases and decreases followed in the following years, until 2019. With the introduction of the language exam exemption in 2020, the number of graduates in this field increased significantly. Despite only 70 students graduating in pastoral care in 2021, the ratio of students to graduates was better than in the two social work fields studied (see Figures 5 and 6).

It is important to note, however, that the statistics on the number of students enrolled in the pastoral care program do not reflect the actual total number of students. The reason for this is the introduction of the split (integrated) training program during this period. The present research focuses only on the numerical statistics of students enrolled in the bachelor's program, so data on students enrolled in the non-university program have not been processed. Further comparisons are



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also hampered by the fact that, according to the Education Office, the FIR and AAE statistical databases do not contain information on the career paths of pastoral training graduates.<sup>7</sup>

### **Challenges and factors influencing the social perception of social work**

The statistical results suggest that, although changes in cultural values may contribute to social acceptance levels, they do not uniformly affect the level of social acceptance of the characteristics of social work and the human support professions - training programmes - most closely associated with it. The social perception of social work depends to a large extent on the level of public awareness of the social sector, how it is portrayed, and what characteristics are attributed to social work itself (Ferge 2017). One factor hindering the credibility of measuring occupational prestige is that a credible picture can only be obtained of professions about which respondents have a strong knowledge and perception (Goldthorpe – Hope 1973). The majority of Hungarian society is still not aware of the general characteristics of the social work profession. The low social acceptance of social work education and the social sector in Hungary contrasts with generally accepted trends in developed Western countries (Erdős 2019). Contrary to the overall perception of the US and UK populations, the Hungarian public often perceives social workers as individuals with low educational attainment, working for minimum wage, and performing manual labour tasks (Szoboszlai 2017). According to Bognárné Erdős Márta, unlike bottom-up models that follow the principles of solidarity, Hungarian social work largely follows a top-down centralized model that is not conducive to promoting a positive societal perception of social work. The current model tends to support the continuous decline of social tolerance and stigmatizes marginalized groups and the volunteers and professionals who work with them (Berger 2019). The interim perception of social work and the outcomes of methodological measurement are influenced by a multitude of social, political, educational, governmental, economic, and other extraordinary factors. Based on the above, any coherent conclusion regarding the social sector and its education can only be drawn through a multi-dimensional survey (Szabó 2011).

### **Conclusion**

Overall, it can be concluded that changes in cultural values only partially explain the trends in interest towards social work and associated helping professions. The

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<sup>7</sup> Due to lack of data and other biasing factors, the data series on pastors-chaplains are included in the study for information only and not as a reference point (see Figure 5-6).



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research highlights that while interest in social courses (social work—social pedagogy) has declined significantly in recent years, the popularity of psychology and nursing has increased. The increase in the number of social course students over the past two years is mainly due to the relaxation of admission requirements, rather than increased interest in the subject. Expanding the recruitment base in this way raises qualitative concerns, as the relaxed admission criteria essentially limit the possibility of selecting students on the basis of their professional aptitude, and the introduction of lower requirements does not directly address the problem of dropouts and early exit. The research data show that a significant proportion of students with qualifications in social work and social pedagogy leave the profession early, further exacerbating the workforce shortage in the social sector in the long run. Graduates in psychology and nursing specializations, which share the most similar content characteristics with social work, are more likely to find employment in occupations matching their qualifications. The decline in student numbers in social specializations is driven by complex social and economic factors. To improve the acceptance and popularity of social work education in the future, it is essential to implement measures aimed at changing societal attitudes and enhancing the prestige of the profession as soon as possible. This includes public awareness campaigns, policy changes to support social work education, and enhanced career support for social work graduates.

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