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The Impact of Social Work Supervision on Interns' Employment Intention: New Evidence from Mainland China

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Abstract

Supervision is a key link in social work practice and plays an important role in the cultivation of social work professionals. This study investigated the impact of social work internship supervision on the employment intention of 271 social work interns from five universities in Guangxi, China. The results show that the employment intention of male students is higher than that of female students, and the employment intention of interns with urban household registration is higher than that of interns with rural household registration; internship investment and school–enterprise cooperation have a positive impact on the exertion of the supervision function, but internship investment plays a full mediating role between the supervision function and employment intention, whilst school–enterprise cooperation regulates the relationship between the supervision function and internship investment. Real factors, such as economy and social status, continue to be important factors influencing social work students' employment intention. When conducting social work internship educational activities, schools should create a favourable internship environment and working conditions for interns and maintain good cooperation with internship organisations. This will facilitate internship supervision and enhance employment intention.

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Introduction

At present, the quality of employment is a prominent problem that puzzles the training of social work talent in colleges and universities. On the one hand, the supply of social work talent cannot meet the growth in the demand for social services (Nordstrand, 2017); however, the inconsistency between social work professional education and employment opportunities and the mismatch between teaching content and practice needs persist (Wu *et al.*, 2016). Applied and practical talents are crucial resources in the field of social work (Hemy *et al.*, 2016). Social work is fundamentally grounded in relationship-based practices (Connolly and Harms, 2015), and the acquisition of knowledge through practical education lies at the heart of social work education (Baum, 2011). In the process of social work professional practice education, internships are critical for the development of social work professionals (Nordstrand, 2017). Internship experiences directly influence students' career aspirations, and securing a job in the field of their choice is one of the indicators of high-quality employment (Baum, 2011).

Supervision is not only directly linked to the completion of students' internships, but also plays an important role in students' career selection and employment (Noble and Irwin, 2009). Effective supervisory relationships can promote the improvement of social work values and changes in the organisational system (Noble and Irwin, 2009). Moreover, supervisors play a crucial role in providing positive guidance for the professionalism and professional confidence of social work practitioners or interns (Egan *et al.*, 2016).

Currently, existing research has focused on specific practices related to the personal growth of supervision, as well as the role of supervision, supervision relationships, supervision skills, supervision systems and the educational function of supervision (Nordstrand, 2017; Vassos *et al.*, 2018). Social work practice supervisors have long struggled to meet professional and disciplinary expectations (Egan *et al.*, 2016). This is because social work supervision is considered a core feature in the development of social workers' professional identity (Hafford-Letchfield and Engelbrecht, 2018). Despite research suggesting ways to recruit, maintain and develop social work through initiatives such as creating higher incentives and pay packages and improving policy support for social work

(Wong and Lee, 2015), surprisingly few studies mention the use of supervision to achieve these goals.

In mainland China, social work education draws inspiration from the Hong Kong model. Social work undergraduate students are required to complete a minimum of 800 h of professional practice, with the most significant being a four-month internship during their senior year. During the internship, two supervisors are assigned to guide the students, typically consisting of an academic advisor from the school and experienced social workers or project managers from the internship placement. This arrangement aims to ensure the quality of students' professional learning and practice, helping them apply theoretical knowledge to real-world work and develop their professional competencies. From the perspective of employment orientation of social work interns, this study analyses the factors affecting the supervision function and focuses on exploring the mechanism of the supervision function on employment intention, as well as the role of internship investment of interns and the degree of school–enterprise cooperation in the mechanism, to explore how to improve interns' employment intention and provide some reference experience for the training of social work professionals.

Factors influencing the employment intention of social work students

Job opportunities for social workers are increasingly influenced by various factors such as class, gender, ability, culture and income (Noble and Irwin, 2009). This means that social workers may experience higher levels of stress and burnout compared to other professional groups, which is related to the nature of social work practice and affects their career choices and transitions (Lloyd *et al.*, 2002).

Factors influencing student engagement in internships and career choices also include individual qualities and institutional requirements (Hemy *et al.*, 2016). A family's economic background is an important factor influencing individual career choices (Wu *et al.*, 2016). Students from lower economic backgrounds often lack financial support from their families, resulting in greater financial needs (Benner and Curl, 2018). In China, where social work development is still in its early stages, social work students tend to choose alternative jobs with higher salaries and better benefits due to a lack of economic support (Wu *et al.*, 2016). It is worth noting that low professional employment willingness is not only a problem amongst social work students in China, but also amongst social work students in Uganda, who do not aspire to find a social work job after graduation (Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019). Generally, the motivations of social work students and their employment aspirations reflect

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important issues that need to be addressed in social work and social work education (Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019).

Research also found a positive correlation between interest in social work and perceived status, with a higher proportion of women engaging in social work (Campanini and Frost, 2004; Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019). Unlike students in other countries, who have a primary career preference for social work due to their goal of helping others, Chinese social work students do not initially prioritise social work as their first choice. They lack the motivation to study social work and pursue careers in the field (Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, low recognition of social work and social pressures from significant others significantly influence the perceptions and career choices of social work students (Guo, 2017). When students perceive low societal recognition and receive little support from important individuals, they may have lower satisfaction with the profession and be less willing to pursue a career in social work (Guo, 2017).

Additionally, because social work interns are not yet fully engaged in professional work, they may be influenced by fewer factors in their career intentions than social workers. However, socioeconomic status can still affect employment choices of social work interns. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 1: Female interns have a significantly higher potential job quality than male interns.
>
> Hypothesis 2: Interns with a rural household registration have significantly lower employment willingness than those with an urban household registration.

The relationship between supervision and employment intention

Social work supervision is a professional training method in which experienced practitioners within an organisation provide regular and ongoing supervision and guidance to newly recruited staff, frontline junior workers, interns and volunteers. Its purpose is to enhance their professional capabilities and facilitate their growth (O'Donoghue *et al.*, 2018). Supervisory relationships can impact a supervisee's sense of well-being, career development and approach to career planning (Heckman-Stone, 2004; Caras and Sandu, 2014). Supervision satisfaction is particularly important for students who are just beginning to form a professional identity and can significantly affect students' learning motivation and professional identity development (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014; Shulman, 2021).

The employment aspirations of social workers are influenced by factors such as the work environment, professionalism and prospects for career development within social organisations (Guo, 2017). Positive work relationships and a conducive work environment enhance job satisfaction amongst social workers (Abu-Bader, 2005) and impact their internship

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experiences (Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; Guo, 2017;). However, it is worth noting that supervisory support serves as a protective factor for students' engagement during internships (Lloyd *et al.*, 2002). School supervisors' supportive behaviours have been emphasised by Cooper *et al.* (2010), who proposed that supporting students is a function of teachers and is necessary before, during and after students' learning experiences.

Empirical research indicates that social workers may experience higher levels of stress and burnout than comparable professional groups, which poses an educational challenge (Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; Benner and Curl, 2018). Wuenschel (2006) suggests that the lack of effective supervision provided by schools can diminish students' sense of achievement during internships and consequently lead to professional burnout. Conversely, the presence of effective supervisory support reduces the risk of professional burnout amongst students (Strozier *et al.*, 2000; Boudreau *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, the level of professional support within an organisation can directly or indirectly impact the employment experiences of social workers. Supervisory support and perceived inclusiveness within an organisation are important predictors of job satisfaction amongst social workers (Acquavita *et al.*, 2009).

Taking all these factors into consideration, the organisational factors in which social work interns are placed may influence the role of supervisory support. Considering the uneven development of social work in different regions of China, the coastal areas tend to experience higher levels of professional development in social work. Therefore, high-quality supervision in these regions may positively influence interns' employment choices. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> Hypothesis 3: There is a significant positive correlation between supervisory function and interns' employment intention.
>
> Hypothesis 4: Students' internship engagement mediates the relationship between supervisory functioning and employment intentions.

Internship settings in the school education system

Field education, also known as professional internship in China, is an important component of social work education. It provides students with structured and supportive experiences to apply academic knowledge in social work practice (Bogo, 2006). Field education involves collaborative relationships amongst students, field instructors, faculty liaison officers and internship agencies. Field instructors, who are social workers, play a dual role of supervising, guiding and evaluating social work interns (Bogo, 2006; Asakura *et al.*, 2018). Faculty liaison officers, on the other hand, are responsible for supporting students' internship learning, fostering positive relationships between universities and agencies, and assisting field instructors in their role as social work educators (Wayne *et al.*, 2010). Whilst most

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American schools do not assign full-time faculty members as faculty liaison officers (Bogo, 2006), in China, each student must be assigned a mentor to oversee their internship and serve as a liaison officer.

Because of the assumption that social work education is based on placing graduates within a well-functioning service system, it does not align with the fragmented reality of China's service system (Wang and Zhou, 2010). Many supervisors simultaneously hold roles as social workers or managers, and the overlap of these roles prevents them from fulfilling their supervisory functions (Nordstrand, 2017). This is a common issue in social work internships in most countries. In Australia, only 72 per cent of social work students receive one-on-one supervision per week, which falls far short of the latest requirements set by Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (Vassos *et al.*, 2018).

Scholars argue that supervision should undergo changes to facilitate the development of students' professional characters (Killen, 2012). To make supervision effective, it is necessary to provide supervisees with the opportunity to have more time for exploration, reflection, learning, development and problem-solving, moving away from the increasing focus on managerial supervision or procedural management (Brown and Bourne, 1995). Another viewpoint suggests that the key to overcoming the challenges faced by students in their internship work and addressing difficulties in social work internships lies in strengthening collaboration between schools and internship organisations (Zhu, 2000).

Partnerships between social work schools and organisations are crucial for training new social workers (Tsui, 2004). Social work schools typically aim to provide students with a certain level of supervision during their undergraduate studies, although students receive supervision during their internships, it may not necessarily achieve the goals (Schmidt and Kariuki, 2019). Therefore, cooperation between schools and internship organisations in supervision can maximise the effectiveness of the supervisory role, aligning the content and models of supervision with the current needs of social work development. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> Hypothesis 5: School–enterprise cooperation moderates the relationship between supervisory functions and internship engagement.
>
> Hypothesis 6: School–enterprise cooperation moderates the relationship between supervisory functions and employment intention.

Research design

Sample

Data were collected from internship students majoring in social work at five undergraduate colleges in Guangxi Province, China. Stratified

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sampling was used and fifteen classes were selected from five schools. Ten students were randomly selected from each class for the survey, resulting in a sample size of 300. The questionnaire will be filled in online and the investigator will contact the selected class leader to distribute and collect the questionnaire. Subsequently, the investigator will provide the necessary instructions and access links to the online questionnaire. After excluding missing values for certain variables, 271 valid samples were obtained, with a response rate of 90.33 per cent. Prior to the survey, the respondents were informed about its purpose and content and provided informed consent to participate. All participants were assured of their anonymity to protect their privacy. This study and its research programs were approved by the Ethics Committee of Human Research Ethics Committee of Hechi University, China. All methods were carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the aforementioned ethics committee.

Main variables

Employment intention

In this study, the professional confidence and employment intention of social work interns in their respective fields of study were used as the basis for evaluating their employment intention, specifically their intention to pursue a career in the field of social work. The questionnaire items for this variable included four statements: 'Your confidence in pursuing a career in social work'. A 5-point scoring system is used, where '0 = very high, 1 = relatively high, 2 = average, 3 = relatively low, 4 = very low' and higher scores indicate lower employment intentions. The KMO value for this variable is 0.83, and Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.92, indicating good reliability and validity of this variable.

Supervisory function

The supervisory functions in this study primarily focus on the interns' subjective evaluation of the supervisor's roles such as 'authority, role model, resource integration, motivation and support', as well as the 'effectiveness of supervision'. The questionnaire items for this variable include nine statements such as 'The supervisor demonstrated authority during the internship supervision process'. A 5-point scoring system is used, where '0 = strongly agree, 1 = somewhat agree, 2 = neutral, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = strongly disagree' and higher scores indicate lower effectiveness of supervisory functions. The KMO value for this variable is 0.93 and Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.94, indicating good reliability and validity of this variable.

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Internship engagement

This study examined the level of student engagement in professional internships based on three aspects: 'expectations', 'behavioral involvement' and 'identification'. The questionnaire items for this variable included one question: 'Overall, how much do you expect from your professional internship?' A 5-point scoring system is used, where '0 = very high, 1 = relatively high, 2 = average, 3 = relatively low, 4 = very low' and higher scores indicate lower levels of engagement. The KMO value for this variable is 0.67, and Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.76, indicating good reliability and validity of this variable.

School–enterprise cooperation

This study evaluates the relationship and interaction between the university and internship supervisors from the internship units, including 'level of importance', 'degree of interaction', 'level of support' and 'information sharing'. The questionnaire items for this variable include four questions, such as 'Overall, how important does the university consider internship supervision?' A 5-point scoring system is used, where '0 = very high, 1 = relatively high, 2 = average, 3 = relatively low, 4 = very low,' and higher scores indicate lower levels of cooperation. The KMO value for this variable is 0.80, and Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.87, indicating good reliability and validity of this variable.

In recent years, there has been a high proportion of female students in the field of social work. Therefore, we incorporated gender as a factor in our analysis model to distinguish between gender differences in employment intentions in social work. Additionally, considering that the current salary level for social work professionals in our country is relatively low, this study also explored whether there are differences in employment intentions based on students' urban or rural household registration status. Thus, this study controls for gender and household registration as variables.

This study also analysed factors such as the setting, frequency and strictness of supervision as control variables to examine their impact on the supervisory functions of social work internships. For details about the participants' demographics, please refer to Table 1.

Data analysis

The data analysis consisted of three steps. The first step involved a descriptive analysis of the basic characteristics of the supervision function, student engagement, cooperation level and employment intentions. The second step involved analysing the relationship between the supervision function and

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Table 1. Basic information ($N = 271$).

Variables		Percentage	Variables		Percentage
Gender	Male students	44.65%	Grade	Grade 2	19.56%
	Female students	55.35%		Grade 3	35.79%
Regional	Town	33.95%		Grade 4	44.65%
	Country	66.05%			
Variables		Min.	Max.	Mean	St.
Professional relevance		0.00	4.00	1.27	0.934
High-profile		0.00	4.00	1.39	0.870
Distance		0.00	4.00	1.54	1.185
Economic level		0.00	4.00	1.41	0.914
Internship subsidy		0.00	4.00	0.95	1.110
Supervisory input		0.00	4.00	1.49	1.118
Supervisory frequency		0.00	4.00	2.36	1.158
Supervisory rigor		0.00	4.00	1.71	0.934

employment intentions using a linear regression model. The third step involves conducting a chain mediation analysis of the supervision function, internship engagement, university–industry cooperation and employment intentions. For the descriptive and linear regression analyses, SPSS version 25.0 will be used. For the mediation analysis, SPSS version 25.0, along with the process plugin (Hayes, 2018) will was used.

Results

Descriptive statistical analysis

Table 2 shows that there were no significant gender-based differences in the levels of engagement ($F(269) = 1.328$, $t = -0.585$, $p > 0.05$), cooperation ($F(269) = 1.047$, $t = 0.084$, $p > 0.05$) and supervision ($F(269) = 0.607$, $t = -0.745$, $p > 0.05$) amongst social work interns. However, there was a significant difference in employment intention ($F(269) = 0.290$, $t = -2.912$, $p < 0.01$), female students had lower employment intentions than male students. This finding contradicts Hypothesis 1.

Regarding the urban-rural differences, there were no significant differences in the levels of engagement ($F(269) = 2.328$, $t = -0.583$, $p > 0.05$), university–industry cooperation ($F(269) = 0.682$, $t = -1.319$, $p > 0.05$) and supervision function ($F(269) = 0.085$, $t = -1.435$, $p > 0.05$) amongst interns. However, there was a significant difference in employment intention ($F(269) = 0.310$, $t = -3.903$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that rural students had lower employment intentions than urban students (scoring higher). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is validated.

The results of the correlation analysis between the variables indicate that gender is significantly positively correlated with employment intention ($t = 0.175$, $p < 0.01$) and household registration is significantly

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Table 2. Independent sample T-test ($N = 271$).

		Intern engagement	School–enterprise cooperation	Supervisory function	Employment intention
Gender	Male students	3.620 ± 2.281	4.884 ± 3.066	9.785 ± 5.795	5.661 ± 3.730
	Female students	3.780 ± 2.207	4.853 ± 2.950	10.333 ± 6.197	6.967 ± 3.620
F(269)		1.328	1.047	0.607	0.290
t		−0.585	0.084	−0.745	−2.912**
Regional	Town	3.598 ± 2.330	4.533 ± 3.101	9.359 ± 6.174	5.185 ± 3.573
	Country	3.765 ± 2.193	5.039 ± 2.936	10.464 ± 5.915	7.000 ± 3.652
F(269)		2.328	0.682	0.085	0.310
t		−0.583	−1.319	−1.435	−3.903***

Note: Statistically significant values.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$; F=statistical value of the test.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics ($N = 271$).

Variables	*M* ± *SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	0.55 ± 0.498	1					
2. Regional	0.66 ± 0.474	0.187**	1				
3. Intern engagement	5.02 ± 2.580	0.076	0.123*	1			
4. School–enterprise cooperation	4.87 ± 2.997	−0.005	0.080	0.671***	1		
5. Supervisory function	10.09 ± 6.016	0.045	0.087	0.731***	0.777***	1	
6. Quality of potential employment	6.38 ± 3.720	0.175**	0.232***	0.547***	0.433**	0.386***	1

Notes: Statistically significant values are
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$.

positively correlated with employment intention ($t = 0.232$, $p < 0.001$). Engagement level was significantly positively correlated with cooperation level ($t = 0.558$, $p < 0.001$), supervision function ($t = 0.616$, $p < 0.001$) and employment intentions ($t = 0.554$, $p < 0.001$). University–industry cooperation was significantly positively correlated with the supervision function ($t = 0.777$, $p < 0.001$) and employment intentions ($t = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$). Supervision was significantly and positively correlated with employment intention ($t = 0.386$, $p < 0.001$) See table 3 for details. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was validated.

Multiple linear regression analysis of supervision function

We constructed five models as listed in Table 4. All variables were standardised prior to the analysis. Model 1 served as the baseline regression model for the supervision function of social work interns and included two control variables: gender and household registration. The results indicated that the influence of gender ($t = 0.487$, $p > 0.05$) and household registration ($t = 1.316$, $p > 0.05$) on the supervision function was not significant. The

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results of the correlation analysis indicated that female and rural students had lower employment willingness (higher scores).

Model 2 involved conducting a regression analysis on the supervision function by adding five factors related to internship organisations to Model 1. The data showed that the degree of relevance to the profession ($t = 3.839$, $p < 0.001$), reputation of the internship organisation ($t = 4.880$, $p < 0.001$), and the economic development level of the internship organisation's location ($t = 3.354$, $p < 0.001$) had a significant positive impact on the supervision function of social work interns. However, the distance from home to the internship organisation ($t = 1.492$, $p > 0.05$) and internship subsidies ($t = -0.573$, $p > 0.05$) did not significantly affect supervision.

Model 3 incorporated three variables–supervision setting, supervision frequency and supervision strictness—based on Model 2. From the statistical results, it can be observed that all three variables—supervision settings ($t = 2.475$, $p < 0.05$), supervision frequency ($t = 2.340$, $p < 0.05$) and supervision strictness ($t = 5.468$, $p < 0.001$)—had significant impacts on the effectiveness of supervision.

Model 4, built upon Model 3, incorporated an analysis of interns' level of engagement. The data analysis results indicated that the higher the level of intern engagement, the better the supervision performance ($t = 10.480$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, based on Model 4, the inclusion of school–enterprise cooperation in Model 5 revealed that the higher the level of cooperation between the school and supervisors, the better the performance of supervision ($t = 10.145$, $p < 0.001$).

Analysis of multiple linear regression model of employment intention

As shown in Table 4, five models were constructed. All variables were standardised prior to the analysis. Model 6 served as the baseline regression model for employment intention and included two control variables: gender and household registration. The results indicated that both gender ($t = 2.275$, $p < 0.05$) and household registration ($t = 3.439$, $p < 0.001$) of social work interns had a significant positive impact on their employment intention. Specifically, female and rural registered students exhibited higher employment intentions than male and urban registered students. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 were further validated.

Model 7, built upon Model 6, includes five influencing factors related to internship placements and conducts a regression analysis of employment intention. The data revealed that the degree of professional relevance of the internship position ($t = 2.297$, $p < 0.05$), reputation of the internship organisation ($t = 4.515$, $p < 0.001$), distance from home ($t = 3.795$, $p < 0.001$), economic development level of the internship location ($t = 4.032$, $p < 0.001$) and internship allowance ($t = 3.661$, $p < 0.001$)

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Table 4. Multivariate regression analysis ($N = 271$).

Variables	Supervisory function					Employment intention				
	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*	*Model 9*	*Model 10*
Constant	0.061	0.050	0.046	0.044	0.035	0.059	0.046	0.044	0.044	0.043
Gender	0.062	0.053	0.050	0.048	0.037	0.060*	0.049	0.047	0.047	0.046
Regional	0.062	0.053	0.050	0.048	0.037	0.060***	0.049*	0.047*	0.047*	0.046**
Professional Relevance		0.057***	0.055**	0.053*	0.042*		0.053*	0.052	0.052	0.052
High-profile		0.060***	0.058**	0.062	0.049		0.055***	0.060	0.060	0.060
Distance		0.055	0.053	0.051	0.040		0.051***	0.048***	0.049***	0.048***
Economic level		0.060***	0.057*	0.055*	0.043		0.055***	0.053***	0.054**	0.054***
Internship subsidy		0.053	0.052	0.050	0.039		0.049***	0.047***	0.047***	0.046***
Supervisory Input			0.052*	0.050*	0.040					
Supervisory frequency			0.052*	0.050	0.039*					
Supervisory rigor			0.053***	0.052***	0.041***					
Intern engagement				0.065***	0.053*			0.061***	0.064***	0.065***
School–enterprise cooperation					0.045***				0.055	0.071**
Supervisory function										0.075**
R	0.092	0.587	0.666	0.700	0.829	0.267	0.666	0.704	0.707	0.716
R^2	0.008	0.345	0.443	0.490	0.687	0.072	0.444	0.495	0.500	0.513
F	1.145	27.004***	15.348***	23.844***	161.905***	10.322***	35.262***	26.650***	2.260	6.789**

Notes: Statistically significant values are
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$, and the values in parentheses are standard errors.

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all had a significant positive impact on the employment intention of social work interns.

Model 8, built on Model 7, incorporated the analysis of interns' level of engagement, and the data analysis results indicated that the higher the level of interns' engagement, the better their employment intentions ($t = 5.162$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, based on Model 8, the inclusion of school–enterprise cooperation in Model 9 revealed that the level of school–enterprise cooperation did not have a significant impact on employment intention ($t = 1.503$, $p > 0.05$). Subsequently, in Model 10, the supervision function was added based on Model 9: However, the data analysis results showed that the higher the supervision function, the worse the employment intention ($t = -2.605$, $p < 0.01$). This finding contradicts Hypothesis 3 and requires further in-depth analysis.

Analysis of the mediation model of internship investment and school–enterprise cooperation

To further understand the impact of supervision on the employment intention of social work interns, this study also analysed the mediating role of internship engagement and school–enterprise cooperation in the relationship between supervision and employment intention. All variables were standardised prior to the analysis. The Hayes (2018) PROCESS plugin was used to test Model 8, extracting 5,000 bootstrap samples to estimate the 95 per cent confidence interval of the mediating effect. Gender and household registration variables were included as control variables, with the supervision function as the independent variable, employment intention as the dependent variable, internship engagement as the mediating variable and school–enterprise cooperation as the moderating variable, establishing a mediation moderation model. The data analysis results are shown in Table 5, where the direct effect of the supervision function on employment intention is -0.108 ($t = -1.300$, $p > 0.05$) and the indirect effect is 0.029 (with a 95 per cent confidence interval of [0.140, 0.325], excluding 0), indicating a significant indirect effect. Therefore, internship engagement plays a fully mediating role in the relationship between supervision and employment intention, thus supporting Hypothesis 4.

In addition, the moderating effect of school–enterprise cooperation on the relationship between the supervision function and internship engagement is significant ($\beta = -0.065$, $p < 0.05$, 95 per cent confidence interval [−0.008, −0.030], excluding 0). However, the moderating effect of school–enterprise cooperation on the relationship between the supervision function and employment intention is not significant ($\beta = -0.030$, $p > 0.05$, 95 per cent confidence interval [−0.087, 0.029], including 0). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 is supported, but Hypothesis 6 is not. School–

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Table 5. Mediation model test ($N = 271$).

Variables	Intern engagement				Employment intention			
	B	*t*	LL	UL	*B*	*t*	LL	UL
Constant	0.050	0.964	−0.052	0.153	0.023	0.430	−0.082	0.127
Gender	0.020	0.409	−0.075	0.115	0.131	2.666**	0.034	0.227
Regional	−0.033	−0.672	−0.128	0.063	0.177	3.603***	0.080	0.274
Supervisory function	0.484	6.347***	0.334	0.634	−0.108	−1.300	−0.271	0.056
Intern engagement					0.473	7.590***	0.350	0.595
School–enterprise cooperation	0.208	2.753**	0.059	0.356	0.250	3.255**	0.097	0.403
Supervisory function* School–enterprise cooperation	−0.065	−2.260*	−0.122	−0.008	−0.030	−1.000	−0.087	0.029
Supervisory function -> Intern Engagement					0.229		0.140	0.325
R		0.638				0.627		
R^2		0.407				0.393		
F		36.423***				28.475***		

Note: Statistically significant values.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$.
LL, lower confidence interval; UL, upper confidence interval; B, standardised coefficient; R^2, coefficient of determination; F, statistical value of the test.

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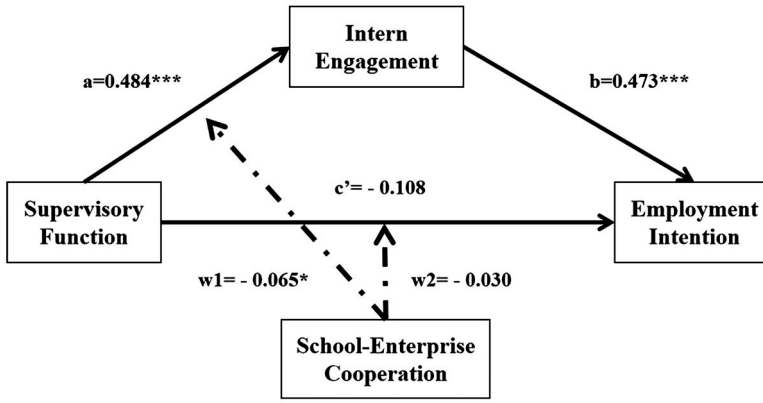

Figure 1: Mediation regulatory pathway.

enterprise cooperation only moderates the path between 'supervision function and internship engagement'. The detailed results of the moderation paths are presented in Table 5 and Figure 1.

Discussion

Rational choice based on reality: characteristics of interns' employment intention

Previous studies have suggested that the career choices of social workers are influenced by social status and that a higher proportion of women tend to enter the field of social work (Campanini and Frost, 2004; Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019). However, this study revealed that male students have a slightly higher intention to pursue social work as a career than female students (Campanini and Frost, 2004; Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019). It is important to note that one of the reasons social work students do not choose social work as a profession is their lack of motivation to study social work (Bukuluki *et al.*, 2019). This result may be attributed to the differences in social work education and cultural backgrounds in mainland China. In other countries, students often choose to study social work with the motivation of 'helping others', but social work is not the first choice for students in China (Wu *et al.*, 2016).

Furthermore, this study found that urban students had a significantly higher willingness to seek employment than rural ones. Previous research has indicated that family economic background is an important influencing factor in individual career choices (Wu *et al.*, 2016). This is because students from lower economic backgrounds may face greater financial pressure and lack family support, which may compel them to pursue occupations with

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higher financial demands (Benner and Curl, 2018). In mainland China, social work salaries are relatively low, and social work students tend to lean towards alternative jobs that offer higher wages and better benefits (Wu *et al.*, 2016). Compared to rural students, urban students experienced relatively less economic pressure, which explains the differences in the results mentioned above. Therefore, for students in mainland China, the choice of social work is influenced more by practical considerations and a higher need for financial stability rather than a 'career ideal' of helping others.

A favourable internship environment has a positive impact on the enhancement of supervisory functions and employment willingness

In this study, the degree of professional relevance, reputation and economic development of the internship position positively influenced the supervisory functions of social work internships. This indicates that good internship work environments and conditions are beneficial for the growth of interns. However, in the context of the disconnect between social work education and the reality in mainland China (Wang and Zhou, 2010), factors such as distance from home and internship subsidies do not have an impact on the effectiveness of supervision. Therefore, for interns, a good work environment and good working conditions are conducive to supervisory support.

Of course, the availability of supervisors, frequency of supervision and strictness of supervision directly affect the extent to which supervisory functions are realised during the internship. Additionally, the level of internal engagement and school–enterprise cooperation also has a positive impact on the effectiveness of supervision. This result is consistent with previous research that emphasises the importance of the relationship between social work schools and organisations in the training of social workers (Tsui, 2004). Strengthening the cooperation between schools and internship organisations is beneficial for providing effective support to social work interns (Zhu, 2000).

The environment and conditions of the internship organisation positively influenced the employment intentions of social work interns. Although the distance from home to the internship site and internship allowance have a relatively low impact on supervisory function, these two factors still affect interns' career choices. Similarly, a high level of commitment from interns and strong collaboration between universities and enterprises positively impacted interns' employment intentions. This indicates that factors such as the working environment, professionalism, prospects and development opportunities in social organisations are considerations for students' employment intentions (Guo, 2017). This is because the internship environment is related to the internship experience (Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; Guo, 2017).

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Therefore, the selection of internship organisations is crucial in the process of cultivating social work talent.

Collaboration: the inevitable choice for enhancing the supervisory function and employment intentions

The results of this study indicate that effective implementation of the supervisory function positively influences the employment intentions of social work interns. Due to the likelihood of experiencing burnout in the professional process of social workers (Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; Benner and Curl, 2018), a high level of support can effectively reduce the risk of professional burnout amongst social workers (Boudreau *et al.*, 2004). The supervisory function of internship supervisors in internship organisations is not only to ensure service quality (O'Donoghue *et al.*, 2018) but also to contribute to the sense of achievement for social work students during their internship (Wuenschel, 2006) and job satisfaction (Acquavita *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, the presence of internship supervisors in internship organisations undoubtedly enhances the employment intentions of social work interns. Considering the uneven development of social work in different regions of China, the coastal areas have higher levels of professional development in social work. In these regions, high-quality supervision may positively impact interns' employment choices.

It is worth noting that in this study, university–enterprise collaboration played a fully mediating role between supervisory function and employment intentions. This means that whilst emphasising the role of supervision, it is also necessary to strengthen interns' commitment to professional social work internships and recognise the importance of supervision and the supervisory process to enhance their professional service capabilities and cultivate professional confidence. Additionally, although university–enterprise collaboration does not directly regulate the relationship between supervisory function and employment intentions, it significantly moderates the relationship between supervisory function and internship commitment. This result also supports the important supportive role of high-quality university–enterprise collaboration in the growth and employment choices of interns (Zhu, 2000; Tsui, 2004). In other words, students' practical experiences should not be completely detached from their school involvement, even when they are not studying on campus. Mutual cooperation between schools and internship organisations remains necessary.

Conclusion

In this study, the supervisory role of social work interns and their employment intentions were found to be at a moderately high level.

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Additionally, male students showed higher employment intention than female students, and interns from urban areas had higher employment intention than those from rural areas. Regarding the factors influencing the supervisory role, the degree of relevance and reputation of the internship organisation, economic development level, personal investment level of interns and university–industry cooperation all played a positive role in the supervisory role. However, distance from home and internship subsidies provided by the organisation did not have a significant impact on supervisory roles. In terms of employment intentions, the degree of relevance and reputation of the internship organisation, economic development level, distance from home and internship subsidies all had a positive effect on interns' employment intentions. Although university–industry cooperation, internship investment and supervisory role were positively correlated with employment intentions, internship investment fully mediated the relationship between supervisory role and employment intentions. This means that the supervisory role does not directly influence interns' employment intentions, but rather affects them through internship investment. University–industry cooperation only moderated the impact of the supervisory role on internship investment, whilst its moderating effect on the relationship between the supervisory role and employment intentions was not significant.

For individual students, economic and social status remains important factors influencing whether social work students pursue careers in the field. However, it is important to acknowledge that students' personal involvement and level of engagement also impact their willingness to enter the profession. Supervisors should strive to fulfil their supervisory role and guide students in active and meaningful participation. They should employ planning, monitoring and adjustment strategies, collaborate with students to establish learning objectives, and provide timely evaluation, reflection, summary and adjustment during the internship process. This ensures that students can promptly adjust their internship objectives and behaviours, thereby enhancing the quality of their efforts and engagement during the internship. Additionally, favourable environment and working conditions in a good internship organisation can positively affect social work interns' future career choices in social work. Therefore, when teaching social work, selecting high-quality internship organisations for professional internships is beneficial for improving the quality of professional education. Therefore, for employers, when recruiting students, it is crucial to improve the work environment and conditions as much as possible, enhance relevant benefits and compensation, and increase the attractiveness of positions.

Finally, the role of supervisory support is significant for social work students' future employment in their field. More importantly, the field experience is the product of the collaboration between academic institutions and agencies' (Ford and Chui, 2000), during the internship process,

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there should be increased interaction and collaboration between the school and internship organisation's supervisors to enhance the professional confidence of social work students. It is necessary to hire fieldwork instructors or supervisors as the main liaison between institutions and students. This approach allows students to cultivate closer relationships with internship organisations, whilst also ensuring they receive more professional and effective guidance. Supervisors are also encouraged to further develop their skills and reinforce supportive roles in practice teaching (Yeung *et al.*, 1998).

The limitations of this study are as follows: first, the sample was limited to social work students from five cities in Guangxi, which may not represent the overall situation in China. Second, the research findings relied on self-reporting by social work students and have not been validated by other sources. Finally, this was a cross-sectional study, and there may be some deviation between the participants' future employment choices and their current employment intentions. In future, it will be important to consider expanding the sampling framework by including a larger sample from the coastal regions of China and diversifying the types of respondents. In addition, longitudinal research methods should be employed to compare the actual career choices of social work students at different time points. This provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing employment decisions in the field of social work over time.

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors of this study declare no conflict of interest and that the study has not been submitted for publication anywhere else.

Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study and its research programs were approved by the Ethics Committee of Human Research Ethics Committee of Hechi University, China (2022JGB326-1). All methods were carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the aforementioned ethics committee. All participants were informed about the contents of the survey and obtained their consent.

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Availability of data and materials

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

Authors' contributions

All authors made a significant contribution to the work reported, whether that is in the conception, study design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation, took part in drafting, revised the article; gave final approval of the version to be published, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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