ADDRESSING COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

COVID-19 resulted in massive disruption and changes in every aspect of our lives. To curb the spread of the virus, many governments limited the movement of people or imposed full 'lockdowns'. This created significant challenges for social workers practising with people often reliant on interpersonal support such as those at risk of domestic abuse; with mental health problems or learning disabilities. Measures to reduce viral spread affected the education sector at all levels from pre-school to higher education, disrupted traditional classroom pedagogy and shifted to technologically-supported e-learning to minimise disruption to the students' education. In lockdown, online teaching has become the new norm. E-learning has its limitations for professional curricula such as social work. Like most countries, field practice represents a compulsory component of the social work curriculum in Malaysia which measures the capabilities or competency of students to enable them become qualified social workers. When COVID-19 forced universities and agencies to halt field placements in Malaysia, the immediate challenge was to find alternative ways of assessing students. This paper aims to provide an overview of field education assessment in Malaysia during the pandemic and to pose questions for future assessment as Malaysian social work drives towards increased professional regulation.

Keywords: COVID-19; social work education; social work teaching and learning; field practice; Malaysia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented disruption to the daily lives of billions of the world's population. At the time of writing, the virus had infected over 15 million people and caused over 600,000 deaths worldwide (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). To control the spread of the deadly virus, governments have imposed movement restriction orders and, in some countries, full lockdowns. The latter has severely affected the economic and social sectors, including the education sector, as schools and the higher education institutions (HEI) were forced to cancel face-to-face lectures. This unprecedented move disrupted the learning of millions of students around the world (Rahman, 2020).

The first three cases of COVID-19 in Malaysia were detected on 25 January 2020, when three tourists entered Malaysia via Johor after arriving earlier in Singapore (Pfordten and Ahmad, 2020). Like other governments, Malaysia imposed the Movement Control Order (MCO) to contain the pandemic on 18 March 2020. The MCO required all public and private educational institutions to be closed. This posed many challenges to the education sector. This created significant challenges for social workers, educators and social work students who practise with people often deemed vulnerable and reliant on close interpersonal support.

The closure of universities forced educators to replace face-to-face classroom-based pedagogy with e-learning, which in this case included accessing learning materials via existing e-learn portal for students, via various forms of online learning applications such as Loom, Flipgrid, Zoom and Webex and was undertaken both synchronously and asynchronously, giving greater autonomy but demanding increased motivation from students in keeping up with the work. Subsequently, online teaching became the new norm amidst lockdown with most universities continuing with online learning in some form for the rest of the semester.

E-learning has its limitations for professional curricula such as social work. Field practice, which measures the capabilities or competencies of students to enable them become a qualified social worker, represents a compulsory element of the curriculum. We recognise the complex debates about instrumental definitions of competence and its measurement and so have added the term capabilities which refers to the person's capacity, context and individuality rather than abstract tasks often completed out of context. Here we use capabilities and competences to refer to the requirements of the role that are undertaken in particular interpersonal contexts and require complex, holistic assessment rather than a tick-box list to indicate satisfactory completion (Bogo, 2010; Coe Regan and Detlaf, 2016). Field education provides students with the opportunities to integrate values, skills, methods and theoretical knowledge, learned in the classroom, into their social work practice. It allows students to intervene and seek to enhance social work practice in the field, providing hands-on experiences which reinforces the students' knowledge of the profession's goals, values and ethics. Hence, the urgent need to find alternatives for conducting social work field practice across Malaysia.

This paper aims to provide an overview of field education assessment in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic and to pose questions for future assessment as Malaysian social work drives towards increased professional regulation. We outline the professional requirements for field practice, a key measure of social work students' capabilities or competency as documented in a recent Malaysian-based study. We discuss the primary challenges for social work students to fulfil their field practice requirements during the Malaysian Government's Movement Control Order (MCO), designed to curb the spread of the virus by restricting people's movement. We then consider the immediate responses and strategies of local social work educators to address identified challenges. Finally, the paper explores the development of post-pandemic scenarios in Malaysian social work education, drawing from a global context where in some countries professional social work practice is already being shaped to remote contact with service users, with correspondingly higher risks attached to accurately monitoring wellbeing through compromised professional judgement.

Social Work Education in Malaysia

Social work programmes were introduced to produce qualified and professional graduates in the field of social work (Parker et al., 2016; Azman and Singh, 2019). The strengthening of professional social work practice started in 1973 with the founding of the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW). The formal introduction of social work education at the higher learning institutions was then introduced by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), offering a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), in 1975. After 1996, several other universities started to introduce social work programmes including Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA).

With the comparatively late introduction of social work programmes at university level in Malaysia, there is a strong need to work on the standardization of social work curricular across universities to produce competent professional social workers with transferable knowledge and skills. Thus, the National Joint Consultative Committee for Social Work Education (NJCCSWE), whose members comprise Malaysian public HEI offering social work education, was formed in 2012 (Azman and Abbas, 2012), with the aim of improving the standards, competency and direction of social work education across Malaysia.

Despite on-going efforts to enhance the social work profession in Malaysia, there remain a limited number of qualified social workers in practice. To fill this void, public HEI offer certificates and diplomas courses to practising social workers who have no formal social work qualifications. This certification programme allows social workers to have some basic competencies in serving the various population groups, particularly marginalized populations and people made vulnerable.

Malaysia has yet to have legislation to regulate social work practice, education and profession. The MASW, the NJCCSWE and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development are currently and aggressively pushing for the establishment of the Acts and standards related to social work (Azman and Singh, 2019). With a Social Work Act, much more can be achieved to make social work a much needed and recognised helping profession in the country.

Social Work Field Practice

Social work field practice is integral to the curriculum (Walsh, et al., 2019). The experience gained during field practice is essential to high-quality social work education (Petra et al., 2020). It is through field practice that students are able to employ the theoretical and conceptual knowledge learned in the classroom in real-world settings. Shulman (2005) re-emphasized that field practice involves the head (knowledge and cognitions), the heart (emotions, ethics, and use of self), and the hand (learning by doing). During field practice, social work students are supervised by experienced social workers and work with diverse service user systems. Students experience many aspects of social work practice while working in social services agencies (Kay and Curington, 2018).

All undergraduate and postgraduate social work students are required to undertake field practice to develop their competencies as social work professionals (Petra, et al., 2020). In the United States (US), the Council of Social Work Education (2015) guidance dictates that undergraduate social work students must undergo a minimum of 400 practicum hours while postgraduate social work students are required to undergo 900 hours of practice,

as field practice defines social work pedagogy. In Malaysia, undergraduate social work students complete 900 - 1000 practicum hours, while postgraduates undertake 600 - 900 hours.

Social work graduates need to demonstrate core competencies, which are essential for professional social work practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008; Johnson et al., 2012; Noronha and Monteiro, 2017). A series of focus group discussions, conducted by the authors between January and June 2019, with Malaysian social service providers offering field practice opportunities, explored the various elements or indicators to measure social work students' capabilities or competencies. Findings clearly indicated that the core elements required would be the students' capabilities in applying their knowledge, values, ethics and skills with people in practice. Our research identified central elements for developing the field practice curriculum in Malaysia (see acknowledgement below).

The lockdown, designed to stop the spread of COVID-19, severely affected the implementation of social work field practice in Malaysia. Most social services agencies temporarily ceased operations and students needed to postpone their field practice until the next academic session. Uncertainty remains over when agencies might operate normally again. This has undoubtedly delayed students' progress as they are unable to finish the required field placement hours for graduating. Furthermore, social work educators needed to determine the activities or assessments that could make up for the uncompleted field practice hours. This created a stressful situation for both social work educators and students.

Responses and Strategies

Because of the centrality of field education, any alternatives, in the Malaysian curriculum, must not dilute its rigour, must meet the required hours and provide similar experiences in conducting individual casework, group work and community work. To achieve this, several strategies were discussed, refined, and implemented to ensure that social work students would be able to fulfil their outcome-based learning, whilst adhering to MCO rules and regulations implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education and the government.

In order to cater for graduating students, priority was given to those who had started their field practice prior to the pandemic. Students who had completed 80 per cent of the total field hours (for example a total of 960 hours for BSW and 600 hours for MSW), were deemed to have successfully completed practicum requirements. This decision met the guidelines of the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) – the body endorsing and certifying all higher education degrees. The reduced hours also met the restriction orders imposed by the government. At USM, the missing hours were replaced through online supervision, seminars and case discussions.

For non-graduating students several measures were taken. Case studies were introduced to replace face-to-face direct field practice with individuals and families (case work). For example, students undertook at least one basic case study based on secondary data from credible sources. The task required students to identify issues emerging from the case, discuss the implications of these and propose the most appropriate interventions to be implemented. The case study developed problem-solving approaches enabling students to apply the values, knowledge and social work skills required, and present an appropriate intervention. The students' competencies for critical analysis, problem-solving and the

application of methods and intervention are evaluated via online presentations, discussion and submission of full written case report.

Group-work practice was replaced by remote practice involving students in pairs making a video recording of a mock group work practice using digital tools such as Loom, Flipgrid, Zoom or Webex. The video recording focused on the application of group work methods that were underpinned by the knowledge, values, ethics and social work skills students learned from group work classes. Students' abilities and competencies were also evaluated via online discussions, presentations, submission of reports which include video recordings, and critical self-reflection on the assigned tasks.

In terms of community work practice, students were required to conduct two community work activities to address issues in their local community. Similar to other tasks, students could use any digital tool they deemed suitable. For example, students were required to facilitate an online intervention and webinar series involving members of the local community, to submit evidence of the activity and a full written report. Once again, the competency of the students was measured according to their levels of criticality in assessing, planning, implementing interventions, exercising evaluation and terminating the activities.

Students were required to be in weekly contact with their supervisors and to report on their progress or other matters related to their field practice. Students were asked to present a practicum report at the end of their field practice to share their experiences with lecturers, other social work students, and their practice agency supervisors. The presentations were conducted online using platforms such as Zoom. The exercise focused on interventions students conducted, the challenges they faced, and what they learnt from the field placement and related experiences. This reinforced their learning, allowed educators to assess students' developing competence and to evaluate where changes in delivery and curricular were necessary.

Social work field practices and supervision in Malaysia will continue using the various online platforms after the pandemic as it has become a 'new norm' in teaching and learning. A short survey was conducted with social work students in Malaysia concerning their experiences of online field education and supervision. Students reported that the workload appeared greater than regular field education and supervision. Also, somewhat negatively, students experienced increased stress as they had to cope with multiple course assignments. This feedback led to intense discussion between social work educators to reflect and adjust the different forms of assignment for all social work courses, including the components of casework, group work, community work. As educators, we experienced the changes in diverse ways. The online assignments appeared to test student learning and competency development appropriately but they were brought in quickly and we would have liked more time to discuss, agree and determine how online assignments can best be used. However, we were pleased with the assignments and ability to assess competence at this time, including the additional, unintended element of assessing student ability to work under pressure and in novel situations.

There is as yet no feedback from employers and agency supervisors but this, when it comes, may, again, demand curricular changes. Developing responsive, agile education practices, especially in field education, represents a key point of our learning from this pandemic. We will also know more about the effectiveness of these measures in the future when service user feedback is gained. We recognize, as a programme, that it is important for evaluative feedback to be taken from all areas to ensure student learning is maximized. Without central

standardization we continue this within our universities. While we were pleased with the pedagogical appropriateness of our response to student competency assessment, we do recognize that we need to continue to develop online approaches and to take time and to undertake formal evaluations over time to ensure they remain fit for purpose and improve. A more systematic delivery and the opportunity to introduce students to them would help to allay student anxieties.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic will be with us for some time. Malaysia, like other countries across the world, is slowly opening up where the pandemic is under control. This unprecedented situation has forced all of us to change how we live and work. In higher education institutions, online teaching has become the best alternative given the circumstances and have shifted social work educators to rely more heavily on digital tools than ever before. While recently considered a novelty, online teaching has become the norm, and educators have been forced to embrace the use of the technology as the main medium of teaching and learning. This has demanded new learning from educators and the terms 'working from home' and 'learning from home' have become catchphrases of 2020.

While educators and students show high enthusiasm in the use of online learning tools, there are concerns over how it affects the quality social work education (Burgess and Sievertsen, 2020), and it remains important to ensure that social work graduates have the necessary competencies to excel in the social work profession.

Educators and students have also encountered various challenges in developing technology-based approaches including familiarisation with and learning to use the new online technological tools for teaching, overcoming difficulties in internet access, increased workloads in meeting coursework requirements, and personal matters that may affect either students and educators psychologically, emotionally or socially. These experiences lead us to ponder how we develop learning and teaching activities in the future. As well as what may be gained and what lost in the process; and this will become more apparent over time in a post-lockdown era as we learn more about how students have experienced this enforced adaptation to social work education in Malaysia. There is no going back to 'business as usual' and our learning so far indicates that virtual teaching and learning is here to stay. This requires HEIs offering social work programmes to be willing and able to adapt both curriculum and mode of delivery. With students returning to the campus in phases to adhere to physical distancing requirements, virtual learning remains the best method to facilitate access to education. In Malaysia there are limited practicum opportunities owing to the small number of human services organisations in operation. Thus, social work programmes must find alternative and creative ways for social work students to continue their study, and eventually be graduating to meet the job market. Our earlier project brought stakeholders together to identify the competences and capabilities for field education. However, the current pandemic precluded a partnership approach to the initial immediate changes. This is something we will seek to address post-pandemic.

Practicum training is central to the social work curriculum, as it allows lecturers to measure the capabilities or competencies of the social work students as qualified social workers. The majority of HEI offering social work programmes in Malaysia were able to facilitate social work field practice and develop appropriate virtual education, despite the

restrictions imposed by the MCO. These experiences offer possibilities for course designers and lecturers to manage and restructure the requirements of field practice to ensure such fundamental learning can be implemented during trying times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly and, possibly, permanently transformed social work field practices and supervision. In the future, adaptation to online education and assessment of our students will remain central to their development as competent and capable practitioners.

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Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interests was reported by the authors.

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