Social work education in a global pandemic: strategies, reflections, and challenges

During the first week of March 2020, the Editorial Board of this journal met in Manchester, England where members from across England, Scotland, Spain, and the United States joined for the annual Board meeting. Back then, handshakes were a 'normal' formality in greeting one another (in this part of the Western world) before taking a seat tightly around a Board room table where water glasses were filled from communal bottles handed across and down the tables to each other; coughs and sneezes were relatively ignored. These practices were accompanied by some slight rumblings and mumblings about this novel coronavirus, COVID-19, that seemed to be affecting 'other parts' of the world, but had not reached 'these' shores; at least to a level that caused concern, pause, or action. Literally one week later, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the terms 'social distancing,' 'lockdown,' and 'quarantine' had global meaning.

Over seven months on, the world continues to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and grapples with the drastic changes that have been endured across the personal, relational, social, employment, and educational aspects of our lives. We have watched the number of positive COVID-19 cases reach over 33.5 million worldwide and, at the time of writing this editorial, the total number of deaths have surpassed one million (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 has disproportionally affected older adults, individuals with pre-existing conditions, people with less financial resources, and individuals from marginalized groups, thus, highlighting the inequalities and disparities rooted in classism, capitalism, and systemic racism and oppression that can no longer be ignored. We wonder if it is possible, or accurate, to talk about acclimatization to changes under COVID-19 as the 'new normal'? Rather, should we brace ourselves for numerous 'normals' as we continue to experience ebbs and flows in changes to our 'normal' ways of working, socializing, and experiencing the world, and begin to prepare for 'second waves' and potentially third waves?

As Archer-Kuhn, Ayala, Hewson, and Letkemann discussed in their reflective article on the experience in Canada, COVID-19 hit social work education like a tsunami and catapulted social work programs into remote working and practice learning, and online delivery and virtual platforms. This situation left educators being reactive and providing educational and support services to students in a short turnaround, which was often deemed less than adequate. Yet, equally the tsunami sparked opportunities for innovation, creativity, and humanistic endeavors in meetings the needs of the students and moving forward in delivering social work education remotely and virtually. These innovative efforts will survive the COVID-19 pandemic and will serve as the basis for new ways of working, thus, the change

and discomfort endured has led to some new practices to serve as the 'new normal' at least, and as more efficient and effective ways of working at best. The social work education community has many strengths, resources, strategies, best practices, experiences, and stories to share, and this special issue aims to highlight the impact COVID-19 has had on different nations, creative responses developed to manage the pandemic, and ways in which the social work education community can learn and support each other for dealing with natural/man-made disasters in the future. Key themes across the special issue include developments in the use of online and virtual platforms, practice learning and practice placements, service user involvement, and the nature of social work. The journey and work through the pandemic and beyond will continue.

Online and virtual platforms

For many social work programs, technology has served as a viable alternative to in-person teaching and practice learning opportunities. With access to online learning platforms, such as Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets and others, social work educators were able to transform learning from the physical class-room to a virtual classroom, and students were able to meet with service users with the assistance of telehealth technologies. Such technological innovations have assisted many social work programs to move through the crisis versus stalling or halting all educational activities. As with many aspects of COVID-19, this was not a fully inclusive option for all educators, students, or service users as demonstrated by the research findings and reported experiences as presented in this special issue. Educators felt unprepared and reluctant to teach online, as described by Csoba and Diebel in Hungary, with some educators not having access to the appropriate technological equipment to deliver teaching remotely, as discussed by Onalu, Chukwu and Okoye from Nigeria. Additional challenges for students were reported, such as lack of technological equipment and Internet capability.

Papouli, Chatzifotiou, and Tsairidis present findings from an online survey distributed to social work students in Greece on their use of online and virtual platforms during COVID-19. The three themes from this study resonate as the themes that are also present across other stories in this special issue featuring the ways in which Universities and social service organizations across different countries quickly moved to online and virtual platforms. The first theme is the extent to which the students could use online and virtual platforms for academic study and e-learning. Many students were able to make the quick shift from in-person to online learning and even extended their use of technology to further engage in educational activities to keep them active and occupied during social distancing and isolation, such as taking language classes, or online music and art workshops. Yet, for others, the shift highlighted inequities among students that is noticed by authors in this issue representing experiences from countries across the globe, which included lack of access to technological equipment, no or poor Internet connectivity, home environments not conducive for learning, and work or caring responsibilities that limited the ability to be present for online learning. Quick responses from Universities and educators were launched, such as the distribution of

educational resources to students in Chile prepared by the Social Work Researchers Network, as described by Matus Sepulveda, Kaulino de Almeida, Muñoz Arce, and Reininger Pollak.

The second theme from Paploui et al.'s study is the use of online and virtual platforms to stay connected, particularly with family and friends, through participation in online discussion and support groups, or by accessing counseling services, or other fitness and wellness classes. The immediate shut down or partial shut downs of economies and Universities accompanied by governmental orders for social distancing, isolation, and quarantine, left many students, staff, and educators isolated and lonely without the physical and social space to connect on educational and social issues. While many of the students in Paploui et al.'s study demonstrated their creativity in seeking social supports virtually, authors in this issue described more concerted efforts to simulate and stimulate social connection through online and virtual platforms. Farigon, Sanfelici, and Sicora in Italy describe how they built and maintained connection with students, sometimes who were living away from their families, to strengthen their feeling of being part of a community. Gómez Ciriano, writing of the experience in Spain, described how a country characterized by closeness of relationships and community attempted to create a new online culture that aimed to maximize the amount of emotions, expressions, and feelings that were naturally lost by being virtual versus face-to-face.

The third theme in Papolui et al.'s study was the use of online and virtual platforms to participate in solidarity and volunteer activities. Students initiated efforts to volunteer for neighbors and communities, which included providing psychosocial support services, animal care, and learning support and information services, which mirrored efforts described by other authors representing different countries. As described by Yuan, He, and Duan, social workers and students in China also participated in volunteer activities to provide immediate responses to needs in the community delivered both online and offline, which included delivering supplies and providing emotional and social support and counseling. To respond to the immediate transformation from in-person social services to virtual, via 'telehealth' or 'telebehavioralhealth,' Wilkerson, Wolfe-Taylor, Deck, Wahler, and Davis describe how a University in the United States quickly developed a free online training for students and social work practitioners on best practice in telehealth accessed by over 2000 users.

Practice learning and practice placements

Practice learning, or field education,—the terminology varies—is a core element of the education of social work professionals, relying on the support and commitment of state, independent, and voluntary sector agencies providing 'human services'; however, these services may be organized in the different countries of the world. Payment to agencies for the provision of placements, or by agencies to students, exists in some nations but not in others, and so the supply of placements can be a challenge. Typically, students are required to complete a specific number of hours or days in practice, often mandated by regulatory bodies; and agencies provide supervision of day to day activities and are usually responsible for providing or contributing to the assessment of students' practice. In the context of a fast-moving

global pandemic, organizations struggled to work out how to deliver their core services while complying with national and local restrictions and lockdown, resulting in many student placements suspended or withdrawn.

This interruption to normal placement activity threatened students' progress, and the potential delays to qualification not only created significant personal and financial difficulties for individual students, but also had consequences for universities' planning and management of their programs and for the supply of new practitioners into the social work workforce at a time of increased need. Contributions to this special edition record responses to these challenges, revealing examples of social work educators and practitioners finding creative ways of turning crisis into opportunity, while also foregrounding some of the themes that have permeated commentaries on practice education submitted to this journal in recent years, such as questions about the rationale for the specified number of hours to be spent in practice learning, the value of 'non-traditional' placements, how to measure quality in practice education, and gaps in the practice curriculum, with implications for our understanding of what social work is, and could—and perhaps should—be.

Papers from Australia, Northern Ireland, the UK, the USA and Malaysia talked about the relaxation or removal of practice hour requirements, and a focus instead on demonstrating that students had met practice learning outcomes, with a more permissive approach to how this might be achieved. O'Rourke, Maguire, Tanner and Mullineux consider Northern Ireland's strategy of withdrawing final year students early from their placements, and recruiting them into the social work workforce. In the USA, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) allowed a change from practice 'in-person' to 'remote-based' field activity, as discussed in the account by Morris, Dragone, Peabody and Carr of a student-initiated telephone companionship project for isolated older people; and Australian modifications to standards allowed work from home and the recognition of 'non-traditional' placements, examples of which are described in Morley and Clarke's paper. These included an international activist placement conducted via Zoom, organizing and mobilizing for social change, and an academic-led applied research project with a focus on exploring how research can advance goals of social and environmental justice

The responses to the pandemic by those responsible for social work field education have been remarkable for their creativity and imagination, but also for the speed and pace of their implementation. They have demonstrated the flexibility of social work practitioners and educators, but Beesley and Devonald's paper, while celebrating the achievements of an established UK employer–university partnership in responding effectively to the local placement situation, identified that some stakeholders were less involved in decision-making than others. They discussed how students and service users, although represented within the partnership, were informed about the plans as they unfolded, but were not fully included in the decision-making process; a theme that can be found in other papers in this special edition.

The work highlights some surprising contradictions in the impact of the pandemic on practice education opportunities; and in doing so raises interesting questions about the scope and ambition of social work and social work education. As movement was curtailed and access to physical spaces restricted, so virtual and conceptual spaces opened. Initial concerns about the suitability of virtual forms of communication for

teaching and learning, and for service delivery, gave way to acceptance of the contribution these technologies could make, bringing students and services users together across geographical distances in way that may otherwise never have happened. This took place alongside a realization that assessment methods and requirements will need to be revisited, as discussed by Asman, Singh, Parker and Crabtree in their paper looking at the competency requirements of social work students in Malaysia.

Adjusting to social work and social work education during a pandemic has also foregrounded concerns about gaps in the social work curriculum, some of which had been emerging before COVID-19, but which have taken on increased significance in recent months. Csobu, looking at the experience in Hungary, emphasized the importance of developing students' skills in online and digital methods of social work practice, and the challenges for educators in achieving this. Onalu and colleagues note that the emphasis on micro/casework problems in Nigerian social work education has left students overwhelmed by the macro challenges arising from the pandemic and argue that teaching about social work responses to crises and disasters should be included in the curriculum. Morley and Clarke remind us of the importance of critical pedagogy in the education of social workers; the impact of the pandemic having provided visceral examples of patterns of inequality and their consequences, and opportunity to consider the social work response to this.

The reflections of the contributors to this special edition raise questions about whether these urgent and pragmatic changes to the regulation of practice education, and the innovative approaches that followed, should be reviewed post-COVID, and about which, if any, might be retained and integrated into new models of practice teaching and learning.

The voice of service users

In reading the different contributions to this special edition, it is noticeable that there is a lack of service user voices. Sen, Fetherstone, Gupta, Kerr, McIntyre and Quin-Aziz in their account of the development and production of an online COVID-19 journal are a major exception to this noting that over 25% of the contributions to their free-to-access journal were from people with lived experience. This silencing of service users comes against a backdrop of the launch of the joint IFSW and IAASW Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training in August 2020 that stated social work education programmes; '*must* (italics in original) … develop a proactive strategy towards facilitating Service User involvement in all aspects of design, planning and delivery of study programmes' (IFSW and IAASW, 2020). In order to achieve meaningful service user involvement, they also demanded that programmes ensured reasonable adjustments were made to facilitate their participation. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have undermined these aspirations, as social work educators have struggled to find ways of maintaining, let alone developing, service user involvement in responding to the challenges to social work education during the pandemic. We can understand that such a position was a response to the speed of the impact of COVID 19 on courses and the need to adapt to the changing circumstances to ensure that students were not disadvantaged in the process. However, such a position neglects the daily experience of service users and reinforces the view of service user involvement as a luxury or tokenism that in times of difficulty becomes expendable. This neglects the ability of

many service users who are already involved with social work courses' including their ability to be nimble, manage competing and complex priorities whilst bringing their experiential knowledge and wisdom to the support of students and social work educators alike.

Reflections on the changing nature of social work

It is clear from the contributions to this special edition that social work's role in response to COVID-19 has been experienced differently across the world. In Nigeria (Onalu et al.) social workers below a certain grade were sent home and not viewed as 'key workers,'. In China Yuan et al. recount how the pandemic offered the social work profession the opportunity to increase its public esteem by quickly developing policies and practices valued by citizens. In Northern Ireland, (O'Rourke et al.) the partnership between the Universities, the regulator and employers allowed students to qualify early and enter the profession even though they had not completed their full number of practice learning days. The Universities identified any competencies the qualifying students needed to evidence in their first year of employment, the Assessed Year in Employment. In comparison most other countries struggled for students to complete placements and their courses with other students having to complete placements at the start of their second year. This begins to beg the question as to why different countries have different numbers of hours/days as highlighted in the article by McFadden, Russ, Blakeamn, Kirwin, Arland, Lahteinen, Baugerud and Tham with a comparative review of eight countries. Are these days/hours merely a bureaucratic requirement rather than focusing on learning outcomes which could be met within a minimum and maximum hours/days?

Throughout this special edition you will see examples of how social work schools rapidly responded to the crisis in moving to online learning where there was much learning along the way. Rodriguez also challenges social work educators in recognizing how COVID 19 has impacted disproportionately on marginalized communities with his rallying call and identification of practical steps for social worker educators and social work students working together to develop new skills to close the gap. Within all this we see a movement towards a need to re(value) and (re)discover community-based practices whilst (re)evaluating the curriculum in response to changing nature of social work practice with a pandemic context. There is also a need to affirm the importance of activism to challenge digital poverty, inequalities, marginalization and promote social justice. Social work practice in many countries has become too narrowly focused on individual practice and whilst this is important in response to the pandemic it is not patently not enough.

Lastly, as these articles show there are many similarities and differences to the problems faced within the different nations reflected in this special edition. COVID-19 has shown how the world is connected and what happens in one area can have ripples and impacts in others. Thus, with the increased connectivity and online learning this makes possible, it is now more important than ever for students in one nation to learn with and from those in other nations. There is a real opportunity here to create international classrooms.

Conclusion and future worlds

The major conclusion from the 21countries represented in this special edition is that social work education will never be the same. This raises potential questions which we need to consider, and scenarios for which we need to prepare. The speed and creativity in moving to online teaching and the recognition of its many advantages mean that it cannot be put back in the box. If social work education is to become more blended, both online and face-to face, what is the best blend for effectively ensuring the development of the social workers of the future? Or, will we find Universities seeing this as an opportunity to increase profits and reduce costs? It is also likely that many conferences in the future will have both face-to-face and online sessions and what will this mean for building networks and disseminating knowledge?

These papers have highlighted the many similarities and differences in the experiences of the different nations which provide opportunities for new learning. With our greater connectivity can we build more accessible national and global learning opportunities in online classrooms? How should social work education and social work students in lower middle-income countries be supported to benefit from the positive elements of these changes? Also, as creative opportunities for practice learning expand, how can we sustain these non-traditional placements or, will we default to our previous placement activity?

We would also like to suggest that there is even a bigger challenge for social work education in the post COVID-19 world. How will nations pay the costs of the pandemic where they have experienced increased unemployment, reduced gross domestic product (GDP) and increased national debt? This is likely to lead to further government chosen austerity measures—but where will this austerity fall? Within the current neo-liberal orthodoxy this is likely to mean a return to the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', a further dismantling of the welfare state safety net (where there is one) increased eligibility thresholds and reduced benefits along with greater precarity and stigmatizing of service users. Will social work educators create alliances with such groups and reflect these possibilities and consequences in their teaching and scholarship standing up for compassion, social justice and human rights? In such a situation, social work education has to decide whether it wants to be part of the problem or part of the solution. If part of the solution, the creativity, interconnectedness, and responsiveness shown here will be critical particularly as any chosen austerity measures are likely to be viewed as essential and the new 'normal'!

Alternatively, we can try and capitalize on some of the positives from the experience. We can emphasize our interconnectedness and our impact upon the planet and look more towards learning together across nations and continents. Can we develop a more proactive 'disaster' response aspect to our education of tomorrow's social workers? We can evidence not only the medical costs but social costs of the pandemic ensuring that the well-being and mental health of citizens as a consequence of government responses to the virus are recorded and responded to? Maybe we can even develop our own telesocial care whilst also recognizing the important contribution of lower paid workers in social care and residential support of the elderly and food distribution. There are also opportunities here to create new alliances with service users and non-government organizations for students to learn

new skills and engage in activism and policy development to help influence governments in how economic recovery can be achieved in ways other than the 'old austerities'.

Finally, we encourage you to read the different papers whilst considering the implications for the future of social work education and join the debate as to what type of scenario you wish to work towards.

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