

# The Challenges of Social Work for Practical Major Students at Times of Crises from the Perspective of Mentors

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## Abstract

This paper examines the challenges, as reported from the professors' perspective, faced by students in their field course of a baccalaureate social work program during the coronavirus pandemic. The paper also proposes improvements in the field training course for use in any future crisis. Furthermore, it aims to highlight the importance of field training for the students. Using a qualitative approach, researchers interviewed a sample of eight faculty mentors (3 men and 5 women) who taught and supervised students in the baccalaureate programs from the University of Jordan, Al-Balqa' Applied University, and Dhofar University. Study results show that students face numerous challenges, such as lack of communication between them and the supervisors in the field institutions, student dissatisfaction with the concept and implementation of online-training training, struggle in learning basic skills to handle certain intervention situations, and the difficulty of applying these skills remotely.

Recommendation: Increased use of smart devices and digital platforms during field practice. The creation of new education materials that include visual elements that can be used more interactively in an online environment.

**Keywords:** challenges, practicing social work, mentors, online training

## 1. Introduction

Despite the enduring reliance on inappropriate approaches based on colonizing West-centric models and discourses, pedagogical practices using critical reflection can improve the capability of social work educators to prepare students to work towards social change and social justice (Morley & O'Connor, 2016). Social Work (SW) programs and field settings have been helping students build reflective SW practice competencies using virtual platforms. These competencies may be evaluated through "Workplace-Based Assessments" forms that require both trainees' and trainers' input and authentication. The Specialty Advisor Committee for Cardiothoracic Surgery has established a minimum requirement for 50 of these forms to be completed in a given training year, and for these to span the entire training curriculum. There is also a requirement for evidence of learning and commitment in research, quality improvement work, medical education, management, and leadership (Cardiothoracic Surgery Curriculum, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has greatly influenced how people live and work all around the world. The enforcement of lockdowns has significantly impacted industries, including education, as schools and universities in the world were forced to close their campuses and this subsequently disrupted the learning of millions of students (Rahman, 2020). Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. As social work scholars and educators dedicated to human rights, we are a bit stunned as we navigate this new portal. To create justice-focused change, social workers must engage clients, communities, and political leaders (McPherson, J. 2020). To establish a new normal as a consequence of the disruption due to the covid pandemic, educational and professional bodies should embrace this opportunity to critically assess and challenge conventional practices while seeking to dynamically support new education and well-being paths.

## 2. Literature Review

It is an opportune time for social workers to commit to a rights-based approach in their practice. Social workers should utilize their micro- and macro-level skills to address people's immediate needs while asserting pressure for fair restructuring of privilege, power, and assets in our societies (Mapp et al., 2019). Social work students' transition from class-based learning to experiential learning during fieldwork training marks their entrance into the world of the profession and the demands of learning through practice. The significance of field experience in shaping social work students is supreme, and cannot be repudiated (Abuiyada, 2017, p.1847).

The anxiety and uncertainty during the time of COVID-19 pandemic challenged our conceptions of the social work field practice landscape. Nonetheless crisis situations can also present and expand the opportunities to rebuild, advocate, improve, and ultimately achieve a more inclusive, ethical, and reflective practice that promotes health, well-being, social justice, human rights, allyship, empowerment, and a stronger sense of community (Udaha & Francis, 2021, p..60)

The study (Azman, et al., 2020) concluded that the consequences of the forced adjustment of students to social work with new methods of completing field training considering the coronavirus pandemic caused the creation of a set of challenges that hindered the successful conduct of training courses. According to the results of this study, these challenges revolve around two aspects. The first is related to technical problems such as internet connection, availability of devices, and other obstacles that cause an increase in the student's study burden. The other related to the extent to which the students were affected by what was new in their lives during the current crisis psychologically, socially, and emotionally, and the direct reflection of these effects on their learning to practice the profession during the field training courses.

(Malka, 2021) agreed with our study when she concluded that the students suffer from great difficulty in achieving a balance between their personal dealing with the crisis and their response to its negative effects on them and their role as trained social workers in providing support and assistance to the beneficiaries to face the crisis itself and its consequences on them. The results of this study also showed that virtual training from home led to the inability of most students to separate the training time from their private time, in addition to not realizing the duplication between their regular roles at home and their professional roles in training.

Indeed, the study (Hindi and Mojally, 2021, p.37) came with similar results showing that the problems of the Internet and devices posed a major obstacle for students and academics during the training course electronically, after it showed that it was not possible to conduct training on the ground because the institution refused to receive students. This is in addition to the weak experience of faculty members in using technology, and the students' need for more instructional lectures to use electronic platforms for training. Therefore, students completely reject the idea of virtual training solutions from home, in place of the actual training on the ground, as it limits the student's ability to communicate with their professors and with each other, and this extinguishes a kind of superficiality on training in one way or another. (Hussain, 2020) supported these results when it concluded that the new ways of performing training courses during the pandemic led to a noticeable lack of scientific and practical experience for students and a clear deficiency in their psychological and emotional skills compared to those acquired by students in real training.

In contrast to previous studies, the study (Greenberg et al., 2021) highlighted in its results the effectiveness and success of virtual field training materials on the Internet, the similarity of its results to the results of actual training on the ground, and the extent to which both teachers and students were satisfied with the new experience and its conformity with their expectations without the presence of No challenges mentioned.

This positive view of the reality of field training in light of the coronavirus pandemic was supported by the study (Csoba & Diebel, 2020), which showed that there are a set of opportunities granted by the pandemic conditions to both social work students and beneficiaries that were not available to them in advance; For example, the virtual training experience for students on the Internet contributed to the development of their personal and educational skills significantly, while allowing clients to access group work services despite the large distances that prevent them from the locations of social institutions. The current circumstances in light of the crisis also contributed to the development of the environment and methods of training students by discovering modern professional aspects such as the digital environment for social work. While the study (Baciu & Tranca, 2021, p.188) agreed with this study that the conditions of the pandemic and the accompanying virtual training provided students with additional opportunities to develop their professional skills in practicing social work at the individual and collective level. The study (Azman, et al, 2020) came with different results indicating that Corona pandemic and the ensuing closures and restrictions limited the ability to devise new and creative ways to train social work students to practice the profession.

The lack of resources and infrastructure to train social work students, in addition to a noticeable lack of social institutions and social workers qualified to train them in the field, were among the most prominent challenges facing field training students according to the results of the study (Tanga, 2013, p.19).

### 3. Methodology

Qualitative research is especially appropriate in studying the phenomenon of field practice. Phenomenology refers to a philosophical paradigm for conducting qualitative research that emphasizes people's subjective experiences, and interpretations of the world (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). To gain a better understanding of the context and environment of the challenges in social work field practice, researchers used a qualitative approach. This approach helps in exploring the context and environment of field practice from the perspective of the mentor sample.

#### 3.1 Research Questions

What was the importance of field training for baccalaureate social work students?

What were the challenges of practicing social work during the coronavirus pandemic?

What are suggestions and improvements for future field practice?

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview instrument developed by the researchers. Mentor participants were interviewed using this semi-structured process. The interview questions were created using the research questions as a framework, and they were open-ended. The responses for this study were recorded using field notes and an audio recording device. The recording was documented verbatim. The researchers read and coded responses one question at a time across all participant interviews based on the purpose of the study.

#### 3.3 Population and Sampling

*Population.* The University of Jordan, Albalqaa' Applied University, located in Jordan, and Dhofar University, located in Sultanate of Oman are the research population centers for this study.

*Sample.* This study included mentors who supervised field training in two major universities in Jordan and one in the Sultanate of Oman, which has BA in social work program. These included teachers ( $n = 8$ ) 3 men and 5 women. The participants were informed of the research study at the beginning of the discussion by introducing the purpose of the research. The purpose of this sample was suitable for the research questions because the purpose of this study was to recognize the challenges of practicing social work during the coronavirus epidemic from the perspective of the mentors.

### 4. Results

The practice of online-training online learning has had a tremendous impact on the students. In the beginning, the participants in this study confirmed that during the lockdown students did not go to the field, which means no practicing but they were still required to pass this course, so practice online which needs the following; Providing students with the most important applied knowledge that must be mastered in dealing with cases such as psychological measures, applying what is learned to the surrounding environment (relatives) instead of real cases in institutions, training the skills of therapeutic interviews, and discussing what is filmed by students on learning sites such as zoom or teams.

#### 4.1 The Importance of Field Training for BA Social Work Students

Field training is a key component of social work education. Theoretical and practical learning are crucial for students to become professional social workers (Alhajjaj, 2019, p.1).

Respondents identified that field training is a professional method performed by specialists to improve the performance of students and complete the educational process as a social service.

Omar stated that *Field training serves as a professional method employed by specialists to enhance students' performance and facilitate the completion of the educational process.* Other scholars agreed.

Social work training needs to have a paradigm shift from massification to slowing down and focusing on quality delivery methods, practice and standards. With needs on the rise, social work training curricula should incorporate essential subjects such as epidemiology, and pandemic management to equip students with skills needed for public health emergency and service delivery at all levels (Udaha & Francis, 2021, p.64).

Also, Sharifah indicated that field training covers the technical aspect and the professional preparation of students in general.

*Preparing students by equipping them with requisite knowledge and skills proficient in applying the profession's principles and ethics across various institutional settings*

Fieldwork in this virtual environment requires a particular toolkit. The students must consider whether and how their existing methods training is suitable for the new environment and enhance a particular set of skills (Krause, et al, 2021, p.267).

The increased psychological and social pressures as well as the entry of technology in practice for field training increased the importance of field training to prepare students electronically by providing them with methods and roles of social skills during the pandemic. The importance of practicing during the coronavirus pandemic, also enhances the cognitive skills of the trainee students from the impaired cognitive diversity that they receive through the available technology with much less effort and cost to the students and their families.

Roya said *Students should receive training in technology so that we can enhance their cognitive skills, overcoming any challenges posed by cognitive diversity*. Also, Hasan mentioned that *students should have more training courses on how to use technology like zoom and Microsoft teams*.

Field education is the key pedagogy for social work, aiming to incorporate the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020). All participants agreed that field training is important for students in social work. Mona assured that *students should be involved in the training courses no matter if its crises or not, we should find alternatives so students can practice before they graduate*

Field training programs are self-directed projects for students who are more effective in developing culturally competent practices and contribute to ensuring sustainable development; They also work to provide evidence-based knowledge for social work practice on environmental issues in society (Al-Makhamreh, et al., 2016, p.870) Which includes issues related to health and disease.

#### *4.2 The Challenges of Practicing during Coronavirus Pandemic*

Social work educators face numerous challenges in completing online learning. Most of the respondents stated that many of the social work educators and students do not possess sufficient technical proficiency and proficiency to conduct online teaching and learning.

Hasan mentioned that *students struggle to pick up essential skills for handling situations and facing difficulty in applying them from a distance*.

All respondents agreed there were many challenges of practicing social work including a lack of direct contact between students and their supervisors, student's disapproval of the idea of online-training training, and the problems regarding the internet. Omar confirmed that *during the coronavirus pandemic, there's been a noticeable lack of communication between students and their supervisors*.

Also, Ghareeb said *some difficulties arise when attempting to communicate with all students simultaneously, especially during online-training work situations*.

In addition, some respondents indicated that the lack of sufficient experience among the workers in the field for online-training training and the use of specialized applications to become practical does not lead to the desired goal due to the incapacities of communication between the trainee student and the "specialist" worker, for lack of experience in distance learning skills, including management methods, classroom control, and student interaction.

Yamamh indicated that *there's a disconnect between students and their supervisors, and many institutions show little cooperation in organizing training workshops*.

Mona indicated that *limited experience in the field among workers in online-training training and utilizing specialized applications presents a challenge to achieving desired training objectives*.

On the other hand, some participants indicated that online-training training has enabled students to use social networks effectively and scientifically and to be able to use new applications to communicate with institutions and the university, including training supervisors. Salma indicated that *regarding the distribution of internet access to all students, there are challenges associated with teaching both students and educators how to use electronic applications*.

Also, Hassan mentioned that *the students were unprepared to learn and implement, thus presenting challenging*

ideas.

#### 4.3 The Suggestions and Aspirations for the Future

This work highlights numerous important aspects of trainees at a time of dynamic external pressures, with implications for individuals and organizations; so, the respondents were asked to provide suggestions and recommendations.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a call to action not just for an immediate social work response, but also for advancing the profession. It will be a focal point for social work to redesign, develop and address new ways to enhance social work education, training, and engagement with students. Advancing social work education requires significant efforts to revisit our pedagogical approaches, learning and teaching practices. There needs to be more emphasis on public health management, social policymaking, and inter professional learning in social work curriculum (Udaha & Francis, 2021, p.64)

Respondents suggested that conducting workshops, mental health training courses, and volunteer campaigns electronically through various applications is necessary. Roya emphasizes *the significance of organizing workshops, mental health training sessions, and volunteer campaigns electronically using various applications.*

Salma also suggests *Utilizing essential applications like Zoom and Teams to communicate electronically with students.*

In addition, providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become a social worker capable of employing the principles and ethics of the profession within different institutions. Hassan confirmed that *Providing students with distance learning skills and utilizing modern technologies to enhance their qualification courses are important.*

They also indicated that Internet access for all students should be free. Sharifah said *Free Internet access should be made available to all students to ensure accessibility.*

Some suggest preparing a specialized field training manual, also contracting official agreements with social institutions and organizations working in the field of social work to train students. Mona mentioned *Developing a specialized field training manual to prepare experienced, competent individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills for trainee students' needs and requirements.* Other researchers stated that using critical and global perspectives and critical pedagogical practices will be necessary to support and challenge students in entering critical reflection processes (Jönssona & Aina Lian Flemb, 2018)

## 5. Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic posed significant personal and professional challenges to trainees.

Respondents focused on the immediate challenges faced during the coronavirus, still some reflected on the lessons learned and the suggestions for social work in the future, and for restructuring social policies that address more fairly the needs of people. Researchers supported these responses.

We need to seize the opportunities in this challenging time and aim to achieve a COVID-19 safe economy and society, where people — everyone, our clients and the communities we work with — can feel safe, have economic opportunity and participate fully in the process of rebuilding communities (Udaha & Francis, 2021, p.59)

Many felt that the practice realities during Covid epidemic have exposed existing weaknesses in the social work profession, thus providing an opportunity to reflect on the nature and practice of social work, how the profession might be better prepared for similar situations in the future and might regain its professional confidence (Banks, et al, 2020, p.579). Although the study shows critical perspectives from the social work educators; this work also highlights several important perspectives of trainees at a time of dynamic external pressures, with implications for individuals and organizations at a national level and beyond. Nonetheless, this crisis is a teachable moment, one for stakeholders to step up and demonstrate an unyielding focus on core medical values, professionalism, quality, and safety of care.

Study respondents expressed concerns about how students in the field can learn how to make interventions if they cannot contact the client directly; Faculty concerns about online learning for practice courses and clinical competencies were documented pre-pandemic. This result agreed with Banks, et al, (2020) and several social workers expressed concerns that practices developed during the pandemic involving little or no personal contact might linger on or be installed permanently.

Similarly, social work students faced several challenges when it comes to online-training learning. Online learning

was the obvious choice, and during this episode of coronavirus, educators and students were eager to embark on a new journey but at the same time were also anxious about many issues, particularly in ensuring the provision of quality social work education (Azman, et al., 2020).

Developing social work practice competencies is complex and requires a combination of procedural competencies such as knowledge and skills, along with met competencies such as self-awareness and self-reflection (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Under those circumstances social work practice took on an improvisatory mode as social workers had to determine and enact safety in new situations on home visits. (Ferguson et al., 2022, p.16). The recent study of that time has revealed that there was poor preparation of social work students for fieldwork practice and a lack of dealing with such crises.

Finally, although the researchers primarily focused on past challenges, participants were also asked to give suggestions and recommendations in facing such crises in the future

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the results of the study researchers recommended: Increased use of smart devices and digital platforms during field practice and creation of new education materials that include visual elements and can be used more interactively in an online environment. Furthermore, training supervisors and students through virtual field training should adopt the electronic social service course to develop the skills of students and teachers.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

The research had certain limitations. The sample size was small because we needed to measure the objectives of the study from the perspective of educators, as a qualitative study based on limited numbers of mentors who specialized in social work. It is very possible that participants elsewhere had some different experiences. If the sample size were larger, generalizing would be possible and be able to draw wider ranged conclusions.

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### Authors contributions

Dr. Huda A. Alhajjaj was responsible for methodology, results, conclusion, and revising. Dr. Ali S Tabook and Dr.

Nasser A. ALSaiari were responsible for drafting the manuscript, introduction and literature review. Dr. Mohamed M. Foda and Dr. Amneh A. Gharaibeh were responsible for abstract, data collection, recommendations, and limitations of the study. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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