

Social Work Education During COVID-19: Students' Perceptions of the Challenges and Opportunities of Online and Blended Learning

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded, educators have needed to rapidly adapt the ways of delivering study materials to facilitate learning for university students. This article discusses the findings from a series of focus groups conducted with social work students to explore their perceptions of the move toward online and blended learning and teaching. It reports on their initial apprehensions, summarized in four key findings: (a) interactions with staff, (b) a sense of community, (c) assessments, and (d) opportunities to grow. Although these consultations occurred prior to the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year, students' accounts raise important questions about ways in which feelings of belonging to a learning community can be cultivated and sustained as blended approaches to learning and teaching become more embedded in social work training. The article concludes by highlighting the need for ongoing considerations around creating a sense of community in an inclusive, supportive, and sustainable way. In so doing, it underlines the value that intersectional and critical research can add to these discussions as a means of promoting social justice in social work education.

Keywords: distance delivery, blended learning, focus groups, “suitability” of social work program online

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had unprecedented effects on numerous aspects of daily life, including all levels of education, from primary schools to higher education (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Following the initial lockdown measures in early 2020, and the ongoing requirements for social distancing, the sector had to adapt to the challenges of providing academic excellence amid institutional closures. To respond to these exceptional public-health measures, educational institutions around the world, especially universities and colleges, moved to online teaching (Ali, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020). As will be discussed, this shift had particular implications for practice-based degrees such as social work, which is fundamentally a relational discipline that prepares students for working directly with individuals, families, and communities (Smoyer et al., 2020). This article provides an insight into students' perceptions of the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work and social policy education.

Context

To balance the value of face-to-face learning with legislated safety measures, some universities (including the University of Strathclyde, where this project was based) aimed to gradually move toward an online and blended mode of learning, the latter of which combines face-to-face teaching with e-learning platforms (Su & Rao, 2020). Discussions of the utility of

online and blended approaches to learning and teaching trace back to the 2000s and have been associated with several benefits (e.g., Colis & Moonen, 2001; Rovai & Jordan, 2004). For example, reductions in time and cost needed to travel to and from school or university, as well as opportunities to combine education with other (work) commitments. More recent studies underscore increased flexibility and interactivity between educators and students as advantages of this approach, made possible by the technological advancement and development of e-learning platforms (Evans et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). Yet despite the potential effectiveness of online and blended learning approaches, the changing environment of COVID-19 and the evolving government guidelines created uncertainty as to whether and when a transition from online to blended (and eventually face-to-face) learning would be possible.

This was further compounded by the consideration of wider factors that impact students' learning and their ability to engage with the course(s). Namely, students are also parents, children, carers, and employees living within particular social, familial, and economic contexts. In Scotland, for example, schools were closed shortly before the formal announcement of the United Kingdom lockdown on March 20, 2020. As a result, many students were affected by home-schooling and increased care responsibilities (e.g., United Nations, 2020; Wenham, 2020), being furloughed (the strategy of the United Kingdom government to financially support workers in certain sectors during the mandatory COVID-19 closures), or being made redundant (e.g., Morley & Clarke, 2020). Some also needed to care for and shield their vulnerable or elderly relatives (e.g., Mclaughlin et al., 2020), all while experiencing illness, loss, and grief amid the global rise of infections and deaths. In addition, there were widespread concerns that the impacts of COVID-19 were not distributed evenly, with certain family types being more prone to financial hardship (Child Poverty Action Group, 2020). For instance, men seemed to have suffered more in terms of health impacts of the pandemic, while social and economic burdens of a lockdown fell disproportionately on women (Wenham et al., 2020).

Yet the latter group is overrepresented in social work education. According to the British Association of Social Workers (2016), 85% of social work students in the United Kingdom are female. Scotland demonstrates the greatest gender balance and, even then, four fifths (80%) are women. Thus, the pandemic might affect this population differently than the general student population and warrants further examination.

As members of a university, faculty, school, and academic discipline committed to tackling inequality and practising social justice, we aimed to gain a greater understanding of the effects of this public-health crisis on our students' learning to inform our academic teaching. This article reports on a series of focus groups with Social Work and Social Policy students on their experiences, views, and expectations regarding the provision of online and, eventually, blended learning in the wake of COVID-19. The primary purpose of this consultation exercise was to ensure that student voices were prominent in the discussions around the move to online and blended learning, allowing teaching teams to best meet their needs. Our project complemented other work already being conducted in the university, which sought to ensure that the move toward online learning did not disadvantage particular groups of students. The consultations were completed before the beginning of the academic term, in August 2020. While we recognize that the students' views may have changed over time, the insights from this work provide documentation on the early experiences of COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on student learning, raising important questions about what students value in social work education.

Methods

These consultations aimed to gather students' experiences, concerns, and suggestions around the changing academic needs in light of COVID-19. All undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde ($N_{\text{total}} = 1,020$; $N_{\text{sw}} = 373$; $N_{\text{sp}} = 647$) were invited by email to participate in an online focus group to discuss their views on the move toward online and blended learning. The two main criteria for participation were that the individuals were currently enrolled in one of the modules offered by the school, which was controlled for by sending an invitation through the school's mailing list, and that they were ready to use their camera when sharing their views. As per Acocella (2012), focus groups can elicit responses on new and under-researched issues, such as the topic in question. They can provide detailed information employing a relatively informal discussion through a bottom-up approach (Acocella, 2012; Fox et al., 2007; Stewart & Williams, 2005). It is argued that focus groups can allow participants to create a frame of reference expressing a range of existing opinions on a given subject and generating data through interaction (Acocella, 2012; Stewart & Williams, 2005). While we understand that the camera requirement might have reduced our sampling pool, and we encourage future research to examine students' choices not to use a camera in online classrooms, we believed it to be relevant for creating a more welcoming and intimate environment for discussing these issues. Namely, as the interactions between participants in focus groups can be key in acquiring depth and richness of information, there was a possibility that conducting the groups in an online environment might create anxieties for students or lead to an unequal engagement with the topics examined (Stewart & Williams, 2005). However, as will be demonstrated, the discussions emerging in this project were rich and insightful.

As noted above, the focus groups were designed as rapid-response consultations with students rather than a research exercise. Regardless, we sought and received ethical approval from the School of Social Work and Social Policy's Ethics Committee. The following measures were undertaken to adhere to the best practices in research: (1) focus group findings were reported in aggregate to ensure confidentiality; (2) verbal consent was sought for recording at the beginning of each focus group; (3) data were stored at the university's cloud service, maintained by the university's information technology (IT) department, and destroyed after six months; (4) access to the recordings was granted to the working-group members only. Additionally, verbal consent to publish the findings was obtained from all participants.

Twelve students agreed to take part in the consultations through three synchronous, online focus groups held via Zoom, involving four students in each group. The gender ratio of the participants was about 60:40, with seven female participants and five males, which is more diverse than the national ratio of social work students in Scotland or the United Kingdom. However, this was not a representative sample of our student population, as the overall gender split of students in the Social Work department is skewed toward females. This might have important implications for practice given the potentially gendered impacts of lockdown. Regarding the race, ethnicity, and nationality of our participants, we did not ask them to self-identify as part of this project. Yet while discussing some of the issues related to not being on campus, it transpired that there was only one international student in our sample and all other participants were from the United Kingdom. Three students were enrolled in the Master in Social Work (MSW) program, eight in the Bachelor (honours) in Social Work (BaSW) program, and one in the undergraduate Bachelor of Social Policy program. The majority of

participants were continuing students, and three out of eight BaSW students were about to start their first year.

The focus groups were led by the first and the second authors of this article, one in the role of the moderator and the other as an observer and notetaker (Acocella, 2012). To allow for enough time for the ideas to (re-)emerge and get reshaped by the group (Acocella, 2012), each focus group lasted about 50 minutes, covering five areas: (a) online and blended learning with their perceived benefits and downsides; (b) financial implications of online and blended learning; (c) a shift to blended learning; (d) perceived health and safety risks; and (e) module assessments. The focus groups were transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to inductively identify and interpret patterns of meaning within the data (Mackieson et al., 2019). The most prominent themes focused on the role of the institution in supporting students during a national pandemic and, more broadly, on pedagogical approaches to social work education. They raised challenging questions as to how social work educators can respond to students' perceptions and values of social work education that might be threatened in an online setting.

Findings

The following four themes were identified and will be discussed further: (a) students' interactions with staff; (b) a sense of community; (c) assessments; and (d) opportunities to grow.

(Real-Time) Interactions With Academic Staff

Our participants had limited experience of online learning at the time of the focus groups. Yet despite some apprehension about the transition to online and blended learning, they had predominantly positive attitudes toward this model of teaching, given the current pandemic. Nonetheless, students expressed concerns about access to adequate IT equipment, lack of the non-verbal dimension in online communication (e.g., body language), and quality of the class delivery due to potential (in)stability of the internet connection on either end. There was a strong preference for synchronous lectures, compared to a pre-recorded input, which would maximize engagement with teaching staff and has been recognized as a crucial part of the educational process (Gilbert, 2015). The possibility for live interaction was viewed as an important part of learning: "I feel I work better and learn more by being in the class, and I feel that interaction in the classroom is better as well, rather than being online" (BaSW, year 4).

Likewise, opportunities to ask questions during lectures were seen as essential, and this preference persisted even when pre-recorded lectures were identified as a potentially useful tool for revision:

I would like the live lectures because I feel that if I have a question, I could ask there and then. If it's recorded, I will have to email someone, and I don't know when or if they will get back. Yeah, maybe there could be a mixture—it could be live and recorded because that way I can still access it afterwards. (BaSW, year 3)

Some participants expressed concerns regarding their motivation and self-discipline when studying online from home, arguing that asynchronous teaching paired with immediate and unimpeded access to the recordings allowed procrastination. They reflected on the need for timely and regular communication from the university to support their engagement with study materials. Concerns were also raised about the lack of a designated study space in one's own home, peace and quiet needed to progress, and IT equipment to participate online. The role of

the library was prominent here, not just as a source of knowledge but also as a physical space dedicated to study. It enabled a stable internet connection, access to resources, and an opportunity to work with peers, as well as individually. Subsequently, the inability to access this learning space, due to lockdown, increased some participants' anxiety.

A Sense of Community

Participants worried that online learning might affect their student identity and a sense of belonging to a student community. They argued that their physical presence at the university was paramount to meet and connect with others. This peer interaction could not be mirrored through online means, as it often occurred spontaneously between the lectures, demonstrating that students valued not only the face-to-face exchange of information on an academic level, but also the casual discussions in which they engaged outside of the classroom. As per Zhang and Bayley (2019), our participants also saw informal peer interaction as an essential part of the learning process within a student community. While these concerns were expressed in all focus groups, they were particularly acute among the participants starting their first year:

This is my first year, so building relationships with new peers and lecturers.... I don't know how it's going to be.... When you are in a classroom you are totally focused on the lesson, ... we get kind of live interaction.... I don't know how [this] is going to work.... I am really nervous about it. (BaSW, year 1)

The participants placed the onus on faculty members, expecting them to play a key role in creating opportunities for students to interact with their peers. They suggested organizing frequent small-group activities to create a comfortable group dynamic and to enhance online collaboration. According to Vesely et al. (2007), the role of an educator is essential in building a student society in an online environment. Similarly, our participants indicated creating a community and improving students' communication with the teaching team as the two most prominent reasons behind the expressed desire to move from an online to a blended learning model, assuming that adequate health and safety protocols would be in place. As one first-year student explained,

I think I would really appreciate blended learning because that's one of the essences of going to uni, first and foremost, meeting new people.... If these measures will be put together by the university, following the rules of the pandemic, I think it's okay; it will be nice. (BaSW, year 1)

While these concerns about accessing opportunities to build a learning community are likely to be common among students, they have specific implications for social work students. Namely, as social work training is inherently practice-oriented, our participants worried that without a strong grounding and opportunities for learning in the community, they would not be sufficiently prepared for practice upon graduation.

Assessments: Opportunities and Challenges

In Scotland, social work students are required to undertake 160 days of assessed practice learning to achieve their professional qualification (Scottish Social Services Council [SSSC], 2003). However, such opportunities were substantially disrupted by the pandemic, as placements abruptly ended in March 2020, when the United Kingdom went into a period of lockdown. Even though they resumed in August 2020, some placement agencies faced significant issues regarding their capacity to host students. Thus, in addition to anxieties

surrounding the perceived difficulties in building a learning community in an online environment, our participants were concerned about the diminished opportunities for practice learning and social work placements, as well as the negative effects this might have on their education, including the perceived devaluation of their overall degree. Thus, there was a call for an open discussion between the lecturers and the students to find a suitable assessment that would reconcile the prevailing context with academic quality and standards of social work education (SSSC, 2019). One participant indicated the need to find a balance between lowering the standards, considering the pandemic, and keeping them high enough to relay a sense of accomplishment: “We shouldn’t be made to feel that they are making it too easy [for us], so our degree would feel like it isn’t worth it.... So we still feel that we earn that fourth, or the third year.” (BaSW, Year 4)

Nevertheless, the overall situation created disruption, delays, and considerable anxiety among students. The participants argued that social work cannot be stopped because of the pandemic and that people in need of services will still be in need, regardless of the epidemiological situation. They feared that the lack of first-hand experience would negatively affect their opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and, eventually, the value of their degree. The participants agreed on the importance of the theoretical approach to social work but highlighted the frontline experiences as crucial and discrete aspects of their degree. As per Martin and Hollows (2016), practical activity helps students articulate theoretical knowledge and skills, familiarizes them with the work in a real-world setting, and enables them to gain confidence in their abilities.

An Opportunity to Grow?

While the initial concerns about the lack of in-person learning and teaching were substantial, particularly regarding placements and other forms of practice learning, some participants also showed remarkable resilience, identifying potential opportunities for growth. For example, second year social work students are required to undertake an assessed interview with a member of the school’s Service User and Carer Network. Some participants noted that these interviews could be done online and, although it would not be the same experience, it could be a test of their adaptability as future social workers. “As social workers, we have to be able to work remotely, flexibly, use and apply technology appropriately” (MSW, year 2)

Thus, a longer period of online learning could allow students time and space to develop new skills, which could be essential going forward.

Discussion

While the small-scale nature of this project means that care must be taken not to overstate the weight of these findings, there was an overall consensus among participants that online and blended learning provided a provisional and convenient solution that allowed them to continue with their studies amid an international pandemic. Yet at the time of the focus groups (in August 2020), the participants were clear that this mode of learning and teaching was not what they had signed up for. They were looking forward to moving toward blended learning, as long as the government health and safety guidelines were enforced in the university setting. For example, working in smaller groups, keeping physical distance, and having dedicated time slots to circulate in classroom and procedures in place to avoid crowding at the entry and exit

points. It is notable that students felt that this form of learning provided a temporary solution to an immediate problem, particularly as in the intervening months it became increasingly clear that blended and online learning are likely to remain an enduring feature of social work education (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

Despite the perceived challenges of online and blended learning, students also recognized some potential benefits. Some students underscored the opportunities that the pandemic had created to build resilience, improve their skills in working flexibly and remotely, and optimize the use of technology in their practice. This resonates with research from other jurisdictions, which suggests that creative solutions to access practice learning are possible, e.g., the provision of “non-traditional” placements, a reduction in the required hours of practice learning, and opportunities for remote or online development and assessment of practice competencies (Morley & Clarke, 2020). This has led to calls for a continued commitment to exploring more flexible and creative practice-learning opportunities that focus on the outcomes, and that might better meet the needs of a diverse student population, e.g., working-class students, minority or marginalized groups, students with care responsibilities, or those who are first in their family to attend university (Morley & Clarke, 2020). However, while social work educators from different jurisdictions have much to learn from one another, we would caution against an assumption that successful initiatives can simply be transferred from one context to another, without further research or reflection, as local circumstances will vary in important ways. To give just one example, in Scotland, 96% of people identified as ethnically white in the most recent census (Scotland’s Census, 2021). While we did not ask our participants how they identified in terms of race and ethnicity, it is reasonable to expect that this will shape their experiences in particular ways and that their accounts may not fully capture all the potential barriers that individuals from a minority background might encounter in this new and evolving educational context.

Morley and Clarke (2020) argued that any permanent shift toward blended approaches must be cognizant of the existing inequalities and the lived realities of students. We would echo these arguments, as participants’ apprehensions about inadequate IT equipment, lack of reliable internet access, or a quiet space to study speak to the diversity of students’ lives outside of the university and to financial pressures they might be already experiencing. Our university sought to ameliorate these difficulties through hardship funds, providing laptops to those who might need them, and striking a balance between synchronous and pre-recorded content, accessible as and when competing pressures allow. These initiatives are a positive step forward, but further research is needed to better understand the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on teaching and practice learning, change in students’ attitudes and experiences over time, student retention, and routes into the profession for those who have experienced social marginalization or disadvantage. As white, able-bodied, and heterosexual students can be privileged in the design and delivery of social work education (Bernard et al., 2014), research that adopts a critical and intersectional epistemology will be particularly valuable if we are to meaningfully support students of colour, those who identify as LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. This could entail further research with social work students, but we would also suggest that we have much to learn from students who begin but do not complete their studies, as well as the aspiring social workers who find the barriers to degree-level study insurmountable. Community-outreach and participatory-action-research methodologies could be of significant value here in developing our understanding of how some of

the technologies used in delivering blended learning may (or may not) assist in creating pathways into the profession for all suitable candidates and especially those from marginalized groups.

Importantly, our findings suggest that students' concerns about engaging effectively with blended learning were not merely practical; they were also relational. The desire for a return to "normal" was predominantly linked to relational concerns: fears of diminished communication with fellow students and staff, limited exposure to wider university life, and a lack of a sense of belonging to a learning community. These findings resonate with other research on the experiences of social work students because of the rapid shift to online and blended learning necessitated by the global pandemic, which identifies the relevance of belonging and engagement (Smoyer et al., 2020). Notably, our findings suggest that students expected faculty to play a key role in creating opportunities for peer interaction. While this is a legitimate expectation, we suggest that realizing it in practice may not be as straightforward as it might first appear. For example, while our student respondents emphasized the need for timely and regular communication from the university, others have argued that an increase in email volume in response to COVID-19 may elevate stress levels among both students and faculty, to the detriment of mental health (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Furthermore, responding to the pandemic has created a prolonged—but unsustainable—period of "unimaginable additional work" for faculty, the effects of which may not, as yet, be fully articulated or understood (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020, p. 1011). Indeed, gendered and racialized dynamics in *who* undertakes the majority of pastoral support are longstanding barriers to academic career progressions for women, and in particular women of colour, which may have become even more entrenched as a consequence of the pandemic (Pereira, 2021). This has obvious negative implications for these women and also for students from minority groups who often welcome more diversity among faculty (Bernard et al., 2014).

Finally, our findings suggest that there is a need for ongoing reflection as to how a sense of connection and belonging among students can be cultivated in a sustainable way. These conversations should not be confined to the university. As social work education in Scotland is mapped against specific standards (SSSC, 2019), it is essential for social work programs to work closely with students, relevant regulatory bodies, service users and carers, and social work employers to understand the potential implications of these changes to social work learning and teaching for future employability. Importantly, such inclusive conversations may have a role to play in alleviating the concerns expressed by participants that the changes in learning and teaching necessitated by the pandemic might affect how future employers perceive the value of their degree or the adequacy of their preparation for practice. Future researchers may wish to explore whether involving students in such discussions may have parallel benefits in supporting the development of their identities as professionals in training, at a time when face-to-face contact with the university might be reduced.

Conclusion

Through the analysis presented in this article, we highlighted the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by social work students, including its effects on teaching delivery, learning opportunities, and other social and educational implications. We have shown that while students recognized online learning as providing them with opportunities to develop new skills, build resilience, and demonstrate flexibility, they nonetheless tended to view online and blended learning as a temporary solution to the immediate restrictions imposed by the

COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is in tension with a growing consensus that online and blended learning will likely continue to be a part of social work education, which has also led to calls to reflect on the challenges and opportunities this poses in a range of areas, such as effective pedagogy, practice learning, opportunities for national or global online classrooms, and ways for social work educators to engage with social policy responses to the pandemic, including the threat of further austerity measures (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

Given the small scale of this project and the limited diversity of our sample, which captured only a snapshot of a particular group of students' views at a particular point in the pandemic, our contribution is necessarily modest. In this paper, we demonstrated that many of our students' anxieties surrounding the adoption of blended learning were not only practical (in that they worried about accessing adequate IT equipment, quiet space to work, and reliable internet connections) but also relational. Students' concerns about blended learning revealed a strong desire not only to maximize their learning opportunities (for example, by being able to ask questions in real time) but also to feel a part of a wider, and more connected, learning community. We encourage more research on the experiences of minority students, as well as those of students from the LGBTQ+ community, to examine the role of intersectionalities in mitigating or aggravating this shift from in-person to blended (and online) learning. Our findings raised several questions about how student communities might be established, resourced, facilitated, and maintained, especially as we move through the latter stages of the pandemic and possibly into a new era, when blended learning is more embedded within mainstream learning and teaching. Going forward, there might be a need for open and inclusive conversations exploring not only the opportunities for innovative and creative learning and teaching formed by the rapid adoption of blended learning, but also the meaning of these developments to students as members of a community, both inside and beyond the university.

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