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## COVID-19 impact on social work admissions and education in seven international universities

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### ABSTRACT

Inter-country Social Work admissions and educational comparisons are difficult due to variance in policy and practices between Social Work educational providers, even within the same country. However, this paper aims to provide an examination of different levels of impact that COVID-19 'lockdown' had on 'admissions to social work' processes and on education, using examples from universities in Australia, England, Finland, Northern Ireland, Norway, Ireland and Sweden. Already we know that across these examples, admission processes differ significantly. Variances are between selection and entry methodologies with some institutions using academic entry criteria and personal statements and interviews, while others use academic entry criteria and relevant experience or academic entry only. We also know that practicum duration is variable across providers, lasting between 75 and 200 days. Despite all differences, a distinct adjustment to lockdown required a shift to virtual teaching methods for each institution. This paper seeks to explore the range of approaches adopted to lockdown in relation to practice learning placements in each example. We consider the underpinning values and principles that guided responses to these change processes in the various institutions and longer-term implications emerging from the required rapid change processes are discussed.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Education; professional practice; training

## Introduction

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China (COVID-19), and rapidly spread across the globe to several other countries, becoming a threat to public health globally. Within weeks, the World Health Organization (WHO) designated the virus a global pandemic, and all countries were urged to take 'urgent and aggressive action' to reduce the risk of viral contamination and reduce fatalities (WHO, 2020). By March, the COVID-19 virus had spread to 177 countries (Sahu, 2020). Globally this pandemic has led to great social and economic disruption for governments and their

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citizens with a rising death toll and attempts to prepare, protect and treat citizens, which impacted across all sectors in society. Legislation was rapidly produced to set out the lawful basis of COVID-19 related public health rules and restrictions across countries. Governments imposed drastic measures to manage risk to public health, including the closure of major institutions, including education, hospitality, social and travel sectors. In order to reduce the risk of viral spread, people were asked to isolate, apply strict social distance rules and work from home. The pandemic therefore has impacted on most aspects of life for global citizens, including 'lock-down' necessitating closure to schools and universities (UNESCO, 2020). We consider the rapid change process required in this context and specifically, how this impacted social work education. We apply a 'compressed modernity' lens to conceptualize the deconstruction and reconstruction of previously considered 'concrete' systems and processes required in our universities for admissions, course delivery and curriculum management.

### ***Aims and objectives***

This paper aims to examine how representatives from universities in seven countries, including Australia, England, Finland, Northern Ireland, Norway, Ireland and Sweden, reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on social work education. Author representatives from seven countries will reflect on the following questions relating to their university.

What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the following three domains?

- (1) Admissions to social work education.
- (2) Teaching and learning activities.
- (3) Practice placements.

### **Methodology**

The lead author invited co-authors from these countries to contribute to the paper by responding to the three questions above.

### **Theoretical framework**

The paper will draw on systems and resilience theory to consider the exogenous shock absorbed by the need for rapid change, specifically in social work education systems during the pandemic period. We also comment on resilience in the inter-connected systems associated with social work educational provision. Bronfenbrenner's Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) has relevance in the context of social work education, as several structures contribute to the educational process. For example, using the concentric circle model, students are at the micro-level, directly impacted by the meso-system, via educational knowledge transfer in interaction with peers and academic staff whilst using a range of teaching and learning resources. This activity happens in the context of an exo-system, which includes placement providers, employers, practice teachers, regulators and professional bodies. A model of resilience proposed by Comfort et al. (2010), frames systems at levels of resilience to 'external shock', to emerge from disruptive episodes with their central institutions intact. For social work students

and educators, responding to unforeseen challenges related to campus closure, abrupt ending to practicum, and a sudden shift to online admissions and teaching environments, demonstrated levels of resilience and flexibility in people and structures. But this rapid change also involves tensions and challenges across layers of systems, that are both interconnected and dynamic, but simultaneously separate. Boin (2009) defines resilience in the context of disaster management at specific stages such as mitigation, prevention, preparation and response and recovery and offers models of evaluation from individual, organizational and policy contexts. From this perspective, determinants of effective change strategies are centered on several characteristics. These include an ability to improvise, ensure a flexible and co-ordinated approach and endurance. In this paper, these characteristics are identified as the protective factors that facilitated levels of resilience in social work educational systems in our examples.

## Results

### *Changes to admissions*

Variations to admission processes are evidenced across examples in this paper. All universities use grades or entry examination. Some use a level of work experience to assess suitability and England and Ireland use personal statements. Sweden and Finland use grades only. Some universities do not rely on interviews as part of their selection processes, whilst England, Northern Ireland and Ireland do. Adjustments were required at micro, meso and exo-system levels, showing an ability to adapt in a co-ordinated and flexible way in line with Boin's resilience framework.

Those that usually recruit students using interviews had to rapidly adapt to online methods in order to ensure a first-year cohort would be in place for 2020–21 entry. Those universities all shifted to varying examples of 'virtual' interviews and either pre-recorded responses to questions within a pre-arranged timeframe or used synchronous interviews. Decisions on how to manage this shift were sometimes autonomous for universities (Ireland, England) and sometimes in agreement and in partnership with external stakeholders, namely social work employers, who contribute to the admission interview processes and governing bodies such as regulators (Northern Ireland). In Australia, admission processes were unaffected, but registration and enrolments were impacted as the academic year begins in January. Table 1 outlines the range of methods used across the universities.

### *Lockdown and campus closure—rapid shift to online learning*

All universities in these examples had to show flexibility by moving to online teaching and learning methods due to campus closure. For some universities, online

**Table 1.** The admission process for social work education.

<i>Admissions Criteria</i>	Australia	England	Finland	N. Ireland	Norway	Ireland	Sweden
Grades (or matriculation exam) (G)	GE	GEPI	G	GI	GE	GEIP	G
Experience Important (E)							
Interviews (I)							
Personal Statements (P)							

teaching is a relative norm and usual teaching has a mixture of online and in-person teaching elements (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Australia) whilst in other universities, this was a new departure (England, Northern Ireland, Ireland) and rapid change processes were experienced at micro and meso-system levels. These included considerations of staff training, student internet accessibility issues and access to devices, home-schooling demands on staff and students and caring for relatives or self-shielding due to untested COVID-19 like symptoms. Examples from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Australia, showed planning and flexibility for the first-year cohort entry in 2020–21, which includes exceptions being made for newly admitted students to have some in-person teaching in smaller groups in line with social distancing rules. This was based on concerns about student retention and additional concerns around high applicant numbers seeking to defer until 2021 entry. In our examples, some authors write about their own university experience and others set this in the context of regional approaches across universities in their countries thus operating at a macro-system level which showed system adaptability and endurance in this rapid change process.

### *Australia*

The Australian university is a regional university and a long-term provider of online education with 80% of students typically studying online. The social work program offers both on-campus and online study modes. To meet accreditation standards all social work students are required to meet a minimum level of face-to-face attendance with attendance for online students focusing on practice skills. The transition to fully online teaching was able to be managed due to existing online content and approaches with adjustments to assessments and provision of skills training online.

### *England*

The English university shifted to online teaching following lock-down. Technology was used to provide a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning platforms. This was achieved using existing Virtual Learning Environment. On-line tutorials, discussions and group work were provided. Student feedback was positive. The use of remote working technology has been noted to be exhausting by staff and students. The assessment schedule was altered, and the regulations around extensions were relaxed.

### *Finland*

In Finland, a partnership model exists through the Finnish National University Network for Social Work (Sosnet) with co-operation across six universities delivering social work education. A regional decision was reached for teaching faculty to work remotely, and all courses were to be delivered online. Each university and its teachers had the freedom to adapt teaching and learning methods accordingly to local needs. In comparison with educators in other disciplines, social work teachers had flexibility and were pedagogically equipped and experienced to undertake the necessary changes. Consequently, the transition to an online program was accomplished without major problems.

### ***Ireland***

In Ireland there are five universities and one Further Education college delivering social work education and the methods of teaching and learning delivery are mainly face to face. In the Irish university, an immediate shift to online teaching was reflected by the rapid shift of academic staff, to alternative modes of delivery. Small group interactive online teaching was the preferred option from students which was labor intensive for academic staff as teaching had to be repeated across sub-groups of students. Working from home, no access to usual office technical equipment and variable internet accessibility and hardware and software availability were noted as key challenges.

### ***Northern Ireland***

In Northern Ireland, there are two universities delivering social work education, and they are connected by a regional 'Degree Partnership' model but have autonomy around independent institutional decisions on matters of teaching and delivery within the 'Rules of the Degree' as set out by the regulator, Northern Ireland, Social Care Council. Both universities shifted to online teaching and learning modes of delivery in order to complete the required teaching and assessment to ensure students were progressed through exam board processes. Challenges for academic staff related to moving learning and teaching resources to online formats, and ensuring students had access to the internet and devices to ensure they could participate.

### ***Norway***

The Norwegian example describes the need to rapidly shift to online teaching, as a 'digital revolution'. Academics established a Facebook group shortly after the lockdown called 'Digital Resources Teaching Guide'. The group recruited thousands of members and provided peer-to-peer support with guidance on how to conduct digital teaching. In addition, the universities and colleges provided digital mentors for technical support. The most challenging aspect of this shift was in relation to communication skills training. For instance, role-play is a central part of training in helping students learn and develop skills in professional conversations.

### ***Sweden***

In Swedish example, moving to online teaching was not a dramatic change, as most of Social Work Education in this university was already online, with students living in different parts of Sweden. Lectures, seminars, group discussions were already delivered virtually, except for once or twice during training when the students were expected to be on campus occasionally per semester. Skills training and personal development seminars are usually in person in the Swedish university and these too shifted to online. Not all universities in Sweden provide 'distance based' online teaching to this extent. For those universities, the shift to online teaching would have meant a rapid change.

### ***Implications for practicum***

Across all universities in our examples, practice placements ended or were paused during March 2020, due to government-based COVID-19 directives, which informed university guidance on health and safety for students and staff. The interesting difference across

examples in this paper, is variances in university autonomy in this rapid decision-making process, especially if the universities are in national or regional partnerships with other universities and governing bodies. This, in some instances, is related to whether, social work and social work education, is a regulated profession coupled with the role of governing bodies, such as regulators or government at macro-system levels. Table 2 shows that in England, Northern Ireland, Ireland and Finland, social work is a protected legal title and is a regulated profession. In some of these examples, this means that social work education is also regulated (England, Ireland and Northern Ireland), but this is not the case in Finland.

In all these regulated examples, partnership decisions with external bodies were reached about ending placement which included communication and decision making with key stakeholders such as other universities, regulators, employers, municipalities and/or government showing a coordinated and flexible approach to crises and change. Alongside these distinct variations, other differences are note-worthy across countries that are unrelated to the current discussion but provide interesting context. For example, differing duration of courses also co-exist in both regulated and non-regulated course provision. The range for undergraduate qualifications in social work is between 3 and 5 years and duration for master's level is 2 years in all examples. Practicum days also vary significantly. Table 2 shows that this ranges from 75 days in Sweden to 185 days in Northern Ireland. This shows that there is no international consensus on practicum duration for social work education.

### **Australia**

In the Australian example, approximately 40% of placements were impacted including being delayed, stopped, paused or students being shifted from service user direct contact, to increased project or research activities. Of those continuing to provide direct service user contact, some did so via telehealth approaches through work from home arrangements. This micro-level flexibility was supported at a macro level by the AASW (2020). Although education providers tried to minimize the impact on progress, this interruption to practicum had the potential to delay course progression and graduation for some.

### **England**

In the English university in our example, only community-based placements continued. At a macro-level, the professional regulator (Social Work England) worked with Higher Education Institutions to examine the practicalities of placements, around social distancing rules. Most universities in England operate within Social Work Teaching Partnerships but have the autonomy to make changes to assessment schedules and placement decisions, coupled with additional learning activities to support placement success.

**Table 2.** Regulation, duration of social work education and impact on practicum.

	Australia	England	Finland	N. Ireland	Ireland	Norway	Sweden
Social Work is a legally protected title and a regulated profession	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Length (years) Undergraduate	4	4	3	3	4	3	3.5
Length (years) Masters or Relevant Graduate Route	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Practicum days	145	170	120	185	133	135	75

### **Finland**

In Finland, there was a variable approach to practicum ending. Although there is a regional six university partnership model (Sosnet), all academic institutions have the autonomy to make independent decisions, which enabled faculties to decide on the practice education arrangements. Only one Finnish university decided to terminate students' practice education. The other universities continued offering practice education and even initiated new placements, subject to the support of agencies and provision of supervision by practitioners. Students were given the option of postponing their placement depending upon their own or families' health enabling micro-level empowerment and flexibility.

### **Ireland**

When the lockdown commenced, placements were terminated midway through practicum. In most instances, the social workers who were supervising placements were instructed to work from home and the placement agencies were closed. This meant that students could not go to their placement sites or meet with supervisors, service users or other agencies. This unexpected cessation of placements had further micro-level consequences for students who were due to graduate, but who were then unable to do so as they could not complete their placement. As restrictions gradually eased, final year students were able to recommence their fieldwork experience, enabling them to finish their qualification.

### **Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland student placements ended mid-way through, following government guidance and a partnership decision by the universities and relevant external stakeholders. Final year students received their full award early and were expedited to the workforce and this was supported by the Degree Partnership Board including the Department of Health 'DoH' and the regulator, NI Social Care Council. The unforeseen ending of placements had inherent challenges for at multiple levels for employers, practice teachers, tutors and students but ultimately for service users, as proper endings were not possible in the timescale. Decision making was rapid and partnership working was evidenced as mainly positive, and reflection on this episode will be an ongoing process for all involved.

### **Norway**

In the Norwegian university, practice placements ended after the government and the Ministry of Care and Health Services closed all universities and colleges. The Ministry of Education and Research directed the universities, as far as possible not to disadvantage student progression on courses. First-year students in the child welfare degree had few days left of their practice and got the full award. Students on social work courses were only halfway through their practice and were required to complete additional work to meet the learning outcomes required. These micro-level adjustments were absorbed by students, and the interruption was not expected to cause a delay in their progress.



### **Sweden**

In Sweden, timing was fortunate as campus closure did not impact as the university use (Autumn) for practicum. Therefore, in March, no students were on placement. Shorter visits to workplaces, for example, for interviews with social workers, were transformed into online meetings or phone calls so social distancing rules were adhered to.

### **Discussion**

Boin's (2009) determinants of effective change strategies are helpful in the context of rapid change and systemic educational adjustments considered in this paper. In our examples, we have evidenced an ability to improvise and find solutions rapidly under legislative and time-pressured government directives. The changes impacted on students, staff, placement providers and service users. This has happened differently across countries, but all have demonstrated the ability to provide a flexible and coordinated approach within each university, and sometimes in partnership with regional or national networks. Boin (2009) describes resilience associated with an ability to react and withstand an exogenous shock as a form of endurance with the integrity of the 'institution' remaining intact, and applied to our example, we suggest this was exemplified in progressing students to course completion, despite this disruption. Compressed modernity is a useful way to consider the speed of change that occurred at an extremely condensed rate both in terms of time and space (Chang, 2010). This concept depicts the dynamic co-existence of separate social systems in symbiotic change processes from deconstruction (of one way to doing things) to construction (to building new ways of doing things) to reconstruction (of adopting new ways of doing things).

The level of flexibility and adjustment in all our examples has provided many lessons on more efficient ways to manage social work education. Aspects of changes will be retained and only time will tell, if these will be adopted longer term to meet the 'endurance' dimension of Boin's resilience model. All authors have provided comments on the adoption of some of the transformative changes that will be trialed to adopt for future usual practice. This was particularly the case for admissions in Northern Ireland, where efficiencies in time management were experienced when online interviews were adopted. In Finland, an online admission interview plus an entrance examination is likely to be retained due to time and resource efficiency. Some universities already deliver significant levels of teaching online due to their geographic area or international student population (Australia and Finland). Practicum adjustments had a variation in approaches to ending student placements early and permitting full credit (Finland, Northern Ireland and Norway). In Northern Ireland and England, an assessed year in employment enables students to carry forward unmet learning needs into their first year, providing a safety net to ending placements early, which helped in the rapid decision-making process but had not been part of the intended use of this structure.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has managed to capture the experience of social work educators across the included countries through the lens of systems and resilience theory. The discussion illuminates a level of insight into our commonalities and differences in how we govern

and deliver social work education internationally. It also confirms the central role of the core values and principles of social work, particularly those of partnership, problem solving, communicating and minimizing harm. The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need to quickly embrace technology, learn new skills rapidly and left educators in the position of 'learners' too. Thus, the changes impacted both those who educate and those who receive education. In sum, the reflections from the authors in these seven countries all are saying that the universities had managed the situation quite well despite some of the challenges involved at specific points. However, it is acknowledged that practicum endings with service users were abrupt, and this contrasts with social work core principles of relationship-based practice. Therefore, we consider it likely that students, tutors and practice teachers had to manage internal value conflict about this sharp cut-off, with all the implications of unplanned endings, for those involved. This needs to be further researched in a future paper and attention paid to unforeseen consequences of decisions made and whether 'endurance' is indeed a feature of these changes.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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