



FEASIBILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The study entitled “Feasibility and Effectiveness of Online Learning in Social Work Education in Sri Lanka” explores the adaptability, accessibility, and pedagogical value of online learning methods introduced in social work education. The shift from conventional classroom-based learning to online platforms—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—has brought about significant changes in teaching and learning experiences across higher education. For a discipline such as social work, which relies heavily on experiential and field-based learning, this transition has generated critical questions about maintaining the integrity of skill development and professional values in a digital learning environment.

This research aims to examine the feasibility of integrating online learning into social work education and to assess its effectiveness in achieving learning outcomes, particularly concerning the theory–practice gap. A mixed-method approach was employed, including a quantitative survey among undergraduate students and qualitative interviews with lecturers and fieldwork supervisors. The findings indicate that while online learning has enhanced flexibility, accessibility, and digital competence, it also presents challenges related to interaction quality, fieldwork supervision, and resource inequalities. The study concludes that a blended learning model combining online and face-to-face strategies offers the most effective pathway for sustainable and inclusive social work education in Sri Lanka.

KEY WORDS : *Feasibility, Online Learning, Social Work, Education*

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Education is a dynamic process that continuously evolves to meet the demands of social, economic, and technological transformation. In Sri Lanka, higher education institutions have increasingly embraced digital learning platforms to ensure continuity of learning and teaching. The field of social work, being practice-oriented and grounded in human relationships, presents a unique case in the adoption of online learning methods. The sudden shift to virtual learning during the pandemic period created both opportunities and challenges for students, educators, and institutions engaged in social work training.

Social work education emphasizes the integration of theory and practice. It involves the development of knowledge, values, and skills necessary to engage effectively with individuals, families, and communities. Fieldwork training remains the “signature pedagogy” of social work, providing opportunities for experiential learning and reflection. The introduction of online platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and Moodle has significantly influenced the traditional learning process, requiring both students and educators to adapt to a new learning culture.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While online learning ensures academic continuity, the question of its **feasibility and effectiveness** in a discipline that requires interpersonal interaction, empathy, and practical exposure remains largely unexplored in Sri Lanka. Challenges such as poor internet connectivity, limited digital literacy, and inadequate supervision mechanisms have raised concerns about the overall quality of social work education delivered online. Therefore, this study seeks to examine whether online learning is a feasible and effective method of delivering social work education in Sri Lanka.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General Objective:

To evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of online learning in social work education in Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify students’ and educators’ perceptions of the feasibility of online learning.

2. To examine the effectiveness of online learning in achieving theoretical and practical learning outcomes.
3. To explore challenges and opportunities in implementing online learning in social work education.
4. To recommend strategies for improving the integration of online learning into social work education.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How feasible is online learning for social work education in Sri Lanka?
2. How effective is online learning in achieving social work education objectives?
3. What are the challenges faced by students and educators in online learning environments?
4. What strategies can enhance the quality and inclusivity of online social work education?

Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Online Learning

Online learning, often termed e-learning or virtual education, refers to a mode of delivering education through digital technologies and internet-based platforms. It allows flexibility in accessing learning resources and enables interaction beyond physical classrooms. Scholars such as Garrison and Anderson (2003) describe it as a transformative process that fosters learner autonomy and collaboration. However, its effectiveness depends on students' motivation, access to technology, and the capacity of educators to adapt teaching methods.

2.2 Online Learning in Social Work Education

Social work education globally has experimented with online and blended learning models, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies from various contexts highlight mixed outcomes: while some report increased accessibility and digital skill development, others emphasize the loss of experiential engagement, peer interaction, and emotional connection—elements vital to professional social work training.

In the Sri Lankan context, social work programs traditionally rely on face-to-face teaching and field supervision. The abrupt digital transition has created a learning gap, especially among students from rural and low-income backgrounds. Yet, online learning has also allowed educators to introduce innovative digital pedagogies such as virtual case simulations, online group discussions, and reflective learning journals.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory** and **Social Constructivism**. Kolb (1984) emphasizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Social Constructivism, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), stresses the importance of social interaction and collaboration in knowledge construction. Together, these frameworks support the notion that even in digital contexts, learning remains effective when students engage actively and reflectively with content and peers.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A **mixed-method design** was adopted to provide both breadth and depth of understanding. Quantitative data captured general trends and perceptions, while qualitative insights explored deeper experiences and meanings.

3.2 Study Population and Sample

The study was conducted among undergraduate social work students and lecturers attached to selected Sri Lankan higher education institutions offering social work education.

- **Sample size:** 120 students and 10 lecturers participated.
- **Sampling method:** Stratified random sampling ensured representation from different academic years and regions.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

1. **Questionnaire Survey:** A structured questionnaire was distributed online to assess perceptions of feasibility, accessibility, and learning outcomes.
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers and fieldwork supervisors to explore qualitative perspectives on teaching effectiveness and supervision challenges.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and frequencies. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed to extract emerging themes related to engagement, adaptability, and challenges.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Findings and Discussion

4.1 Feasibility of Online Learning

Findings revealed that 78% of students found online learning *partly feasible*, primarily due to flexibility in attending lectures and reduced travel costs. However, 62% reported frequent internet disruptions, while 48% indicated a lack of devices suitable for continuous online learning. Lecturers expressed concerns about the preparedness of institutions to deliver effective online education, citing limited training and infrastructure support.

4.2 Effectiveness in Achieving Learning Outcomes

While theoretical understanding was successfully delivered online, both students and lecturers agreed that *practical skill development suffered significantly*. Around 70% of students reported difficulties in applying classroom knowledge to field practice, and 60% felt less confident in handling casework virtually.

However, some benefits were noted—students developed stronger digital communication skills and greater self-discipline in managing time and assignments.

4.3 Interaction and Engagement

The quality of interaction between students and lecturers decreased in virtual settings. Lecturers found it difficult to assess non-verbal cues or emotional expressions during online discussions. Students missed peer learning and informal sharing that typically occur in physical classrooms. Despite these limitations, interactive tools such as breakout rooms and online group presentations partially compensated for the lack of direct engagement.

4.4 Fieldwork Supervision Challenges

Fieldwork supervision emerged as the most challenging area. Supervisors indicated that online monitoring could not replace face-to-face observation and mentorship. Students also reported feeling disconnected from communities and clients. This highlighted the

importance of reimagining supervision frameworks that combine digital monitoring with periodic in-person visits.

4.5 Opportunities and Innovations

Despite constraints, the transition to online learning encouraged innovation. Institutions began developing virtual libraries, e-learning repositories, and blended teaching models. A few lecturers introduced reflective blogs and online peer review exercises, which improved critical thinking and writing skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that online learning in social work education in Sri Lanka is *partially feasible and moderately effective*. It serves as an important alternative learning mode, particularly during emergencies, but cannot fully replace in-person experiential training. A hybrid model that integrates digital flexibility with field-based practice is most suitable for the discipline.

The findings reaffirm the importance of aligning technological innovations with the core values and pedagogies of social work. With adequate institutional support, digital infrastructure, and capacity building for educators, online learning can complement traditional methods and enhance educational resilience.

5.2 Recommendations

1. **Develop Blended Learning Frameworks:** Combine online theoretical instruction with face-to-face fieldwork components.
2. **Enhance Digital Infrastructure:** Improve internet connectivity and provide devices for economically disadvantaged students.
3. **Capacity Building for Educators:** Conduct training on online pedagogy, digital tools, and virtual supervision methods.
4. **Integrate Virtual Simulation Tools:** Use case-based simulations to replicate field experiences in online settings.
5. **Promote Student Support Mechanisms:** Establish online counseling and mentorship platforms to maintain student engagement and well-being.
6. **Policy Integration:** Encourage higher education authorities to adopt flexible policies that recognize blended learning models in professional disciplines.
7. **Further Research:** Conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate long-term outcomes of online learning in skill development and employability.

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