



EXPLORING THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

Herath, H.M.D S

National Institute of Social Development, Seeduwa, Sri Lanka

Email: subodini@nisd.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the current landscape of Social Work education in Sri Lanka, focusing on the National Institute of Social Development (NISD), the country's leading state institution in this field. The research identifies challenges related to curriculum development, accessibility, faculty capacity, and alignment with international academic and professional standards. It also explores opportunities for enhancing the quality, relevance, and global compatibility of social work education. Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders including students, faculty, and practitioners the study provides insights into both structural and pedagogical dimensions of social work training. Findings reveal that while Sri Lanka has made significant progress in formalizing Social Work education, substantial gaps remain in curricular modernization, digital integration, research orientation, and responsiveness to national social service needs. The inclusion of International Social Work in the new MSW curriculum represents a key advancement, fostering global perspectives and professional adaptability. Overall, this research contributes to the discourse on strengthening Social Work education as a transformative force in promoting social justice, professional competence, and sustainable social development.

KEY WORDS: *Social Work Education, Sri Lanka, National Institute of Social Development, Curriculum Development, International Social Work, Professional Standards, Social Service Sector*

Introduction

Social Work education plays a pivotal role in preparing professionals to address multifaceted social issues, promote human rights, and contribute to equitable social development. At a global level, the field is shaped by key theoretical orientations such as systems theory, strengths-based practice, human rights frameworks, and evidence-based interventions, which guide both practice and pedagogy. International bodies such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) emphasize intercultural competence, ethical practice, and global solidarity as essential components of professional training (IFSW, 2018). These trends highlight the growing need for Social Work education systems worldwide to remain dynamic, research-oriented, and aligned with international standards.

In Sri Lanka, Social Work education has gained institutional legitimacy primarily through the establishment of the National Institute of Social Development (NISD), the leading state institution mandated to train professional social workers. Over the years, NISD has expanded its academic offerings from diploma-level qualifications to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees reflecting national efforts to formalize and professionalize the sector. Existing studies acknowledge this progress but also point to persistent challenges related to curriculum modernization, faculty development, research integration, and limited digital learning infrastructure (Herath, 2022; Fernando, 2021). Moreover, debates continue regarding the extent to which current programs adequately respond to emerging social issues such as ageing, child protection, migration, disaster management, and community resilience.

Despite the global movement toward competency-based, practice-informed, and internationally connected Social Work education, Sri Lanka's academic frameworks have been slow to adapt. Key gaps remain, including limited exposure to global perspectives, inadequate alignment with international professional standards, and insufficient mechanisms for integrating new knowledge into teaching and field practice. These shortcomings highlight a significant gap in the literature concerning how Sri Lanka's Social Work education system positions itself within the global Social Work landscape and how well it prepares graduates for both local and international practice environments. Addressing this gap is crucial, as the quality and relevance of Social Work education directly influence the nation's capacity to respond to growing social complexities. The recent introduction of the International Social Work module into the MSW curriculum marks an important advancement; however, its impact, integration, and alignment within broader curriculum trajectories remain underexplored. Therefore, this study examines the current landscape of Social Work education in Sri Lanka, focusing on both its strengths and systemic limitations. By assessing institutional capacity, curricular relevance, and alignment with global standards, the study aims to contribute new insights that can guide

policy development, institutional reform, and the advancement of Social Work education as a transformative force in national development.

Literature Review

The development of Social Work education globally has been shaped by shifting socio-economic conditions, theoretical advancements, and evolving professional standards. Internationally, there has been a strong movement toward competency-based education grounded in evidence-informed practice, critical theory, and interdisciplinary approaches. Social Work programs increasingly integrate systems theory, ecological frameworks, human rights perspectives, and anti-oppressive practice to prepare graduates for complex and rapidly changing social environments (Healy & Link, 2019). The growing emphasis on global citizenship and ethical responsibility is reflected in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles published by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2018), which highlights values such as human dignity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness as essential components of professional training. In addition, digital innovation and research literacy have become core expectations in modern Social Work programs. According to Shaw and Lunt (2018), digital competency and online pedagogical methods are increasingly integral to Social Work education, expanding opportunities for virtual field instruction, global networking, and remote learning. These developments underline a broader trend toward preparing graduates who can navigate both local and transnational challenges, such as migration, humanitarian crises, aging populations, and global inequality (Dominelli, 2020).

When compared with these international trends, Social Work education in Sri Lanka displays both progress and significant limitations. Since its establishment in the 1970s, the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) has served as the primary institution responsible for formal Social Work training in the country (Payne, 2020). Early efforts focused on building foundational professional knowledge and practitioner skills to respond to social service demands. However, scholars argue that Sri Lanka has not kept pace with global advancements, particularly in the areas of curricular modernization, research integration, and international collaboration (Herath & Perera, 2021; Jayasinghe, 2022). Traditional pedagogical approaches, reliance on lecture-based teaching, and limited use of digital learning tools continue to hinder the progression of Social Work education in the country. A comparative perspective illustrates the depth of the gap. Countries such as Australia, South Africa, and India provide robust models of practice-integrated learning, international partnerships, and research-driven pedagogy. In Australia, for example, Social Work education is structured around strong linkages between universities and community service agencies, ensuring fieldwork is both rigorous and reflective (Midgley, 2020). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) mandates clear field education competencies, emphasizing reflective practice,

cultural safety, and research application. By contrast, Sri Lanka's field practicum structure often suffers from inconsistent supervision and limited placement diversity, as noted by Fernando (2021).

Similarly, South African Social Work programs emphasize decoloniality, contextual responsiveness, and community empowerment, blending academic learning with grassroots practice (Sewpaul, 2016). This contrasts with the Sri Lankan model, which has been critiqued for limited contextual adaptation despite the country's unique socio-cultural and post-conflict realities. India's premier institutions, such as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), demonstrate strong international collaborations, interdisciplinary teaching, and integration of contemporary issues such as climate justice and development-induced displacement (Desai, 2019). These practices highlight the importance of contextualized, research-informed, and globally connected curricula areas where Sri Lanka still lags. Despite these contrasts, recent reforms indicate growing areas of convergence between Sri Lanka and global standards. The introduction of **International Social Work** into the MSW curriculum at NISD constitutes a major step toward bridging long-standing gaps related to global exposure and comparative analysis. This integration aligns with international calls for culturally competent, globally aware practitioners capable of navigating both local and transnational social issues (IFSW, 2018; Healy & Link, 2019). The course promotes intercultural sensitivity, global policy awareness, and collaborative learning competencies that are increasingly necessary in an interconnected world.

However, the literature consistently points to persistent structural challenges that limit the full realization of these advancements. These include inadequate research capacity, limited faculty development, insufficient funding for international collaborations, and weak integration of practice-based evidence into curriculum planning (Herath & Perera, 2021; Jayasinghe, 2022). Compared to international models where research, practice, and policy are tightly interwoven, Sri Lanka's Social Work education system remains primarily classroom-centered with minimal opportunities for applied research or international exchanges. In summary, global literature positions Social Work education as dynamic, interdisciplinary, and globally oriented, whereas the Sri Lankan literature describes a system still emerging from traditional pedagogical foundations and institutional constraints. While meaningful reforms particularly the introduction of International Social Work signal positive movement, substantial gaps persist in aligning Sri Lanka's Social Work education with international standards. Addressing these gaps will require sustained investment in research, faculty development, digital transformation, and global partnerships to ensure that Sri Lankan Social Work graduates are fully equipped to meet national needs and engage effectively in the global professional arena.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to critically examine the current state of Social Work education in Sri Lanka, centering on the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) as the primary institutional context. A qualitative approach was deemed most suitable because the phenomena under investigation educational quality, curriculum relevance, pedagogical experiences, and institutional processes are inherently complex, subjective, and socially constructed. Understanding these dimensions requires attention to personal narratives, institutional cultures, and interpretive experiences that cannot be meaningfully captured through numerical measurement. The qualitative design therefore enabled the researcher to explore how stakeholders perceive, negotiate, and interpret their roles within the Social Work education system, providing rich, contextualized insights into structural and pedagogical realities. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of participants who possess direct and substantive engagement with Social Work education in Sri Lanka. This sampling method allowed the study to target individuals with specific knowledge, experience, or authority relevant to the research questions. The rationale for choosing purposive sampling was grounded in the need to gather in-depth, expert-informed perspectives from those who actively shape, experience, or influence the educational environment, such as faculty members, students, field supervisors, and administrative actors. Selecting information-rich cases enhanced the analytical depth of the study and facilitated a comprehensive examination of institutional dynamics.

The study involved a total of 28 participants, strategically drawn from diverse stakeholder groups to reflect the multi-layered nature of Social Work education. The sample included six faculty members involved in curriculum design and instructional delivery, twelve students representing both undergraduate (BSW) and postgraduate (MSW) programs, six practicing social workers and field supervisors who contribute to field education, and four administrators and policy-level stakeholders responsible for institutional planning and governance. This composition ensured that multiple dimensions of the educational system academic, administrative, and practice-oriented were captured and analysed. Data collection was conducted through a combination of focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Four focus group discussions were organized, two with undergraduate students and two with postgraduate students, each comprising five to six participants. These focus groups facilitated interactive dialogue, enabling participants to collectively reflect on their experiences of curriculum content, teaching approaches, field placements, and institutional support. In addition, eight key informant interviews were undertaken with faculty members, field supervisors, and senior administrators. These interviews provided deeper, individual-level insights into curriculum development processes, institutional challenges, resource constraints, and strategic priorities. All focus group discussions and interviews were guided by semi-

structured protocols to maintain coherence across sessions while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they perceived as important. With informed consent, all sessions were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The use of multiple qualitative strategies allowed for methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The diversity of participants and data sources contributed to a robust and nuanced understanding of the systemic conditions influencing Social Work education in Sri Lanka.

The qualitative data collected through interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using a systematic and iterative thematic analysis approach. This method was selected because it enables researchers to make sense of large volumes of narrative data by identifying recurring patterns, meaningful categories, and underlying concepts relevant to the research objectives. The analysis began with repeated readings of the verbatim transcripts to ensure familiarity with the content and context of participants' accounts. Initial codes were generated to capture key ideas, descriptive statements, and interpretive insights emerging from the data. These codes were then organized into broader thematic categories that reflected participants' experiences, perceptions, and recommendations regarding the current landscape of Social Work education in Sri Lanka. Through constant comparison and refinement, these categories were consolidated into well-defined themes that accurately represented the collective perspectives of the stakeholder groups. Ethical considerations formed an integral part of the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to commencing fieldwork, ensuring that the study adhered to recognized research ethics standards. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifiable details from transcripts and reporting. All audio files and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher, thereby safeguarding participant privacy. These procedures ensured that the study met accepted ethical norms for conducting research involving human participants. To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, multiple strategies were employed throughout the research process. Data triangulation was achieved by drawing on three complementary sources: individual interviews, focus group discussions, and the review of institutional documents such as curricula, policy guidelines, and program reports. Triangulation strengthened the accuracy and depth of the findings by allowing cross-validation of emerging themes. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm that the themes accurately represented their views and experiences. This process helped to refine the findings and strengthen interpretive validity. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by continuously

examining the researcher's assumptions, positionality, and potential biases, thereby reducing the risk of subjective influence on data interpretation.

Although qualitative research prioritizes depth, contextual understanding, and meaning-making over statistical generalizability, the methodological rigor applied in this study ensures that the findings offer credible and transferable insights. The detailed accounts and triangulated data provide an evidence-based understanding of the challenges and opportunities within Social Work education at NISD. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions on curriculum development, institutional strengthening, and policy enhancement in the Sri Lankan Social Work education sector.

Results and Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed five interconnected themes that collectively illustrate the current landscape of Social Work education at NISD. The first theme, *curriculum relevance and modernization*, reflects a mixed picture of progress and ongoing gaps. Participants acknowledged that the introduction of the International Social Work module within the MSW curriculum marks an important step toward global alignment and is consistent with contemporary theories emphasizing the need for culturally competent and globally oriented Social Work practice. This aligns with the theoretical framework, which situates Social Work education within a global local nexus, requiring curricula to prepare graduates for both local community needs and international professional standards. However, participants also noted persistent gaps, particularly in relation to experiential learning, research-based practice, and interdisciplinary approaches. These findings resonate with existing literature highlighting that Social Work curricula in many developing contexts often struggle to integrate practice-based and research-informed components in a systematic manner.

The second major theme concerns *faculty capacity and pedagogical practices*. Although the faculty at NISD possess strong theoretical grounding, participants emphasized limitations in adopting innovative and student-centred teaching methods. This constraint reflects the broader theoretical understanding that effective Social Work education depends not only on curriculum content but also on pedagogical competence, continuous professional development, and institutional support for teaching innovation. The reliance on lecture-based methods described by participants echoes literature documenting similar challenges in Social Work programs in the Global South, where resource limitations and heavy teaching workloads often prevent faculty from modernizing their pedagogical approaches.

A third theme focuses on *student experiences and the learning environment*. While students valued the exposure to global perspectives provided through course content, they

reported challenges related to research engagement, access to digital resources, and guidance during field practicum. These concerns align with theoretical perspectives that emphasize the importance of holistic student support, including academic mentorship, digital literacy, and structured guidance to strengthen the integration of theory and practice. Consistent with literature, the findings underscore that the quality of field education central to Social Work training is significantly shaped by the availability of trained supervisors, institutional coordination, and student preparedness.

The fourth theme, *institutional resources and infrastructure*, emerged as a recurring concern among all categories of participants. Limited digital platforms, outdated library collections, constrained access to online research databases, and insufficient technological facilities were seen as major barriers to effective teaching and learning. These findings directly correspond with the conceptual framework, which highlights institutional capacity as a foundational determinant of educational quality. Similar challenges have been widely documented in regional and international studies, suggesting that institutional investment in infrastructure is a key requirement for strengthening Social Work education in low-resource settings.

The final theme centers on *internationalization and global alignment*. Participants consistently recognized the value of global exposure particularly through the International Social Work module in enhancing students' understanding of comparative Social Work, ethical standards, and cross-cultural practice. This reflects the theoretical orientation that positions internationalization as a driver of educational quality and professional relevance in an increasingly interconnected world. However, participants also suggested that internationalization at NISD remains at an early stage and could be significantly strengthened through academic partnerships, joint research initiatives, and virtual knowledge exchanges. This aligns with scholarly discussions supporting international collaboration as a pathway for enhancing academic quality, research capacity, and global mobility in Social Work education. Overall, the findings demonstrate that NISD has made notable progress in modernizing its Social Work programs, particularly through curricular updates and the incorporation of global content. However, when compared with the theoretical framework and existing literature, it is evident that further investments in curriculum integration, faculty development, learner support systems, and institutional capacity are essential. These efforts are crucial to ensure that graduates are equipped with the competencies required to respond effectively to both local social issues and global professional expectations.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and interconnected factors shaping the quality and direction of Social Work education at NISD. The enhancement of curriculum

relevance through the introduction of International Social Work reflects a positive shift toward global standards and aligns with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the need for culturally informed, globally competent practitioners. However, the analysis indicates that this curricular innovation can achieve its full potential only when accompanied by stronger integration of experiential learning, research-based pedagogy, and interdisciplinary approaches. This aligns with the conceptual framework, which underscores curriculum modernization as a multidimensional process that extends beyond content updates to include pedagogical transformation and practice integration. Faculty capacity emerged as another critical determinant of educational effectiveness. While faculty members demonstrate strong theoretical expertise, limited opportunities for professional development and insufficient exposure to innovative teaching methodologies constrain their ability to adopt participatory, practice-oriented pedagogies. This challenge reflects broader regional trends in Social Work education, where institutional constraints often restrict the development of contemporary teaching practices. Strengthening faculty capability is therefore essential for ensuring that curricular reforms translate into meaningful learning experiences.

Students' experiences further illuminate the need for a more supportive and resource-rich learning environment. Although exposure to global perspectives has enriched students' conceptual understanding, gaps remain in research engagement, digital literacy, practicum supervision, and consistent integration of theory and practice. These findings correspond with the theoretical emphasis on holistic student development, which requires robust guidance systems, accessible academic resources, and structured field-learning processes. Institutional resources and infrastructure also play a decisive role in shaping educational quality. Limitations in digital platforms, library resources, and technological tools were found to hinder both teaching and student learning. These constraints underscore the need for sustained investment in institutional capacity to meet contemporary educational demands.

Finally, the theme of internationalization demonstrates both progress and ongoing potential. The incorporation of global content has effectively broadened students' cross-cultural awareness and professional outlook. However, internationalization remains underdeveloped in areas such as academic partnerships, collaborative research, and virtual exchanges. As highlighted in the theoretical framework, meaningful global engagement requires systematic institutional support rather than isolated curricular insertions. Strengthening international linkages would therefore position NISD more prominently within global Social Work education networks. Overall, the discussion highlights that while NISD has taken commendable steps toward modernizing Social Work education, continued advancements in curriculum integration, faculty development, student support, infrastructure improvement, and international collaboration are essential to sustain quality and global relevance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Social Work education at NISD is evolving in significant and promising ways, particularly through the integration of international perspectives and renewed emphasis on global competence. The five interrelated themes curriculum relevance, faculty capacity, student experiences, institutional resources, and internationalization collectively shape the strengths and limitations of the current educational landscape. While notable progress has been made, especially in aligning the curriculum with global expectations, sustained and coordinated efforts are required to embed experiential learning, enhance research integration, strengthen faculty pedagogical skills, and improve institutional infrastructure. Addressing these areas will support the development of well-prepared Social Work professionals capable of responding effectively to complex social issues in both local and global contexts.

Recommendations

Enhancing the quality and relevance of Social Work education at NISD requires the implementation of several interrelated strategies. Curriculum development should be systematically strengthened by integrating international and comparative Social Work perspectives across all modules, ensuring alignment with both global professional standards and national social service priorities. Such integration will cultivate critical thinking, cross-cultural competence, and the ability to navigate complex social contexts. Faculty development must be prioritized as a strategic institutional focus. This can be achieved through structured professional training programs, exposure to international teaching methodologies, collaborative peer-learning initiatives, and incentives that encourage pedagogical innovation. Strengthening faculty capacity is essential for delivering interactive, reflective, and practice-oriented learning experiences that effectively bridge theoretical knowledge with applied skills. Experiential learning should be expanded and formalized through improved fieldwork supervision, structured reflective learning mechanisms, and the creation of applied research opportunities that connect classroom learning with real-world practice. These measures will enhance students' professional readiness and the practical applicability of their training. Institutional resources and infrastructure require targeted enhancement. Investments in digital platforms, modernized library facilities, access to current academic databases, and robust online learning systems are critical to support both teaching and research activities. Adequate infrastructure will ensure that educational processes remain responsive to contemporary professional demands.

Internationalization initiatives should be further developed to include joint research collaborations, co-taught seminars, visiting scholar programs, and virtual student exchanges. These engagements will provide faculty and students with broader exposure

to global Social Work practices, facilitate cross-cultural learning, and strengthen the institution's position within international academic networks. Comprehensive student support mechanisms should also be strengthened. This includes mentorship programs, academic guidance, research supervision, and digital literacy training, all of which contribute to a conducive learning environment and enhance students' ability to engage with complex professional challenges. Finally, establishing rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems is imperative. Regular assessment of curriculum effectiveness, student learning outcomes, and alignment with both national and international professional standards will promote evidence-informed decision-making, continuous improvement, and the sustained development of socially responsive, ethically grounded, and globally competent Social Work professionals.

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