



IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DELIVERING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND FIELD PRACTICE THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The abrupt transition to online learning during the pandemic presented significant challenges for social work education, a field deeply reliant on experiential learning and human interaction. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities in implementing the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum, specifically the Field Practicum, via digital platforms in Sri Lanka. As a developing nation, Sri Lanka contends with persistent digital inequities, including inadequate infrastructure, unequal technology access, and financial constraints that impede full student participation. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research engaged 350 BSW students and 20 academic and field staff from the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) and the University of Peradeniya. Quantitative survey data were supplemented with qualitative insights from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Framed by Constructivist Learning Theory, the study evaluated how online environments support or hinder the development and application of social work competencies. Findings revealed that while online education maintained academic continuity and enhanced accessibility for rural and marginalized students, overall satisfaction was moderate, with only 59% rating the experience as effective. Primary challenges included unreliable internet connectivity (74%), high costs of data and devices (60%), and difficulties in replicating hands-on activities like field supervision and role-playing. The study concludes that online learning offers flexibility but cannot fully substitute for the experiential methods central to social work education. It recommends robust policy initiatives, training in digital instruction, enhanced student support, and the creation of a blended model incorporating a specialized Field Practicum Application for remote supervision.

KEYWORDS: *Social work education, online learning, field practicum, constructivist learning, blended education*

1. Introduction:

1.1 Context and Rationale

The global move to virtual learning during the pandemic transformed the landscape of higher education almost overnight. While many disciplines adapted to digital delivery with relative ease, social work education encountered unique obstacles. Social work training is built on human engagement, emotional understanding, and community practice skills, which are challenging to foster in online settings.

In Sri Lanka, where face-to-face instruction is the traditional norm, this sudden shift exposed structural inequalities in technology access and institutional readiness. Despite these hurdles, adopting online education ensured academic continuity and created new opportunities for students in geographically remote areas. However, the lack of direct field exposure and supervision raised serious concerns about the professional readiness of graduates trained under remote learning conditions.

This study was conceived to systematically address these concerns. It explores both the limitations and the potential of online social work education in Sri Lanka and suggests pathways to better balance access, quality, and professional integrity.

1.2 Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the obstacles and potential associated with delivering social work education and field practice online in Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives

1. Identify the principal difficulties in implementing virtual teaching and supervision within the
BSW program.
2. Examine the adaptive strategies employed by institutions, educators, and students.
3. Assess the impact of online learning on the accessibility, quality, and perceived effectiveness
of the social work curriculum.
4. Propose policy and instructional measures for the sustainable integration of digital and experiential components.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 The Educational Basis of Social Work

Social work education is distinguished by its commitment to integrating knowledge, values, and skills through experiential learning. The instructional process extends beyond

classroom theory to include case analysis, role-play, group exercises, and direct community engagement. The Field Practicum is the most critical bridge between academic theory and practical application (Roy, 2012). It is the setting where students internalize ethical standards, build professional confidence, and learn to respond effectively to human need (Ife, 2016).

In Sri Lanka, formal social work training began in the early 1950s, initially focusing on welfare services for children, families, and the elderly. Since then, the field component has remained the cornerstone of professional education. The pandemic-driven shift to remote learning disrupted this model, forcing educators to question whether the essential competencies of social work could be maintained without in-person experience.

2.2 Access to Higher Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's education system is based on the principle of free access, guaranteeing educational opportunities from primary through secondary levels. However, admission to the public university sector is intensely competitive. Fewer than 3% of eligible students secure admission annually (Jayaweera & Gunawardena, 2007). Many who qualify cannot enroll due to financial constraints or inadequate infrastructure.

In this context, the expansion of online education seemed to offer a viable solution. It allowed a broader segment of youth, including those in remote or low-income communities, to pursue degree programs from home. Yet this very transformation revealed new forms of inequality. Students with poor internet connections, limited digital literacy, or financial hardship were less able to participate fully, undermining the equity goals of higher education.

The situation was even more complex for social work. Field practice, supervision, and interpersonal learning did not translate easily to an online format. As universities turned to virtual classrooms, the core of practice-based training was threatened. Understanding this impact and its implications for the professional development of social workers became the central motivation for this research.

2.3 Constructivist Learning Theory as an Analytical Lens

This study employs Constructivist Learning Theory as its guiding framework. This theory posits that learners are active participants who construct knowledge through engagement and reflection, rather than passive recipients of information (Carswell, 2001). In social work education, constructivism aligns naturally with the profession's emphasis on inquiry, problem-solving, and experiential understanding.

When applied to digital learning environments, the theory underscores the necessity of maintaining three key forms of presence: social presence (interaction and collaboration), cognitive presence (critical thinking and reflection), and teaching presence (instructional guidance) (Garrison et al., 2000). The effectiveness of online education hinges on

sustaining all three. However, when poor connectivity, financial hardship, or technological limitations disrupt interaction, the learning process becomes fragmented, and students miss crucial opportunities to internalize core social work skills such as empathy, ethical judgment, and interpersonal communication.

2.4 Global and Local Views on Digital Instruction

International literature indicates that universities in developed regions have gradually adopted online or blended formats for social work theory courses (Davis & Stader, 2019). These approaches increase flexibility and access, yet challenges persist in field instruction and supervision. Ethical monitoring, confidentiality, and authentic observation of student-client interactions remain significant concerns (Reamer, 2021).

In developing countries, the barriers are more fundamental. In Sri Lanka, digital infrastructure is uneven and expensive. Internet coverage is inconsistent, and many students rely on mobile data connections that are neither reliable nor affordable (Nanayakkara & Wijesuriya, 2007). Consequently, models developed in wealthier contexts cannot be directly transplanted; they must be adapted to local conditions. The central challenge is designing blended and low-bandwidth solutions that facilitate authentic learning while safeguarding the profession's ethical and practical standards.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This approach was selected because educational experiences involve complex interactions that cannot be fully captured by numerical data alone. The mixed-methods framework enabled a balanced analysis, where quantitative findings provided measurable insights into the prevalence of issues, and qualitative evidence added depth and contextual understanding of participants' lived experiences.

Data were collected from two primary state institutions offering the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree: the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) and the University of Peradeniya. These institutions represent different settings, allowing for comparative insights into variations in digital readiness and teaching practice.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised BSW undergraduates who participated in online learning during the pandemic, along with the academic staff and field instructors involved in their teaching or supervision. The study included three student cohorts (2017/2018, 2018/2019, and 2019/2020), all of whom had experienced a full cycle of online education.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure proportional representation across year levels and institutions.

Category	Institution	Sample Size (N)
Students (Quantitative)	National Institute of Social Development & University of Peradeniya	350
Academic Staff / Field Instructors (Qualitative)	National Institute of Social Development & University of Peradeniya	20

3.3 Data Collection

Two complementary data collection strategies were employed:

1. Quantitative Surveys:

Structured questionnaires were used to gather statistical data on students' demographic profiles, internet access, perceived effectiveness of online learning, and satisfaction levels. These questionnaires were initially distributed via Google Forms; however, inconsistent internet connectivity necessitated telephonic assistance for many students, a limitation that itself reflected a central theme of the study.

2. Qualitative Methods:

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Twenty interviews were conducted with academic staff and field supervisors to capture expert opinions on instructional suitability, institutional challenges, and professional competency outcomes.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): These sessions were held online with student groups to encourage shared reflection and identify common experiences and coping mechanisms.

All participants provided informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional committees before data collection.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine frequencies, percentages, and relationships among variables. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed, coded, and organized thematically. Triangulation of both data types enhanced validity, ensuring that statistical trends were supported by narrative evidence.

4. Findings

4.1 Participant Characteristics and Learning Context

The analysis showed that female students constituted the majority of participants at both institutions, consistent with gender trends in the social work discipline. A notable characteristic of the sample was the high proportion of students from rural districts, illustrating how the online learning model expanded participation beyond urban centers.

This accessibility, however, presented a paradox. While online education broadened opportunities, it also exposed rural students to infrastructural and financial vulnerabilities that limited their learning experience. Many participants appreciated the flexibility of remote learning, but also expressed significant frustration due to poor connectivity and economic strain.

4.2 Technological and Financial Barriers

Most students identified internet connectivity and financial cost as their most significant obstacles.

Challenge	Students Affected (%)	Impact on Learning
Poor Connectivity / Signal Quality	74%	Disrupted real-time classes and interaction
High Cost of Data / Devices	60%	Created financial stress; reduced participation
Limited Digital Literacy	43%	Restricted use of advanced online learning tools

Poor signal quality particularly affected students in rural and estate sectors who depended on unstable mobile networks. These interruptions forced students to rely on recorded lectures, which diminished active participation and limited the collaborative learning essential for social work training.

The financial burden was also considerable. Many students reported spending a substantial portion of their household income on mobile data, often prioritizing educational expenses over essential family needs. Institutional relief measures, such as limited data subsidies, were inconsistent and insufficient. As a result, online learning inadvertently reinforced the very inequalities it was meant to reduce.

4.3 Institutional Readiness and Technical Support

The two institutions displayed notable differences in technological preparedness. The University of Peradeniya had a functional Learning Management System (LMS) that enabled students to access recorded lectures, submit assignments, and review materials asynchronously.

In contrast, NISD's LMS was in its early stages, lacking the capacity for comprehensive course delivery. Technical support was limited, and many lecturers had to troubleshoot problems independently. Consequently, most academic interactions occurred via Zoom, WhatsApp, and Email, which maintained basic communication but lacked the instructional sophistication required for structured online education.

This situation aligns with what Hodges et al. (2020) term "Emergency Remote Teaching" rather than planned digital instruction, a temporary solution for continuity, not a sustainable educational model.

4.4 Curriculum Component Performance

Student satisfaction levels varied significantly across different curriculum components.

Curriculum Component	Satisfied / Highly Satisfied (%)	Dissatisfied / Not Satisfied (%)	Key Challenge
Theory Lectures	47	3	Limited interaction; reliance on recordings
Case Studies	33	23	Difficulty linking theory with practice
Group Work	70	23	Loss of teamwork atmosphere
Role Play	38	41	Absence of non-verbal cues
Field Practicum	34	40	Inability to conduct supervised fieldwork

The data clearly indicate that while theoretical knowledge transfer was maintained, experiential learning suffered. Activities requiring real-time human engagement, role-play, and the field practicum recorded the lowest satisfaction rates. Students reported that online supervision lacked immediacy and that without field visits, they could not meaningfully connect theory to practice.

5. Discussion

5.1 Balancing Access and Quality

The findings present a dual reality. On one hand, online learning preserved educational continuity and extended access to students who might otherwise have been excluded. On the other hand, limitations in digital infrastructure compromised the quality of interaction and skill development.

Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through dialogue and collaboration. However, unstable internet connectivity fragmented classroom communication, turning active learning into passive content consumption. This explains the moderate overall student satisfaction, despite an appreciation for the flexibility of virtual learning.

The expansion of access, particularly for students from rural and low-income backgrounds, marks a significant step toward educational equity. Yet, these same students bore the greatest digital burdens, including poor connectivity and financial constraints. Without structural interventions, this paradox will persist, leaving the promised inclusivity of online education unfulfilled.

5.2 Institutional Constraints and Policy Gaps

The study highlights a general lack of institutional preparedness to support digital instruction in professional fields. Most universities that adapted to online platforms reactively, focusing on delivery rather than teaching methodology. Training opportunities for academic staff were scarce, forcing lecturers to learn new technologies while simultaneously teaching.

The absence of dedicated technical teams further weakened institutional resilience. Policy at the national level also lagged behind the pace of digital transition. While other sectors developed clear frameworks for online operation, professional programs like social work lacked standardized guidelines for maintaining quality assurance and ethical standards in virtual practice.

5.3 Field Practicum and Professional Competency

The most critical challenge concerns the Field Practicum, the defining element of social work education. The findings indicate that remote supervision was largely ineffective in cultivating the competencies required for professional practice. Students missed opportunities for live client interaction, observation of non-verbal cues, and guided ethical decision-making.

Academic staff confirmed that these deficiencies risk creating a competency gap among graduates. Without sustained, direct field experience, students struggle to develop

essential attributes like empathy, problem-solving, and reflective judgment. This has serious implications for employability and professional credibility.

To address this, the study proposes developing a specialized digital supervision system that allows for real-time monitoring, documentation, and reflection. Introducing a Field Practicum Application could serve this purpose, supporting blended learning models where digital tools complement, rather than replace, experiential education.

6. Conclusion

The shift to online education during the pandemic served as both a crisis response and a catalyst for innovation in social work education. It demonstrated that academic continuity is possible even amid severe disruption. However, this study's findings indicate that access to technology alone does not guarantee educational quality or professional competence.

While online learning expanded opportunities for geographically remote and economically marginalized students, its limitations were substantial. Unreliable connectivity, high data costs, and the absence of structured field practice hindered students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. These challenges weakened the vital link between classroom learning and professional development, underscoring the need for systemic reform.

Grounded in Constructivist Learning Theory, the study affirms that authentic learning in social work depends on active participation, reflection, and supervision. Therefore, digital tools should be viewed as complementary supports, not substitutes, for experiential learning. Institutions must move beyond temporary emergency adaptations and adopt a strategic blended approach that effectively integrates technology with direct human engagement.

7. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The study proposes several evidence-based recommendations to enhance the resilience and quality of social work education in Sri Lanka.

7.1 Policy-Level Interventions

1. Reduce the Digital Divide:

The government, in partnership with telecommunications providers, should negotiate subsidized internet packages and device support schemes for higher education students. Low-interest student loans or grants can ensure that economic hardship does not bar access to virtual learning.

2. National Infrastructure and Quality Standards:

The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Higher Education should introduce a standardized quality assurance framework for online professional education. This framework must define technical standards, ethical guidelines, and evaluation mechanisms for digital instruction in social work programs.

3. Integration with the LEARN Network:

Tertiary institutions should strengthen their connection with the Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN) to ensure stable and equitable broadband access, particularly for rural learners.

7.2 Institutional Strengthening

1. Develop Dedicated Technical Units:

Institutions like NISD should establish specialized technical support units to assist both students and lecturers in resolving real-time digital issues. This will reduce teaching interruptions and improve institutional readiness for blended learning.

2. Accelerate LMS Implementation:

The Learning Management System (LMS) must be fully operational and accessible to all academic departments. It should host structured content, facilitate assessments, and provide feedback channels that encourage self-directed learning, a core principle of constructivist learning.

3. Faculty Capacity Building:

Ongoing professional development programs should be implemented for lecturers, focusing on digital instruction, course design, and student engagement strategies. Educators need to master online facilitation skills that maintain motivation and foster dialogue, even in virtual environments.

7.3 Instructional and Curricular Innovations

Adopt a Blended Learning Model:

The BSW curriculum should integrate both virtual and in-person learning. Theoretical components can be delivered effectively online, while essential experiential components like role-plays, case conferences, and community work should continue face-to-face. This hybrid structure can achieve the dual goals of accessibility and professional competence.

Develop a Digital Field Practicum Platform:

A specialized "Field Practicum Application" should be designed to facilitate remote supervision. This system should enable real-time communication among students, field supervisors, and academic mentors; include features for case documentation, ethical reflection, and progress tracking; and ensure all professional standards are maintained in remote contexts.

Encourage Student Reflection and Use Simulation Tools:

Incorporating digital simulation and reflective journaling platforms can strengthen professional judgment in online settings. By integrating structured reflection exercises into the LMS, institutions can partially mitigate the lack of direct field contact.

8. Implications for Future Research

This study primarily focused on the immediate challenges and responses observed during the pandemic. Future research should explore the long-term impact of blended learning models on the professional competence and employability of social work graduates. Comparative studies across other South Asian contexts could offer valuable insights into how digital inequality shapes professional education in the region. Additionally, further investigation into the ethics of virtual supervision, simulation-based field training, and student well-being in digital environments would significantly enrich the growing scholarship on social work education.

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