

# Social distancing and social work field placements

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**Abstract:** The impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on social work practice placements around the world and in the United Arab Emirates is of concern to students, social work educators and service users. In this practice note, I focus on the impact of the interruption to social work practice learning for students at the United Arab Emirates University and reflect on the introduction of 'social distancing', a health and safety strategy aimed at reducing the likelihood of the spread of the coronavirus. I propose ways in which students in school placements can continue to develop their social work knowledge and skills 'from a distance' and while physically absent from their practice learning settings.

**Keywords:** crisis management; social distancing; practice learning; coronavirus; social work; emergency; field placements; humanitarian relief

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## Introduction

I started teaching social work at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in August 2018 and was assigned to teach a module called 'Social Work and Humanitarian Relief'. As part of this module, I introduced the topic of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) which broke out in 2014 mainly in West Africa. I outlined the steps taken by various National and International Agencies to manage its spread and effects. We focussed on Sierra Leone, a country reported to have had 3896 deaths (CDC Online). I outlined the Radio Education Programme supported by UK's Comic Relief and we examined the successes and challenges of that programme. A few weeks after these series of lectures, COVID-19 took hold and by 4th March 2020, the UAE government announced an early Spring break with the closure of all schools and universities. The closure of schools was aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19. The current plan is that the first 2 weeks is taken as Spring break thereafter schools and universities will remain closed to face to face teaching, with the use of online and distance learning. This strategy supports social distancing, a phrase which is being more frequently used since the outbreak of the Corona Virus (COVID-19). Social distancing, according to Reluga (2010, p1) involves

changes in behaviour that prevent disease transmission by reducing contact rates between susceptible individuals and infected individuals who may transmit the disease.

By restricting contact with individuals or groups of people, social distancing practices have the potential to reduce the severity of an epidemic, however the benefits of social distancing are largely dependent on the extent to which it is used by individuals. Social distancing should not mean emotional isolation or losing human connections and in line with our values, social workers should endeavour to maintain contact with vulnerable service users who may be isolated during this time. Isolation, which can impact negatively on mental health and other areas of wellbeing can be minimised by maintaining connections and links through the telephone, social and other electronic media. This is an important strategy to safeguard our most vulnerable while keeping ourselves safe. In this practice note, I report on the disruption to social work practice learning as a result of the COVID- 19 in many parts of the world, and the United Arab Emirates in particular. I argue that placement providers and Social Work Programmes must be

better prepared to respond to similar occurrences in the future and that contingency planning to support some form of practice learning become built-into teaching and learning schedules at Universities.

It is my view that significant, life changing learning has been lost in terms of direct work with service users, learning from colleagues and supervisors during this period and for the UAE, there may be additional loss of practice learning time due to Ramadan which is likely to start towards the end of April this year. For students graduating in June, there will be no time to complete the requisite number of practice learning hours and any suggestion of an extended academic year is unlikely to be welcome news for students. This places social work programme providers in a difficult position, uncertain about how to support students at this time and how to ensure disruption to learning is kept to the minimum. This disruption to learning will also affect nursing, physiotherapy and other professional programmes where students require a period of learning in practice.

All first placements at the UAEU are undertaken in schools whilst second placements are completed in Organisations and Agencies such as the Family Development Organisation, Zayed Higher Organisation, Social Support Center and the Department for Community Development, to mention a few. These Organisations prepare students to work with families, persons with disabilities, groups and communities. With schools in the UAE closed, social work students were initially required to stay home, however students in Organisations were asked to adhere to the policies and strategies being implemented by their hosts until the decision was taken that these students too be allowed to engage in social distancing. As social work educators and practice educators, we know that practice placements do not always enable students demonstrate fully their knowledge and skills. The question which we need to consider now is how practice educators can effectively and fairly assess and comment on student's ability to practice when there has been minimal direct practice and little opportunity to undertake direct observations of practice. In the UAE, 'social worker' is not yet a protected title which means that many professionals in social work roles and those who supervise social work students are not qualified social workers. This poses additional challenges in terms of creative teaching, learning and assessment in the context of distance learning.

Social work practice is a complex activity and according to Ashencaen-Crabtree (2008) demand for skilled, professional knowledge and intervention is required in the UAE. In order to prepare students to undertake complex tasks when they qualify in the UAE, it is crucial that

appropriate practice learning opportunities are available to students.

According to Holtzman (2017) the area of public health social work in the United States of America is a smaller area of practice compared to other specialist areas and limited public health content is taught across all levels of social work education. In our social work curriculum at the UAEU, public health related topics are minimally taught, however advocacy, awareness raising, and well-being strategies are addressed in the taught curriculum and practice modules.

The aim of this paper is not to suggest that social work students should defy national public health and safety directions issued by Governments, it is to generate some discussion around the implications of disruptions to practice learning and to propose strategies which may be utilised by Universities and Practice Educators to keep students engaged in learning outside the formal physical spaces of practice placements.

## **Suggestions for practice educators and students**

Social work practice educators in countries affected by COVID-19 will have their own ideas of activities to supplement direct practice with service users whilst adhering to the social distancing protocols. I am recommending the following specifically for students in school placements.

1. Using the updates on the spread and effects of COVID- 19 to generate discussions online. These discussions should be customised according to the country and should reflect the measures being taken by Governments to manage the spread of the virus. For social work students in the UAE, providing literature around public health social work will be a useful starting point.
2. Social work students should be asked to critically reflect on the nature of the spread and examine which groups or individuals are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. We already know that the elderly and people with specific pre-existing health conditions are most at risk, however, how do other factors such as social class, homelessness, gender, disability, race or ethnicity impact on infection rates and severity of the condition? These discussions will enhance awareness of inequalities and should guide students development of interventions for specific groups in the future.

3. For students placed in schools, supervisors and social work educators could support them to monitor through school databases and systems, any children or families infected or affected by COVID-19 and offer the necessary advice, supports and interventions as practically possible.
4. Where there were any child safeguarding concerns before the closing of schools, social work students should be tasked with following up on these children by completing telephone assessments and reviews with the families and children to ensure children are safe.
5. Where parents are unsure and anxious about how to manage their children during this period of social distancing, social work students should be encouraged to share best practice with parents about the need to maintain structure and routine as much as possible. Students should be encouraged to research the strategies being used elsewhere and customise for their own communities and cultures.
6. Social work students who were working with children who have additional needs can continue to monitor these children remotely to ensure continuity of service provision and support for parents and carers as and when needed. Guidelines and strategies used by teachers and school social workers with children in school should be shared with parents and carers to assist them during this period of home schooling.
7. A major role for school social workers in the UAE is monitoring pupil attendance and engagement with learning. The introduction of distance learning in this period to manage the spread of COVID-19 will require student social workers to prioritise ongoing monitoring of children who historically were known to have poor attendance and to ensure their wellbeing and safety.

The suggestions proposed in this practice note cannot be implemented without the agreement and support of various authorities and of course service users, children and their families. It is acknowledged that the reality of COVID-19 is that infections are spreading fast in the absence of a vaccine or cure. Globally, governments are responding to this threat alongside health care workers, medics and social workers across micro and macro practice. There is growing concern about the impact of poverty and overcrowding in some parts of the world and anxiety about the extent to which poor and weak health care systems will cope if the crisis worsens.

This may be the time to review our social work placement guides and practice learning agreement proformas with the view to incorporating

statements about how practice learning might take place (or not) in the event of natural or man-made disasters, epidemics or pandemics on local, national and international levels.

## Conclusion

At the time of writing, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified COVID-19 as a global 'pandemic' and social distancing is the operative strategy. Although social workers remain unclear about what this means for social work education and practice learning, they have and are responding in various creative and innovative ways to ensure the dignity and worth of people affected and infected by COVID-19.

As social workers are in the business of addressing life's challenges, I am optimistic that educators and practitioners will work together to ensure maximum learning is achieved for all, especially students whose practice learning opportunities are occurring within the context of social distancing.

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