Commentary:
Digital Poverty in Social Work Education During Covid-19

Panagiotis Pentaris
Sue Hanna
Gemma North

Abstract: *The use of technology in social work education is neither new nor without debate. The conversation has been gradually informing us of the challenges and controversies, as well as benefits in education, practice, policy, and research. Yet, in the face of COVID-19 and associated quarantine measures, social work education has been tasked with a fast-paced adjustment to online, and where feasible, hybrid learning. This reflection raises the argument that the pace of organisational adjustment is not always the same as those studying social work. This leaves many students in digital poverty and generates inequality gaps that may need addressing, with more inclusive curricula and alternative methods of practice learning.*

Keywords: *Social work education; digital poverty; digital literacy; COVID-19; pandemic*

Social work education and practice have not always connected to '*digital professionalism'* (Taylor, 2017). In other words, both educators and students experience difficulties with digitisation. Without a doubt, online social work education has been previously challenged for its effectiveness and appropriateness (Kurzman & Littlefield, 2020). COVID-19 has further provoked this debate by imposing education at a distance, while requiring students and faculty alike to quickly adjust to a virtual environment of knowledge exchange and assessment. Social work programmes have had to quickly adjust the delivery of education material, assessment, and practice-based learning. Over the last six months, programmes in the United Kingdom have suspended most of student's practice-based learning and adopted online assessment methods, which challenges fairness in the assessment process, considering variations in IT skills and access, and adapted almost universally to online methods of teaching (Social Work England, 2020). In other words, social work education has been faced with two options, as with everything else during this period: either pause and wait until it is possible to restore previous functionalities, or adjust to the new reality, one which requires virtual presence and digital literacy. The demands of social work education, though, require educators and students to react, adapt, and evolve in challenging situations.

At a time when higher education is largely influenced by information and communication technologies (ICT), COVID-19 has exacerbated digital inequalities (Beaunoyer et al., 2020) and emphasizes a greater gap in accessibility of education between various student groups (e.g., younger and mature students; students in rural and urban areas). These ineualities are commonly discussed in the context of the interchangeable concepts of 'digital illiteracy' and 'digital poverty' (Norris, 2001). The former refers to the skills and abilities to make use of ICT, but the latter is inclusive of the issues of accessibility and acceptability of ICT methods as alternatives. According to Barrantes (2007), digital poverty is defined as the lack of ICT and can be characteristic of any segment of the population regardless of economic poverty, while

the concept of digital divide is predominant in conversations referring to inequalities in accessing and using ICT. Those in higher education are expected to be at lower risk of digital poverty, with the assumption that they are primarily of the younger generations. It is often the case, however, that social work student cohorts include those from a wider range of backgrounds, for example 'mature' students attending or returning to education later in life.

Drawing on the classifications of digital poverty (Barrantes, 2007), social work students during COVID-19 may be 'connected' but lacking in skills and knowledge about e-education and content creation features (e.g., online presentations) which constitute digital wealth. A desktop analysis of 20 countries' higher education response to COVID-19 (Crawford et al., 2020) found that among developed economies (e.g., Australia, Germany, and the UK) semester/term breaks were not extended, campuses were closed, and teaching was moved online. Only some institutions in the US, such as in Texas, chose not to follow suit. To the contrary, in developing economies (e.g., Brazil, Jordan, Malaysia, and South Africa), there was a varied response. Responses, either from developing or developed economies, that wanted students to start following content and be assessed online place the demand on students to have access to electronic devices and online platforms, as well as to be literate enough to make use of ICT altogether. These two requirements are essentially what can increase student satisfaction in online education (Chen et al., 2020).

Despite the many and varied efforts to accommodate digital student needs during COVID-19, the gap between the digitally poor and wealthy is widening, with emerging inequalities that social work education needs to address moving forward. Two main challenges have emerged from this situation. First, how will social work education bridge this gap and enable all students, regardless of ICT knowledge, to pursue their commitment to education. The second challenge is a longer-term one--how do we monitor and understand the impact of the ICT gap on students who were undertaking their degree course when measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 were implemented? Should we expect a change in the quality of practice in future social workers compared to those whose education was impacted by COVID-19, and how will this reflect on other stakeholders (including experts from experience/clients/service users)? Finally, if digital poverty characterizes social work students, and soon to be practitioners, then how is Gibson et al.'s (2020) argument that social workers are responsible (along other professionals, we argue) for eradicating the digital divide among clients/services users/experts-from-experience a possibility? These are only a few questions that this commentary wishes to raise, to highlight a key challenge that social work education and its students continue to face in these times of ongoing quarantine measures for protection from COVID-19 and the challenges to student learning that arise as a result.

References

Barrantes, R. (2007). Analysis of ICT demand: What is digital poverty and how to measure it? In H. Galperin & J. Mariscal (Eds.), *Digital poverty: Latin American and Caribbean perspectives* (pp.29-53). Intermediate Technology Publications. https://doi.org/10.3362/9781780441115.002

Beaunoyer, E., Dupéré, S., & Guitton, M. J. (2020). COVID-19 and digital inequalities: Reciprocal impacts and mitigation strategies. *Computers in Human Behavior, 111*, 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106424

Chen T., Peng L., Yin X., Rong J., Yang, J., & Cong, G. (2020). Analysis of user satisfaction with online education platforms in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Healthcare, 8*(3), 200-226. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8030200

Crawford, J., Butler-Henderson, K., Rudolph, J., Malkawi, B., Glowatz, M., Burton, R., Magni, P., & Lam, S. (2020). COVID-19: 20 countries' higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching, 3*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.1.7

Gibson, A., Bardach, S. H. & Pope, N. D. (2020). COVID-19 and the digital divide: will social workers help bridge the gap? *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 63*(6/7), 674-676. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2020.1772438

Kurzman, P. A., & Littlefield, M. B. (Eds.). (2020). *Online and distance social work education: Current practice and future trends*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003016557

Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the internet worldwide.* Cambridge University Press.

Social Work England. (2020). *Social Work England: A specialist regulator focused on enabling positive change in social work*. https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/

Taylor, A. (2017). Social work and digitalisation: Bridging the knowledge gaps. *Social Work Education, 36*(8), 869-879. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1361924

Author note: Address correspondence to Panagiotis Pentaris, School of Human Sciences & Institute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, Greenwich, London SE10 9LS, UK. Email: p.pentaris@gre.ac.uk