



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## **Social work teaching and learning in the era of COVID-19: lessons for the future**

Mackle, D., Montgomery, L., & Kelly, B. (2023). Social work teaching and learning in the era of COVID-19: lessons for the future. *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.1921/jpts.v20i2.2080>, <https://doi.org/10.1921/jpts.v20i2.2080>

### **Published in:**

Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning

### **Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

### **Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

### **Publisher rights**

Copyright 2023 Whiting & Birch.

This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

### **Open Access**

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

# Social work teaching and learning in the era of COVID-19: Lessons for the future.

Danielle Mackle<sup>1</sup>, Lorna Montgomery<sup>2</sup>, and Berni Kelly<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 restrictions led to the rise of new forms of social engagement and interaction, as well as the need for professionals, including social workers, to develop new digital skills. This paper considers the role of the social worker and the impact on social work training for undergraduate students in light of the changes that have taken place as a result of the global pandemic. The paper draws on the findings from an online survey (using qualitative and quantitative question sets) conducted with 30 undergraduate social work students in 2021. As we transition back to face-to-face teaching and learning, this paper considers the implications of online learning for social work students, analyses the benefits and limitations of this to the learning and practice environment, and captures the lessons to hold on to for the future.

**Keywords:** Social work, teaching, learning, COVID-19

1. Lecturer in Social Work, Queen's University Belfast
2. Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Queen's University Belfast
3. Professor of Disability Studies and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast

**Address for correspondence:** [d.mackle@gub.ac.uk](mailto:d.mackle@gub.ac.uk)

**Date of first (online) publication:**

## **Introduction**

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on education, from the primary level right through to the tertiary level. In Northern Ireland, like the rest of the world, schools, further and higher education colleges, and Universities had to alter the format of their teaching quickly and abruptly to the online environment. Blumenstyk (2020) and Shklarski and Ray (2021) point out that the effect of university campus closures impacted more than just teaching delivery; students had to leave university campus accommodation, libraries, student societies, and sports centres were closed, conferences were cancelled, and in the world of social work in Northern Ireland, student social work PLOs were stood down early, at just after the midway point of placement (McFadden et al., 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, some Further and Higher Educational Institutions (FHEI), including the Open University, were equipped to offer online teaching; however, for most, this was not the case, and FHEIs, their educators and their students felt unprepared for this rapid shift (Fidalgo et al., 2020). By mid-March 2020, FHEIs had to quickly choose an online learning platform to deliver their teaching based on the capabilities of that platform to facilitate the learning strategies selected by the FHEI (Carter et al., 2020). Each FHEI had to redevelop its teaching and learning techniques to deliver the content of its courses in an online environment, which included facilitating live online lectures, pre-recording video lectures and sharing these online with learning materials for asynchronous learning, as well as offering blended learning, i.e., live online or pre-recorded lectures but supported by face to face socially distanced smaller group tutorials and seminars (Favale et al., 2020). FHEIs also had to consider the mode of assessment for each of their modules and courses, developing online exams and setting new assignments (George, 2020).

This paper will draw on the findings from a survey (using qualitative and quantitative question sets) conducted with 30 social work students in the first year of the Bachelor of Social Work degree in 2021. The survey explored student experiences of online teaching during their 'preparation for practice learning' (PfPL) module in semester one and how well this online teaching prepared them for their placement in a practice learning opportunity (PLO) in semester two. Their PLOs were undertaken during a time of strict COVID-19 measures, including social distancing. Much recent research has been conducted that highlights the benefits of blended learning (online and face-to-face) as a strong pedagogical approach (Finlay et al., 2022; Karma et al., 2021). As we transition back to face-to-face teaching and learning, this paper will consider the implications of online learning for social work students, analyse the benefits and limitations of this to the learning and practice environment and capture the lessons to hold on to for the future.

## **The Social Work Degree in NI and the Preparation for Practice Learning (PfPL) module**

The degree in social work in NI was established in 2004 with the requirements for the degree programme set out by the regulator, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). These requirements established that the degree should focus on practice learning referred to elsewhere as fieldwork, the academic learning to support this, alongside improving and developing critical reflection, applying theory to practice, and the

development of communication skills (Wilson and Kelly, 2010). The Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree at Queen's University Belfast provides a three-year route for undergraduate students (UGR) and a two-year relevant graduate route (RGR) for those students coming with a previous degree in a relevant subject, for example in the social sciences, teaching, nursing, or youth work. The BSW degree for both cohorts of students includes two assessed PLOs whereby students undertake an 85-day PLO in a social work agency and a 100-day PLO in a social work agency.

To assist students in their preparation for their first PLO, a requirement of the degree, as set out by the NISCC, is for students to successfully complete the regionally agreed PfPL module. This module aims to prepare students for their PLO, focusing on the development of knowledge, skills, and values as the core components of social work practice. The module has been developed to provide students with an immersive and comprehensive foundation for undertaking the PLO and to assess their readiness to undertake direct supervised practice as a student social worker in the workplace (Wilson and Kelly, 2010). The module is made up of 12 weeks of weekly two-hour lectures and three-hour skills workshops. Through the lectures and workshops, the module provides students with a basic knowledge of the typical stages and processes of helping people (from tuning in, through assessment and onto evaluation), engagement, and evaluation skills. The module equips students to develop their interpersonal communication skills for initial engagement with service users in the social work role. Students also learn about issues relating to professional accountability and identity, including the NISCC Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers. The module assists students in developing their self-awareness and skills for reflection on personal and professional values and their impact on social work practice, with particular emphasis on fostering an emerging understanding of an anti-oppressive approach within the context of engagement with service users and caregivers. The PfPL workshops are co-taught by academics and social work agency partners, and students must pass this module to progress into their first PLO. Workshops are delivered to small groups of approximately 14 students, and the simulated role-plays are the key learning method. Each week, students are required to undertake a role-play of a pre-set scenario. Initially, students interviewed each other, taking on the role of social worker and service user, and then gradually transition towards gradual engagement with service users and caregivers.

### **Online Teaching and Learning in Social Work**

The literature identifies that undergraduate degree programmes in social work have been slow to adopt online teaching and learning practices (Lee et al., 2019; Smoyer et al., 2020). Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016) posit that the belief that social work cannot be taught online is driven by concerns that interpersonal skills and relationship-based practice cannot be developed fully in the online environment. However, Crisp (2019) and Robbins et al. (2016) highlight that online social work degree programmes have been taught in the UK, Australia, and North America for the last decade.

It is important to distinguish the difference between online taught social work programmes and the rapid move from face-to-face social work programmes to the online environment. Those programmes historically taught online will have benefitted from extensive planning with sound pedagogical approaches informing the design to ensure a high-quality delivery

(Hitchcock et al., 2019). Those courses moving from face-to-face delivery to online delivery, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, were trying to replicate face-to-face teaching in the online environment (Dinh and Nguyen, 2020; Smoyer et al., 2020).

While FHEIs were able to offer the necessary technology and tools for online teaching delivery (such as platforms like Zoom and MS Teams), educators who had never taught online were suddenly expected to change their teaching methods overnight with many educators identifying a gap in their technological or software knowledge and having to embark on a steep learning curve to become proficient as quickly as possible (Gurung, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020; Shklarski and Ray, 2021). Further challenges impacting on educators included issues with internet connectivity and having to learn how to engage and motivate students online (Gurung, 2021). Besser et al. (2020) also highlighted the stress that educators suffered because of the increased workload resulting from online teaching.

The shift from face-to-face learning to online learning also impacted students. Campus accommodation, libraries, and student spaces in general closed, and many students had to move home. The literature has highlighted practical issues for many students engaging in online learning from home. Thus, not all students had access to Wi-Fi or a laptop, with some students linking to their classes via their mobile phones; furthermore, not all students had access to a quiet place where they could study (De Jonge et al., 2021).

Another important issue to note in relation to student learning is how the online environment does not cater to all learning styles; for example, online learning can have more of a negative impact on neurodiverse students (Saline, 2021). Indeed, those students who thrive on the regularity of classes and face-to-face support from educators may have been impacted by the move to a more asynchronous learning environment (De Jonge et al., 2021). “Zoom fatigue” has become a common phrase in the academic and professional spheres. Lischer et al. (2021:10) define Zoom fatigue as “excessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at a video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility.” Teaching and learning via Zoom, or any online video platform is not the same as face-to-face teaching and learning. Further findings from De Jonge et al. (2021) found that students demonstrated a desire for face-to-face interconnectedness with their peers, both in terms of their shared learning and also in terms of emotional support, which the online environment was unable to replicate.

Many students were also impacted by personal stressors, including having to home-school their children, care for older or sick relatives, or shield themselves due to the risk that COVID-19 could pose to their health and well-being if they had a health condition (Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). Research by Lanfranconi et al. (2021) identified that women with caring responsibilities were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of dealing with extra workload on top of studying.

However, despite the challenges faced by both educators and students, Lischer et al. (2021) highlight that the digital environment is playing a more important function in many professional spheres, including social work. They identify that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the digital literacy of both educators and students and that this has become an indispensable tool that needs to be developed and continued for future students as we

transition back to face-to-face teaching (Lischer et al., 2021). McFadden et al. (2020) state that the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the need for social workers to embrace technology and learn new digital skills. Mishna et al. (2021) have identified how COVID-19 has changed the context for online communications globally, and they address how the online environment offers service users more flexibility in how and when they communicate with their social workers and how this flexibility can increase the likelihood of contact (except for those individuals and families who need face to face contact due to child protection and risk concerns). Cipolletta et al. (2017) and Mitchell (2020) address the fact that while online communications pose some challenges, including technological issues, they highlight the positive opportunities that the online environment can have for the social worker and service user relationship.

## **Methods**

This study was an online survey targeting relevant graduate route (RGR) social work students currently undertaking their first PLO, to seek their views on how well the online teaching in the PfPL module prepared them for their PLO in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors (the module convenor and the current and previous PLO coordinator) developed a self-administered online questionnaire using Google Forms. The School Ethics Committee was consulted, and the survey was approved without submitting a full ethics application because the survey was an evaluation of teaching. The survey invitation contained an introductory paragraph that informed participants of the study's aims, the confidentiality of their responses, and the freedom to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the study altogether. The questionnaire comprised a combination of closed- and open-ended questions developed from a scope of the literature. The survey captured participants' demographic details, their PLO service user group, and setting, as well as asking participants to quantify the time spent working virtually and in-person with service users. A Likert scale was used to determine how well participants felt the PfPL module prepared them for their first PLO in a range of skills. Further Likert scale questions were used to ascertain how helpful learning skills online were for the PfPL module in assisting in preparing for communicating via online platforms/telephone and in person. Participants were asked how important a blended approach (mix of virtual and in-person teaching) is to teaching skills for practice in the PfPL module for future cohorts and which, if any, would be most suited to being taught online. The open-ended questions were designed to elicit feedback in the participants' own words on their perceptions of the online learning environment and the ways in which it prepared them for practice learning. This included questions such as "list the top three benefits you gained by being taught online" and "list the top three downsides you may have experienced being taught online".

The questionnaire link was disseminated to the 42 relevant graduate students via email six weeks before they finished their 17-week (85-day) PLO. 30 of the 42 students responded. The main purpose of the study was to gather feedback from RGR social work students about their experience of online teaching and how well this online teaching prepared them for their PLO during a time of strict COVID-19 measures, including social distancing.

Data analysis was conducted by two of the authors. A descriptive approach for the quantitative data analysis was utilised as the goal of the research was to present the students' responses to the survey items to address the research questions (Gall et al., 2007). The researchers developed several tables from the data which are displayed from tables 1-11 below. The researchers also employed content analysis on the qualitative responses in the survey (Elo et al., 2014). Content analysis was useful to quantify the relationship between all the grouped content within the open-ended question sets. The open-ended questions were coded and categorised within each question to determine similar answers, and frequency counts of commonly occurring responses were tabulated for reporting purposes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

The study has produced important insights into student views on how well online skills teaching prepared them for PLO. However, there are some limitations to note. Although the survey yielded a very good response rate, the total sample is relatively small for a survey, so advanced quantitative analysis or comparison across experiences (for example, age, gender or PLO setting) was not possible. In terms of the demographic data, we did not collect ethnic identity, this was due to the small cohort of students surveyed (n=42) and the risk that answering this question could breach anonymity by making the student/s identifiable within the question sets of a majority Caucasian sample. In terms of gender, only one participant identified as male. This is likely because of the cohort of 42 students, a very small number were male (n=5). In addition, the cohort of students engaged in the study all had a previous relevant degree which may have impacted on their experience of the module. It would be helpful to undertake further research with other cohorts, including those who do not have relevant degrees, to explore the views of a wider range of student groups. The findings of the study are presented below.

## **Study Findings**

The survey findings provided contextual information on the PLO settings where students were placed and the types of contact, they had with service users. Respondents also indicated their views on how well the PfPL module prepared them for their PLO experience across a range of areas and provided helpful insights that can inform the further development of preparation for PLO for future student cohorts.

### Demographics

The survey respondents were undertaking their PLO in a range of settings, the majority of which were in Family and Childcare, with the next largest cohort working in adult mental health. Other settings included children and adult disability services, older adult services, education, and welfare service, and older adult mental health. 29 respondents were female, and one was male. 11 respondents were in the 18-24 age category; 10 respondents were in the 25-34 age category; 8 respondents were in the 35-44 age category, and one respondent was in the 45-54 age category. 18 respondents were working in fieldwork settings; 7 in residential settings; 1 in a hospital setting; 2 in day-care settings, and 2 in "other" settings.

### Time spent online and in-person with service users on PLO

Half of the survey respondents (n=15) stated that they spent 50% of a typical day working virtually with service users on PLO, and a further 13% (n=4) only engaged virtually with service users with no in-person contact with service users. Most of the daily online work consisted of telephone contact with service users and other professionals, as well as MS Teams/Zoom/Skype sessions with service users and professionals and writing up recordings and responding to emails. This contrasted with in-person contact other respondents had with service users and other professionals, including home and office-based meetings with service users.

### Online teaching of skills for in-person and virtual contact with service users

Respondents were asked how well the online PfPL module prepared them for working in person and virtually with service users during their PLO in relation to a range of social work skills. These included preparing for contact, i.e., tuning in; preparedness for verbal communication and interviewing skills; non-verbal communication skills; developing effective working relationships with service users; assessment and care planning; providing emotional responses and demonstrating empathy; application of social work values and anti-oppressive practice (AOP); and, finally, the ability to evaluate and reflect on practice. The following tables present the findings for each of the skills.

**Table 1: Preparedness for preparing for contact.**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	0
Somewhat	2	1
Neither prepared or unprepared	0	0
Prepared	16	18
Very prepared	12	11
Average	4.27	4.30

**Table 2: Preparedness for verbal communication and interviewing skills**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	0
Somewhat	0	5
Neither prepared or unprepared	2	0
Prepared	17	16
Very prepared	11	9
Average	4.30	3.97



It is interesting to note from Tables 1 and 2 that respondents identified similar feelings of preparedness for working both face-to-face and virtually with service users when it came to preparing for contact and their preparedness for verbal communication and interviewing skills.

**Table 3: Preparedness for non-verbal communication skills**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	2
Somewhat	1	6
Neither prepared or unprepared	2	4
Prepared	16	11
Very prepared	11	7
Average	4.23	3.50

Table 3 demonstrates that students were more likely to report not feeling prepared for online contact with service users in the areas of non-verbal communication. This may reflect uncertainty about how to demonstrate effective non-verbal communication over the telephone/ on online platforms where visual display or observation of non-verbal communication is more restricted.

**Table 4: Preparedness for developing effective working relationships with service users.**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	0
Somewhat	4	3
Neither prepared or unprepared	4	9
Prepared	17	13
Very prepared	5	5
Average	3.77	3.67

Table 4 highlights that respondents identified similar feelings of preparedness for working both face-to-face and virtually with service users when it came to developing effective relationships with service users.

**Table 5: Preparedness for assessment and care planning**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	2	3
Somewhat	11	10
Neither prepared or unprepared	10	4
Prepared	6	9
Very prepared	1	4
Average	2.77	3.03

As identified in Table 5, the main area where students felt less prepared for in-person contact was assessment and care planning, with only seven students indicating they felt prepared or very prepared. Interestingly, in the area of assessment and care planning, felt more prepared for virtual work with service users, with almost twice as many students (n=13) reporting that they felt prepared or very prepared in this skills area. This may indicate that when students are taught online and practice assessment skills via online platforms during the taught semester, they feel more prepared for undertaking assessments online on PLO compared to in-person assessments as they have no prior experience of in-person contact with service users.

**Table 6: Preparedness for identifying and responding to feelings**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	0
Somewhat	3	1
Neither prepared or unprepared	4	4
Prepared	15	19
Very prepared	8	6
Average	3.93	4.00

**Table 7: Preparedness for applying social work values and anti-oppressive practice (AOP)**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	0
Somewhat	1	2
Neither prepared or unprepared	4	4
Prepared	17	17
Very prepared	8	7
Average	4.07	3.97

**Table 8: Preparedness for ability to evaluate and reflect on practice**

	Face to face	Virtually
Not at all	0	0
Somewhat	0	1
Neither prepared or unprepared	2	3
Prepared	18	18
Very prepared	10	8
Average	4.27	4.10

Tables 6-8 highlight that the respondents identified similar feelings of preparedness for working both face-to-face and virtually with service users when it came to identifying and responding to feelings; applying social work values and anti-oppressive practice and the ability to evaluate and reflect on practice. In terms of the core social work skills necessary for practice learning (and beyond), the findings show that online teaching did not hinder students' ability to develop these through the course of the module.

### **Online teaching of skills for communicating with service users**

Students were asked to rate how helpful online skills teaching on the PfPL module was in relation to communicating via telephone, online or in-person (using a 5-point scale from not very helpful at all to very helpful).

**Table 9: Preparedness for communicating via telephone.**

1 (not helpful at all)	2
2 (somewhat unhelpful)	9
3 (neither helpful or unhelpful)	8
4 (helpful)	9
5 (very helpful)	2
Average	3.00

Table 9 demonstrates a lower level of helpfulness in preparing students for telephone contact (37% reporting this as helpful or very helpful, n=11) reflects a lack of attention to this mode of communication in the PfPL module which focused more on direct contact (either face-to-face online or in-person) with service users. One student further explained this point:

*“The big missing piece was not having experience of working on the phone as this has been the majority of my PLO. In addition, a lot of services have a phone duty desk and students are on a rota for this. There are no non-verbals on the phone and trying to do an assessment and build up a picture is more of a challenge”.*

**Table 10: Preparedness for communicating via online platforms**

1 (not helpful at all)	0
2 (somewhat unhelpful)	0
3 (neither helpful or unhelpful)	7
4 (helpful)	13
5 (very helpful)	10
Average	4.10

**Table 11: Preparedness for communicating in person**

1 (not helpful at all)	0
2 (somewhat unhelpful)	3
3 (neither helpful or unhelpful)	3
4 (helpful)	16
5 (very helpful)	8
Average	3.97

It is interesting to note from tables 10 and 11 that most students felt that online skills teaching had been just as helpful in preparing them for in-person contact with service users (80% reporting this as helpful or very helpful, n=24) as it had been for online contact with service users (77% reporting this as helpful or very helpful, n=23).

### Benefits of online skills teaching

Respondents were asked about how helpful the online skills teaching on the PfPL module was for contributing to the development of their repertoire of skills for practice for their next PLO and future practice; two found it unhelpful, eight neither helpful nor unhelpful, 11 helpful, and eight very helpful.

In qualitative comments about the module, students elaborated on the positive aspects of the module and acknowledged the challenge of the shift to online modes of delivery:

*“I really enjoyed the module and felt supported throughout. I think considering the chaos of the year in general for everyone, it was handled brilliantly”.*

Students were asked to list the top three benefits of being taught online. Many of the respondents identified practical benefits. The most significant benefit was not having to spend time travelling to and from university (n=13) and not incurring travel costs (n=9). Students also highlighted that being taught online allowed for more time to study compared to being taught face-to-face (n=12).

Students reported that learning new online IT skills, developing confidence in communicating via online technology were beneficial (n=8). Some students also appreciated the ability to ask questions in the chat function instead of having to ask a question in a large lecture theatre (n=8). Some respondents noted that being taught online helped them to learn new ways to communicate and build relationships (n=7). Other respondents enjoyed the flexibility of being able to go back and listen to the recorded live lectures (n=5):

*“I liked the mix of lectures and small groups. I have referred back to lectures/videos and notes throughout PLO”.*

Some respondents highlighted that there was no excuse for missing or being late to lectures as these were online and that there was less likelihood of lectures being disrupted due to questions being added to the chat function rather than interrupting the lecturer (n=4). One student stated:

*“I felt it worked really well for me; lectures were on time and well organised and probably less interrupted as it was online”.*

Some students also provided qualitative comments on the benefits of the virtual teaching approach indicating that they enjoyed the use of break out rooms online which enabled role playing in very small groups or to access one-to-one learning support that may not have been available during in-person classroom-based teaching. Students also appreciated the opportunity to learn about diverse ways to communicate with service users in a changing world:

*“I was learning new ways of building relationships and became more comfortable with being online... it made me think of how my communication skills needed to evolve due to the new world we are living in.”*

### Disadvantages of online skills teaching

Respondents identified that the main drawback of being taught online was not being able to meet their peers or have the whole campus experience (n=18). One student commented:

*“The lack of 'in person' contact feels like a disconnect both with teaching staff and peers. It's much harder to have good debate and discussion during lectures”.*

Other respondents noted that being taught online restricted physical access to the library (n=5) and that it was more difficult to engage and communicate with lecturers (n=7), as one student stated:

*“It was harder to practice non-verbal communication, harder to get to know colleagues, harder to engage”.*

*“I wasn’t able to communicate as effectively online. Conversation doesn’t flow naturally and you’re unable to accurately read non- verbals”.*

A further disadvantage was the lack of opportunity to meet with service users in person during their input on the module, (n=5). A few respondents stated that “pretending” to be in-person while role playing an online platform was difficult, and others found that the online platforms meant it was harder to practice and identify non-verbal skills, as one student explained:

*“It didn't adequately prepare us for face-to-face contact as we didn't practise face-to-face. It was harder to convey body language on line which is very important...”*

Some of the other practical drawbacks of online teaching included difficulties with Wi-Fi (n=2), fatigue (n=1) or stress (n=1) as well as the impact of sitting at a computer on posture (n=1):

*“I found being online for tutorials very tiring and stressful.”*

### Online learning for future learning and cohorts

Students were also asked to rate how important it is to maintain a blended learning approach to teaching skills for on the PfPL module for future student cohorts. Three respondents stated not at all important, one not important, two neither important nor unimportant, eight important, and 16 very important. These findings indicate a preference for maintaining a mix of online and in-person teaching of skills.

If a blended approach to skills teaching was maintained for future cohorts, students were asked how many skills tutorials should be virtual (responses were missing for 2 respondents). Only three students indicated there should be no virtual teaching in the future and half of the respondents (n=15) stated that just a few virtual skills tutorials would be helpful to gain experience in online and remote communication. However, 10 students indicated a preference to maintain substantial levels of online teaching with 7 respondents stating that half of the skills tutorials should be virtual two students reporting that the majority of skills tutorials should be virtual, and one person indicating that all skills tutorials should be virtual.

Respondents were asked if a blended learning approach to teaching for practice in the PfPL module was adopted for future cohorts, and which aspects of teaching would be most suited to the online environment. Preparing for contact (i.e., tuning in) and evaluation and reflection on practice were considered to be the two aspects of teaching most suited to online teaching by 18 respondents.

### **Discussion**

The findings of the survey indicate that the swift shift to online teaching did not hamper student learning in relation to the core skills they are expected to develop in preparation for

practice learning as, overall, students felt prepared in a range of skills areas. With the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on social work practice, almost two-thirds of respondents had substantial levels of virtual engagement with service users on their practice learning opportunities. There was a twofold benefit, therefore, of being taught skills online during the PfPL module in advance of their PLO. On the one hand, students had the opportunity to develop their own skills and confidence for using online platforms to engage with others, including learning in relation to managing Wi-Fi access, troubleshooting technical issues, and becoming familiar with communication online. On the other hand, students were also learning how to use and demonstrate core social work skills via online platforms as they had practiced role plays online with each other, their tutors, and drama students. The findings indicate that advancing the student experience of utilising online technology alongside developing their core skills for practice via online role-play-based learning equipped students with the skills necessary for PLO during the ongoing pandemic.

During the pandemic, the need for Covid related restrictions and physical distancing led to the increased use of online practice, often in the form of video calls and other digital fora, to engage with service users and, in so doing, to carry out core social work tasks of assessment and interventions (Pink et al., 2022). As noted, the students in this study, to a large extent, perceived that their online preparation for practice learning provided them with the skills to engage with service users in these virtual platforms at various stages of the social work process. Assessment and care planning was, however, the only area where students felt much less prepared for practice. This finding may well be related to broader tensions relating to teaching assessment and care planning skills rather than a weakness of the online approach to skills teaching. This is an area of skills teaching where first-year students on this module often feel challenged, partly because the module focuses on skills for engaging with service users, building effective working relationships, and models of assessment and care planning. However students' learning in relation to specific assessment tools is often provided later within the practice learning settings. On reflection, during PLO, students may think it would have been helpful to have learnt more about specific assessment tools within the PfPL module. The current rationale of the PfPL module is to introduce students to assessment and care planning skills more broadly with the expectation that students engage in more in-depth learning on this aspect of practice on PLO as they begin to utilise different assessment tools in practice settings. Wilson and Kelly (2010) have previously highlighted the tension between technical training on how to use specific assessment tools/forms that can be provided on PLO and the broader focus of PfPL module on teaching the theory and skills of assessment. A further area highlighted by the study findings for further consideration is the development of telephone skills, particularly as this mode of communication has become more central to social work practice in the context of COVID-19 (Lischer et al. 2021).

Whilst COVID-19 imposed a move to online skills teaching for this cohort; the findings indicate a preference to maintain some aspect of online delivery for future cohorts. Indeed 80% of respondents (n=24) felt it was important or very important to have a blended approach to skills teaching for social work students. As the majority of students indicated that the online skills teaching had been helpful at preparing them for both online and in-person engagement with service users, there is no indication that a blended approach would detract from the quality of skills teaching or the extent of student preparedness for

practice learning. Engaging students in online learning certainly seems to enhance their skills and confidence for online engagement with service users and help to enable students to prepare for and reflect on their practice experience. Reflecting student concerns about the detrimental impact of online learning on their wider student experience and engagement with learning support on campus, further and higher education institutions are now returning to in-person teaching as we move on from pandemic-related restrictions. However, the findings of this survey suggest that the benefits of blended approaches of skills learning for social work students should be further considered. In this new post-covid era when social workers, service users and other professionals have become accustomed to virtual ways of working and can benefit from blended approaches to practice, the challenge for social work educators is to reflect this changed practice world as they teach skills for practice and prepare social work students for their first PLO experience. This is in keeping with the wider literature promoting social work students and practitioners' digital literacy (Turner, 2016; Taylor, 2017). Lischer et al. (2021) identified the increasing role that digitization is playing in social work practice and within a range of other disciplines. They identify digital literacy as no longer an added extra but a core component of social work practice. Pink et al. (2022), in reviewing digital practices in child protection, conclude that, rather than being seen as a last resort, a hybrid practice should become a core element of social work.

*“The digital is now an inevitable and necessary element of social work practice, which must be understood as a hybrid practice that integrates digital practices such as video calls and face-to-face interactions” (Pink et al., 2022, 413).*

In recognising this transition to hybrid working, a Digital Capacities Framework has been developed by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). The joint digital capabilities statement (produced by BASW and the Social Care Institute for Excellence), identifies the knowledge, skills and values social workers need to develop their use of digital technology in practice. The framework seeks to support social workers with practice judgements and decision-making in order to meet the needs of service users who could benefit from digital technology, and support educators to consider how to strengthen social workers' understanding of the role of digital technology in social work. The framework also supports social workers to adhere to practice regulations and ethical practice. In particular, educators are required to embed digital capabilities within all areas of the curriculum and to provide specific means of assessing these capabilities (BASW 2020). Moreover, the Subject Benchmark Statement for social work, which reflects the generic knowledge and skills required for the award of a social work degree throughout the UK (revised in 2019), requires social workers to develop the use of technology and numerical skills.

To a large extent, social work students in this study evaluated the online teaching positively, with the majority of students indicating that they felt prepared to practice in a range of skills areas and engage in the social work process. Northern Irish social work education has been presented as providing a positive model in promoting student engagement, reflection and professional development (Dill et al. 2016). More specifically, the PfPL module at Queen's has previously been evaluated positively in preparing students for practice learning (Duffy et al 2013; Duffy and Hayes, 2012; Dill et al 2016).



However, a central feature of this module has been the involvement of teaching partners who are service users, carers, drama students/ actors. The input from these partners is considered a core element of teaching, and the relative merits of each partner has been evaluated (Duffy et al., 2021). Co-produced teaching is seen to concur with the policy trajectory in the UK, where service users and carers are expected to have a significant role in informing policy and practice developments. Service users are seen to offer a unique perspective on the “reality” of services (Ardila-Gómez, 2014). From a pedagogical position the inclusion of lived, experience-based knowledge brings distinctive learning for social work students (Trevithick 2008). Opportunities for inclusion of service users and carers were limited, for pragmatic reasons, in the online environment on this occasion. However, given the evidence base for their contribution as central members of the teaching team, there is a definite need to re-establish the level of involvement that existed prior to Covid-19. Given the focus on continued hybrid approaches service user and carer online involvement should be continued. Additionally, drama students continued to be involved in the module, and it is important to note that the majority of respondents perceived the online involvement of drama students as helpful, suggesting that their role could be extended to help social work students tune into the service user prior to contact. Future research should evaluate the hybrid approaches that educators could take to engaging service users, carers, and drama students or actors in skills teaching for student social workers.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As we move forward into a post COVID-19 world, it is necessary for the field of social work to continue to consider the impact that online communications have had on social work practice and education. Based on an empirical study of student experiences of online preparatory skills teaching in advance of their first PLO during COVID-19, this paper adds value to practice education literature across social care disciplines. In the return to in-person teaching and learning, consideration should be given to curriculum development that enhances the digital literacy of students and empowers students to engage remotely with services on all aspects of the social work process (Lischer et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2021). The study findings highlight that a blended approach to skills teaching should be maintained to develop social work students’ skills for working virtually with service users and professionals by telephone and via online platforms. As social work and other disciplines continue with hybrid modes of working and given the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the workforce, it is essential that social work education prepares students for a range of virtual and in-person approaches to practice and equips them with a blended and adaptable skill set (Lischer et al, 2021; Mishna et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2020). As the skills curriculum and blended approaches to social work skills teaching are further developed, there is also a need for further research and evaluation of the delivery and effectiveness of such approaches for a wider range of social work students to provide a robust evidence base for the ongoing enhancement of social work education. It would be useful now, 1-year post COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing, to deliver a blended PfPL skills module and evaluate its effectiveness in current practice settings.

## References

- BASW. (2020) *Digital Capabilities Statement for Social Work Practice: Summary*. The British Association of Social Workers [Accessed 04.02.23 at <https://www.basw.co.uk/digital-capabilities-statement-social-work-practice-summary>]
- Blumenstyk, G. (2020) Why coronavirus looks like a 'black swan' moment for higher education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 66, 25
- Carter, R. A., Rice, M., Yang, S., and Jackson, H. A. (2020) Self-regulated learning in online learning environments: Strategies for remote learning. *Information and Learning Science*, 121, 5–6, 311–319
- Cipolletta, S., Frassoni, E., and Faccio, E. (2017) Construing a therapeutic relationship online: An analysis of videoconference sessions. *Clinical Psychologist*, 22, 2, 220–229
- Crisp, B. R. (2019) Social work education: Moving the profession into the future. *Australian Social Work*, 72, 1, 3–7
- De Jonge, E., Kloppenburg, R., and Hendriks, P. (2020) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work education and practice in the Netherlands, *Social Work Education*, 39, 8, 1027-1036
- Der Feltz-Cornelis, V., Maria, C., Varley, D., Allgar, V. L., and De Beurs, E. (2020) Workplace Stress, Presenteeism, Absenteeism, and Resilience Amongst university Staff and Students in the COVID-19 Lockdown. *Front. Psychiatry* 11, 1284
- Dill, K., Montgomery, L., Davidson, G. and Duffy, J. (2016) Service-user involvement in social work education: The road less traveled. *Field Educator*, 6, 2, 1-11
- Dinh, L. P. and Nguyen, T. T. (2020) Pandemic, social distancing, and social work education: Students' satisfaction with online education in Vietnam. *Social Work Education*, 39, 8, 1074–1083
- Duffy, J., Das, C. and Davidson, G. (2013) Service user and carer involvement in role-plays to assess readiness for practice. *Social Work Education*, 32, 1, 39-54 doi:10.1080/02615479.2011.639066
- Duffy, J. and Hayes, D. (2012) Social work students learn about social work values from service users and carers. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 6, 4, 368-385 doi:10.1080/17496535.2012.654497
- Duffy, J., Montgomery, L., Murphy, P., Davidson, G. and Bunting, L. (2021) Differing knowledges: Comparing the contribution of drama students and service users in role-plays preparing social work students for practice. *Social Work Education*, 40, 5, 624-640
- Favale, T., Soro, F., Trevisan, M., Drago, I. and Mellia, M. (2020) Campus traffic and e-Learning during COVID-19 pandemic. *Computer Networks*, 176

- Fidalgo, P., Thormann, J., Kulyk, O. and Lencastre, J. A. (2020) Students' perceptions on distance education: A multinational study. *International Journal of Educational Technology. Higher Education*, 17, 1
- Forgey M.A. and Ortega-Williams A. (2016) Effectively Teaching Social Work Practice Online: Moving beyond Can to How. *Advances in Social Work*, 17, 1, 59–77
- George, M. L. (2020) Effective Teaching and Examination Strategies for Undergraduate Learning During COVID-19 School Restrictions. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49, 1, 23–48
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T. and Bond, A. (2020) The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*, 27–39
- Lanfranconi, L. M., Gebhard, O., Lischer, S. and Safi, N. (2021) Das Gute Leben im Lockdown? Unterschiede Zwischen Frauen und Männern mit und Ohne Kinder im Haushalt während des COVID-19-Lockdowns 2020: Befragung an einer Deutschschweizer Hochschule. [The Good Life During the Lockdown? Differences Between Women and Men With and Without Children Living in the Household During the COVID-19 Lockdown in 2020: Survey Conducted at a German-Speaking Swiss University]. *GENDER-Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 13, 29–47
- Lee, J., Hernandez, P.M. and Marshall, I. (2019) Review of Online Education in Social Work Programs. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 16, 6, 669–86
- Lischer, S., Caviezel Schmitz, S., Krüger, P., Safi, N. and Dickson, C. (2021) Distance Education in Social Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Changes and Challenges. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 720565
- McFadden, P., Russ, E., Blakeman, P., Kirwin, G., Anand, J., Lähteinen, S., Baugerud, G A. and Tham, P. (2020) COVID-19 impact on social work admissions and education in seven international universities, *Social Work Education*, 39, 8, 1154-1163
- Mishna, F., Milne, E., Bogo, M. and Pereira, L.F. (2021) Responding to COVID-19: New trends in social workers' use of information and communication technology. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 49, 4, 484-494
- Mitchell, E. (2020) "Much more than second best": Therapists' experiences of videoconferencing psychotherapy. *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, 10, 121–135
- Pink, S., Ferguson, H. and Kelly, L. (2022) Digital social work: Conceptualising a hybrid anticipatory practice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 21, 2, 413-430
- Robbins, S. P., Coe Regan, J. A. R., Williams, J. H., Smyth, N. J. and Bogo, M. (2016) The future of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52, 4, 387–397

Saline, S. (2021). Thriving in the new normal: How COVID-19 has affected alternative learners and their families and implementing effective, creative therapeutic interventions. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 91, 1, 1-28.

Shklarski, L. and Ray, K. (2021) The abrupt transition to distance social work teaching: Lessons learned in the age of COVID-19. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 41, 5, 505-519

Smoyer, A. B., O'Brien, K. and Rodriguez-Keyes, E. (2020) Lessons learned from COVID-19: Being known in online social work classrooms. *International Social Work*, 63, 5, 651–654

Taylor, A. (2017) Social work and digitalisation: Bridging the knowledge gaps. *Social Work Education*, 36, 8, 869–879

Turner, D. (2016) Only connect': Unifying the social in social work and social media. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30, 3, 313–327

Wilson, G. and Kelly, B. (2010) Evaluating the effectiveness of social work education: Preparing students for practice learning. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 8, 2431-2449