

'Creativity and Care in times of crisis: an analysis of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 virus experienced by social work students in practice placement'

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the way social work responds to a wide range of social issues. This paper evaluates a small-scale research project conducted by academics teaching on a United Kingdom (UK) social work degree programme. It explores the experience of students undertaking social work placements and how their practice was impacted upon by the resultant lockdown. The focus of which concerns the challenges students faced when they were unable to continue their real time practice placements and instead were asked to undertake virtual learning experiences through the use of Action Learning Sets (ALS) and Blogs. The responses indicate that the students found the use of Action Learning Sets increased the impact of their experience during a difficult period. Important lessons can be learned which can contribute to enhancing the educational experience on social work programmes in the UK. These lessons included the recognition of the student voice in delivery and the use of online forums for group learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, student experience, Action Learning Sets, changing practice, knowledge development

Introduction

Covid-19 has already had a profound, and often misunderstood impact on the way social work and social care agencies deliver their services to those they serve. The chief executive of BASW suggests that based on their research,

referrals to social services for children, adults and families will surge once lockdown eases, and 'hidden harms' and stored up need are revealed. More than 85% of respondents in our survey expected this to start impacting in September, when children go back to school. But, through this, social workers' vital roles in protecting and empowering people at risk, and whether these have been hampered, will become visible to governments. Public awareness and support for social workers and their concerns will grow. It will be impossible to ignore the huge gaps in funding and moves to yet again invest in the centralised NHS, rather than local social care, will be resisted by local authorities (Allen, 2020).

A number of recent articles in *Research in Practice* have explored the potential impact of Covid-19 on social work practice. For example, Ferguson, Pink and Kelly (2020) suggest that children's social care has, "been innovative and have improvised in creative ways that, if sustained post pandemic, could renew practice for the better". This could include:

- A more humane practice.
- Outdoor and mobile practice, a shift from the home being the primary locus for engagement to increased engagement outside the home.
- A change in the way social workers use their time, as they move towards different forms of engagement.
- A new hybrid form of practice which integrates face to face, digital and humane practice.

Featherstone and Bowyer (2020) suggest similar possible outcomes when they identify the 'potential arising from shifts in practice' and opportunities to 'spring clean our practice'.

The challenges to students beginning their professional practice, in sometimes complex practice environments, can be enormous. Many students had their experience of practice suspended/delayed, delivered in alternative ways or in some cases continued. This initial study explores the way agencies, students and universities coped with the challenges raised by the crisis through an analysis of the experiences of one university on the South Coast. It also begins to explore the implications of these challenges for practice post-virus.

In the UK, all social work students are required to undertake practice placements, which represents around 50% of their learning on a degree programme, the remainder being in the academic setting. Placements provide essential opportunities not only to meet the professional capabilities required of a social work student (BASW, 2018), but also experience in the field to

demonstrate developing practice skills, effective reflection and engagement with professional supervision (Fortune et al., 2007; Parker, 2007). 'Real-world' practice capability is considered as important as academic capability in students' professional learning and development (Bogo, 2010; Cleak and Smith, 2012; QAA, 2019; Wayne et al., 2010). Indeed, for some students it is the most memorable part of their programme of learning (Doel and Shardlow, 2005).

While the majority of placement providers adapted their practice to work online, using virtual platforms such as 'Skype', 'Zoom' and 'MS Teams' to continue their engagement, some providers found adapting at such speed problematic. Occasionally, this resulted in placement cessation.

The causes of placement cessation in this student cohort were found to be twofold. First, statutory placement providers found the immediate increase in the volume of work due to Covid-19 affecting the general population, and for vulnerable people already known to them, extremely challenging (O'Leary and Tsui, 2020). In such circumstances, all practitioners and a majority of managers were called into frontline practice, leaving social services departments with reduced capacity to provide ongoing student support. In addition, local authorities worked on the assumption that much of their workforce would be absent due to illness, or shielding (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2020).

Covid-19 also impacted on placement providers in the private, voluntary and independent sector (PVI) for this cohort. Some voluntary agencies introduced a temporary shutdown, while for others, workloads increased significantly.

A second factor concerned gender and age. A majority of social work students are female, and many juggle family and childcare responsibilities traditionally associated with their gender (Galley, 2020; Hemy et al., 2016; Stone and O'Shea, 2013). Home-schooling during the lockdown became an immediate and added pressure on their time (Alon et al., 2020). Under such circumstances, some students felt that the stress resultant from an immediate increase in familial responsibility, while effectively working full-time in placement, was a situation they could not sustain. The theme of gender will be addressed in a separate but related paper.

Key themes in the literature

Dealing with crises in social work

Social work has been among those professions at the forefront of dealing with past global and humanitarian crises, disease and pandemics. In the UK however, our experience and expertise of pandemics is limited. Discounting localised disease outbreaks, the last major pandemic in the UK was Influenza in 1918, and to a much lesser extent HIV in the 1980s/90s (Hamler et al., 2020). Increasing mortality rates and widespread disease also has a significant social and economic impact in the way it effects mental wellbeing, education, and employment (Garrett, 2008; Hays, 2005; Keogh-Brown et al., 2010).

Demand for essential social work services during the present pandemic rose steeply (Bauer, 2020; Berg-Warner and Morley; 2020, World Bank, 2020). Critics cite the need for local authorities to have acted more rapidly to assess risk and reconfigure support to children and families (Cook and Zschomler, 2020). Some commentators have described difficult logistics, where social workers were prevented from distributing physical resources or relocating people with lived experience (PLWE), due to lockdown and 'social distancing' measures (Abrams and Dettlaff, 2020; Banks et al, 2020). However, other services which rely on referrals initially saw a dearth of enquiries (Abrams and Dettlaff, 2020), with a fall in child safeguarding referrals being particularly noteworthy (Bravo, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, practitioners have been mindful of the requirements of 'social distancing' (Devlieghere and Roose, 2020). While there was still some face-to-face practice being conducted early on in the pandemic, inevitably practice moved online. Barsky (2020) questions social worker's effective use of online platforms and competency of practice when using these. Maintaining confidentiality online has also been highlighted as potentially problematic. Some social workers have been asked to use their personal devices and extend hours of availability, thereby encroaching on personal boundaries. Cook and Zschomler (2020) recommend reinforcing these boundaries by switching off or muting devices.

Research by Banks et al. (2020: 7) suggests that working online creates "an altered reality within which social workers negotiate practice", some of which could represent a 'new normal'. Similar issues have been reported in the wider media (see for example, Gillett, 2020).

For PWLE without internet access or equipment, this represents a challenge that highlights structural inequality, disadvantage and in some cases, human rights violation which increase isolation and can have subsequent effects on mental health (Banks et al., 2020; Cook and Zschomler, 2020). Van Dorn et al. (2020) go further, focusing on inequality and risk for those needing to use public transport, highlighting the disparity inherent in being vulnerable, when needing to shop or order medication online, but without the resources to do so.

For those who do have digital resources, Cook and Zschomler (2020) suggest that regular but limited contact by social workers is most effective. Aluffi Pentini and Lorenz (2020: 6) however warn of the possibility of the "digital erosion" of social work practice, and to guard against a lack of face-to-face contact/practice becoming the norm, due to costs. However, it is worth balancing their concerns with Allen's (2020) alternative, more optimistic, prognosis quoted above.

Dealing with crises in social work education

Initial literature concerning the effects of Covid-19 on university students was perhaps most prevalent from China (see for example Pan, 2020). At the time of writing, the relative paucity of literature exploring the experiences of social work students during the early stages of the UK Covid pandemic is unsurprising due to the developing situation.

The lockdown of March 2020 saw university teaching, learning and administration transfer online almost overnight. For mature students facing different demands on their digital knowledge this may have been problematic, however the majority of younger students are digitally literate and competent (Galley, 2020; Kamarianos, 2020) and for them this may have been less of an issue.

In addition, Kamarianos (2020) suggests however that Generation Z students (those born in 1997 onwards) are more able to deal with uncertainty and adversity. They have a closer relationship with uncertainty at a macro level, in terms of economic crisis, global terrorism, and on a micro level, in terms of a constant threat of symbolic and personal harm, a shift in cultural norms and values, and fluidity of gender.

According to Knight (2010) social work students are more likely to experience trauma in practice placement than their Practice Educators. Knight (2010) finds that experience, age, gender, ethnicity and placement setting are all contributors on the extent that trauma is experienced. The results of her study suggest education and preparedness can ameliorate the effects of trauma.

Stakeholder voices (agency, student, university, PWLE)

Along with placement disruption, Covid-19 has brought other unintended consequences. A significant increase in the demand for health services has been mirrored in the PVI sector and the social support for vulnerable people it provides. Analysis by Mak and Fancourt (2020) suggests a significant increase in the amount of volunteering in urban areas across the UK and they identify that significant investment is needed to respond to these demands. Such networks of support are often facilitated by social workers, and their role at this time has been seen as crucial (Truell, 2020). This may also suggest a redefinition of the social work role and a return to more community-based initiatives (Allen, 2020).

PWLE are a cornerstone of social work education (SWE, 2019 & 2020). As users of services, they can be those most affected by isolation, and many who engaged previously were subject to the 'digital divide', not having equitable access to technology or the internet (Gibson, Bardack and Pope, 2020; The Hill, 2020). To compound this, two thirds of PVI agencies reported a temporary shutdown during lockdown (Pascal et al., 2020).

Continuing support for social work students during Covid-19

As with social work education in most other countries, the social work programme at Solent University temporarily ceased all face-to-face educational activity in favour of using various platforms of digital media (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020).

Although some students might appreciate the flexibility of online learning and adapt quickly to it, Kamarianos et al (2020: 37) warn that 'a lack of communication between university and students was one of the main negative consequences of the pandemic and lockdown'.

Disruption in practice learning emphasises a need for stringent strategies for assessment and to develop transparent and effective processes when such disruptions become evident (Parker, 2010). Durkin and Shergill (2000) highlight the fundamental benefits of developing a team approach around the student, which is akin to Wenger's (1999) notion of communities of practice. Bucknell (2000) goes further, supporting a solution-based approach, which stresses what students need to do to pass, while emphasising the need for rigorous feedback to support the student thereby maximising opportunities for success.

Furness and Gilligan (2004) warn of the potential dangers of passing or qualifying a student who is unfit for practice, perhaps through a lack of real-world experience. Indeed, a lack of capability and necessary training has been highlighted in numerous Serious Case Reviews and Inquiries. It is essential therefore to ensure that this experience is not diminished, a concern of this research and the reason it developed in the direction chosen.

To ameliorate negative effects for those students for whom placements had ceased, it was necessary to ensure their continued learning and development, and to satisfy the requirements of SWE at the end point of the first mandatory placement (BASW, 2018).

The learning strategies which were implemented are outlined in greater detail later, but broadly follow those from other countries. China has been one of the first to report and the paper by Bao (2020) sets out strategies which HEIs might implement under such circumstances.

Initially, this involved making emergency plans and dividing the teaching content into smaller units (Bao, 2020: 114). Students were assigned to small 'Action Learning Sets' (ALS), which McGill and Brockbank (2004: 11) assert is 'a continuous process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group or 'set' of colleagues, working on real issues'. In this context, the 'colleagues' were students' practice educators and lecturers. Inevitably, much of this learning involved simulation which Bogo et al. (2014) assert greatly assists competency-based learning.

Abbott and Taylor (2013: 37) note that for learning in social work, ALS can assist with decision making, working with change and making assessments 'which supports reframing an issue to facilitate an emotional shift to develop new action and learning'.

Taking account of online platforms that the ALS operated from, Bao's (2020) strategy emphasises the use of 'voice' in teaching in terms of its online physical presence to enhance expression and body language.

Methodology

This was a small-scale research project, largely undertaken by academics involved in the ALS, engaging with students undertaking that project. At the time of the UK lockdown (2020), the second-year cohort comprised 45 students who were engaged in the field on placement, which commenced in February 2020.

Within the first week of lockdown, 24% (n=11) of these students found that their placement had broken-down as a result of capacity issues or agency closure, with a further 16% (n=7) experiencing reduced learning opportunities resulting in a decision to cease placement at the mid-way point. This was less than initially anticipated. However, placement cessation can be distressing for all involved; the student, the practice educator, the supervisor, the agency, academic staff, student colleagues and has a detrimental effect on those receiving services (Parker, 2010).

40% (n=18) of 2nd year students therefore completed the second half of their placement through a university-developed virtual placement 'Action Learning Set' (ALS) project, in 3 groups of 6 students with a member of academic staff acting as group facilitator.

The ALS project was designed to mirror and enable students to evidence key placement-related learning objectives. These included a range of activities focused around weekly Action Learning group meetings. For example, developing effective communication skills, team working, self-directed time management and organisation skills, developing skills with information technology/online communications software, and researching key issues.

Weekly ALS group meetings were supported by a member of the academic team but chaired in rotation by students in the group. By engaging in the activities outlined above, students were able to evidence their learning via a weekly blog, using a checklist of tasks, written exchanges and feedback, with management of the blogs rotating each week to a different student.

It was anticipated that on the conclusion of the ALS project, we would have explored two key issues. First, the experience of students undertaking their first practice placements in social work/social care settings at the time of the UK Covid-19 crisis and the way their learning experiences have been modified/alterd or enhanced during their practice experience. Second, to highlight new, innovative forms of practice which have emerged as a consequence.

We sought to use and apply research methods were relevant that would assist in achieving the desired research outcome (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). A qualitative research paradigm and purposeful participant selection could assist the researchers in developing new ways of teaching and learning, particularly in times of crisis (Erben, 1998: 5).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought through the university's ethics committee, in line with BERA (2018) research guidance providing: confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, the right to withdraw, and transparency about the purpose of the research and what the data would be used for. The study was approved through an expedited procedure within the Faculty.

Participants were ALS students at Solent University and were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time without providing a reason, other than where their involvement in Action Learning Sets was a requirement of amended assessment criteria.

The research team were mindful of the potential that participants might provide 'desirable' answers during semi-structured interviews, as the interviewers were largely drawn from academics of the social work programme (Grimm, 2010; Lavrakas, 2008; McDonald & Ho, 1998). Interviews were conducted upon conclusion of the ALS project in order to counteract such concerns. Care was taken to address any uncertainty about how participation in the research would not impact on completing their studies.

The Sample

A purposive sampling strategy engaged ALS project students using an online JISC survey, which canvassed for voluntary participation in the research study. ALS students were information rich possessing a valuable quality of experience and insight (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017; Merrill & West 2009; Patton, 2015). There were 12 survey responses, with 9 agreeing to participate and of those, 6 agreed to interview. Initially their Blogs and Portfolio Evidence were reviewed, which informed development of the semi-structured interviews.

Analysis

Interviews were conducted via 'ZOOM' and audio recorded with recordings sent to a professional transcription service. The transcripts were then coded using the inductive approach favoured by Applied Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

Generated data was analysed drawing on the response of participants through the triangulation of interview transcripts, blog entries, survey responses, reflective pieces, and evaluation in light of the literature review (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Therefore, the analysis presented here was *inductive*. This inductive approach to analysis also drew from a participatory ethical stance (Shaw, 2008). Such analysis privileges the voice of research participants, in this case students.

Initial analysis was conducted through data familiarisation, reading the transcripts before coding to the research questions. Themes from the transcripts which emerged repeatedly were coded and analysed with the help of NVivo.

Thematic analysis was used to further uncover key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three themes were identified inductively, which in turn composed of sub-themes and codes. Two research team members analysed the available data, cross-checking the analysis to arrive at

these themes. Themes 1 and 2 relate to the student placement experience and responses of placement agencies to Covid-19. These themes will be the focus of a different paper. Theme 3 provides the rationale for this paper.

Theme 1: Participants provided retrospective observations about wider placement changes and agency responses to Covid-19, concerning the period before their placement ceased. They highlighted variability in agency response, both within and between agencies.

Theme 2 - Student experience of Covid-19 lockdown: Participants gave insight into their lived experience of lockdown, while navigating placement disruption. Support from placement supervisors and practice educators was a key mediating factor during this time, in part determining the stress and uncertainty experienced by students.

Theme 3 – Action Learning Set Project

A key element in supporting students during this period was their involvement in Action Learning Sets. Based on the experience of student participants this section evaluates the ALS as an alternative to placement. Survey responses were an important data set for this theme. Both quantitative and qualitative data drawn from the survey have been included in this analysis, which foregrounds qualitative responses. Participant blogs also offer insight into the efficacy of the ALS. Further reference was made to the ALS project during semi-structured interviews. The results are discussed below under some of the key sub-themes, originally inductively coded using Nvivo.

Sub-theme #1: The positives of the ALS approach

Participant skills and knowledge development

Participants framed their more positive experience of the ALS in terms of skills and knowledge development. The development of interpersonal communication skills appeared a particularly positive outcome of the ALS approach. In response to question 3 of the survey, 100% (n=12) participants reported their communication skills had benefitted from the ALS; with 92% of respondents (n=11) reporting their team working skills had developed further because of the ALS., which is evident from this survey response:

So, I think my communication's got better, 100%. More confident when talking. I think my voice is clearer because I am confident. And my active listening skills have got better, because obviously on a Zoom call, so many people could be talking, because it's hard to recognise cues online, more so than in person ... and my IT skills have probably got better.

This comment is reflected in other responses. The constraints of online communication, for example, not being able to clearly recognise non-verbal communication, encouraged participants to be more responsive in critically reading the communication of others and utilising concise, focused verbal interjections within group discussions. Moreover, as indicated, many participants reported improved ICT skills, especially using online communication platforms. Blogging, as a novel communication strategy, was also reported as a new skill by other participants. One interviewee gives further insight into her newly acquired blogging skills:

... I was surprised, I've never done blogging before but I have gained this knowledge of academic blogging, which I was so proud of myself, as initially I didn't know what the coordinators wanted us to do, but as you get into it, you find it more interesting and you learn more.

This participant experienced a sense of surprise and epiphany in the efficacy of online communication and her ability to adapt to this new medium. Like a number of other participants, this interviewee was able to not only develop a new skill but also experienced a sense of empowerment in their ability to adapt to uncertain circumstances. 58% (n=7) reported improved ICT skills resultant from their ALS experience. Qualitative responses in the survey and interviews suggest an appreciable development in ICT skill for a large majority of participants.

Participants also reported the ALS as a source of knowledge development. 57% of participants (n=8) strongly agreed or nearly strongly agreed the ALS offered an opportunity to learn about real world social work issues, with no participants strongly disagreeing. One interview participant gives greater insight into the knowledge-building potential of the ALS:

The ALS project not only allowed for further research and therefore wider understanding into issues but also allowed for reflection between other peers in regard to the information found.

This represents views evident in other interviews and in qualitative responses to the survey. Using ALS meetings and contributions to the blog, participants were able to develop their knowledge of wider practice issues through evidence-based research and active learning with peers. Peer-to-peer dialogue offered an important learning dynamic for participants, providing an opportunity to access a wider body of knowledge and research through the completion of group tasks. Several participants indicated this not only enhanced their team working skills but also created a sense of group solidarity during Covid-19 uncertainty. 83% of participants (n=10) indicated the use of 'Zoom' encouraged good conversations with peers. The following quotation further illustrates the benefits accrued in terms of knowledge development and teamwork:

It was a great opportunity to work with colleagues that I'd never worked with before.

That tested my team-working skills. Also, my communication skills both written and verbal. The project was a chance to evidence creativity. All the knowledge that I've earned during the research is extremely valuable and to be honest I would not have researched so much around certain issues without being asked...

This highlights the collective knowledge gained from the cooperation required between students. It also indicates the ALS afforded positive challenge, not only by developing skills but also encouraging increasingly creative approaches to knowledge development. This emphasises the responsibility felt by participants in being asked to contribute to a structured group exercise that could have a bearing on others' development. The sense of responsibility and ownership of group learning needs was most richly evident in the blog. Three separate blogs were developed, by the three groups involved in the ALS. Each blog, in terms of frequency of output, ran to over 200 pages. Blog input was knowledge contribution in terms of ideas and theories participants had uncovered through individual research. There was also a significant amount of peer-to-peer dialogue, involving clarification of ideas and supportive messages acknowledging the contribution of blog participants.

The teamwork dynamic of the ALS was cited as the most positive aspect of the project, both in the survey and semi-structured interviews. One survey participant highlighted the team dynamic created a powerful learning environment that should be replicated in future ALS projects:

The use of small teams. Needing to comment on each other's blogs to enhance every one's learning. I think from this project I would take forward to my final year, the importance of giving and taking feedback to improve learning and knowledge, teamwork importance as well as lone working [sic].

Peer-to-peer feedback appears the key ingredient of this respondent's experience, suggesting it reified the learning potential of the ALS project, providing skills to be taken forward to their final year placement. The ALS also presented challenges, eliciting constructive feedback.

Sub-theme #2: Challenges of the ALS and Suggested Improvements

Connectivity and IT

Participants were given scope to voice constructive criticism of the ALS project and put forward suggested improvements for the benefit of future ALS projects. Problems with technology and connecting to remote working were the most apparent challenge: 75% (n=9) reported ICT and

connection difficulties, with 41% of participants (n=5) reporting more holistic difficulties engaging with online communication.

Balancing involvement in the ALS with personal commitments, such as parenting, was also an issue identified by participants and mirrors challenges experienced on placement. Indeed, 50% (n=6) of survey participants reported problems balancing the project with personal commitments. Parenting and home-schooling challenges were noted by some participants in open survey responses:

... the 'Zoom' calls in the middle of the day were inconvenient to people who had children, it should've been up to the individual group what time they set the meeting for so that it could've been done in the evening [sic] for example when people's children are in bed to lessen distraction...

This suggests more consultation and negotiation over availability and the timing of set ALS meetings may have improved the experience of some participants over the three-week ALS period. This set approach to timings was in-part the result of a quick transition from placement to the ALS project, which was formulated and planned in a relatively short timescale. The rapid implementation of this approach created some ambiguity for participants. A third of participants (n=4), reported difficulties understanding the expectations of the task. A whole group induction to the project took place, with staff facilitators supporting separate groups throughout the project. For participants, facilitators played a key role in clarifying the ALS expectations, however some reported the facilitator did not clarify their own understanding of the project, resulting in any confusion they experienced.

The role of Practice Educators

Practice educators also participated in ALS online group discussions, conducting observations on student communication for placement portfolio evidence. Participants also sought practice educators as a source of support through the process, including advising on the expectations of the ALS. A sizeable minority of participants, 25% (n=4), reported challenges related to practice educator involvement. One participant reported general challenges her group faced in working with practice educators (PEs) on the ALS project:

Some PEs didn't turn up at all throughout the ALS project. If anything of this sort is to happen, PEs should get more training prior to us coming in, so that when we don't understand anything we can still fall back on them to help us ... when we don't understand what we are expected to do and we call them [practice educators], they give us different version of what we should do, and then when we come to our group we are just confused.

Practice educator non-attendance for this participant, while an issue, was overshadowed by the perceived lack of preparation of practice educators for the ALS. This and other participants suggested there appeared to be a variable level of practice educator understanding of tasks, which translated into inconsistent advice and support. Several participants advised that practice educators should be more prepared for future ALS projects, through greater training about expectations and purpose. For the above participant and others, greater practice educator preparation could have enhanced further the real-world learning potential of the project by increased contribution of their experience, many of whom are in frontline practice.

Confusion expressed by some participants about the task and concerns over the related preparedness of practice educators, points to the need for a fuller induction with clear aims and objectives, with ongoing support of staff facilitators, to answer questions and provide clear direction to the project. For most participants, the expectations of the project were clear but the confusion apparent in a sizeable minority reinforces the need for a clear induction process to remote ALS projects.

Participants suggested a number of other ideas for improvement. For some respondents, more group meetings would have enhanced the experience: "The meetings however were very compact, and I felt as though an additional meeting or two would have been beneficial to allow questions to be asked". This suggests that more meetings, beyond the three that occurred, would have addressed any confusion and ambiguity associated with the ALS project. Underlying these findings, confusion, practice educator preparedness and the small number of meetings, is the issue of time. The ALS project was designed, prepared and enacted over a short timescale, less than two weeks, in response to the swift changes brought about by Covid-19. This highlights the need, where possible, for sufficient time to be devoted in planning a remote project such as this.

The involvement of People with Lived Experience (PWLE)

The academics planning this project considered the involvement of service users, or PWLE, as a key resource. The lack of time available led to a conscious decision not to involve PWLE in this particular project. In light of this, the survey elicited participant ideas about how PWLE could have been involved in the project, with a view to identifying scope for future PWLE involvement. 20% (n=9) of participants offered a range of open responses to this question. The clear consensus was PWLE input would have enhanced the ALS experience, by offering their perspectives on the diversity of topics covered in ALS meetings and the blog. Participants advocated for the active involvement of PWLE in all aspects of the ALS project, including facilitating meetings and helping co-produce the ALS project by setting tasks. The majority of respondents to this question felt they would have benefited from gaining insight into the impact of Covid-19 on PWLE who already had pre-existing needs. The open responses indicated this would have enriched participant knowledge of real-world social work issues, that may be exacerbated by Covid-19. This points to the knowledge development potential of PWLE

involvement. However, this means properly resourcing this involvement. Digital poverty and connectivity are a real issue for PWLE and it may be that programmes need to consider the resources they devote to this involvement by ensuring that PWLE contributing to their programmes are resourced to do so, perhaps by negotiating increases in ESG funding.

Conclusion

ALS was an approach designed to provide an alternative learning opportunity to placement, where placement cessation occurred. The ALS no doubt modified student learning because it was unable to replicate the placement experience. We do not claim the ALS is superior to placement-based learning, which will always provide a much richer learning experience. What the findings demonstrate is that the virtual ALS does offer a meaningful alternative to placement, albeit with limited real-world learning opportunities. Furthermore, the ALS has provided a pedagogic arena for skills and knowledge development, including communication skills and evidence-based practice. The ALS also promoted peer-to-peer support that in itself enhanced student social networks.

Among the issues we have highlighted attention needs to be given to diversity-related issues around caring, parenting and the balance in students' lives, resourcing PWLE involvement from the start to make that involvement meaningful and recognising that students may themselves find dealing with technology more of a challenge than we allow for.

The ALS is a proactive response to an unprecedented time of upheaval, utilising mass communication media. Such times require innovation that promotes a sense of continuity. ALS as a concept is not new, however, the relative novelty of widespread online working in a time of pandemic, means that the ALS represents an innovative approach to practice which has not previously been attempted. The ALS offered learning experiences grounded in real world practice concepts, such as teamwork, fully aligned with the ideals of more orthodox practice-based learning. Given this, the positive response of participants suggests the innovative format of the ALS promoted a sense of both cohesion and continuity.

Such innovation often comes with challenges, and participants offered insights into how this novel approach can be further refined and implemented in the future as a teaching technology. Learning from this project indicates the ALS needs to be integrated more fully into the syllabus, acting as an embedded feature of the student experience to reinforce both placement-based and academic-focused learning. This requires a move away from the condensed format used in this project, instead working towards an approach that makes ALS an integral feature of the entire social work programme. ALS is a very flexible approach and could be implemented in future both virtually and face-to-face, or using a blended mix of both.

McKee and Markless (2017) highlighted the beneficial impact of using ALS in the education of medical students, to support their medical placements. They noted that the inclusion of ALS as

a support mechanism for placement learning helped bolster 'soft' skills, including communication and reflection. Their own research offers indicators for further development, including the use of more diverse exercises that develop reflection and evidence-based learning, for example the use of reflective writing exercises and structured analysis of peer reviewed research. McKee and Markless (2017), in particular, used critical incidents as the anchor of their approach. The project described in this paper has not delved into critical incident theory as a learning method, but McKee and Markless' (2017) paper offers a signpost to further conceptual development of the ALS approach at Solent, which is aligned with the requirements of placement.

Aware that we have only been able to deal with a range of generic issues, we recognise that a more complex evaluation around gender, race/ethnicity and (dis)ability would provide more comprehensive results. However, we previously noted that there was some evidence that Covid-19 was enabling potential for engaging with new forms of practice which could lead to a shift in the practice environment to a more open, reflexive form of practice (Allen, 2020).

This paper is part of wider research into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the student experience of practice. The findings suggest that the use of Action Learning Sets has improved communication skills, ICT skills, research capacity, an ability to use and appreciate feedback and the development of team work skills. An overall factor was the contribution the groupwork and blogs made to knowledge development. We assert that these findings contribute to a more reflexive and sensitive form of practice and can become permanent part of a curricula which promotes new forms of practice and academic development.

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