



# Complexities in Student Placements Under COVID-19 Moral and Practical Considerations

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The work placement experiences of MA and BA social work students at an English university during a pandemic were explored by way of an online survey. Thirteen students responded and reported that the moral and practical consequences of a sudden forced move to the “new normal” of online working and assessment raised serious issues about the boundary between home and work life, and about the relationship-based nature of the career they thought they were entering. Experiences of moral and practical support from agencies were mixed, and a lack of consistency across different placement agencies led to feelings of unfairness in the students’ experience. Opportunities for incidental and tacit forms of learning were lacking in online working environments and students were strong of the belief that the future of social work would entail a permanent locus shift from community work to online interaction regarding the people (service users and carers) with whom they worked. This shift was largely perceived in terms of loss and a further diminution in relationship-based practice in English social work services, which have increasingly been dominated by a task and performance management culture before the onset of COVID-19.

**Keywords:** student placements, social work, moral complexity, work – life balance, student support, “new normal”, relationship based practice

## CONTEXT

Social work training in England has undergone many changes since its beginning in the past century, with its status having been raised to that of a profession requiring degree level entry from 2003 (Department of Health, 2002). The role of employers in determining successful students has increased in recent years, as the curriculum has increasingly emphasized professional capabilities and competencies. In 2020, social work students on 2-year MA courses or 3-year BA courses were obliged to complete a 70-day and a 100-day placement in work agencies as core components to their professional qualifying courses. The 70-day placement is usually in a voluntary agency, whereas the 100-day placement is usually in a state agency where the role, whether in children’s or adults’ services, is likely to encompass more formal work around issues of risk and vulnerability. In regard to their practice capabilities (British Association of Social Work [BASW], 2018), both MA and BA students are expected to demonstrate the same levels of ability.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A key debate in contemporary social work is whether traditional relationship-based practice (Ruch, 2007) is still at the core of a profession based on values of individuality, respect, and self-determination; or whether the incursion of business values and models into social work has meant that performance management, targets, and budget compliance (Harris and Unwin, 2009), have dominated practice and policy.

Relationship-based ways of working view human behavior as complex and multifaceted, i.e., people are not simply rational beings but have affective – conscious and unconscious – dimensions that enrich but simultaneously complicate human relationships. The professional relationship is seen as an integral component of any professional intervention, with systems compliance a secondary concern (Ruch, 2007). Unwin and Hogg (2012) state that every interaction between social workers, and children and families is unique, and that being able to explore issues in depth from a relationship-based platform can produce insights that effectively help challenge power imbalances and structural oppression. A relationship-based approach is seen as enabling practitioners to work in depth and move away from any reductionist view of children and families.

Social work student placements have traditionally offered “real world” learning environments which are quite different from the more theoretical orientation of the classroom, albeit students are expected to use placements to understand the fit between theory and practice. Prior to the COVID-19 lockdown and its associated move to online working, students have always been able to benefit from this “opportunistic, unplanned, and often serendipitous” way of learning (Hyams and Sadique, 2014, p. 440); Marsick and Watkins (2001) also emphasized the importance of everyday interactions and incidental learning with peers and supervisors. Similarly, Kloppenburg et al. (2018) advised that learning through exposure to academic and professional communities remains crucial for social work education, acknowledging that “the reduction of participation in this community inevitably leads to an erosion of the learning environment for social work students” (p. 16). The opportunities for tacit learning, situated within everyday social encounters and interactions with co-workers (LeClus, 2011), were significantly reduced for students during the pandemic. Bethere et al. (2014) emphasized that positive relationships with students represent a key precondition for the achievement of positive learning outcomes, whereas Phelan (2015) placed great importance on “the interplay of people” (p. 529) in providing students with the opportunity to learn from role models and be exposed to the mores of professional socialization. Moreover, Lave and Wenger (1991) stressed the impact that being part of a community of practice has not only on learning, but also on the construction of professional identity and status, a point subsequently emphasized by Webb (2017).

The New Right’s introduction of business models into social work and other public services can be seen as having eroded much of the discretion in professionals’ roles, in that it introduced managerialist approaches to performance management, rather than trusting professionals to make decisions on

risk, relationship, and resource utilization (Harris, 1999). Faith was traditionally placed in professionals as guarantors of the performance of welfare-state services, including social work. This traditional culture compares starkly with performance management cultures which are characterized primarily by quantitative measures of control (league tables/targets/budgetary compliance), rather than being concerned with qualitative and relationship-based issues. The risk to social work under performance management regimes is that practitioners can lose sight of why they are in their professions and can marginalize their service users and carers as units on a spreadsheet, or costs to be cut (Harris and Unwin, 2009). This risk of commodification increased with the onset of the 2020 pandemic, which brought a significant lessening of face-to-face contact with social workers.

When the World Health Organization [WHO] (2020) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, people across the world started to experience a “new normal” (Atuel et al., 2020) in relation to their whole lifestyles encompassing personal relationships, work, and studies. Following WHO’s advice that all countries should take urgent and aggressive action, the United Kingdom government implemented a strict plan for protecting public health including imposing a national lockdown at the end of March 2020. All aspects of public life were radically affected, including the closure of schools and universities.

The sudden change in both study and working environments under COVID-19 set university students on a rapid learning trajectory, especially with regard to IT systems of communication. Social work students on work placements received confusing, and at times, conflicting messages, about their status as the key or critical workers. Such confusion echoed national mixed messages, and both academic and workplace tutors alike strove to interpret such guidance in the interests of their students’ career futures, while prioritizing issues of health and safety. This guidance continues to change at the time of writing, but essentially, social work students became classed as key workers, equipped with personal protective equipment and privy to a range of protocols about safe working. The student environment changed overnight – no longer were they in offices with supervisors and fellow students on a day-to-day basis, and neither were they receiving face-to-face support from academic tutors. Their world became primarily an online world. Furthermore, the fact that some 90% of social work students are female meant many had childcare or other caring responsibilities (Amadasun, 2020). Significant numbers of students are in ‘digital poverty’ and cannot afford the quality information technology (IT) equipment necessary to work professionally from home, even if they have the space and privacy (Office for Students, 2020). This same study found that 52% of students believed their learning was impacted by poor internet connections, and 71% reported a lack of any private space at home in which to work. The confidential, and sometimes distressing, nature of social work placements made such environments even more challenging. The scope for blurring boundaries and incurring the moral injury (Litz et al., 2009) of bringing issues of abuse and neglect into their own homes *via* video conferencing and calls, constituted a scale and form of challenge that students had not

expected to encounter when they originally signed up for their social work course.

Women, in general, seem to have borne the brunt of COVID-19, an Office for National Statistics (2020) study having found that 67% of women, compared to 52% of men, took the responsibility of home education for children. Many social work students are in part-time employment alongside their studies, the loss of such employment during the pandemic causing further difficulties according to the Trades Union Congress (2020). Ninety percent of working mothers interviewed in this latter study reported that the financial and childcare/education responsibilities had negatively impacted their physical and mental health. Students who could not afford to take a break from their studies had little choice but to work long hours and fit in their studies around domestic responsibilities.

In tandem with the above work placement changes encountered, the academic environment also changed rapidly, both for students and staff. Traditional classroom-based teaching moved largely to online delivery, comprising a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning, delivered via a variety of learning platforms (Jonge et al., 2020). At the University of Worcester, the virtual learning environment strived to recreate and replace class delivery. Social work student feedback regarding such changes was mixed, but largely appreciative of adaptations brought into play to prevent disruption of studies. A national study by the Office for Students (2020) found that 51% of students said they were satisfied with the quality of their teaching during the pandemic, compared with 34% who were dissatisfied. Students who reported having live online lectures tended to view their teaching more positively than those taught *via* recorded lectures or slides.

At the beginning of the pandemic, all social work placements were suspended by Social Work England (SWE), the professional regulator for social work, as students were not initially seen as key essential workers. Subsequently, SWE initiated an open dialogue with universities in an effort to design realistic strategies for recreating placement around the social distancing rules. The University of Worcester was part of this dialogue, aiming to offer students from both of its BA and MA programs the opportunity to complete their placements as seamlessly as possible in terms of learning objectives, assessment, and direct work opportunities. Broadhurst and Mason's (2020) insistence that face-to-face working and co-presence continued wherever possible, informed the university's endeavors in rising to this challenge. Students, academic staff, practice educators, and university placement teams all found themselves caught up in Chang's (2010) construct of compressed modernity – an accelerated and complicated process of deconstructing, constructing, and then rapidly reconstructing structures and strategies. Amadasun (2020) held the view that the pandemic's enforced move to online working, and the lessening of certain practice standards by the government, had undermined and overturned key values of social work.

The above fascinating, but unforeseen, set of circumstances led the authors to become interested in studying the effects of the

“new normal” on their students in placement and the research proposal below was formulated.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The research project aimed to explore how the “new normal” of teaching and assessment practices affected students on their professional qualifying courses, particularly in regard to work placements.

The key objectives were:

- ▶ to identify and explore the challenges affecting student social workers practice placements in the COVID-19 context,
- ▶ to identify and explore the challenges affecting student social workers' personal/family life and well-being in the COVID-19 context, and
- ▶ to establish whether any aspects emerging from this particular context were likely to impact students' future social work practice/career intentions.

## METHODOLOGY

The study took place during November and December 2020, during England's pandemic period, which had included periods of lockdown. The associated prohibition of non-essential personal contact meant that methodologies comprising focus groups, observations, or face-to-face interviews were not feasible, and it was also appreciated that social work students carried heavy workloads, both academic and practice. Therefore, an online survey was devised as a means of eliciting perspectives about working on placement in times of pandemic. The e-survey appeared to be the best way of reaching students on placement, was inexpensive, and offered a form of data collection which was flexible and time efficient (Braun et al., 2020). Sending the e-survey link to students provided them the opportunity to complete the survey at their convenience, with no immediate pressure, and an opportunity to share perspectives confidentially and anonymously. However, the limitations of an e-survey are acknowledged as a non-discursive form of participation. Considering the qualitative nature of this study, it would have been ideal to establish direct contact with the respondents, in order to capture non-verbal interactions and the subtleties of discussions around sensitive personal topics. The anonymous online survey consisted of five questions, providing participants with free text boxes to expand any answers. The core questions were:

- ▶ How has your learning been impacted by working remotely during the practice placement?
- ▶ How has working from home during placement impacted your personal life?
- ▶ How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your academic attainment during the practice placement?

- ▶ How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your opportunities to develop specific social work skills and knowledge in placement?
- ▶ In your opinion, which aspect(s) of social work organizations' culture and practices, in relation to student placements, do you think will change after COVID-19?

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Worcester Allied Health and Community Ethics Panel (Ref-CHLES20210004-R), and the survey was administered by the authors via "e-survey creator" to final year BA and MA social work students in November 2020, remaining open for a month. A central link meant that no student identification other than participant number was identifiable.

The main difficulty encountered by the researchers was in engaging students to complete the survey. Although the link was sent to 45 students, only 13 respondents had completed the survey at the point of survey closure. This was despite two reminders having been sent, the authors (both also academic tutors to the students) being concerned not to be overly demanding for fear of skewing the research. Students may have perceived power dynamics at play, possibly with consequences for non-participation, even when the survey was presented as anonymous in nature.

Survey respondent fatigue (Porter et al., 2004) was identified as the probable reason for not having received a higher response rate. From the start of the pandemic, social work professionals and students were frequently asked to be part of various exploratory projects by professional and regulatory organizations, such as the British Association of Social Workers and SWE, their employers, and academic staff. Hence, many students may have felt respondent fatigue and afforded little priority to a staff research project.

The findings discussed below were arrived at via thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) of the survey responses. The authors read and reread the survey responses individually, coded them line by line, and subsequently developed overarching themes which were compared and refined as appropriate to produce the following themes: the diverse impacts of remote working on student learning during placement, confusions between personal and professional worlds, effects of a lack of face-to-face interaction on professional development, opportunities, and challenges in skill development, and post-COVID-19 predictions regarding "virtual" social work. The contents of these themes are discussed below.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### The Diverse Impacts of Remote Working on Student Learning During Placement

Student experience in relation to remote working was diverse, being mainly determined by the degree of support received from their placement provider. In particular, respondents reported encountering difficulties in relation to using the specific data systems used by various placement providers.

One respondent reported: "When working from home, no IT support and guidance around how the data system works is provided in person, the assistance over the phone is not efficient; mistakes are made and they make you feel lousy." It was very difficult to build the knowledge and skills related to this key component of working, with another student expressing their insecurities in regard to this aspect: "I was not sure what I was doing, I was trying hard to get used to using the electronic systems at home without support. My workplace supervisor was very busy, so I was unclear most of the time about what I should be doing."

However, other students had a positive experience, reporting that: "The placement provider offered additional support and training. . . which was invaluable" and "The support system was great." Additionally, one respondent felt "It was challenging, but I managed to do it on my own, although slowly, which gave me confidence in my ability to adapt."

Respondents acknowledged that working from home was the biggest challenge: ". . .not being in the office environment took away the opportunity to listen and learn from other social workers." Informal and incidental learning, an important source of knowledge for students (Marsick and Watkins, 2001), was diminished or non-existent due to the lack of contact with the teams and not working in an office environment or shadowing professionals. Others recognized the limited opportunities for such informal and incidental ways of working: "I had not enough opportunities to shadow social workers, which I needed in order to learn," "I have not been able to learn from others, ask questions, or observe other professionals," and "I had less opportunities to get support from colleagues in the team." Another student concluded that "The main impact was on amount and quality of time I was able to spend with qualified social workers, learn from them, and develop my own style. leading to less chances to gain the knowledge otherwise assumed." The above quotes demonstrate that students could not make use of the opportunistic and serendipitous ways of learning seen as so important by Hyams and Sadique (2014), and they also missed out on the essential daily interactions with peers and supervisors (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). Similarly, Kloppenburg et al. (2018) advised that learning through exposure to academic and professional communities remains crucial for social work education, acknowledging that "the reduction of participation in this community inevitably leads to an erosion of the learning environment for social work students" (p. 16). The opportunities for tacit learning, situated within social encounters and serendipitous interactions with co-workers (LeClus, 2011), were significantly diminished.

Contact with other students completing their placement within the same organization was also recognized as an important source of support. Unfortunately, this form of support was not available for students during remote working, with one respondent having recognized that: "Working remotely made it challenging to feel connected to other students," while another reported that: "I felt isolated, couldn't share my experience with anybody."

Another challenge identified by students was related to the difficulties in relating to the emphasis placed on ethical ways

of working (Banks, 2016; British Association of Social Work [BASW], 2018) in their classroom teaching, to the realities of pandemic-enforced ways of working. Students completing their placement remotely felt they were not promoting the key ethical principles of social work, citing their inability to connect to service users and carers face-to-face, building appropriate rapport, and delivering relationship-based practice: “There were no more face-to-face assessments; assessments were done *via* telephone, therefore, not directly seeing service users. You can’t fully reach individual needs this way.” Another respondent concluded: “I was unable to get a true picture of service users’ situations – this impacted on the quality of service provided to them.” The same barrier was recognized by other respondents who acknowledged that remote placements were offering “. . . less opportunities to engage with service users,” which made building rapport with service users and carers difficult, combined with the fact that: “Communication and assessment over the phone hindered the relationship between social workers and service users.” Another respondent observed that: “Service users’ limited access to technology made me unsure if the information gained is accurate or not.” All the above observations echoed the ethical challenges encountered by social workers around the world in relation to their daily practice under the pandemic, as reported by Truell and Crompton (2020).

However, some students perceived the remote placements as a positive challenge, demonstrating they were in possession of key practice elements, such as the ability to improvise, flexibility, and endure, which McFadden et al. (2020) stated were important protective factors that facilitate resilience in the social work educational field. For example, one respondent recognized that: “I learned a lot about different ways of working and it has made me more flexible,” and another considered remote working as an opportunity for: “. . . getting better in using virtual technology, getting more used to it, finding ways in which we can connect more efficiently” and “ultimately gaining confidence and having the feeling you can achieve the goal of qualifying, no matter what.”

## Conflicts Between Personal and Professional Worlds

As Banks et al. (2020) noted, social workers have had to handle significant extra pressure during the pandemic due to remote working, as the line between their work and personal work was “blurred” (p. 17). This dilemma was reported by students completing the survey – they also felt this pressure, leading sometimes to an inability to draw a clear line between professional practice and personal life. One of the respondents found that: “It was difficult to separate work from personal life, because they blend into each other when working from home, where it can feel like you are always available.”

Other respondents reflected on missing the opportunities for reflection and decompression offered by commuting back and forth to work, with one respondent experiencing difficulties in: “. . . switching off when finishing work, because there was no journey to reflect and separate the two.” This led to a very thin, almost non-existent, line between professional and personal

spaces, with one respondent describing that: “I finish work, leave one room, and then I’m a mum, cooking tea and doing homework with my children.”

Attending to their parenting responsibilities at home and using the same space for work brought in logistical difficulties as well. Several students reported the lack of an appropriate workspace; the fact they had to buy new furniture to improvise an office arrangement in their home, and also working in family spaces, made it very difficult to promote and maintain some key aspects related to the ethical and confidential conduct of social work. Respondents found it difficult to maintain confidentiality when working at home and having family around, especially those who had to work in a shared space, such as a kitchen or a living room. With children being homeschooled for most of the time during the pandemic, students, especially females, have had to undertake a double role, mostly within the same time framework, as both student in placement and parent *in situ*. This multifaceted role put additional pressure on them, affecting the quality of their learning and making one respondent feel that: “I was not doing anything as I should have, not in placement or as a mom,” or causing them to feel they are failing in both areas: “My daughter wanted to play with me; she didn’t understand why I was at home but didn’t have time for her. I was stressed because of my work, didn’t have patience to deal with her, then I felt a bad parent because I was keep sending her away.”

Conversely, several responses produced evidence of positive impacts brought to students’ personal lives by remote working. Time saved on commuting, for example, freed up time for other tasks and roles. Some students reported that they “saved time, which was spent on self-care instead,” or in supporting their children with the school run – “after a long time, I was happy I could take my son to school and pick him up in the afternoon.” Childcare provisions (pre- and after-school) were less available during the pandemic, and there was often confusion about whether such providers should view students as key workers. However, some respondents welcomed the fact that they were spending less money on childcare facilities now that they were able to work from home.

## The Effects of a Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction on Professional Development

Despite students having rapidly developed new key skills of communication in practice, the virtual nature of their work placements was considered a significant factor hindering their academic attainment.

Strong views were expressed regarding the virtual recall days back at university – days designed during placement to enable students to summarize the key knowledge and skills achieved in practice, as well as to reflect on their journey in placement. Most importantly, such days offer the opportunity to reunite with peers and create a strong sense of togetherness and belonging to a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), as well as a strategy for empowerment and support to continue their learning journey. As a mandatory component of their practice modules, students usually attend these recall events on the university campus. However, due to the specific restrictions in place, recall

days were delivered virtually during the period of this present research study. The feedback received from respondents in the survey clearly reflected that organizing the recall days virtually led to a loss of these events' meaning, diminishing the power of peer support, a form of support seen as critical by Graham and Rutherford (2016).

One respondent felt that: "Virtual recall days didn't give me the sense of being in the same boat," which was confirmed by another one's opinion: "virtual recall days were not reassuring and motivating as they would have been face-to-face – they don't give you the chance to have an easy chat." In addition, there are some specific comments related to the effectiveness of these activities when delivered online: "there were no natural discussions in virtual recall days," "I lose concentration very quickly in virtual environments," or "virtual recall days don't offer you the dedicated learning time, space and mind-set; we can't learn from each other." Another respondent concluded that: "I need to have face-to-face activities at university – this is what we have signed up for."

Some respondents, however, were more focused on the practical side of things, acknowledging that completing the recall days virtually gave them the opportunity to save time and resources: "It is much easier to have the recall day virtually, we don't need to travel, we save time and money."

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Remote working also affected students' opportunities to develop key professional skills, e.g., observation, assessment, and presentation. Respondents reported that completing their direct observations of practice when they are observed by their workplace supervisor (a key element of their practice placements) was challenging, due to the virtual nature of the placements:

- ▶ "Because I was not able to visit the service users in their environment, my observation skills were negatively impacted,"
- ▶ "I was observed delivering a presentation on Zoom – I couldn't see my audience, hence my presentation ability was impacted," and
- ▶ "Service users do not like virtual meetings; therefore, it was very difficult to get an agreement from a service user to be part of my virtual direct observation."

The answers above clearly acknowledged the challenge of creating a meaningful relationship with service users in a virtual environment, recognizing that technology, although beneficial in general, has also impacted negatively on social work practice (Heslop and Meredith, 2018).

However, some of the respondents also perceived such challenge as an opportunity to "push" themselves outside their comfort zone, and become creative, flexible, and resilient: "We are learning to work with limited resources, using online and social media, we are learning in crisis. There are all valuable skills to take with us in our future careers." Another respondent recognized that: "I did develop skills in virtual working and being more flexible in practice."

The above reflections resonate with Ruch's (2007) contention that challenges, uncertainties, and mistakes could also be considered as turning points and learning opportunities for practitioners in social work.

## POST-COVID-19 PREDICTIONS REGARDING "VIRTUAL" SOCIAL WORK

As a conclusion to their surveys, respondents detailed their opinions in relation to the elements of practice placements they anticipated were likely to become permanent post-COVID-19.

The core view from respondents was that virtual contact would become a significant part of social work practice, both in relation to working with service users, as well as with teams, with consequences for professional standards and relationship-based practice (Truell, 2020). This position is summarized by the following respondent: "Face-to-face social work will be reduced post-COVID. This will have a serious impact on relationship-based and person-centered social work."

Respondents envisaged that they would experience virtual supervision and placement meetings in the future, and that workplace induction and training will stay online. One respondent posed the question: "How you can become part of the system, when you are isolated by the other components of it?" Although respondents accepted that virtual practice would become a substantial component of professional practice, they called on academics and practitioners to remain aware of the importance of direct work with service users and carers, as well as the benefits of direct contact with teams in office environments. One respondent articulated: "I am clear that we will continue to use virtual technology, but I hope that it will be recognized that a student cannot learn good or bad practice without observing [service users and carers] live." Respondents largely hoped that, in their efforts to blend remote and direct ways of working, both universities and placements will think more creatively about how students can meaningfully meet placement requirements for authentic relationship-based ways of working, and not just become computer operators who are technically efficient at form-filling and reaching performance management targets. There was general agreement that this was not the form of career students had signed up to follow. One positive note from a respondent was concerned about the role students had managed to play during the pandemic, often providing a much-needed extra pair of hands when staff were off sick. This respondent's view being that in future crises, "placements will become more reliant on students, as they became more independent, and showed they can work without so much support when working from home."

## CONCLUSION

Organizing social work practice placements during the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a particularly challenging experience for universities and employers who provided placements for participating students. Ensuring that social work teams were safe and practiced ethically during these unprecedented times of pandemic was clearly difficult, and the integration of students within this environment led to many dilemmas, made worse by

ever-changing government directives. Student participants in the above research gave mixed views about their experiences, many appreciating the opportunity to continue their chosen career path, despite the radically changed workplace environment, while others felt disadvantaged by the continued expectations that placements should continue. The latter group of students found that online working militated against the types of relationship-based ways of practice they had envisaged in the field, whereas others accepted this diminution in personal contact, and looked to the new skills they had developed in a virtual environment. Such findings can be located within key literature such as Kloppenburg et al. (2018) who advised that learning through exposure to academic and professional communities remains. Tacit skills (LeClus, 2011) might also be learnt via online interaction, but the incidental learning and serendipitous encounters where informal knowledge might be exchanged are absent in such forums. Informal interplay of people (Bethere et al., 2014) are also absent in the formal signing in and out of online interactions and professional socialization (Phelan, 2015) is very limited.

It is indeed to the credit of all that placements continued, and the University of Worcester has not reported any cases of COVID-19 having been contracted by students while on placements, which have been managed more safely since personal protective equipment and clear working protocols were established. Accommodations have been made by both universities and workplaces regarding flexible hand-in dates of assignments and offering greater flexibility in placement hours for students; this latter provision being particularly valued by student-parents.

The ethical costs of “keeping the show on the road” for the service users and carers at the receiving end of services is not known, although some respondents suggested that theirs was a lessened experience, especially when unable to communicate face to face. It would appear that social work’s move to a performance management model (Harris and Unwin, 2009) has not been halted by the pandemic; indeed, the efficiency of online ways of working in keeping systems going has been hailed as a success which, although technically accurate, has not included students feeling part of the community of practice as identified by Lave and Wenger (1991). Student opportunities to achieve Webb’s (2017) professional identity and status have also been hampered by an online environment which does not lend itself to the development of close working relationships, which are often cemented in professional circles by informal and serendipitous interactions.

The cost to future generations of social workers may be that they do not stay in a profession which is based on virtual ways of working. Most students believed that the legacy of the pandemic will mean continued reliance on as many virtual platforms

as possible, especially in the cash crisis likely to impact local authorities (Government) post-pandemic.

Valuable lessons have been learned during the pandemic by universities and placement providers, as reflected in the above findings. Regular online sessions for students, as well as online recall days while in placement, received mixed praise from student participants, while the importance of direct support within their respective teams, and the value ascribed to incidental learning in the workplace was highlighted as critical to personal and professional development. Work placement environments which allow for such informal spheres of interaction should form part of the new practice models which will emerge post-pandemic. It is recommended that customized assessment and support systems for newly qualified social workers should be put in place to ensure that any gaps in learning accumulated during pandemic student placements are addressed. Additionally, universities must continue to find safe ways of developing and maintaining a sense of collegiality among students who lamented the loss of such support when most academic learning went online.

In conclusion, although Amadasun (2020) noted that the pandemic had somehow undermined and overturned key values of social work practice, positive insights can be taken from the student testimonies in the above research. These testimonies resonate with Broadhurst and Mason’s (2020) views that the value of face-to-face interactions and the power of co-presence remain ever critical for the social work profession, whatever challenges the post-pandemic world will present.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Worcester Ethics Panel. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RS and PU completed the writing of this research study. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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