
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Work Education: Reevaluating Undergraduate Quality Assurance in the Social Work Unit, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone

Mohamed Bangura

Lecturer One, Department of Sociology and Social Works, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone

Corresponding Author: Mohamed Bangura, **E-mail:** mfb17320@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the policy and quality assurance discourse in social work undergraduate academic education ensuing at the Social Work Unit at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, following the recent reengineering approach due to the Covid-19 pandemic and technological polarisation. Regrettably, final year social work university pre-service social work student's practicum or internship evaluation could not be finalised. The practicum or internship is a critical component in social work education as it engenders professional transformation, thought and development. Unlike other academic modules, which could be downright via online and distance education, the practicum or internship, being a practical undertaking in a classroom atmosphere, accorded unique challenges. The research question that the paper addresses is: How would certification of social work students be finalised when this time-tested evaluation had not been done? The paper employs content and discourse analysis to unwrap the philosophical and professional discourses being promoted by faculty in order to appreciate how they are likely to regulate succeeding management of social work education. The discourse is that the emerging 'current normal' should not trade-off the quality assurance structures that evolved consequently.

| KEYWORDS

Undergraduate, quality assurance, social work, education

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 January 2023

PUBLISHED: 15 January 2023

DOI: 10.32996/bjtep.2023.2.1.1

1. Introduction

This research documents and critiques the policy and quality assurance discourses centred on the practicum in social work education ensuing at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. The Social Work Unit normally deploys the majority of its pre-service social work education final year students in outlying rural and urban areas of the Freetown Municipality for their practicum or internship. Social work educators from the department's social work education unit would ordinarily visit the students for the practicum or internship assessment. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, necessitated the prohibition of gatherings and hence the closure of universities across the country. The abrupt closure of universities thus created an assessment conundrum for social work educators with regard to student social workers on practicum. This meant that alternative modes of practicum assessment which measured lecturer readiness had to be availed if students were to be certified as competent. The debates on alternative assessment models for the practicum ought to be understood in the context of Juliette Oko's (2006) assertion that, while there is widespread consensus among stakeholders that the quality of social work education programmes matter, 'there is less agreement on how to define and assess quality' in a social work education programme. The University's Social work unit, whose recognised niche is social work education and culture, has pioneered a highly regarded pre-service social work education programme at the undergraduate level. The four-year degree programme is an initial social work education (SWE) course whose structure is referred to as the 3-1 (Kwong, 2017). This is because the programme comprises the first three years of academic study at university, followed by a one-year period of practicum in different urban organisations, and the final year is spent at university and internship, ostensibly to provide opportunities for reflection. The one-year period of practicum, also known as student internship practice or work

Copyright: © 2022 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

experience, is an important stage in the professional development of social workers (Tippa, 2020); Hewson et al. (2010) in pre-service programmes. Hewson et al. (2010) regard the practicum as an important rite of passage in a social worker's career, as certification is often contingent upon its successful completion. In Sierra Leone, social work education, as foregrounded in this unit of education and in accordance with the country's Ministry of Tertiary and Higher education policy expectations, values the practicum as an indispensable component of social work education curriculum, as it is during this period that the social worker-to-be demonstrates 'classroom readiness' in the actual site of teaching and learning. The credibility of a social work education programme rests on its graduates being able to demonstrate empirically effective social work practices and competencies that have been shown to lead student learning. As Hewson et al. (2010) explain, the practicum makes it possible for student-social workers to get to know the 'real world' of organisations and managers or directors and what it means to interact with clients and their problems. The hope is that such real-world practice will lead to the development of craft knowledge that can be applied later as a practice social worker (Sichling and O'Brien, 2019).

In social work education history, the place and contribution of the practicum in engendering professional transformation, reflection and growth are firmly established (Ramsay, 2003; Hewson, 2010). As a result, the practicum is 'highly scrutinised and contested, with different stakeholders weighing in to debates about the place of practice in philosophical, pedagogical, procedural, and policy terms' (Yarbrough, 1975). The contestations arise partly because of the lack of uniformity in social work education practices that tend to vary from country to country. As Mamphiswina (2000) reminds us, 'social work education need (s) to be understood within the political, social, cultural and economic contexts in which it is embedded, but it also requires cognisance of the conceptual and epistemological assumptions underpinning its curriculum models and organisational systems'. An understanding of these debates is critical as it brings to the fore the unique though not necessarily conflicting, notions of social work as a craft and practice as a profession (Parker, 2013). In contributing to this social discourse, this research reignites the policy discourses over the assessment of the practicum. In this regard, the question: 'Who will assess whether sufficient professional social work learning has been achieved and demonstrated?' Wong (2022) is particularly illustrative of the contestations between university-based social work educators and work-based supervisors. Even more importantly, the question is about what model of social work education carries the day. The problem is partly rooted in what Fook and Gray (2004) describe as the 'universalism' of Social Work Education, which is marked by an apparent disjuncture between organisations as primary sites for the practicum (Bukaliya and Babra 2014) and universities as alleged ivory towers of social work theory. In the case of the social work unit in this research, university-based social work educators have abrogated to themselves the sole and final adjudication over what is considered satisfactory performance by students-social workers during practicum. The cooperating student-social workers are relegated to bystanders in deciding the final mark. This arrangement which had worked seemingly well thus far, was thrown into disarray by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent closure of universities. Unfortunately, the social work education students' practicum assessment could not be finalised as not all students-social workers had been visited by the lecturers. Thus, a practicum assessment conundrum confronted the unit, with faculty caught up in finding a solution to the problem. Would it be possible to certify student-social workers as competent when the cherished 'rite of passage' – the practicum – had not been completed to the satisfaction of university lecturers who see themselves as final arbiters in determining satisfactory performance in the practicum? Unlike other academic modules, which could be completed via online and distance education, the practicum, being a practical undertaking in the real world of client-based organisations (Grell, 2021), presented unique challenges.

It is against the above backdrop that the research question that informs this research is: What are the views of social work educators about the assessment of practicum in circumstances where organisations as sites of practical client-based learning are not available for student-social workers to demonstrate their competencies? The significance of the question lies in that the decisions social work educators were likely to make were bound to affect not just the final year student-social workers but also set precedence whose ramifications could potentially result in a paradigm shift in social work education philosophy and practice in Sierra Leone. Equally profound would be the implications for quality assurance in social work education. Thus, the justification for this research is that capturing and interrogating the policy debates over the practicum is bound to bring to the fore the philosophy or philosophies of social work education held by social work educators and, more importantly, point to future directions for social work education practice in the country.

The university, as an institution of higher learning, is relatively autonomous in that it recruits its trainees and controls its university-based programmes. However, the practicum has to be undertaken in organisations that fall under the jurisdiction of the social work unit client-based organisations. Thus, the social work unit does not have direct 'jurisdiction over the quality of organisations, their cultures, and practices' (Giuliani 2011) and, as such, relies on the goodwill and cooperation of the organisations. Practicum occurs when organisations are open, thus forcing the unit to organise its practicum programmes in accordance with the organisation's calendar. Thus, while the social work unit could make arrangements for teaching and learning to continue via various online platforms, the same could be done for final-year students on practicum. This is because organisations have remained closed, thus making it impossible for university social work educators to continue the practicum supervision.

1.1 Quality Assurance for Local Expectations

In the era of increased national social work programme competition, quality assurance in social work is critical in every department's strategic plan to enhance competitiveness and meet international expectations and standards. The definition and approach to quality assurance differ among social work departments in the country and hence becomes imperative to understand the geographical context, the indicators and frameworks, and the successes and challenges associated with implementing quality social work education in the department. This information assists in formulating strategies for quality delivery by taking advantage of best practices elsewhere and avoiding already known pitfalls. Sadly, locally research-based literature pertaining to issues of quality and quality assurance in the Sierra Leonean social work education sector is limited.

Although the idea of quality assurance has been part of the department culture since the establishment of the department, quality assurance has only recently assumed greater importance holistically because of various reasons (Manghani, 2011). The Directorate has decided that traditional academic controls are inadequate (Respondek, 2002). Among some of the reasons are the growth and development of social work education provision characterised by, especially in the development of undergraduate programmes, an explosion in enrollment figures (a Sierra Leone social phenomenon known as "Mass exodus") without a commensurate increase in resources. Other reasons include cross-institutional higher social work education and the emergence of various forms of instruction fueled by developments in technology. Furthermore, the increased need for social accountability requires leaders of the university to constantly improve quality and promote transparency in order to safeguard public interest and confidence in their awards.

The Social Work unit is among the departments that embraced quality assurance in social work education as far back as 2009 through the establishment of the Social Work Sierra Leone. However, with respect to social work education in Sierra Leone, there are very few publications that provide information on quality assurance, its development and its current status.

1.2 Social Evolution of Quality Assurance

The social evolution of performance feedback has developed from a range of approaches. Formal observations of individual work performance were reported in Robert Owens's factory in New Lanark in the early 1800s, hanging a piece of coloured wood over machines to indicate the superintendent's assessment of the previous day's conduct (white for excellent, yellow, blue and then black for poor performance) (Simeon, 2017). The twentieth century led to Frederick Winslow Taylor and his measured performance and the scientific management movement (Jensen, 2018). The psychological tradition developed in the 1930s used approaches that identified personality and performance using feedback from graphic rating scales, a mixed standard of performance scales noting behaviour in Likert-scale ratings, providing evidence to recruit and identify management potential in the field of selection. Later developments removed the middle scale from a five-point scale to develop into forced-choice scale judgements to avoid central ratings. The evaluation also included narrative statements and comments to support the ratings (Schachter, 2018). In the 1940s, behavioural methods were developed using a motivational approach. These included behavioural anchored rating scales, behavioural observation scales, behavioural evaluation scales, critical incidents, and job simulation. All these judgements were used to determine the specific levels of performance criteria for specific issues such as customer service and rated in factors such as "excellent", "average", "needs to improve" or "poor". These feedback ratings are assigned numerical values and added to a statement or narrative comment by the assessor but were essentially developmental and also led to the identification of any potential need for training and, more importantly, to identify talent for careers in line management supervision and future managerial potential. Post-1945 developed into the results-oriented approaches and led to the development of management by objectives. This provided aims and specific targets to be achieved within time frames such as specific sales, profitability and deadlines, with feedback on previous performance (Hoffman-Burdzinska and Flak, 2016). The deadlines may have required alteration and led to specific performance rankings of staff. It also provided a forced distribution of rankings of comparative performance and paired comparison ranking of performance and setting and achieving objectives. In the 1960s, the development of self-appraisal by a discussion led to a specific time and opportunity for the appraisee to evaluate their performance reflectively in the discussion and the interview developed into a conversation on a range of topics that the appraisee needed to discuss in the interview. Until this period, the success of the appraisal was dependent on the skill of the interviewer. In the 1990s, 360-degree appraisal developed, where information was sought from a wider range of sources, and the feedback was no longer dependent on the manager-subordinate power relationship but included groups appraising the performance of line managers and peer feedback from peer groups on individual performance (Boyle, 2013). The final development of appraisal interviews developed in the 1990s with an emphasis on linking performance with financial reward.

2. Methodology

This research is located within the socio-constructivist paradigm and employs qualitative content analysis to make meaning of the debates that occurred via a virtual platform. Social work educators in the social work unit used the unit's official WhatsApp group platform to articulate their views. Content analysis, following Drisko and Maschi (2016), was employed to undertake a 'careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases

and meanings' as regards the social work educators' views on the assessment of the practicum and social work education quality more broadly. Accordingly, the lecturers who participated in the debates were anonymised. The stage for the policy debates was set through a department circular (2020) that invited members from the unit to an urgent meeting whose agenda was: Adoption of an alternative work-related instructional and assessment approach under the Covid-19 pandemic. The unit's WhatsApp platform was used to invite lecturers to 'actively discuss' the practicum or internship issues as they related to social work programmes offered by the social work unit.

3. Literature Review

Identifying common approaches to social work assessment has rarely been met with unbridled enthusiasm and agreement but has instead been met with skepticism, discourse, and frustration. In addition, there are those who are suspicious that there can ever be social work assessment tools developed which are independent enough from specific contextual variables that they can be implemented meaningfully at a sufficient scale and thus provide guidance that diverse stakeholders can trust and implement confidently. Then, there are those who challenge social work assessments that are purportedly objective and neutral and thus perceived as scalable in a critical direction. Critics argue that social work assessments are value statements that are based on the perspectives of the developers of such assessments (Wright et al., 2017). When social work accreditation agencies prioritise certain indices of social worker quality (for instance, dispositions, core practices) and issues of scalability and value-neutrality are ignored, those playing leadership roles in social worker preparation programmes may find themselves without the imperative time, resources, and expertise to respond thoughtfully to external demands. The result may be the cobbling together of social work assessments that are not useful for evaluative or learning purposes and may not reflect programmatic or institutional values.

These include improving social worker quality and demonstrating impact on student outcomes, accreditation, programme improvement, self-reflection, and social justice-centered instruction. Scholars also have asserted that the goal of social work assessment should be to address social issues that challenge the country, such as global competition, college and career readiness, and academic achievement gaps (Hines et al., 2016). There should be ways to use data in powerful ways to support the development of excellent, equity-driven social workers who advance student learning and are committed to and skilled in addressing problems of social justice. Moreover, society must not lose sight of the fact that social work assessment should not be used to assimilate clients but rather to be responsive to, sustain, and revitalise (Farah, 2010) their cultural resources while adding resources that are prized in the Sierra Leonean society.

Many social work researchers have offered frameworks for understanding what social workers should know and be able to do. Agrati and Vinci (2022) propose one set of knowledge and skills composed of the following understanding content concepts; connect content to prior knowledge and experiences; community learning; facilitate standards-based and outcome-based instruction; provide students with opportunities to apply knowledge and master content; assess student learning, make instructional adjustments, and support students in monitoring their own learning; give explicit feedback; and manage student behaviour and client-based organisational routines. Other researchers have nominated that the field of social work education can be improved through a tight focus on a set of "high-leverage" or "core" practices that cut across grades, subjects, and student populations (Delany et al., 2005). It should be noted, however, that some have pointed out the danger of such a focus leading to the privileging of subject matter over practices which address issues of social justice and cultural responsiveness (Farah, 2010).

Such generic knowledge and skills are often perceived as objective and neutral; these are often meant to promote effective social work teaching for all students. But others have challenged this notion. Parker and Crabree (2018), for example, argue that neutral social work assessment tools may serve to marginalise certain populations, "What is seen as objective, in fact, represents the experience of those who possess more societal power, while the experiences of marginalised others are downplayed or outright ignored". Baker et al. (2015) repudiates notions of social work neutrality as false promises, myth-making, and bamboozling. He argues, "The very creation of a tool happens in a context with a certain set of assumptions, intentions, and repercussions (both intended and unintended)". In reality, "Most of the protocols for measuring performance give inadequate attention to social work practices, generally called, 'culturally responsive pedagogy', any high-stakes social work evaluation is likely-unintentionally, and ironically-to fail the very students most in need of highly effective practice knowhow" (Parker and Crabree, 2018). Such practice situates the dominant culture at the center of assessment; this results in the systemic marginalisation of those who are "othered".

The effort to identify neutral, objective measures also may mask epistemological differences surrounding what counts as effective teaching and learning. Hiranandani (2005) document how commonly used observation tools, such as the framework for teaching, may not reflect the kinds of instructional social work practices that research indicates benefit students with disabilities. In her article on this issue, Nava challenges notions of objectivity and neutrality by reflecting the values and needs of diverse learners. She states that many classroom's observations of social work assessment tools exclude equity, humanising pedagogy, and social justice and, instead, describes the development of content-specific observation rubrics that embody programme values of equity and humanising pedagogy.

The issue of what data matter most raises the question of the extent to which those same data do or should reflect programme or institutional values and mission (e.g., social justice, culturally responsive pedagogy) and of whether value-neutral measures are to be preferred or are even possible. And although the paper by Geisler and Berthelsen (2019) on this issue suggests greater retention of social workers who have higher observational scores while in their social work preparation programmes, there remains the question of the extent to which such measures reflect the mission, values, or focus of the programme in which they are being used. Indeed, it has been argued that it is unlikely that any value-neutral measures of social worker effectiveness are possible to create.

The Organisation of Social Work Sierra Leone (2019) emphasises the importance of including a range of stakeholders in social worker assessment, such as lecturers, department leaders, student associations, educational administrators and policymakers in the development and implementation of social worker evaluation and assessment processes. Bulanda and Jalloh (2017) emphasise the significance of including the organisation's supervisors and administrators in assessment, " , particularly those whose survival depends on education to be the greatest equaliser, as promised by Alfred Abioseh Jarrett". Although scholars and practitioners encourage an inclusive approach to who should be involved in assessment, it is important to ask the question: Who is social work assessment meaningful for? It is meaningful for everyone involved in the educational community, but especially for those who are systematically left behind. The language that we use to describe the participants in the assessment matters; for example, the word "stakeholder" implies a language of transaction and return on investment, whereas the word "community" denotes a language of collaboration and meaning-making. This research uses a variety of terms to describe the assessment community and asserts that social work assessment is meaningful for students, lecturers, policymakers, programmes, and the field. Ultimately, social work assessment is meaningful when participants can use the results in powerful ways to improve social work teaching and learning. Concomitantly, who is developing the assessments matters? This is not only a matter of considering at the broadest level the knowledge and skills needed for social work assessment development. Because social work assessment developers advance notions of social work practice that are based on their own assumptions of quality and quality assurance and worth, it is important that those who develop assessments of social workers and programmes (Bulanda and Jalloh, 2017) quality and quality assurance are inclusive of, as well as representative of, the communities these social work assessments will serve.

Client-based observation is the most widely used type of tool to measure social worker effectiveness (Cree et al., 2018). Since 2013, all Sierra Leone universities have required client-based observation as a component of their university social worker evaluation system (Bulanda and Jalloh, 2017). Most of the observation tools used in social worker evaluation were developed for use in research settings, and individuals should not assume that they will function in similar ways in the context of social worker education. Practitioners have learned, for example, that observation scores are often subject to bias and can be sensitive to a variety of contextual. And organisational supervisors and administrators commonly struggle to use observation systems in the ways they were trained. Organisational administrators also approach the observation process in different ways and with different priorities than raters would in the context of social research—they are not just focused on creating "reliable" scores but are focused on managing relationships with final year student interns where a central goal is helping their staff improve. These findings have implications for how we think about the use of these tools in pre-service settings. How can those who should be using these tools be prepared to understand the purpose for which particular tools were developed and to use tools and to apply scores in valid, appropriate ways?

O'Leary and Tsui 2012 encourage scholars and social work practitioners to "move beyond our self-imposed boundaries" when considering social worker assessment. They and other scholars advocate for communal and egalitarian strategies for social worker assessment (Bulanda and Jalloh, 2017). These include engaging students and communities in developing social work assessment tools; assessing social worker impact on students' full potential (for instance, academic, cultural competence, transformative capacities); and using alternative terms for social worker assessment such as "teaching and learning collectiveness" or "lecturer and student development" to drive efforts for collaboration and support (Graham and Ken 2018).

4. The Intent of quality assurance

The intent of the quality assurance policy is to establish a common set of core values for quality assurance within the field of social work education for the entire university and across different levels and main academic areas. The quality assurance policy contains both the university's overall vision for social work education and learning, including principles for quality assurance, as well as a number of objectives for this work. The quality assurance policy must support the Social Work Unit strategy in the field of social work education and also contribute to quality assurance and further develop the degree programmes at the Department of Sociology and Social Work. The quality assurance directorate must provide documentation for Social Work Unit's educational activities. It must also contribute towards enabling the social work programmes Heads of Departments and the Coordinators to make decisions on a sound basis with a view to further developing the quality of the social work unit's degree programmes. Quality assurance is defined as the total of all activities and methods aimed at systematically and purposefully developing and documenting the quality of the Social Work Unit's efforts in the field of Social Work Education.

4.1 Amplification of performance

The dilemma of appraisal has always been developing performance measures, and the use of appraisal to communicate individual performance is the key part of this process. Quantitative measures of performance communicated as standards in the business and industry level standards are to individual performance. The introduction of techniques such as the Balanced Scorecard developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992) extended performance measures and evaluation, including financial and customer evaluation, feedback on internal processes and learning and growth. The Balanced Scorecard is a strategic management tool that aims to rectify strategy and interpret it into an engagement. It thus intends to promote decreasing the challenges involved in utilising only financial performance measures (Chirico, 2016). Performance standards also included qualitative measures that argue that there is an over-emphasis on the metrics of the quantitative approach above the definitions of quality services and total quality management. In terms of performance measures, there was a transformation in the literature and a move in the 1990s to financial rewards linked to the level of performance.

4.1.2 Criticism

Critiques of appraisal have continued as appraisals have increased in use and scope across sectors and occupations. The dominant critique is the management framework using appraisal as an "orthodox" technique that seeks to remedy the weakness and propose appraisals as a system to develop performance (Grint, 2007). This "orthodox" approach argues there are conflicting purposes of appraisal (Sultan, 2005). The appraisal can motivate staff by clarifying objectives and setting clear future objectives with provision for training, and development needs to establish the performance objective. These conflict with assessing past performance and the distribution of rewards based on past performance (Manzoor et al., 2021). Employees are reluctant to confide any limitations to and concerns with their current performance as this could impact their merit-related reward or promotion opportunities (Froese et al. 2018). This conflicts with performance appraisal as a developmental process as appraisers are challenged with differing roles as both monitors and judges of performance and an understanding of counsellors, which Grint (2007) argues few managers receive the training to perform. Managerial reluctance to criticise also stems from classic evidence from Anderson and Stritch that they are reluctant to make negative judgements on an individual's performance as it could be de-motivating, leading to appraisee accusations of lack of managerial support and contribution to an individual's poor performance (Anderson and Stritch, 2015). One consequence of conflict avoidance is managers rate all criteria in the middle rating point, known as the "central tendency". In a study of senior managers by Dhillon. (2013), it was found that organisational partnerships influenced the collaborative pattern of senior executives. The partnership involved deliberate attempts by individuals to enhance or protect self-interests when conflicting courses of action are possible, and ratings and decisions were affected by potential sources of bias or inaccuracy in their appraisal ratings (Dhillon, 2013). There are methods of further bias beyond Dhillon's evidence. Collaborative judgements were distorted further by over-rating some clear competencies in performance rather than being critical across the range of measures, known as the "funnel impact", and if some competencies are lower, they may prejudice the judgment across the positive reviews, known as the "tunnel impact" (Beaton and Leblanc, 2011). Some ratings may only include recent events, and these are known as "recency effects". In this case, only recent events are noted compared to managers gathering and using evidence throughout the appraisal period. A particular concern is the consistency and equity of appraisal ratings, which may be distorted by gender, ethnicity and the ratings of appraisers themselves. Studies have highlighted subjectivity in terms of gender (Nadeem, 2019; Soderlund and Madison, 2017) and ethnicity of the appraisee and appraiser (Chong, 2011). Suggestions and solutions for resolving bias will be reviewed later. The second analysis is the "radical critique" of appraisal. This critical management literature argues that appraisal and performance management are more covert forms of management control (Alkhafaji et al., 2018). This argues that tighter management control over employee behaviour can be achieved by the extension of appraisal to both manual and professional workers. This develops the literature of Letchfield (2015) using power and surveillance, and evidence uses cases in examples of public service control on professionals such as social workers (Jebova and Truhlavova, 2017) and university professionals (Watts, 2021). This evidence argues the increased control of public services using appraisal as a method of control and the outcome of managerial objectives ignoring the developmental role of appraisal with ratings awarded for people who accept and embrace the culture and organisational values. This literature ignores employee resistance and the use of professional unions to challenge attempts to exert control over professionals and staff in the appraisal process (Dasanayaka et al., 2021). One of the divergent issues in removing bias was the use of "interventions" (Featherston et al., 2018). This was based on the assumption that appraisal ratings were a technical question of assessing "true" performance, and there needed to be increased reliability and validity of appraisal as an instrument to develop motivation and performance. The sources of rater bias and errors can be resolved by improved organisational justice and increasing the reliability of the appraiser's judgement. However, there were problems, such as an assumption that one can state job requirements clearly, that the organisation can be "rational" with objectives that reflect values, and that judgments by appraisers are value-free from political agendas and personal objectives. Secondly, there is the issue of subjectivity, where decisions on the appraisal are rated by a "Relational metaphor" (Liu et al., 2015). This metaphor argues that appraisal is often done badly because there is a lack of training for appraisers, and appraisers may see the appraisal as being of no value. Organisations in this context are "relational", and appraisers seek to maintain performance from subordinates, and view appraisees as internal customers to satisfy. This context forces managers to use an appraisal to avoid interpersonal conflict and

develop strategies for their own personal advancement, and avoid censure from higher managers. In this context, appraisal ratings become relational judgements, and managers seek to avoid interpersonal conflict. The approaches of “interventions” and “relational” metaphors of appraisal are both inaccurate, lacking objectivity and poor judgement of employee performance. The question is: how can organisations resolve this lack of objectivity?

4.1.3 Ruminating absence of neutrality

Bird (2020) argues that the solutions to improve objectivity lie in part with McGregor's (Warner, 2009) classic critique by retraining and the removal of “top down” ratings by managers and their replacement with multiple-rater evaluation using 360-degree appraisal. This attempts to resolve bias and objectivity by upward performance appraisal. The solution of multiple-rater reporting uses internal colleagues, customers and recipients of services and will reduce the subjectivity and inequity of appraisal ratings. This solution may be influenced further by the rise in the need to evaluate project teams and increasing levels of teamwork to include peer assessment. The solutions also, in theory, mean increased closer contact with individual managers and appraisees and increased services linked to customer evaluations. A manager in 360-degree appraisal collates feedback rather than judges performance and summarises evaluations. The validity of upward appraisal means the removal of subjective appraisal ratings. This approach is also suggested to resolve gender bias against women in appraisal ratings (Diehl et al., 2022). However, negative feedback still demotivates, and managers' role in detailed feedback still requires skills and sensitivity in discussions. There are concerns with the accuracy of appraisal objectivity, as Walker and Smither's (1999) five-year study of 252 managers still identified issues with subjective ratings in 360-degree appraisals. There are still issues with the subjectivity of appraisals beyond the solutions of appraisal skills training. The contribution of appraisal is strongly related to employee attitudes and has a strong association with job satisfaction (William et al., 2017). The evidence on appraisal still remains positive in terms of reinvigorating social relationships at work (Vogli, 2010) and one benefit of the widespread adoption of large public services in Sierra Leone, such as the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation in Freetown (MHS), is the valuable contribution to line managers' discussion with staff on their past performance, discussing personal development plans and training and development as positive issues (Mpfou et al., 2015).

5. Discussion of findings

The discussion herein is framed along three emerging themes that are framed as questions. First, could client-based assessment by cooperating organisational supervisors and document assessment suffice as the basis for social work certification? Second, could online simulation of teaching be valid in assessing social worker competencies in a country that has invested so little in the affordances of technology? And finally, what is likely to be the ‘new normal’ in the assessment of practicum? An overall picture that is clearly discernible in the findings of this research is that the practicum is indeed highly valued as a rite of passage to social worker certification by educators at the social work unit of education in this research. This view resonates with the dominant trends in social worker education literature that the practicum is considered to be one of the key components of the social worker education curriculum, as shown in the international research literature (Prasad et al. 2021)). As regards Sierra Leone, Bulanda and Jalloh (2017) assert that Social Work Practice is a core course in social worker education in Sierra Leone and that, because it is so important, it (internship practice) should be conducted in such a way that student-social workers can continuously learn new knowledge and skills and develop professionally. Social worker educator supervision during practicum makes possible reflective practice (Ferguson, 2018) which is a key ingredient in social worker professional learning. Hence, as one social work educator argued in the group, the purpose of visiting students during practicum is not for the purpose of collecting marks but for constructive engagement with student supervisors, which can possibly lead to reflective learning. This was particularly evident in the demand that the practicum should not be called work-related learning. Apparently, such a general term misses the essence of the practicum as being about the opportunity for reflective learning as one progresses towards career development. The above is reinforced in Dias and Yesudhas's (2021) assertion that “The exposure to field experience is what makes the social work profession alive and meaningful to the trainee, and to the larger social context which influences and is influenced by the striving to sustain the quality of human life”.

The findings in the research reflect deeply held social worker educator beliefs that highlight the contested nature of assessment. As Mitchell et al. (2021) argue that assessment is a major challenge identified by all practicum stakeholders as it is seen to be impacting directly the quality of the social worker produced. The evident emphasis on the practicum that pervaded all the above responses reflects engrained attachment to the notion of teaching as a praxis in which theory and practice are dialectically engaged. The underpinning philosophical view is, thus, that of social work education as both craft and practice. In this regard, Howells (2018) describes social work education as a combination of art, craft, and science.

An emergent theme in this research is the mistrust that exists between university-based lecturers and the cooperating internship or practicum supervisors (administrators) in most organisations where students are attached to their practicum or internship. The gripe with cooperating supervisor contributing to the final assessment arises from two issues: first, the competence of the cooperating internship supervisors to adjudicate correctly the student- social worker performance on the basis of organisational theory when the student has no recognised mastery of organisational theory, and second, from a perceived potential for bias on

the part of some of the cooperating supervisors or administrators. As Tippa and Mane (2020) point out, the quality of supervision of cooperating internship supervisors cannot be guaranteed. Cooperating internship or practicum supervisors, referred to as administrators in the findings were considered to be ill-prepared for assessing student-social workers for certification. As the rhetorical statement, how many of our internship supervisors were works hopped on our expectations on the assessment of our students? This show not enough induction of internship administrators was done to equip them with the necessary skills for effective assessment of student-social workers during their practicum or internship. There is much doubt about the capacity of cooperating internship supervisors to make reliable, evidence-based judgements when assessing pre-service social workers (Proctor, 2019). Thus, Bulanda and Jalloh (2017) find in their research that lecturers 'felt they had the authority or legitimacy to determine what was worthwhile in Social work education in Sierra Leone'.

The possibility of online simulation of lessons in virtual classrooms alongside the assessment of documents received little support from the social work educators in the unit. Practicum supervision is guided by an instrument that allocates marks for each specific activity at the ratio of 40% for document quality (referred to as the social work practice file), which includes the material and resources that the unit develops to aid teaching and learning and 55% for client-based observation, that is, how the social worker conducts the practice. The university had proposed novel forms of assessment such as virtual assessment: administration of online questionnaires and the use of emails for sending and receiving assessment instruments from lecturers and Work-Related Learning reports from internship or practicum supervisors, respectively. The views expressed herein explicitly rejected such online approaches to assessment on the basis that the internship or practicum involved practical activity during which the student-social worker had to demonstrate competencies in social work practice. The nuances and richness that inheres during practice delivery could thus not be captured and assessed through online technologies.

The third theme discernible in the above findings is the acceptance of the inevitability of transformation. Such a view resonated with a number of social work educators who sought to proffer new innovative ways of assessing the practicum or internship. This view leaned towards a consideration of internship or practicum-based assessment to be done by supervisors in conjunction with university-based assessment. As one participant in the discourse noted, it is indeed a misnomer that internship-based assessment ultimately counts for nothing in the final assessment of students. Elsewhere, for example, in the United States of America, social worker preparation is largely internship or practicum-oriented, with organisations shouldering the burden of educating student-social workers. In Sierra Leone, social workers, especially in rural areas, have not been capacitated enough to shoulder the burden of training final-year student-social workers, unlike in Freetown, where social worker expertise is considerably high.

This discussion has illustrated that the social work educators in this unit of social work education do not hold homogenous views on how social work education practicum assessment could be reformed in the era of post-Covid-19. The responses presented herein constitute a continuum, with one extreme being what could be characterised as the ostrich mentality and the innovators who are willing to embrace technology as a substitute for on-site visits. The moderates in between want greater recognition given to the cooperating internship supervisors and are thus in favour of the greater workplace-oriented assessment. It was apparent that the willingness to embrace change should not be at the expense of standards.

5.1 Capacity Building: Supporting the Field of Quality Assurance

If quality assurance is to move forward forcefully, it will require a corps of professionals prepared to provide both technical skills and leadership. At present, we lack an adequate number of such professionals to staff a national set of organisations. An early priority must therefore be to establish training programmes to prepare these social work professionals. The educational programmes would likely require a year of research and could be built on existing programmes in practicum, community services, research, and mental health.

Two approaches must be pursued. First, education for existing staff and those senior professionals already in or about to enter this work will have to use techniques of intensive continuing education and technical assistance. Second, more organised programmes of training with field experience will be needed to prepare a new cadre of social workers with the tools needed to collect and apply information based on outcomes in quality assurance. Attention to the tools employed in continuous quality improvement is warranted.

Resources will be needed to underwrite the curriculum development and to support the education of these professionals. Especially because many will be asked to forego more lucrative professional activities, support for social work educational programmes other than traditional tuition will be necessary. Ways to make quality assurance more of a profession with a clear career path should be developed. As with the research effort, this work must be carried on well after the reengineering implementation has ended.

6. Conclusion

Social work education programmes over the last few decades have been witnessing gradual transformation, and it would appear that the Covid-19 pandemic is a potential catalyst for transformation. The advent of technology has seemingly had little impact on the assessment of the practicum. The training institutions, such as the social work unit of education under research, have apparently not taken advantage of the affordances of technology to rethink their traditional practices of practicum assessment. While they have embarked on online teaching for other modules, they are yet to find ways of using the same technology to crack the practicum assessment conundrum; hence, the rather conservative views as illustrated in the limited voices for transformation cited in the discussion above. Rural and urban organisations, on their part, have not developed the capacity for innovative technologically driven platforms that could enable social work training institutions to implement alternative assessment models, for example, streaming of lessons. A new normal is in the offing and awaits social work educators to embrace it in ways that uphold the veritable traditions of practicum assessment while adjusting to the current normal.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements: I would like to acknowledge and appreciate the work done by colleagues in the Directorate of the Quality Assurance University of Sierra Leone for their current achievements and quality assurance WhatsApp fora dialogue during the development of this paper. Further acknowledgements go to colleagues in the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1]. Agrati, L.S and Vinci, V (2022) Evaluative Knowledge and Skills of Students Teacher within the Adapted Degree Courses. See <https://www.frontiersin.org>.
- [2]. Alkhafaji P. (2018) The Impact of Management Control Systems (MCS) on Organisations Performance: A Literature Review. *Journal of Economics and Administrative Sciences*. 24 (105) 1. DOI:10.33095/jeasV24i/05.67
- [3]. Anderson, D.M and Stritch, J.M (2015) Goal Clarity, Task Significance, and Performance Evidence from a Laboratory Experience. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. DOI:10.1093/jopart/muv019.
- [4]. Baker, P.D (2015) The Cognitive Impact of the Education Revolution: A Possible Cause of the Flynn Effect on Population. *Intelligence* 49. DOI: 10.1016/J.intelli.2015.01.003
- [5]. Beaton, A.M and Leblanc, J (2011) Traditional Prejudice: Does bias Suppression moderate the Relationship? *ScienceDirect*. 51, 5, 579-583. See <https://www.Sciencedirect.com>.
- [6]. Bird, F (2020) A defense of objectivity Social Services Rightly Understood. *Sustainability: Science Practice and Policy*. 16, 2020- 1. See <https://www.tanfonline.com>.
- [7]. Boyle, I.O (2013) Individual Performance Management: A Review of Current Practice. *Asia Pacific Management and Business Application*. 1 (3): 157-170. DOI: 102177.6/ub.spmba.2013.001.03.1
- [8]. Bukaliya, R and Babra, M (2014) Organisation and Management of Practicum at the Zimbabwe Open University: Issues of Programme Effectiveness, Benefits and Challenges. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*. See <https://www.arcjournal.org>.
- [9]. Burke, W.W (2009) The Douglas McGregor Legacy. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*. 451. 1. See <https://doi.org/10.11771002188630832723>.
- [10]. Bulanda, J and Jalloh, S (2017) A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone. *International Social Work* 62 (2) DOI:10.1177/0020872817725144. See <https://www.researchgate.net>.
- [11]. Chirico, H.I (2016) The Limits of the Balanced Scorecard. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*. 4. 11. See <https://www.scirp.org>.
- [12]. Chong, P (2011) Reading Difference: How Race and Ethnicity Function as Tools for Critical Appraisal. *ScienceDirect* 39, 1, 64-84. See <https://www.Sciencedirect.com>.
- [13]. Cree, V (2018) Evaluating effectiveness in Social Work: Sharing Dilemmas in Practice. *European Journal of Social Work*. See <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1441136>.
- [14]. Dasanayaka, C.H (2021) The Impact of Performance Appraisal Process on Job Satisfaction of the Academic Staff in Higher Education Institutions. *Education Sciences*. Volume 11. 623. See: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educi//0063>.
- [15]. Delany, P (2005) Improving Social Work. *Social Work* 50 (1):93-94. DIO: 10.1093/SW/ 50.1.93.
- [16]. Dias, L and Yasudhas, R (2021) Field Practicum in Social Work Education. *Professional Education*. See <https://www.resaerrchgate.net>.
- [17]. Drisko, J and Maschi, T (2016) Content Analysis (Pocket Guides to Social Work) *Research Methods*. Springer Publishing. See <https://www.amazon.com>.
- [18]. Farah, I (2010) Social Justice and Cultural Responsiveness: Innovative Teaching Strategies for Group Work. *The Journal of Specialists in Group Work* 35 (3): 271-280. DOI: 10:2080101933922:2010.492900.
- [19]. Featherston, R. (2018) Interventions to Mitigate Bias in Social Work Decision-Making: a Systematic Review. *Research on Social Work Practice* 29 (7):104973151881916. DOI:10.177/1049731518819160.
- [20]. Fergusson, H (2018) How Social Workers Reflect in Action and Why They Don't: The possibilities of and Limits to Reflective Practice in Social Work. *Social Work Education: The International Journal* 37, 2018 4. See <https://www.tanfonline.com>.

- [21]. Froese, F.J. (2018) Merit-Based Rewards, Job Satisfaction and Voluntary Turnover: Moderating Effects of Employee Demographic Characteristics. *British Journal of Management* 30(3) DOI:10.1111/1467.8551.122.83.
- [22]. Giuliani, M (2011) Defining Goodwill: A Practice Perspective. *Journal of Financial Reporting and Accounting* 9 (2): 161-175. DOI:10.1108/1985211111173112.
- [23]. Greisler, M and Berthelsen, H (2019) Retaining Social Workers: The Role of Quality of Work and Psychosocial Safety Climate for Work Engagement Job Satisfaction and Organisational Commitment. *Human Service Organisations, Management Leadership and Governance*. 43, 2019 – Issue. See://https://doi.org/10.1880/23303131.1569574.
- [24]. Graham, J.R and Ken, B (2018) Collaboration: A Social Work Practice Method. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*. 80, 1. See https://doi.org/10.1006/1044.3894.634.
- [25]. Gray, M and Fook, J (2004) The Quest for a Universal Social Work: Some Issues and Implications. *Social Work Education*. 23:625-664. DOI:10.080/026/54.70420000252334.
- [26]. Grell, P et al. (2021) Perspectives on Organisational Structure and Social Services Work with Clients in a Narrative Review of 25 Years of Research on Social Services. *European Journal of Social Work* 25, 2022- 2. See https://doi.org/101080/136914572021.1954899.
- [27]. Grint, K (2007) What is Wrong with Performance Appraisals? A Critique and a Suggestion. *Human Resource Management Journal* 3 (3) 61-77. DOI:10.1111/j1748.8583.1993-tb00316.x
- [28]. Hewson, J. A et al. (2010) Enhancing Social Work Research Education Through Research Field Placement. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*. 3, 9.
- [29]. Hines, E et al. (2016) Achievement Gap: A Look Back and A Way Forward. See: <https://www.researchgate.com>
- [30]. Hiranandani, V (2005) Towards A Critical Theory of Disability and Social Work. *Critical Social Work*. 6 (1) DOI:10.22329/CSW.V6I1.5712.
- [31]. Hoffman-Burazinska, K.H and Flak, O (2016) Management by Objectives as a Method of Measuring Teams Effectiveness. *Journal of Positive Management* 6 (3) 67. DOI: 10.12775/JPM2015.016.
- [32]. Howells, A (2018) Creativity, The Art, Science & Craft in Social Work. Conference: Learning and teaching Day, University of Suffolk- DOI:10.13140/RG2.2.13231.6928.
- [33]. Jenebova, R and Truhlavova, Z (2017) The Concept of Constructing the Perspective of Social Work Clients. *Kontak* 20 (1). DOI:10. 1016/j-kontak.2017.09.009.
- [34]. Jensen, S.H (2018) Frederick Winslow Taylor: The First Change Agent, From Rule of Thumb to scientific Management. *The Palgrave Handbook OF Organisational Change Thinkers*. See https://www.linkspringer.com.
- [35]. Juliette, Oko (2006) Approaches to Social Work: A Critical Review of the Strengths Perspective. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*. 87(4) 601-611. DOI:10.166/1044-3894.3576.
- [36]. Kwong, K (2017) Advancing Social Work Practice Research Education- An Innovative Experiential Pedagogical Approach. See https://doi.org/10.54301/orhe.ven.5p1.
- [37]. Liu et al. (2015) Fit, Misfit and Beyond Fit: Relational Metaphor and Semantic Fit in International Joint Venture. *Journal of International Business Studies*. 46,.1. PP.830-849. Palgrave Macmillan Journals.
- [38]. Letchfield, T.H (2015) 'Power' – In book: *Ethics and Values in Social Work Practice*. Edition 1st Chapter: Power. Routledge.
- [39]. Mamphiswana, D (2000) Social Work Education in a Changing Socio-Political and Economic Dispensation: Perspectives from South Africa. *International Social Work* 43 (1): 21-32. DOI:101177/00287280004300103. See https://www.researchgate.net.
- [40]. Mitchell, V et al. (2022) *Social Work Field Education in the United Arab Emirates: Emerging Standards, Opportunities and Challenges*. International Social Work. Sage Publications. See: <https://www.journalsdsagepub.com>
- [41]. Mpofu, M et al. (2015) Training and Development as a Tool for Improving Basic Service Delivery; the Case of a Selected Municipality. *Journal of Economics, Finance and Administrative science*. See https://www.elsevier.org.
- [42]. Manghani, K (2011) *Quality Assurance of Systems and Standard Operating Procedure*. Perspective in Clinical Research. Wolters Kluwer in Medknow Publications. See https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.
- [43]. Manzoor, F et al. (2021) Intrinsic Rewards and Employee's Performance with the Mediating Mechanism of Employee's Motivation. See https://www.frontiers.org.
- [44]. Nadeem, M (2019) The Debate of Minimising Subjectivity in Gender Studies: A Critical Analysis. See https://www.researchgate.net.
- [45]. O'Leary, P and Tsui, M-S (2012) The Boundaries of the Social Work Relationship Revisited: Towards a Connected, Inclusive and Dynamic Conceptualisation. *British Journal of Social Work*. See https://www.researchgate.net. DOI: 10.1093, bjsw/bcr181.
- [46]. Parker, J (2013) *Professional Social Work*. Sage Publication.
- [47]. Parker, J and Crabree, S.A (2018) *Social Work with Disadvantaged and Marginalised People*. See https://www.researchgate.com.DOI:104135/9781526416667.
- [48]. Proctor, E (2019). The Pursuit for Quality for Social Work Practice: Three Generations and Counting. *Journal of Society for Social Work and Research*. See https://www.bcbl.nlm.nih.gov.
- [49]. Ramsay, R (2003) Transforming the Working Definition of Social Work into the 21st Century. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 13 (3):324-338. DOI:10-1177/1049731503013003007.
- [50]. Respondek, L et al. (2017) Perceived Academic Control and Academic Emotions predict Undergraduate University Student Success: Examining Effects of on Dropout Intention and Achievement. See https://www.researchgate.net.
- [51]. Saari, L.M and Judge T.A (2004) Employee Attitudes and Job Satisfaction. See https://www.researchgate.net.
- [52]. Schachter, H. L (2016) Frederick Winslow Taylor and The Idea of Worker Participation: A Brief Against Easy Administration Dichotomies. *Impact Factor*:3, 121. See:https://doi.org/10.1117//0095399789978902100.
- [53]. Sichling, F (2019) Knowledge That Changes Social Work Practice: An Explanation of its Sources of Content. *Advance in Social Work*, Vol.19 no,2(2019) Fall (2019) University of Missouri- St Louis. See https://doi.org//10.18060/22918.
- [54]. Simeon, O (2017) *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- [55]. Soderlund, T and Madison, G (2017) Objectivity and Realms Explanation in Academic Journal Articles Concerning Sex: A Comparison of Gender Studies and the Other Social Sciences. *Scientometrics*. See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>.
- [56]. Sohani, E (2005) Conflict Between Theory and Practice: JQM and Performance Appraisal. *International Journal of Quality Management* 24 (6):796818. DOI:10.1108/102656710510617238.
- [57]. Tippa, G.N (2020) Social Work Students Empowerment through Field Work Practicum: Reflections of Social Work Education. *The International Journal of Analytical and Experimental Modal Analysis XII* (VII):468-478. See <https://www.researchgate.net>.
- [58]. Tippa, G.N and Mane, S (2020) Social Work Students Empowerments through Fieldwork Practicum: Reflections of Social Work Education. *The International Journal of Analytical and Experimental Modal Analysis XII*(VII):468-478.
- [59]. Vogli, R.D (2010) Social Relationships at Work and Depression. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 64 (8) 652-3. DFOI:10.11361jech.2009.094706.
- [60]. Yarbrough, R.D (1975) Operationalism: A Philosophy for Social Work Education. *Journal of Education for Social Work*. (Spring 1975) pp.116-121.
- [61]. Watts, L (2021) Social Work: Professional Development and Training. *Australian Social Work*. Volume 74, 2021.
- [62]. Williams, DI. (2017) The Role and Reprocessing of Attitudes on Fostering Employee Work Happiness: An International Study *Frontiers of Psychology* 8. DOI:10.3389/110fpsyg.2017.0028.
- [63]. Wong, P.Y.J. (2021) Supervision of Supervising Practice: From Idea to Practice. *International Social Work*. Sage Publications. See <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087282110736>.
- [64]. Wright, M.C (2017) Assessment from an Educational Development Perspective. *Wiley Online Library*. See <https://doi.or./10.1002/tiaz2.20051>.