E-Learning and Social Work Education during COVID-19

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has induced changes in the regular patterns of social interaction, causing the need for new approaches to teaching social work. This work aims to examine the features, opportunities, and prospects of implementing e-learning in Social Work Education. The study recruited 116 students from [anonymized for blind peer review] University and 109 students from [anonymized for blind peer review] University. All participants were asked to complete online questionnaires with the view of assessing their perceptions of e-learning. The study uses a structural analysis of the content of academic research in the field of online education in social work to create a questionnaire for surveying students. Based on the results of the descriptive statistics of a students’ survey and the intersection with the study of the corresponding corpus of academic research, a Conceptual model of e-learning in Social Work Education is proposed, which integrates the available academic findings and the real situation estimation in accordance with the assessment of students. Findings suggest that e-learning as a tool for teaching is a promising alternative to traditional classroom or blended learning. The effectiveness of e-learning in social work was highlighted.

Keywords Competence · Conceptual model · e-learning · Service users · Social work

Introduction
To date, an abundance of academic research has been created on online learning in connection with the transition of the education process to distance mode due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most important findings of these studies is the identification of many problems associated with the implementation of total online
learning at different levels from elementary school to university (Algara et al., 2021). Researchers from many countries described the processes and accompanying problems of transit from the usual classroom curriculum to fully online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Besser et al., 2020). The most vulnerable are those professions in which professional activity is associated with direct communication and physical contact with other people. Social work is undoubtedly one of these professions (Kurzman & Maiden, 2014; Phelan, 2015).

Social work (SW) is all about working with and within communities, including the virtual ones. It has gained substantial importance during the COVID-19 pandemic (de Bie et al., 2020; Sonuga-Barke, 2021; Thomeer et al., 2020), shifting the emphasis toward the virtual space (Siciliano et al., 2020; Vincent & Hamilton, 2020). The trend of moving social work education (SWE) toward the virtual setting existed even before COVID-19, with many universities offering SW courses online (Kurzman & Maiden, 2014; Phelan, 2015; Webber et al., 2010), but the pandemic facilitated this transition (McLaughlin et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we interact, as the social distancing guidelines have affected our professional and social lives (Algara et al., 2021), including in the SW space, forcing the active use of virtual technologies (Algara et al., 2021; Gredig et al., 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2020). The present study aims to take a closer look at the features, opportunities, and prospects of implementing e-learning in SWE. The objectives of the study are: (1) to review the existing research into the use of e-learning in SWE and determine COVID-19-induced changes to social workers’ competency profile; (2) to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning SW via online platforms; and (3) to develop a model for online SWE.

**Literature Review**

The science and practice of SW is associated with the concept of social innovation, a “new idea that has the potential to improve either the quality or the quantity of life” (Bianco et al., 2020; Jeong & Alhanaee, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic came with social distancing, economic slowdown (Lonbay et al., 2020), and a humanitarian crisis (Lotta & Kuhlmann, 2020), causing greater social inequality on both a national and global level (Lotta & Kuhlmann, 2020) and introducing new social challenges for social workers to deal with. One of such challenges is the transitioning to distance learning, compelling scholars to investigate COVID-19 from the sociological perspective (Averett, 2020). The pandemic has affected the mental health and well-being of people in lockdown (Sonuga-Barke, 2021). Various measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on health have resulted in considerable collateral damage, exacerbating existing inequalities (Walter & Shenaar-Golan, 2020) and posing new challenges to the scientific community (Sonuga-Barke, 2021).

Modern people are increasingly using social networks for communication and as a way to deliver professional services. Analyzing the effectiveness of networks for addressing public problems (Siciliano et al., 2020), scholars found that changes in network structure, network composition, and tie properties could influence the
community level outcomes. Today, the increasingly popular teaching tool is simulation-based training (Lundquist et al., 2020), which allows determining the quality and level of reflection of the learners (Lundquist et al., 2020). In social work, e-learning is regarded as an evolutionary pedagogy (Phelan, 2015), suitable in various formats for continuing education (Phelan, 2015). However, a contributing factor in students’ achievement was reported to be the effectiveness of the learning, rather than the mode of delivery (Phelan, 2015). Effective learning is related to the emotional well-being of the learner (Howells & Bald, 2020), the burden of which is put on schools and universities, and supports the changing needs of students and industries (Phelan, 2015). In the COVID-19 environment, the learning in social work can be considered effective if it allows obtaining the necessary experience and practical skills virtually. There may be some challenges on this road though.

According to Greek researchers (Karagkounis, 2019), the SW practice and SWE currently have to deal with the consequences of a socio-economic crisis, which have brought the issue of effective leadership to the research front and have provoked the use of value-based approaches in the SW space (Karagkounis, 2019). Another dimension of SW is related to the growing environmental crisis, which forces social workers to get involved in environmental affairs. Therefore, the recent SW programs seek to expand students’ knowledge of environmental justice and how it is part of practice across the micro-macro continuum (Chonody & Sultzman, 2020).

Another work worth paying attention to is the research by Swedish scientists (Wallengren et al., 2019) on the application of “signature pedagogy” in the teaching of critical SW theory and practice on a SW undergraduate course. In the Netherlands, substantial changes in society and social policy have led to the revision of the educational content of SWE and the development of a common knowledge base for SWE (Kloppenburg et al., 2019). The development and delivery of SWE takes place with the involvement of service users and carers (Fox, 2020), which enables the practice-based learning. This approach encourages SW students to improve their practice and helps to identify challenges, enables and barriers, and areas of improvement (Fox, 2020).

Social work education in Europe and the United States undergoes growth and transformation, and the e-learning technology in this context is seen as a supporting tool for transitioning things into the future. In many African countries, however, despite the strong need for social workers, the SWE is confronted with serious issues, such as the shortage of high quality SW educators and ineffective SWE programs (Hagos Baynesagn et al., 2021). In such conditions, promoting SWE would require innovative strategies, including the e-learning-based ones (Christensen et al., 2020), to develop and run an effective SWE program (Hagos Baynesagn et al., 2021). SW students can make use of e-learning tools to learn how to establish partnerships for empowerment and mediate between academic expectations and practical considerations (Aaslund & Woll, 2021). However, not all practical assignments in SWE can be carried out virtually. For instance, learners may need to go to the field to apply theoretical knowledge and gain hands-on-experience. This is the case of community projects in which social workers are charged with the responsibility to solve specific problems that may arise as the project goes on (Aaslund & Woll, 2021). The shortage of high-quality accessible training for social workers in research.
methods and critical appraisal skills led to the development of an e-learning version of a Master of Social Work degree module (Webber et al., 2010). The e-learners who took the module met the learning outcomes to the same extent as the classroom group and were highly satisfied with the mode of delivery (Webber et al., 2010). This finding is a compelling argument in favor of online SWE.

Social work as a profession forces social workers to engage in research. Therefore, the mastery of research skills is an important component of training social workers (Webber et al., 2010). In recent years, however, students have become increasingly reluctant to participate in research courses (Gredig et al., 2020). The reason is fear of research courses, among other things (Gredig et al., 2020). The shift to online practice may help to reduce their anxiety about research and overcome their fears in this field (Gredig et al., 2020). The Israeli researchers note that SW seminars are a source of stress for many SW students (Walter & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to teach SW students emotional self-regulation (Walter & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). E-learning, on the other hand, provides physical separation of students and teachers, easing the stress of speaking in front of audience. Self-presentation skills are important to social work, and e-learning can help learners in mastery of these skills by offering a psychologically comfortable learning environment.

To bridge the gap between research and practice, higher education providers need to establish partnership with local employers with a view to strengthening research capacity (Vincent & Hamilton, 2020), and a mixed form of education may usher in the attempt to do so. However, a complete transition to e-learning may entail serious challenges that would require out-of-the-box solutions. An advanced integrated practice needs a well-designed SW program to exist (Finn & Molloy, 2020). One of the facets of SW is a holding relationship, which arose from the psychodynamic and sociological theory and incorporates the immersion in service user’s everyday life (Ferguson et al., 2020). Now, the question that arises is that whether social workers can immerse themselves into someone’s day-to-day existence virtually and how to use e-learning to teach “being alongside” . In recent years, particular attention has been given to qualifying SW courses, a mainstream training route in England (Hanley, 2020). At the same time, although the e-learning technology was found to intensify the learning process, there is no consensus on the quality of intensified SWE both in society and among students (Hanley, 2020).

Other essential SW skills, such as the ability to connect emotionally to social issues, the ability to self-awareness, can be fostered through art (El-Lahib et al., 2020). The educator’s role in this context includes the design of workshops that will facilitate the development of necessary SW competencies and gaining of hands-on experience (Lonbay et al., 2020). At the same time, the social services market faces a “crisis” for placements, which has a detrimental effect on students (de Bie et al., 2020). This issue does not relate to the mode of delivery, but then again social works of higher ability have more chances for employment.

Radical changes came to human life when the terms ‘social distancing’, ‘isolation’ and “quarantine” acquired a global meaning (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). COVID-19 has disproportionately affected older people, individuals with pre-existing conditions, people with limited financial resources, and those from marginalized groups,
thereby highlighting the inequalities in modern society and creating new areas for social workers (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). This situation made educators protective and opened up opportunities for innovation, creativity, and humanistic endeavors in delivering SWE virtually (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). For many SW programs, technology became a viable alternative to in-person learning and hands-on learning opportunities. With access to online learning platforms, such as Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, and others, social work educators are able to move from physical to virtual classroom. At the same time, technological innovations have assisted many SW programs to survive the crisis (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Even though educators felt unprepared and reluctant to teach online and there were educators and students with no access to appropriate technological equipment and without Internet, online learning platforms have proven effective for teaching social work during COVID-19 (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Many students were able to quickly shift from in-person to online learning and even expanded their use of technology to further engage in educational activities, yet the substantial issues are still there for other students. These issues are inequality in access to technological equipment, no or poor Internet connection, home environments not conducive for learning, and work or caregiving responsibilities that limit the ability to attend classes online (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). That being said, online learning platforms have turned into a means of virtual social support and a tool through which educators can simulate and stimulate social connections, as well as maintain and improve emotional expressivity of communication (Mclaughlin et al., 2020).

Long before the pandemic, researchers highlighted the power of distance learning and online education (Kurzman & Maiden, 2014), pointing out changes in the very paradigm of SWE. Forced social distancing unveiled new opportunities for solidarity and volunteer activities. Students initiated efforts to volunteer for neighbors and communities virtually, which involved providing psychosocial support services, animal care, and educational support and information services (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Volunteering allowed students to respond immediately to needs in the community, both online and offline, which included delivering supplies and providing emotional and social support and counseling (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). To respond to the immediate transition to virtual social services in the United States, local universities started a free online training for SW students (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). One major problem with the online course was field training, the shortage of which threatened students’ progress and could lead to qualification delays. However, many SW educators and SW practitioners have found creative ways to turn the crisis into opportunities (Mclaughlin et al., 2020), which involved work from home, online counseling, and user support. As access to physical spaces was restricted, initial concerns about the suitability of virtual forms of communication for teaching and learning, and for service delivery, gave way to acceptance of the e-learning technology (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Soon enough, it became clear that there was a need to develop students’ skills in online and digital methods of SW practice and identify challenges educators face in this direction (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). It was then found that an effective curriculum should promote teaching about SW responses to crises and disasters, patterns of inequality and their consequences, and foundations of critical pedagogy in the education of social workers (Mclaughlin et al., 2020).
many countries, the pandemic has given an opportunity for the SW profession to
grow and gain respect in society through the rapid development of valued policies
and practices (Jeong & Alhanaee, 2020). The immediate transition to online learn-
ing in response to crisis facilitated the development of new skills among students
and educators (Gherardi et al., 2020), affording ground for international learning
and stimulating the spread of knowledge both nationally and globally (McLaughlin
et al., 2020). In this context, the values of SWE, such as creativity, interconnected-
ness, and responsiveness, will be of critical importance (McLaughlin et al., 2020).
The e-learning technology also provides learners with the opportunity to establish
alliances with service users and non-governmental with the view of acquiring new
skills and participating in the social policy formulation (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

Among the numerous studies discussed above in the field of online social work
education, there is a gap at the intersection of research on teaching methods, the
current state of this field and surveys of the opinions of students of future social
workers on how online learning affects them and how they evaluate it. This gap is
intended to close this study. The significant contribution of this study lies in the fact
that it offers e-learning in Social Work Education, which relies both on the results of
academic research in this area and on the assessment of the quality of implementa-
tion, existing problems and results on the part of students. Thus, the model takes
into account the existing experience of online learning during COVID-19, the expe-
rience of studying online education in the field of social work and its current state
from the point of view of learners.

Methods

The study employs the Delphi method as a way to examine the possibilities of teach-
ing SW virtually, as well as learners’ perception toward this mode of delivery, which
involved emailing a specially developed Simu semi-structured interactive question-
naire to a panel of experts (in this case, learners). The questionnaire was designed to
assess individual and overall perceptions and predict further development of e-learn-
ing in SWE. Anonymity of the questionnaire encouraged learners to express even
unpopular opinions and removed the risk of domination by some experts.

Study Design and Population

The study participants were SW students recruited from two universities in Hel-
wan (Egypt) and the U.A.E. (Arabian Peninsula) by sample random sampling: the
[anonymized for blind peer review] University and the [anonymized for blind peer
review] University, respectively. All participants were asked to complete a 32-item
semi-structured questionnaire designed to measure their perception on virtual SWE.
The questionnaire is based on data from multiple literature sources, which focus on:
• the experience of using e-learning in SWE (Kurzman & Maiden, 2014; Phelan, 2015; Webber et al., 2010);
• the peculiarities of online learning curriculum (Chonody & Sultzman, 2020; Christensen et al., 2020; Fox, 2020; Gherardi et al., 2020; Hanley, 2020; Karagkounis, 2019; Kloppenburg et al., 2019; Lonbay et al., 2020; Wallengren Lynch et al., 2019; Walter & Shenaar-Golan, 2020);
• the possibilities of combining theory and practice in virtual SWE (Aaslund & Woll, 2021; de Bie et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2020; Finn & Molloy, 2020; Siciliano et al., 2020);
• the influence of virtual learning on the emotional state of students (de Bie et al., 2020; El-Lahib et al., 2020; Howells & Bald, 2020);
• SW students’ motivation to learn and work online (Chonody & Sultzman, 2020; Fox, 2020; Jeong & Alhanaee, 2020);
• SW students’ attitude to innovation and research (Bianco et al., 2020; Gredig et al., 2020);
• challenges of virtual SWE (de Bie et al., 2020; Karagkounis, 2019);
• the impact of COVID-19 on SWE (Lotta & Kuhlmann, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Thomeer et al., 2020).

The questionnaire was formulated by the authors of the article on the basis of a structural and logical analysis of the content and findings of the above studies in the field of online social work education. Questions were formulated on the basis of problems that are consistently replicated or recognized as significant and painful factors in more than 60% of all studies. The statements were formulated on the basis of the main research questions that are recognized as relevant and studied in more than 60% of the sources included in the review. In this way, the authors sought to obtain an intersection of the results of academic research that was the answer to these problems and the attitudes towards them expressed by the students surveyed.

The relevancy of the questionnaire was tested based on the results of the survey conducted in this study by coding the answers in the form: “agree” - “1”, “disagree” - “-1” and “not sure” - “0” and further evaluation of the results using Cronbach alpha test. The result obtained corresponds to $\alpha = 0.701$ and may correspond to a sufficient level of relatability to accept the results of the survey. The validity of the questionnaire was tested by an additional independent assessment of the respondents, who were asked to assess the relevance of the content of the questionnaire to the studied area and the completeness of the described issues. The assessment was given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - “does not correspond”, 5 - “completely corresponds”). The non-randomness of the resulting evaluation result was assessed using the chi-square test at $p = .05$. Validity was rated very highly by the participants and this rating cannot be judged as random.

The study took place in several stages. These stages include (1) formulating the research aim and objectives; (2) conducting a literature review; (3) developing a questionnaire; (4) recruiting and surveying the SW students; (5) analyzing data; and (6) building a model for e-learning in SWE. The study recruited 116 students (47 male and 69 female) from [anonymized for blind peer review] University and 109 students (45 male and 64 female) from [anonymized for blind peer review]
University. The questionnaires were posted in online student groups and anonymity was ensured by the use of special code. Statistical analysis was performed using Student’s t-test and correlation analysis. All calculations were done with the help of an online calculator. Because of its small sample, this pilot study does not claim to be representative. The sampling bias, however, has been avoided, and results were reliable enough to build a conceptual model of virtual SWE. The resultant model reflects the current state and prospects of SWE.

Conceptual model of e-learning in Social Work Education (Fig. 1) was formed by the method of contextual analysis of the content and results of academic works, on which the authors relied when developing the questionnaire, as well as on the basis of the results of a descriptive analysis of the responses to the survey described above. In this case, the method of structural equations is not used to form the model, since the formulation of meaningful elements and relationships is of a hermeneutic and structural nature and follows from the logical content of academic research. At the same time, the expressed opinion of students allows a new assessment of the significance of each element or the links between them.

**Limitations**

The required sample size (n=225) is relatively small as the recruitment process was complicated by quarantine restrictions. Other limitations had to do with the fact
that only Social Work department within two universities was surveyed. Although it allowed for statistically reliable results, it cannot guarantee that the sample is representative of the general population. At the same time, the choice to deploy questionnaires through an online channel enabled the relatively quick and convenient collection of data, as well as the creation of a relevant sample.

**Ethics**

The research was conducted ethically in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. The research was approved by the local ethics committees of [anonymized for blind peer review] University and [anonymized for blind peer review] University. Anonymity and confidentiality was ensured by coding all questionnaires. The survey process did not interfere with the learning process and academic performance of students.

**Results and Discussion**

SW students were asked questions aimed at identifying the features of virtual SWE and their attitude to this mode of delivery. The survey was to conduct the comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of e-learning in SWE. The results are depicted in Table 1.

In spite of the presence of statistically significant differences, the overall picture is that results for two different groups of students are somewhat similar. The examined universities both use blended learning and approximately 20% of respondents report that they shifted to purely online learning after the quarantine restrictions came into force. All respondents were familiar with e-learning platforms (such as Moodle) employed in their universities. There is no consensus in literature about the impact of e-learning on academic performance (Phelan, 2015), yet the majority of respondents (approximately 70%) consider e-learning to have a positive influence. In this light, deciding on the mode of delivery, among other things, is crucial for the effectiveness of teaching, as the way educators deliver learning material determines how well students will understand and remember it. In this context, e-learning has significant advantages over traditional formats of training, as it provides more opportunities to work in the information space and respond to urgent issues immediately. E-learning is more dynamic and this motivates learners to learn more and learn better. At the same time, respondents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of virtual SWE are divided, which coincides with the previous findings (Phelan, 2015). More than 40% of students reported that learning in the virtual setting was as effective as learning in the classroom setting, around 20% believed that e-learning was more effective, and approximately 20% were not sure which was more effective. Based on the results above, e-learning has a stimulating effect on learning motivation and academic performance, but the effectiveness of such learning may slightly differ from that of traditional learning. The reason is that in a 100% online SW program, the field training is not as we know it. That is why students may find it hard to spot the opportunities of e-learning adoption in SWE. Among
| No. | Question                                                                 | [anonymized University] | [anonymized University] | t-statistic | p-value |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|---------|
|     |                                                                          | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |            |          |
| 1.  | The University you study at uses:                                        |            |   |            |   |            |          |
| 1.a | Purely online learning                                                   | 21         | 18.1 | 23         | 21.1 | 21.21    | <0.05    |
| 1.b | Blended learning                                                         | 95         | 81.9 | 86         | 78.9 | 21.21    | <0.05    |
| 2.  | The University you study at offers its learning using e-learning platforms|            |   |            |   |            |          |
| 2.a | Agree                                                                    | 116        | 100 | 109        | 100 | 0.00     | >0.05    |
| 2.b | Disagree                                                                 | -          | -   | -          | -   | -        | -        |
| 2.c | Not sure                                                                 | -          | -   | -          | -   | -        | -        |
| 3.  | Choose one of the following options to describe the impact of e-learning on your academic performance |            |   |            |   |            |          |
| 3.a | Positive                                                                 | 82         | 70.7 | 79         | 72.5 | 12.73    | <0.05    |
| 3.b | Negative                                                                 | 4          | 3.4  | 4          | 3.7  | 2.12     | <0.05    |
| 3.c | Neutral                                                                  | 30         | 25.9 | 26         | 23.8 | 14.85    | <0.05    |
| 4.  | The online mode of delivery enables:                                     |            |   |            |   |            |          |
| 4.a | Simulations                                                              | 28         | 24.1 | 25         | 22.9 | 8.49     | <0.05    |
| 4.b | Building of observation skills                                           | 31         | 26.7 | 36         | 33.0 | 44.55    | <0.05    |
| 4.c | Experimentation                                                          | 32         | 27.6 | 35         | 32.1 | 31.82    | <0.05    |
| 4.d | Gaining of concrete experience                                           | 34         | 29.3 | 37         | 33.9 | 32.53    | <0.05    |
| 4.e | Delivery of online consultations to service users                        | 44         | 37.9 | 32         | 29.4 | 60.9     | <0.05    |
| 5.  | Choose one of the following options to describe the impact of e-learning on the effectiveness of Social Work |            |   |            |   |            |          |
| 5.a | Enhancing                                                               | 53         | 45.7 | 49         | 45.0 | 4.95     | <0.05    |
| 5.b | Diminishing                                                             | 8          | 6.9  | 11         | 10.0 | 21.92    | <0.05    |
| 5.c | Neutral                                                                 | 55         | 47.4 | 49         | 45.0 | 16.97    | <0.05    |
| 6.  | Does e-learning meet the needs of student?                               |            |   |            |   |            |          |
| No. | Question                                                                 | University | University | t-statistic | p-value |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|---------|
|     | [anonymized for blind peer review] | Frequency | %          | Frequency   | %       |         |
| 6.a. | Absolutely                                                             | 48         | 41.4       | 47          | 43.1    | 12.02   | <0.05   |
| 6.b. | Partially                                                              | 51         | 44.0       | 49          | 45.0    | 7.07    | <0.05   |
| 6.c. | No                                                                     | 17         | 14.6       | 13          | 11.9    | 19.09   | <0.05   |
| 7.   | Does the e-learning curriculum meet the needs of service users?         |            |            |             |         |         |         |
| 7.a. | Absolutely                                                             | 31         | 26.7       | 32          | 29.4    | 19.09   | <0.05   |
| 7.b. | Partially                                                              | 72         | 62.1       | 66          | 60.6    | 10.61   | <0.05   |
| 7.c. | No                                                                     | 13         | 11.2       | 11          | 10.0    | 8.49    | <0.05   |
| 8.   | E-learning encourages participation in research                         |            |            |             |         |         |         |
| 8.a. | Agree                                                                  | 65         | 56.1       | 61          | 56.0    | 0.71    | >0.05   |
| 8.b. | Disagree                                                               | 12         | 10.3       | 16          | 14.7    | 31.11   | <0.05   |
| 8.c. | Not sure                                                               | 39         | 33.6       | 32          | 29.3    | 30.41   | <0.05   |
| 9.   | E-learning facilitates the cultivation of critical thinking            |            |            |             |         |         |         |
| 9.a. | Agree                                                                  | 63         | 54.3       | 59          | 54.1    | 1.41    | >0.05   |
| 9.b. | Disagree                                                               | 9          | 7.8        | 7           | 6.4     | 9.90    | <0.05   |
| 9.c. | Not sure                                                               | 44         | 37.9       | 43          | 39.5    | 11.31   | <0.05   |
| 10.  | E-learning of Classroom - which is more effective?                     |            |            |             |         |         |         |
| 10.a. | E-learning is more effective                                           | 24         | 20.7       | 26          | 23.9    | 22.63   | <0.05   |
| 10.b. | Classroom is more effective                                           | 9          | 7.8        | 12          | 11.0    | 22.63   | <0.05   |
| 10.c. | Same                                                                   | 52         | 44.8       | 48          | 44.0    | 5.66    | <0.05   |
| 10.d. | Not sure                                                               | 31         | 26.7       | 23          | 21.1    | 39.60   | <0.05   |
| 11.  | Is practice-based learning in social work possible in virtual setting? |            |            |             |         |         |         |
| 11.a. | Yes                                                                    | 79         | 68.1       | 75          | 68.8    | 4.95    | <0.05   |
Table 1 (continued)

| No.  | Question                                                                 | Frequency | %  | Frequency | %  | t-statistic | p-value |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|-----------|----|-------------|---------|
| 11.b.| No                                                                       | 11        | 9.5| 9         | 8.3| 8.49        | <0.05   |
| 11.c.| Not sure                                                                 | 26        | 22.4| 25        | 22.9| 3.54        | <0.05   |
| 12.  | E-learning facilitates the connection of social work theory to social work practice |           |    |           |    |             |         |
| 12.a.| Agree                                                                   | 82        | 70.7| 79        | 72.5| 12.73       | <0.05   |
| 12.b.| Disagree                                                                | 4         | 3.4 | 6         | 5.5 | 14.85       | <0.05   |
| 12.c.| Not sure                                                                | 30        | 25.9| 24        | 22.0| 27.58       | <0.05   |
| 13.  | Was the e-Learning curriculum designed with the involvement of service users? |           |    |           |    |             |         |
| 13.a.| Yes                                                                     | 23        | 19.9| 24        | 22.0| 14.85       | <0.05   |
| 13.b.| No                                                                      | 15        | 12.9| 11        | 10.1| 19.80       | <0.05   |
| 13.c.| Not sure                                                                | 78        | 67.2| 74        | 67.9| 4.95        | <0.05   |
| 14.  | E-learning encourages to improve your field performance                  |           |    |           |    |             |         |
| 14.a.| Agree                                                                   | 78        | 67.2| 75        | 68.8| 11.31       | <0.05   |
| 14.b.| Disagree                                                                | 3         | 2.6 | 4         | 3.7 | 7.78        | <0.05   |
| 14.c.| Not sure                                                                | 35        | 30.2| 30        | 27.5| 19.09       | <0.05   |
| 15.  | E-learning stimulates the creative student-teacher partnership           |           |    |           |    |             |         |
| 15.a.| Agree                                                                   | 69        | 59.5| 64        | 58.7| 5.66        | <0.05   |
| 15.b.| Disagree                                                                | 18        | 15.5| 16        | 14.7| 5.66        | <0.05   |
| 15.c.| Not sure                                                                | 29        | 25.0| 29        | 26.6| 11.31       | <0.05   |
| 16.  | Choose one of the following options to describe the impact of e-learning on emotional wellbeing |           |    |           |    |             |         |
| 16.a.| Positive                                                                | 78        | 67.2| 77        | 70.6| 24.04       | <0.05   |
| 16.b.| Negative                                                               | 1         | 0.9 | 3         | 2.8 | 13.44       | <0.05   |
| 16.c.| Neutral                                                                | 33        | 28.4| 27        | 24.8| 25.46       | <0.05   |
### Table 1 (continued)

| No. | Question                                                                 | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | t-statistic | p-value |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------|---------|
|     |                                                                          | Frequency | %                  | Frequency | %                  |          |         |
| 16.d.| Not sure                                                                 | 4         | 3.5                | 2         | 1.8                | 12.02    | <0.05   |
| 17.  | E-learning increases access to Social Work Education for those living in remote regions and developing countries |           |                    |           |                    |          |         |
| 17.a.| Agree                                                                   | 96        | 82.8               | 88        | 80.7               | 14.85    | <0.05   |
| 17.b.| Disagree                                                                | 12        | 10.3               | 7         | 6.4                | 27.58    | <0.05   |
| 17.c.| Not sure                                                                | 8         | 6.9                | 14        | 12.8               | 41.72    | <0.05   |
| 18.  | E-learning helps to overcome the shortage of high quality staff         |           |                    |           |                    |          |         |
| 18.a.| Agree                                                                   | 99        | 85.4               | 94        | 86.2               | 5.66     | <0.05   |
| 18.b.| Disagree                                                                | 5         | 4.3                | 2         | 1.8                | 17.68    | <0.05   |
| 18.c.| Not sure                                                                | 12        | 10.3               | 13        | 12.0               | 12.02    | <0.05   |
| 19.  | E-learning in Social Work Education helps the University to build partnership with employers and service users |           |                    |           |                    |          |         |
| 19.a.| Agree                                                                   | 59        | 50.9               | 57        | 52.3               | 9.90     | <0.05   |
| 19.b.| Disagree                                                                | 13        | 11.2               | 11        | 10.1               | 7.78     | <0.05   |
| 19.c.| Not sure                                                                | 44        | 37.9               | 41        | 37.6               | 2.12     | <0.05   |
| 20.  | Does the University you study at modify the e-learning path according to feedback evaluation obtained from students? |           |                    |           |                    |          |         |
| 20.a.| Yes                                                                     | 87        | 75.0               | 88        | 80.7               | 40.31    | <0.05   |
| 20.b.| No                                                                      | 10        | 8.6                | 7         | 6.4                | 15.56    | <0.05   |
| 20.c.| Not sure                                                                | 19        | 16.4               | 14        | 12.9               | 30.41    | <0.05   |
| 21.  | Does e-learning assist students to participate in social projects?      |           |                    |           |                    |          |         |
| 21.a.| Absolutely                                                              | 35        | 30.2               | 38        | 34.8               | 32.53    | <0.05   |
| 21.b.| Partially                                                               | 59        | 50.9               | 51        | 46.8               | 28.99    | <0.05   |
| 21.c.| No                                                                      | 8         | 6.9                | 11        | 10.1               | 22.63    | <0.05   |
| 21.d.| Not sure                                                                | 14        | 12.0               | 9         | 8.3                | 26.16    | <0.05   |
| No. | Question                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | t-statistic | p-value |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------|---------|
| 22. | E-learning helps students to improve self-efficacy by easing academic stress and anxiety                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |         |            |            |         |
|     | 22.a. Agree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 84 | 72.4 | 92 | 84.4 | 84.85 | <0.05 |
|     | 22.b. Disagree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | 21 | 18.1 | 15 | 13.8 | 30.41 | <0.05 |
|     | 22.c. Not sure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 11 | 9.5 | 2 | 1.8 | 54.45 | <0.05 |
| 23. | E-learning helps to bridge the research-practice gap                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |         |            |            |         |
|     | 23.a. Agree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 34 | 29.3 | 38 | 34.9 | 39.60 | <0.05 |
|     | 23.b. Disagree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 19 | 16.4 | 24 | 22.0 | 39.60 | <0.05 |
|     | 23.c. Not sure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 63 | 54.3 | 47 | 43.1 | 79.20 | <0.05 |
| 24. | E-learning in Social Work Education facilitates student readiness to handle environmental injustices                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |         |            |            |         |
|     | 24.a. Agree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 46 | 39.7 | 44 | 40.4 | 4.95 | <0.05 |
|     | 24.b. Disagree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 15 | 12.9 | 18 | 16.5 | 25.46 | <0.05 |
|     | 24.c. Not sure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 55 | 47.4 | 47 | 43.1 | 30.41 | <0.05 |
| 25. | E-learning helps social work students to understand and achieve emotional connectedness                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |         |            |            |         |
|     | 25.a. Agree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 74 | 63.8 | 71 | 65.1 | 9.19 | <0.05 |
|     | 25.b. Disagree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 8 | 6.9 | 6 | 5.5 | 9.90 | <0.05 |
|     | 25.c. Not sure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 34 | 29.3 | 32 | 29.4 | 0.71 | >0.05 |
| 26. | E-learning promotes greater participation of experienced educators in the development, adoption, and evaluation of social work programs                                                                                                                                                                        | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |         |            |            |         |
|     | 26.a. Agree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 55 | 47.4 | 54 | 49.6 | 15.56 | <0.05 |
|     | 26.b. Disagree                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 13 | 11.2 | 14 | 12.8 | 11.31 | <0.05 |
|     | 26.c. Not sure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 48 | 41.4 | 41 | 37.6 | 31.11 | <0.05 |
| 27. | Were you able to shift to e-learning quickly?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |         |            |            |         |
|     | 27.a. Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 101 | 87.1 | 98 | 90.0 | 20.51 | <0.05 |
### Table 1 (continued)

| No.  | Question                                                                 | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | t-statistic | p-value |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|---------|
|      |                                                                          | Frequency | %        | Frequency | %        |          |          |
| 27.b.| No                                                                       | 9         | 7.7      | 7         | 6.4      | 9.19     | <0.05    |
| 27.c.| Not sure                                                                 | 6         | 5.2      | 4         | 3.6      | 11.31    | <0.05    |
| 28.  | Which of the following challenges you have faced when switching to e-learning? (choose all relevant options) |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| 28.a.| Insufficient literacy and motivation among teachers                     | 34        | 29.3     | 27        | 24.8     | 31.82    | <0.05    |
| 28.b.| Technical issues                                                        | 57        | 49.1     | 61        | 56.0     | 48.79    | <0.05    |
| 28.c.| Connectivity problem                                                    | 52        | 44.8     | 53        | 48.6     | 26.87    | <0.05    |
| 28.d.| Struggles with the e-learning platform                                  | 25        | 21.6     | 22        | 20.2     | 9.90     | <0.05    |
| 28.e.| Inability to attend online lessons because of external influences       | 61        | 52.6     | 55        | 50.5     | 14.85    | <0.05    |
| 29.  | E-learning helps to coordinate efforts on simulating and stimulating social connections via online and virtual platforms |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| 29.a.| Agree                                                                    | 85        | 73.3     | 82        | 75.2     | 13.44    | <0.05    |
| 29.b.| Disagree                                                                 | 4         | 3.4      | 2         | 1.8      | 11.31    | <0.05    |
| 29.c.| Not sure                                                                 | 27        | 23.3     | 25        | 23.0     | 2.12     | <0.05    |
| 30.  | E-learning retains emotional expressivity of communication               |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| 30.a.| Agree                                                                    | 102       | 87.9     | 95        | 87.2     | 4.95     | <0.05    |
| 30.b.| Disagree                                                                 | 1         | 0.9      | 2         | 1.8      | 6.36     | <0.05    |
| 30.c.| Not sure                                                                 | 13        | 11.2     | 12        | 11.0     | 1.41     | >0.05    |
| 31.  | E-learning facilitates in internationalizing Social Work Education       |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| 31.a.| Agree                                                                    | 99        | 85.3     | 96        | 88.1     | 19.80    | <0.05    |
| 31.b.| Disagree                                                                 | 2         | 1.7      | 1         | 0.9      | 5.66     | <0.05    |
| 31.c.| Not sure                                                                 | 15        | 13.0     | 12        | 11.0     | 14.14    | <0.05    |
| 32.  | Choose one of the following options to describe the impact of e-learning on employability |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| 32.a.| Positive                                                                 | 41        | 35.4     | 37        | 33.9     | 10.61    | <0.05    |
| No. | Question   | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | [anonymized for blind peer review] University | t-statistic | p-value |
|-----|------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------|---------|
|     |            | Frequency | %   | Frequency | %   |               |            |
| 32.b. | Negative  | 10        | 8.6 | 7        | 6.4 | 15.56       | <0.05      |
| 32.c. | Neutral   | 44        | 37.9| 28       | 25.7| 86.27       | <0.05      |
| 32.d. | Not sure  | 21        | 18.1| 37       | 33.9| 111.72      | <0.05      |
| Total |           | 116       | 100 | 109      | 100 |               |            |
| Correlation coefficient | | 1.000 | | | | | <0.05 |
respondents, only 30% were able to identify the advantages of using online mode of delivery and the most important one was that it enables the gaining of concrete experience and delivery of online consultations to service users. The online SWE falls into a grey area in terms of whether it allows gaining practical experience and approximately 45% of respondents reported that they were partially satisfied with how e-learning met their needs. Approximately 70% of respondents believe that it is possible to use e-learning to foster practical skills in social workers, that e-learning facilitates the connection of SW theory and SW practice, and that it encourages students to improve their field performance. This suggests that e-learning has promise for SWE and that e-learning resources are not yet effective in supporting virtual field training, which requires the revision of the current curriculum (Table 2).

Despite the fact that more than 30% of students were not sure about the role of e-learning in cultivating critical thinking and research motivation, more than half of respondents believed that it could facilitate things in this direction. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the use of e-learning with the view of strengthening research potential (Vincent & Hamilton, 2020).

Slightly more than half of respondents suggested that e-learning could stimulate creative collaboration in training. Hence, educators may want to consider online delivery method if they wish to improve the existing relationship with their students. At the same time, more attention should be paid to teacher competence in order to overcome motivational barriers and negative stereotypes that, according to one-third of respondents, teachers have regarding online learning. There is also a need to involve more-experienced teachers in the development of e-learning curriculum. Distance teaching via e-learning can help to overcome staff shortage and attract high quality teachers from other regions and countries (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Another promising direction for developing online education is the creation of international classrooms in the virtual space, which is an undoubted advantage for learners, as they will be able to study the ethnic and racial aspects of SW better, share experience, and jointly solve SW issues.

Students’ emotional wellbeing is essential for successful learning and e-learning helps to lessen psychological barriers that often arise when speaking in front of an audience, reduce the fear of research (Gredig et al., 2020), and improve students’ self-efficacy (El-Lahib et al., 2020; Hanley, 2020; Walter & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). More than half of respondents reported that e-learning had a stimulating effect on their ability to connect emotionally to social work, and even though students were separated from service users, more than 80% reported that expressivity of their communication did not fade away.

The undoubted advantage of e-learning is that it promotes employability, but only one-third of respondents expressed confidence that it could help them become more employable. Other students believed that e-learning did not affect their capacity to gain employment or expressed uncertainty. Some students, on the contrary, felt that

| N (respondents) | Mean | SD   | Chi square | p   |
|----------------|------|------|------------|-----|
| 225            | 151.19 | 19.71 | 71.5       | 0.032 |
employers would turned down a candidate with an online SW degree. At the same time, around half of respondents emphasized the positive impact of e-learning on the establishment of partnership with employers and service users, facilitating the placement of graduates.

Approximately 90% of respondents admitted shifting to e-learning quickly and without substantial difficulties. Nevertheless, some of them have faced hardware and connectivity issues along the way. In addition, it is worth pointing out psychological barriers associated with the adoption of innovative technology. The most common problems were external influences that kept half of respondents away from their computers and other gadgets during the lesson. In other words, e-learning is an affordable solution that requires both educators and learners to create favorable conditions for effective and efficient learning, namely educators need to make sure that a virtual learning environment is safe and learners should focus on minimizing distractions, such as noise.

By integrating survey results and findings from previous research, a conceptual model of e-learning in Social Work Education (ELSWE) was developed (Fig. 1). This model consists of semantic blocks that show a range of e-learning opportunities that can benefit social work, partnership building, SW competence development, and employability, as well as tangible advantages of e-learning over traditional formats of teaching. It can be useful in organizing SWE online and evaluating its effectiveness.

The ELSWE model has 5 semantic blocks: “Opportunities”, “Partnership”, “Competences”, “Employability” and “Advantages”.

The first block, “Opportunities”, includes four components, among which are accessibility, connection between theory and practice, research activity, and internationalization. An important aspect of e-learning is the ease of accessibility, which makes it possible to overcome both geographical distances and restrictions associated with health issues and psychological barriers (de Bie et al., 2020; Gredig et al., 2020; Hagos Baynesagn et al., 2021; Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Defying skepticism and fears, e-learning not only links SW theory to SW practice, but it also contributes to the acquisition of new skills by students, such as online counseling (Finn & Molloy, 2020; Vincent & Hamilton, 2020), promoting their professional development, critical thinking skills, and creativity. It also encourages students to engage in research, strengthening their research potential (Christensen et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2020; Gredig et al., 2020; Vincent & Hamilton, 2020).

Among other things, social work relies on partnership working and if in traditional classroom learning, SW students learn about the importance of such collaborative interaction as a source of professionally significant resources, with e-learning, they become equal participants involved in a tripartite partnership that exists between learning providers, employers and service users (Ferguson et al., 2020; Hanley, 2020). The second and third blocks of the model, “Partnership” and “Competence”, represent determinants that have a positive effect on “Employability”, the fourth block. Additional benefit of e-learning in this context is that graduates acquire skills enabling them to work remotely as consultants, educators, and social work project organizers, etc. (El-Lahib et al., 2020; Finn & Molloy, 2020).
Those components above determine the essential content of the fifth block, “Advantages”. The most important benefits to SW learners are related to their psychological state: e-learning has a normalizing effect on the emotional state of students, which is often a substantial issue in learning that requires universities to take purposeful actions (Howells & Bald, 2020; Walter & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). Through the creation of virtual courses, e-learning opens more opportunities for international cooperation and allows for the involvement of educators from other regions and countries (Hagos Baynesagn et al., 2021), which would be difficult or even impossible with conventional classroom training. Finally, it is crucial to preserve the focus on traditional ‘humane’ values of social work in the e-learning curriculum (Mclaughlin et al., 2020).

Based on the research findings, e-learning meets the needs of SW learners, SW educators, employers, and service users, which makes it a promising solution and determines the areas of further expansion, improvement and development.

Conclusions

The quarantine-related restrictions amid COVID-19 have led to the emergence of new forms of social interaction, as well as the need for new technologies in social work. Both online and blended types of learning are effective in meeting the needs of learners, educators, employers, and service users. The present study shows that 70% of SW students felt the positive impact of e-learning on their learning motivation and academic performance. The results of the study suggest that e-learning can improve research engagement by linking theory to practice and affecting the emotional state of learners. Even though better engagement in research activity was reported by only 56% of students, in the light of new findings showing the extremely low interest in research activity among students, such result can be considered impressive. More than 80% of respondents recognized the importance of e-learning because of its ability to help universities overcome the shortage of high quality staff and create international learning teams with students from around the world. Half of respondents believed that using e-learning in SWE promoted the establishment of partnership with employers and service users, rising chances for employment. In addition, 30% of students reported that e-learning enabled them to volunteer and participate in the online social problem solving process. According to 72.4 to 84.4% of respondents, e-learning had a positive impact on their emotional state.

Findings above suggest that e-learning has substantial advantages over traditional classroom training. However, there were also challenges, such as technical issues, unstable connectivity, the presence of psychological barriers challenging the acceptance of innovative mode of delivery, and external distractions.

The present study offers a conceptual model of e-learning in Social Work Education that defines the core benefits of e-learning. This model can be used as a platform for organizing SWE online and assessing its effectiveness.
Data Availability  Data will be available on request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest  This research has no conflict of interests.

Ethics Approval  The research was conducted ethically in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. The research was approved by the local ethics committees of Helwan University and Ajman University.

Consent to Participate  Informed consent was signed by participants.

Consent for Publication  Not applicable.

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