

## Conference Paper

# Competency of Social Work Educators in Malaysian: A Way Forward

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## Abstract

Social work educators' competency is pivotal in promoting professional social work practices. Effective strategies may improve the competency among social work educators. This study gathered empirical data from a qualitative study conducted among 20 social work educators in Malaysian public universities. The paper derived the strategies from the findings of an in-depth interview. The findings prompt that continuous training, collaborative networking and legislative power are strategies highlighted by the respondents which will increase the competency among Malaysian social work educators. The strategies discussed in this paper will benefit the social work education and social work profession in Malaysia. The implementation of these strategies will give more recognition to social work as a profession and produce more competent and qualified social workers in resolving social issues which threatening the safety and well-being of society.

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## 1. Introduction

The performance of the social workers is reflecting the capability of social work educators in delivering the knowledge in learning session. Social work educators play essential roles in the development of understanding of basic social work to the future social workers. Social work educators need to be updated with current knowledge in social work. That is why competent social work educators are crucial in teaching social work programme or courses. Competency according to Trinder (2008) is the development through components of education, training and experience. Social workers learn from social work educators on the theory and also on the practice components before they become a practitioner.

Training and development is a strategy to prepare an individual in handling new and future tasks (Tahir, Yousafzai, Jan & Hashim, 2014). Training and development bring positive outcomes to an individual as multitask carried in the session. Any useful input will preserve the best performance in the organisation as a whole. Training of teachers provides them the knowledge, skill, and ability that are relevant to the professional life

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of a teacher. During training and development, people do hands-on practice to get real exposure to doing things right. Fieldwork is the best approach to teach and practice the students as well as social work educators in making tasks comprehensive.

In Adu and Okeke (2014) study mentioned that continuous professional development (CPD) in teaching profession act as a structured approach of learning in providing competent practice of the lecturers, obtaining information and enhance skills, knowledge and application of hands-on experience. CPD can be conducted in many form such as formal and structured or informal and self-directed. In addition, according to Adu and Okeke (2014), there are few others similar concepts used that refer to CPD such as teacher development, staff development and professional development. Collaboration consists of five elements which are process dimensions, governance, administration, norms of trust, mutuality and weak organisational autonomy (Sedgwick, 2017). Collaboration is also defined as “*multidimensional, variable construct composed of five key dimensions, two of which are structural in nature (governance and administration), two of which are social capital dimensions (mutuality and norms), and one of which involves agency (organisational autonomy)*” (Thomson, Perry & Miller, 2007; p.25).

In study done by Chaikoed, Sirisuthi and Numnaphol (2017) stated that collaborative network develops based on love, participation behavior, shared learning, soul and spirit, natural leadership quality, participatory work, assigned work, and shared knowledge. The purpose of organisation collaboration is to attain the organisation goals, negotiating among competing interests and brokering coalitions among competing value systems, expectations, and self-interested motivations. The formal and informal interaction between organisations can encourage a form of collaboration at any time. Collaboration also occurs through repeated negotiation and the development of commitments of the organisation (Thomson & Perry, 2006). According to Manžuch (2011), the main reason of conducting collaboration is to achieve the organisations’ strategies which are exploration and exploitation. Collaboration can improve the existing services and discover new areas. That is why collaboration need to have a neat plan to implement and achieving the goals such as having enough resources, expertise and time.

Legislation is a mechanism to monitor the deeds of individuals and groups in the society and also act as institution that direct individual action into a desirable channel (Sehgal, 2005). Law prerequisite an inclusive understanding of basic concepts, an extensive knowledge of legislation and apply it in accurate ways. Practitioners can apply the knowledge of law during service delivery “*in ways which further oppress and disempower service-users, or exercise it in a manner which informs service-users of their entitlements, protects their rights and enhances their quality of life*” (Laird,

2014; p.2). Social workers have a legal duty of care towards their clients in which both practitioners and the employers are responsible to pay damages if they misconduct or fail to deliver correct advice during service-delivery (Laird, 2014).

Thus, this study attempts to explore on the strategies to increase the competency level among social work educators. This paper presented the actual data of the study. This study would be valuable to the social work profession as a whole to what extent the strategies can be taken to enhance the competency standard.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employs qualitative approach in gathering its data. To be specific, the study adopted a case study approach as it covers logic of design, data collection techniques and specific approaches in data analysis (Yin, 2003). The researchers conducted an in-depth interview method to collect the data because in-depth interview would be the best approach in gathering such intense information from the group of experts who are social work educators. In-depth interviews also helped the researcher to seek the essential opinions, perspectives and experiences of social work educators extensively. The researchers interviewed 20 social work educators from seven Malaysian public universities that offered social work programme or courses which are University of Malaya (UM), National University of Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), University of Science Malaysia (USM), Northern University of Malaysia (UUM), Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZA) and University of Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

A semi-structured interview protocol used as a guideline in conducting the in-depth interview. Interview protocol is vital because it helps to “...*keep targeted on the subject of the case study...*” (Yin, 2003; p.69). Probing method was also used throughout the interview session to gain extra information from the respondents. The researcher designed interview protocol based on the previous literature. The in-depth interview took approximately about 1 hour to 1 hour and a half for each session. Participation of the respondents in this study was on a voluntary basis. Before the interview, the researchers obtained written permission from the respondents. A consent form was signed by the respondents as a pledge that they willing to participate in the study. Besides, the study also was abode by the University Malaya Code of Research Ethics which required all researchers to always strive for the highest standards of excellence and morality in research activities. In maintaining the confidentiality, this study did not reveal the participant’s name and replaced the names with codes. The researcher analysed the data using both software Atlas.ti and also manually to build up the themes of this study.

### 3. Results

Currently, there are 74 social work educators in Malaysian public universities who teach social work and subjects. Most of the social work educators are from social work background who are at least earned their degrees in Master of Social Work. But there are still few of them who are coming from other social science field. The results are gathered from the interviews conducted among the social work educators. Continuous training, collaborative networking and legislative power are the strategies needed by the respondents to improve their competencies.

#### 3.1. Training

Continuous training is one of the effective strategies in enhancing competency of social work educators. The educators need to attend training programme as to improve their knowledge as well as to learn new techniques in conducting cases and effective teaching methods. Continuous training can help educators to explore new skills in the field of social work as there are multiple types of social problems that required different skills to be solved. Interestingly, educators would acquire greater ability in explaining to students on the recent and effective techniques in conducting intervention in social cases. It would benefit the students in their practical courses as practicum is part of the syllabuses. Social work educators put forward their stands in such way:

*“...social issues are keep on increasing nowadays. So, it means that we need to undergo training programme or we need to find new techniques to solve the cases or issues. We need to explore...”*

(SWE8/ 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

*“...in my point of view, like I said before on the need to attend training. Training is very important especially among educators because you need to upgrade and update your knowledge...”*

(SWE9/16<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

#### 3.2. Collaborative networking

The other strategy that could enhance or improve competency among social work educators is collaborative networking. Social work educators can refresh their knowledge on current issues through networking. The educators can collaborate with any government or non-government agencies in doing their practices as this can improve

their knowledge and skills over time Collaborative networking can be either local or international as long as it is related to the field and richer knowledge sharing can be achieved. Social work educators further emphasised on this matter:

*“...do networking with practitioner...and then create networking with social workers at Department of Social Welfare (JKM) and also any agencies that have social work practitioners. There are a lot of opportunities that we can gain. Moreover, we can share any new issues arose...”*

(SWE4/16<sup>th</sup> March 2018)

*“...we need to have a lot of networking. Create networking with other agencies either local or international that related to our field...”*

(SWE12/18<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

### 3.3. Legislative power

Currently, there is still no Social Work Act gazetted in Malaysia. According to the respondents, the Act has been drafted many years ago and is yet to be discussed in the parliament. Based on the findings, social work educators agreed that once the Social Work Act is gazetted, the social work profession will get its own recognition. The social work profession then will have its competency standards. It will also have Social Work Council under the act to regulate social work practitioners and educators. For these reasons, the social work educators hoped that the Act would be approved soon by the government. They expressed their voices in such way:

*“...we have prepared everything at the moment. It is just we need to wait to be tabled in the parliament...Although we have been fighting for it for a long time ago...”*

(SWE15/24<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

*“...we are really hope this Social Work Act is gazette because it will bring huge opportunities to the students...”*

(SWE13/19<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

*“...once we have the Social Work Act, it will protect the students. And also we need to view back on the social work syllabus. So that the content would not be so much different with other universities...”*

(SWE9/16<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

## 4. Discussion

Three strategies highlighted by the respondents in enhancing the competency of social work educator which are continuous training, collaborative networking and social legislation. They felt that they need to add or increase those comprehensive strategies to better perform in their teaching process and also at the same time can expand their experience. Furthermore, real exposure in fieldwork setting may equip the educators with current and effective techniques and how to conduct intervention in social work. Social work knowledge is evolving over time. There are new skills from time to time.

The nature of educators is providing valuable knowledge to nurture the students on solving problem with logic decision. Competent social work educators are capable to identify and monitor the contemporary knowledge and skills needed in social work program. Hence, continuous learning and quality improvement among social work educators are necessary over time. It will contribute to the positive changes in delivering input to the students throughout the whole learning process. Scottish Social Services Council (2008) stated that, “...it came out with continuous learning framework tools as to achieve support learning, development, and improve practice; promote continuous improvement in standards of practice, and provide transparency of pathways for career progression...” (p.11).

Meanwhile, social work educators are encouraged to create collaborative networking to improve their skills and knowledge. Furthermore, collaborative networking can promote source of new insights, competencies and relationships (Bonomi, Sarti & Torre, 2019). According to Thomson, Perry & Miller (2007), “collaboration is often assumed as one way to efficiently allocate scarce resources while building community by strengthening inter-organisational ties” (p.24). Continuous training is essential for social work educators to upgrade their skills and knowledge. Training and development can be thought of as processes designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students

However, there are few challenges in performing those strategies namely time-constraints, social and physical resources deficits for multiple team collaboration, supervision and the absence of a specific social enactment to rule out the practice of professional social work in Malaysia. Time-constraint is due to work burden where social work educators are burdened with heavy administrative work besides teaching, doing research and publications. Kusi, Mensah and Gyaki (2014) emphasised that lecturers work under pressure to meet the requirement set by the university in which they are required to produce high-quality paper and publish in high ranking journals. The other

challenge is social and physical resources deficits for multiple team collaboration and supervision. This is due to the absence of institutions or association that provide specific training for social work educators.

Currently, specific training focusing on social work educators are almost non-existent and available trainings are usually designed for the practitioners. As an outcome of the limited training available for the educators, there is no specific teaching instruments and techniques exposed to this group of educators. For instance, in conducting therapy classes such as play therapy and arts therapy, the educators claimed they are not well-equipped with specific teaching techniques in conducting the classes. Social work is a professional course that involve many interventions in solving cases. The final challenge is the absence of Social Work Act. Malaysia does not have Social Work Act in guiding the practice of social work as a whole. Social work educators and practitioner's rights and safety are not well preserved due to the absence of such Act. Besides that, the safety of practitioners and educators in conducting cases are not taken care as Social Work Act is not anywhere in the picture to prioritise the social work professions which include educators and practitioners in Malaysia.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, there is a need for social work educators to upgrade themselves with current skills and techniques in educating the students. In realising such needs, a few strategies should be considered to be implemented. Social work educators need to attend training to increase their existing knowledge and social work skills. So, there is an urgency to organise specific training programme for social work educators to upgrade their competency. The responsible authority need to provide proper training with appropriate tools. The Malaysia Social Work Profession Bill which is in the journey to be enacted soon is important to give recognition to social work as a profession. It is important to provide a framework and mechanism in developing a strong profession of social work as well as competent social workers. With this, the competency of social work educators in Malaysia may enhanced as expected.

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