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To cite this article: Qusai A Ibrahim, Magda Sorur, Lassaad Labidi & Lynelle G Osburn (2021) Quality of social work education and practice in the Arab countries: a comparative study of Palestine, Qatar and Tunisia, *Social Work Education*, 40:8, 1010-1023, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2020.1773781](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1773781)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1773781>



Published online: 11 Jun 2020.



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# Quality of social work education and practice in the Arab countries: a comparative study of Palestine, Qatar and Tunisia

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## ABSTRACT

This comparative study aims to identify student perceptions of the quality of their social work education and practice experience in 3 Arab states. It considers 8 domains: faculty members, the student cohort, curriculum, textbooks, the library, teaching methods, field practicum, and quality of student assessment. The goal is not to produce a set of league tables but to move social work courses in the Arab states towards the achievement of international standards and recognition while recognizing cultural differences and promoting cultural sensitivity. From this study, of the three states, Qatar received the highest relative strength in the 8 domains. This study has several recommendations to improve the quality of social work education and practice in the three studied universities particularly, and for universities in the Arab world in general. In focusing on the 8 domains, it can encourage researchers to study each one individually and build culturally and regionally appropriate recommendations for institutional improvement and professional education in social work.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 August 2018  
Accepted 20 May 2020

## KEYWORDS

Arab countries; quality; social work education; student perceptions

## Introduction

Arab countries are developing social work education and professional practice that balances international social work education standards and Islamic cultural and religious inputs (Al-Ma'seb et al.'s, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2010; Veeran, 2013). Social work in the Arab world has come from indigenous Arab traditions, civil society organisations that have been established to provide care for people who have social care needs and or belong to marginalized groups, and from some limited government care (Al-Makhamreh & Libal, 2012, pp. 453–454; Ibrahim, 2017). There has been no Arab countries' accrediting body to oversee the formulation of standards for social work curricula. Each university is responsible for determining its own assessment criteria without the capacity to share their strengths and successful educational strategies. Moreover, according to a study of 22 Arab universities in 8 Arab countries, (Ibrahim, 2018a, pp. 82–85) 53.9% of social work educators tend not to work across universities or states.

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In the Arab countries, demand for places in social work courses currently exceeds supply. As Al-Makhamreh and Libal (2012, pp. 456–459) Egypt has experienced increase pressure following the demonstrations of 2011 to ‘address entrenched poverty and inequality experienced by the majority of the population’ (p. 456), Jordan has scaled up social work programs, Turkey is undergoing an expansion. The effective supply of courses may require extensive investment in building a culture of quality, increasing resources and equipment, and paying higher salaries to have discipline specialists on faculty knowing that initially, the flow through benefits of those changes may not be visible to all.

The Arab Federation of Social Workers was established through a memorandum of understanding in 2014 with the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Social Workers, Dr Rory Truell. Egypt, Palestine, Yemen, Tunisia, and Morocco were co-signatories. The parties agreed to develop a constitution, launch the Arab Federation of Social Workers and meet in Cairo, the permanent headquarters (Memorandum of Understanding, 2014). However, these efforts may be hampered by the scarcity of professional social work associations in Arab countries that can advocate for the profession and its courses and influence policy and commitments for expenditure, and by weak backing and encouragement from some Ministries of Education.

The process of moving towards ‘a deliberate, aggressive program to work primarily for institutional improvement and the development of professional education in social work,’ takes a long time (Nyquist, 1964). It is first concerned with minimal standards, is evolutionary and has to deal with challenges like a low level of professional expectations or a lack of familiarity with the functions of accreditation.

Accreditation’s main purposes are to help schools develop maximum educational effectiveness and to identify institutions whose competence in the particular educational programs they offer, warrants public and professional confidence. In our current environment, education is also a commodity. Students are customers who want the best value for their money, time and effort. They want the best opportunities at graduation, to engage in the social work profession, which is global (Ahmadi, 2003, p. 15). In many cases, students are studying online and do not attend classes in the country where their course is located. We inhabit a context where both students and graduates are mobile. That is, they can come from any country and work in any country, hence the focus of gaining public and professional confidence is no longer local, but global.

Higher Education institutions and social work courses in Arab countries share in the desire to provide high-quality educational experiences for future social work professionals (Mokhtar, 2006). The Arab states involved in this study have benefitted from the history of social work course accreditation with quantitative, formal and inflexible minima and have embraced consideration of the relationships between the students and the faculty—that is where the student experience is one of interest and support for their intellectual and professional life, as well as for the intellectual life of the institution. It is in the institution’s interest to construct a positive and warm environment for learning and understanding. Processes that support accreditation also provide stimulation to organise higher education offerings, enable critical self-reflection and develop constructive plans leading to greater understanding, vision, policy, and quality teaching.

Since the setting of standards can lead to conformity, sameness and stagnation, it is better to seek excellence.

Educational institutions and the profession show themselves to be responsive to the communities in which they are embedded, including the global community by including students and the community members in the establishment of effective quality measures (Ahmed, 2003; Sadiq, 2005). As Ibrahim (2020, pp. 193–194) note, the unique perspective of students, that is learning and instruction from the position of the receiver, can ‘reveal what is missing, contradictory, or divergent’. To that end, considerable recent research in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has sought student views on educational delivery and quality (Ibrahim, 2018a & Ibrahim et al., 2020b, Ibrahim, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2020a &, 2020b).

This paper is part of a larger study whereby a group of Arab States: Palestine,

Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and Morocco and their social work courses have engaged in illuminating different components of social work education. The findings together, are to be interpreted within the context of each institution’s objectives. Qusai a Ibrahim (2017) reported on the glocalization component of the social work courses from the faculty members’ perspectives in *International Social Work*. He followed with a paper on student perceptions of the profession and its interaction with community issues in the *Global Journal of Human—Social Science Research* (2018). The section of the larger study, which examines student perception of their social work educational and professional practicum experience, is covered in this paper. Therefore, there will be some overlap in the descriptions of methodology and the research participants.

### ***The emergence of the social work profession in the Arab world***

Sadiq (2005) argues that establishing effective quality measures is a means of meeting the challenges posed by globalization, one of which is the competition for educational institution status. For developing countries, economic and social pressures and problems mean increased attention to the developmental dimensions of social work. When this is placed in the context of a ‘global environmental crisis that disproportionately affects the world’s poorest’ (Boetto, 2017., p. 48) exchange of experiences and expertise between countries and states, through research and collaborative studies that are focused on social work education and practice becomes indispensable. Arab countries are taking this initiative (Al-Ma’sseb et al.’s, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2010; Veeran, 2013).

### ***Main study question***

From the social work students’ perspectives, what is the quality of education and practice of social work in Palestine, Qatar, and Tunisia?

### ***Methodology***

a quantitative survey was administered to a non-probability sample of social work students (n = 113) in Arab universities in Palestine, Qatar, and Tunisia to establish students’ perceptions of their courses. The range of countries enables shared and

disparate issues to be illuminated. The countries have different higher education systems. There has been little research conducted on social work education within or comparatively across the region and so the research might also provide insights into unmet and evolving needs of students.

The survey instrument was structured with 104 items. The first 13 questions cover demographic questions, the name and the nature of the course delivery, for example, specific courses and/or training delivered for social workers. The remaining items span eight domains: faculty members, students themselves, curriculum, textbooks, library, teaching methods, field practicum and, quality of student assessment/evaluation. These domains were generated from Arab world social work education and practice experience, research and scholarly discussions. Each domain except two, quality of student assessment/evaluation, and textbooks contained 12 items. The exceptions contained 8 and 11 items respectively. The survey used a 3-point Likert scale for replies: 'disagree', 'neutral' and 'agree'.

Early drafts of the instrument were presented for assessment to a group of experts in the field of social work at universities both in the study countries and elsewhere. Following discussion and analysis, the instrument was revised and determined to be appropriate. Expert review was used to assess the reliability of the instrument but tests for internal consistency were not done. This, and the use of a 3-point Likert scale present limits to in-depth and layered levels of information from the participants. The 3-point Likert scale allows a neutral stance, which might mask subtle concerns that a 4-point scale can extract.

The results were analysed using a descriptive comparative approach where the item is described. The groups of people and their responses are compared (Hamzawy, 1993).

### **Sampling and data collection**

a convenience, non-probability sampling approach was used for selecting universities and research participants that could encompass the geographical area from the Gulf States in the east to the Arab States of North Africa including Morocco in the west. Institution level mechanisms for conducting research on social work programs in the Arab world are currently being developed through cooperative research activities that appear to have begun with Qusai a Ibrahim's ground-breaking project reported in 2017 in *International Social Work* called, *Glocalization and international Social Work education: a comparative study of Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Morocco*. Convenience sampling is appropriate for studies that examine hard-to-reach populations, such as the present case. The resultant limitations are acceptable given the narrow scope of the research question.

The principal researcher contacted and invited social work programs to participate in the study. Each program designated a social work faculty member to be a research associate for data collection and management in that institution. Research associates administered the survey and conducted data collection in classroom and forums as appropriate for that particular university setting. Research associates provided student participants who were majoring in social work, in the final year of their social work programs with information about the study. They covered ethical considerations for example, anonymity and voluntary participation, and answered questions. Students were

assured that they would not lose any benefits if they decided not to participate or if they decided to stop participating in any of the data collection stages.

Final year students who are majoring in social work were identified as being best able to evaluate their programs, their professors, and the quality of their education in general. The students are both the target of the quality of the education category, and represent the outcomes of the educational process. Thus they are capable to judge the effectiveness of social work education.

As reported by Ibrahim (2018b), the principal researcher provided research associates with instructions for data input with a standard format. The principal researcher collated the data and transferred it to SPSS statistical software for analysis. The tests used included: frequency distributions, arithmetic average, and relative strength.

## Results and discussion

The results presented here follow the sequence of the study questions. The first questions relate to the demographic characteristics of the study sample of students in the selected Arab universities (see Table 1). They are shared by the overarching research project and reported by Ibrahim (2017 & 2018). Palestine, represented by Al-Quds University, has the most social work student participants, ( $n = 60$ ) at 53.10% of the total sample. Qatar, represented by Qatar University ( $n = 27$ ) has 23.90%, with Tunisia, represented by Carthage University, ( $n = 26$ ) with 23%.

**Table 1.** The distribution of the students in the universities by state, university, gender, age and marital status. Ibrahim (2018b).

Variable	The state	Variable level	Freq.	%
The state and the university	Palestine	Al-Quds University	60	53.10
	Qatar	Qatar University	27	23.90
	Tunisia	Carthage University -National Institute of Labor and Social Studies	26	23.0
	<b>Total</b>		<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>
Age		less than 25 years	93	82.3
		25 to less than 30 years	18	15.9
		more than 45	2	1.8
		<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>
Gender		Male	25	22.1
		Female	88	77.9
		<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>
Marital status		Single	78	69
		Married	31	27.4
		Divorced	3	2.7
		Widowed	1	0.9
		<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>
Academic title variable of the social work profession in the universities		Social Work Program	60	53.10
		Department of Social Work	27	23.90
		School of Social Work	26	23
		<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>
Have you received any training courses in Social Work at the University?		Yes	33	29.2
		No	80	70.8
		<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>
Take advantage of training sessions		Yes	33	29.2
		No	80	70.8
		<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>100</b>

Final year social work students younger than 25 years old ( $n = 93$ ) comprised 82.3% of the sample, while 15.9% were between 25 and 30 ( $n = 18$ ). 1.8% was older than 45 years ( $n = 2$ ). Researchers attributed the reason for the high percentage of students less than 25 years to the standard age for students to attend universities.

The identified gender of the students in the sample is women ( $n = 88$ ) or 77.9% and men ( $n = 25$ ) or 22.1%. The marital status of the students is 69% ( $n = 78$ ) who are single, 27.4% ( $n = 31$ ) who are married, 2.7% divorced ( $n = 3$ ), and 0.9% ( $n = 1$ ) widowed.

Even though these students are in their final year of a social work qualification 70.8% ( $n = 80$ ) declared that they had complete no training courses specifically on social work in their university.

## Results and analysis of the study questions in eight domains from the perspective of the students

The results for each university on the eight domains can be found in Table 2. For each university, the relative strength of the domain was calculated  $\Sigma w/AN$ , where  $w$  is the weight given in the Likert scale.  $\Sigma w$  is the sum of all the weights in the cohort,  $a$  is the highest weight (in this case 3) and  $N$  is the number of students in the cohort. The result is in the range of 0 to 1. In this table the results are presented as percentages, that is 0.5282 is written as 52.82. This helps to see where the result lies in the range that is weak (below 55), average (56–79) or high, (above 80). These categories are arbitrary and descriptive only. Presented in this way, the views of the students, even though the student numbers in each cohort varies, can be compared. a simple ranking score represents the position of the universities, in comparison to each other, where 1 is the highest and 3 is the lowest.

### Domain 1: faculty members

Student perceptions of faculty members are in the range average to weak for all universities with Qatar University receiving a marginally higher score than Carthage University or Al-Quds University. The results for Qatar University showed low scores for language skills, low ability of academics in using technology, low interest in practical workshops, the use of faculty members from other disciplines to teach social work classes, low levels of faculty accountability, and low scores on good relationships with students. Carthage University faculty's results showed low ability of academics in using technology, lack of continuous training, low levels of faculty accountability, low professional skills, a level of language skills that impaired the ability of faculty members to establish good relations with their students, and low interest in practical workshops. Al-Quds

**Table 2.** Outcomes by domain.

Themes	Palestine		Qatar		Tunisia	
	Relative strength	Ranking	Relative strength	Ranking	Relative strength	Ranking
Faculty members	52.82	3	58.33	1	57.05	2
Students of social work	50.13	3	53.08	1	51.06	2
Curriculum	53.89	2	73.66	1	50.96	3
The university textbook	51.96	3	73.83	1	53.13	2
The quality of the library	52.22	2	72.11	1	48.71	3
Methods of teaching	48.89	3	81.17	1	50.10	2
Field practicum	47.63	2	87.23	1	46.25	3
Quality of student assessment	50.27	3	72.22	1	54.96	2



University faculty results are relatively weak due to the low ability of academics in using technology, low levels of faculty accountability, low scores for language skills, the use of part-time academics, the use of faculty members from other disciplines to teach social work classes and, favouring other disciplines over social work. Two themes here are consistent with the findings of Sadiq (2005) which revealed that a lack of language abilities of faculty members and poor abilities in using modern technologies were major drawbacks for quality social work education.

The significance of 'low language skills' in the academic staff members lies in their reduced ability to benefit from research and developments in the professions of social work and higher education where English is the dominant language. It therefore slows the transfer of new knowledge and the implementation of improved pedagogical techniques. Further, a reluctance to engage with the digital and online world not only limits access to new knowledge and trends in research and practice but also reduces access to communities of scholars and practitioners, therefore international field education opportunities.

### ***Domain 2: the students***

Across all the universities the students scoring concerns directly affecting them and their colleagues is weak. The scores for Qatar University reflect the lack of scholarships to help students cover the cost of the study, poor preparation of social work students, no opportunities for students to participate in curriculum planning and inattention to training students to a scientific level in research skills. Carthage University's score relates to poor preparation for students to work in the specialist areas of professional practice, congested lecture halls, no opportunities for students to participate in curriculum planning, and lack of scholarships to help students cover the cost of the study. Al-Quds University's score relates to imprecision in the selection of social work students, no grants for the cost of study, the absence of objective criteria in selecting social work students, congested lecture halls, and no opportunity for students to participate in curriculum planning.

These results agree with Moore and Urwin (1990) who pointed to the importance of high standards in selection and Faramawy (2005) who revealed the importance of evaluating the performance of faculty members through self-assessment, evaluation from the point of view of the students, and evaluating curriculum, teaching methods and examinations.

### ***Domain 3: curriculum***

In the domain of curriculum, Qatar University scores in the average range (73.66) and the other institutions score in the weak range (Al-Quds 53.89, and Carthage 48.71). Qatar University's score was affected by the perceived lack of curriculum design in relation to the challenges of the times, a lack of social work plans, teaching methods, the lack of curriculum review and the absence of a general strategy for the development of social work education programs; social work education programs being limited to knowledge only, i.e. lacking in skills teaching. Al-Quds University's score is largely due to the adoption of the 'credit hour' system, a limited number of theories, a lack of dedicated input on preventive and developmental practice, a lack of a regular review of curriculum and a poor relation to the labour market. Carthage University's score also is largely due to



the 'credit hour' system, lack of dedicated input on preventive and developmental practice, and a lack of a regular review of curriculum.

These results are consistent with Hilmi (1998) who showed a lack of suitable methods used in teaching social work. They are also consistent with Mansour (1998) who showed that graduate programs devoted solely to casework did not satisfy students' needs for underpinning knowledge, which in turn had a negative impact on students' cognitive abilities and academic competence. They echo the results of Sadiq (2005) who revealed that curriculum content lacked practical application, focus on the transfer of knowledge, and a lack of courses in the use of modern technology.

The credit-hour system allocates a certain number of hours to a subject or course of study that reflects the number of contact hours. It may not necessarily match the number of hours required for the student to meet the learning outcomes of the course of study. Alshamy (2017), studying education students at Alexandria University found for example, that 'students' estimation of the number of hours needed to complete the independent work during the semester were much higher than that of academics except for fieldwork' (p. 39). Whereas Noda (2016) showed that there was an ongoing dilemma between the need for study time (credit hours) to comply with higher education policies and international standards so that students can go on to further study in other places, and 'how to confirm that this study time leads to successful learning' (p. 14).

#### **Domain 4: textbooks**

The results for textbooks, shows Qatar scoring in the average range (73.83) with the other two universities (Carthage 53.13 and Al-Quds 51.96) scoring in the weak range. Qatar University's score is due to perceived poor choices of faculty members, declining social work education curricula, a decline in the continued development of the curricula and a high use of out-of-date literature. Carthage University's score was largely due to poor availability of texts, high prices of textbooks and the perception of low faculty interest in reviewing and keeping up-to-date with contemporary literature. Al-Quds University's score is largely due to the high prices of textbooks, the perception of low faculty interest in reviewing and keeping up-to-date with contemporary literature and a high use of out-of-date literature. There was also a poor availability of texts and lack of study guidance by faculty members.

This result is consistent with Khalil (2003) that textbooks tend to be seen as supplying students with information and courses do not add complementary study resources. It is also consistent with Sadiq (2005) who revealed that much curriculum content lacked a focus on the transfer of knowledge accompanied by an absence of targeted reading to bolster this.

#### **Domain 5: library**

The results for the library, shows Qatar scoring in the average range (72.11) with the other two universities (Al-Quds 52.22 and Carthage 48.71) scoring in the weak range. Qatar University's score is due to the scarcity of modern literature in the social work, the absence of a private library, not linking the library and other libraries in the various fields of social work, the difficulty of gaining access to global data, the lack of availability to use of modern technology in the library, the scarcity of providing cameras and scanners in the library and the difficulty of the copying source material.

Al-Quds University's score is largely due to the long inventory procedures in the library, the difficulty of copying, slow administrative procedures in borrowing, the lack of modern technology at the library, the lack of resources, lack of connection to other social work libraries and the absence of an advanced indexing in the library system. Carthage University's score is largely due to the long inventory procedures in the library, the scarcity of scanners in the library, the lack of resources, the difficulty in copying in the library, the difficulty of access to global data, the complexity of the administrative procedures involved in borrowing textbooks and the absence of an advanced indexing system in the library.

These results are consistent with the Auslander and Cohen (1992) and Hamza (2006) who showed the need for continuous assessment of the library-related resources and to update library information systems. They are also consistent with the Sadiq (2005) who found a lack of indexing, higher than necessary administrative complexities and not being allowed to borrow new textbooks hampered students' learning.

### **Domain 6: teaching methods**

The results for teaching methods, shows Qatar scoring in the high range (81.17) with the other two universities (Carthage 50.10 and Al-Quds 48.49) scoring in the weak range.

Qatar University's score is due to the use of diverse teaching methods, the encouragement of reflection and analysis, innovation, efficiency in teaching research and its applications, management flexibility and responsiveness to social work students, availability of space and facilities, encouragement of invention among students through discussion and dialogue and the use of modern means to provide lectures. Carthage University's score is largely due to a decline in the condition of the lecture halls, the lack of availability of buildings and installations, the lack of computer labs for students, lack of skills in dealing with modern technology, the use of traditional methods for example, rote learning, lecturing and cramming information (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 1410) in social work education, low use of modern means of providing lectures and the lack of language labs. Al-Quds University's score again is due to the use of traditional teaching methods, lack of use of modern means to provide lectures, the lack of diversity in teaching methods and reliance on lectures, a poor climate for inventive students (i.e. lack of discussion and dialogue), the lack of computer labs for students, the lack of language labs and the lack of dedicated buildings.

This result is consistent with numerous studies (Auslander & Cohen, 1992; Hilmi, 1998; Faramawy, 2001; Sadiq, 2005) that reveal the need to computerize information systems in the departments of social work; low graduate performance due to lack of academic preparation and how the content of the curriculum lacks practical applications exacerbated the lack of modern technology resulting in the reliance on traditional lecture form of teaching.

### **Domain 7: field practicum**

The results for field practicum, shows Qatar scoring in the high range (87.23) with the other two universities (Al-Quds 47.63 and Carthage 46.25) scoring in the weak range.

Qatar University's score is primarily due to the lack of burden on the administrators of fieldwork training, the emphasis on the importance of field training, the effectiveness of appropriate supervision in the field, linking theoretical knowledge with field training, standards in the selection of fieldwork supervisors and good supervisory relationships

between the academic supervisor/tutor and students in fieldwork. Al-Quds University's score is due to perceived low engagement of the administrators for fieldwork training, lack of theoretical knowledge relating fieldwork supervision, lack of recognition of the importance of fieldwork training, lack of specific plans for the administrators of field training, poor supervisory relationship between the academic supervisor/tutor and students in fieldwork, low oversight of supervision, and poor selection of training agencies with the right experience and skills to offer student training. Carthage University's score is because of low engagement of the administrators for fieldwork training, lack of coordination of timing of fieldwork training, lack of specific guidance for the administrators of fieldwork training, shortcomings in the selection of supervisors, low oversight of fieldwork training, poor supervisory relationship between the academic supervisor/tutor and students and poor selection of training agencies with the right experience and skills to offer student training.

These results are consistent with numerous studies (Ali, 1986; Mansour, 1990; Mahfouz, 1998; Naji, 2000) which pointed to the discrepancy between the theoretical and the practical side of the fieldwork training in the preparation of social work students that is keeping pace with modern developments in the profession and changing social realities especially in areas of specialization.

#### ***Domain 8: quality of student assessment/evaluation***

The results for quality of student assessment/evaluation, shows Qatar scoring in the average range (72.22) with the other two universities (Carthage 54.96 and Al-Quds 50.27) scoring in the weak range.

Qatar University's score comes from the student's perception that there is a lack of clear standards in accepting social work students, the year's study system, lack of availability of objective tests in the admission of students, a lack of diversity in the examinations systems, scarcity of exams systems that measure students' abilities, and weaknesses in assessments that prevent scientific thinking. Both Carthage and Al-Quds Universities scores are due to the year's study system, the lack of diversity in the examinations systems, low interest in conducting short periodic tests to assess students during the semester, declining interest in the formation of committees to conduct oral tests for students of social work, limited availability of objective tests in accepting students, scarcity of exams systems that measure students' abilities, and weaknesses in assessments that prevent scientific thinking. Al-Quds University's students also noted the scarcity of exams systems that measure abilities.

The results here agree with the Moore and Urwin (1990) who revealed the importance of standards in the selection of social work students and Green et al. (2006) who demonstrated the need to develop continuous assessment systems.

#### **Implications and conclusion**

From this study, it is clear that the analysis of students' perceptions of the social work professional courses currently on offer leave us in no doubt that courses are not meeting minimal standards. These students are active and positive participants in the endeavour to work, as Nyquist said in 1964, 'for institutional improvement and the development of professional education in social work'. The goal is not to produce a set of league tables but to move social work courses in the Arab states towards the achievement of international

standards and recognition. Doing so will allow the best applicants for courses to be selected, enable the exchange of qualified faculty members and put the institutions in a position to receive applicants (students and faculty) from other parts of the world and to generate scholarships through industry and government partnerships. In order to achieve this, knowledge and resources, teaching techniques and strategies need to be shared within Arab states as a starting point.

Social work core curricula need to be taught by qualified social work professionals in that field who are provided with opportunities for continuing education and skills development.

The quality of education cannot be achieved without taking into account, teaching methods so that students experience a learning environment that has sufficient space and equipment to meet their learning needs.

The student learning experience will benefit from faculty developing study plans for social work that incorporate diverse educational strategies.

Selection and screening processes are needed to ensure applications for social work courses are ready to begin such a course of personal and professional development and practice.

Social work course curricula need review and development in line with current theoretical models and frameworks that address current community needs, and social, economic and environmental trends and connect social work education with professional practice. The continuous improvement of study plans and curricula will refer to other social work programs with advanced ranking. Finally, frequent re-evaluation of the curricula to match the needs of the labour market is needed.

Libraries that support social work courses need to be connected with national and international databases including the Internet to enable students and faculty to have access to recent literature in the field of social work. Libraries need essential equipment—cameras, copiers and scanners and printers.

The practice component of social work education can include conducting continuous visits by social work students to social welfare agencies, and practitioners to work with students in relation to current practice skills, techniques and the application of knowledge in the field. Using diverse teaching methods, and adoption of modern teaching strategies in addition to lectures is highly recommended.

It is recommended that academic supervisors and field supervisors hold periodic meetings and intensify visits to increase their acquaintance and cooperation with the aim of exchanging experiences to help in the achievement of the positive educational outcomes for students. Students will need encouragement from faculty and practitioners to develop research skills and to enhance their capacity for evidence-based practice.

Students indicate a preference for shorter and more frequent assessment of their learning and capacity—that is more formative assessment and less emphasis on summative assessment.

These changes to social work courses in the Arab states, based on the perspectives of final year students in three universities, can extend the process of change to improve quality in education and professional practice. It can contribute to the repositioning of social work professional education in the Arab states so that those universities can take advantage of the exchange of ideas and opportunities available in a global context of social work professional education and practice.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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