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Bridging Boundaries to Acquire Research and Professional Skills: Reflecting on the Impact and Experiences of Technology-Enabled Collaborative Cross-Institutional and Transnational Social Work Placement Projects

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Abstract: Worldwide, social work educators' teaching and learning practices are founded on social justice principles and recognised for their evidence-based, interpersonal, cross-cultural, and problem-solving approaches. Placements are integral to social work education preparing students for practice. Learning experienced on such placements, particularly those involving research, can assist students to develop a broad understanding of diversity, inequality, and anti-oppressive practice in local, national, or international contexts. Technology-enhanced, online research opportunities have revolutionised research placements. This article offers a reflective dialogue on the insights gained from two transnational, technology-enhanced social work research-based placements. The first example reviews three student-led, rural-focused inquiries completed in Australia and Ireland; the second pertains to students physically situated in Ireland and who engaged in collaborative online projects while completing their USA-based social work placements online. The authors reflect on the experiences and the skills the students developed and how the application of technology helped meet an increasing need for environmentally sustainable practices in teaching, learning, and research on placement. Publicly available student reflections on significant knowledge and practice benefits gained from their transnational experiences are considered. The study highlights how reflective practice assisted in the enactment of research in online contexts.

Keywords: social work education; work-integrated learning; social work research; online; transnational; social work field education; technology; sustainability

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1. Introduction

Critical to social work field education placements is the progressive development of students' practice skills and their integration of theory and professional knowledge in practice contexts. According to the International Federation of Social Workers' Global Definition of Social Work, values of social justice and human rights are core, and embedding them in social work education is a shared responsibility of key stakeholders (IFSW 2014). In recent years, universities have increased their use of technology to deliver many of their programmes, relying on integrating digital platforms (McFadden et al. 2020; Osburn et al. 2021). In Ireland and Australia in 2020, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, social work academics, students, and practice teachers providing fieldwork placements needed to employ online technology to ensure student professional learning and skills development on fieldwork placements (O'Brien et al. 2023; Short et al. 2023).

Social work fieldwork placements (referred to as placements from now on) allow students to engage in work-integrated learning. Placements are designed to provide

significant benefits, including developing practice skills and contributing service hours to potential employers. Placements are also an opportunity to reflect upon and engage with professional values and help establish networks between the university and a range of communities of practice and services in society.

The application of technology to engage in research and practice learning creates international and outward-looking opportunities. It forms students' professional development, supports online international research and project placements, promotes connection, and helps meet society's need for sustainability in education and practice (UCC 2023; IFSW 2022; United Nations 2015; Doyle et al. 2023; Lomas et al. 2022; McLaughlin et al. 2024; Short et al. 2023). These benefits contrast with the traditional concept of research as a solitary, independent activity. They challenge the development of practice skills and knowledge and provide an enhanced understanding of collaborative working with people from diverse contexts and backgrounds. Informed by the reflective theoretical foundations of Schön (1995), Freire's liberatory pedagogy theory, and social learning theory, this article offers two examples in which we—the authors—reflect and learn from the experiences of participants regarding the use of technology in social work placements. The use of technology enabled cross-institutional and transnational social work collaboration when placements were subject to social distancing.

Contextualising the Research Question Regarding the Use of Technology in Placements

In 2019, COVID-19 lockdowns disrupted placements and provided the catalyst for members of the International Network of Co-operative Inquirers (INCInq) to offer student research placements that originated in Australia and subsequently expanded to transnational projects with student peers in Ireland. Example 1 considers three international co-operative inquiry research projects co-designed and conducted by students, university academics, and placement colleagues (Lomas et al. 2022; Doyle et al. 2023; McLaughlin et al. 2024). Example 2 considers two co-designed online placements with Irish students placed within a USA-based agency.

INCInq members were experienced users of digital platforms for research collaborations and experienced in the application of active and participatory didactic methodologies in research (Whitaker et al. 2022). The technology was accessible and familiar to students through their studies and/or individual experiences. For Irish students, the pandemic precipitated a quick up-skilling in their use of technology. Using technology encouraged students to become active participants in their learning. Co-operative inquiry aided the development of their professional skills by promoting the recognition of power relations and power equalisation, thus developing their leadership skills using technology platforms for learning on placement (Rose et al. 2024; Colás-Bravo et al. 2021).

This article addresses the question: How can technology-enabled, sustainable, transnational collaborations support the attainment of research and professional skills by social work students on placement? This article aims to reflect on the potential of technology in cultivating critical inquiry, shared values, relationship-based power equalisation, trust, and collaborative methodologies within education transnationally.

2. Methodology

The authors of this article critically reviewed their experience of existing completed transnational technology-enhanced student research placements. This involved a reflexivity-orientated approach with a purposive sample. Reflective dialogue methodology allows people from diverse backgrounds to come together and—through interaction—polyvocalise, log, and examine multidimensional ideas about a topic of inquiry. The academics have a particular interest in online, technology-enhanced learning that provides students with transformational, transnational learning experiences (Pascoe et al. 2023b) while ensuring placements align with accreditation and regulatory standards.

Method

This research followed a three-phased approach. Phase one was identifying the topic and research question. Phase two involved the authors vocalising their experiences of technology-enhanced placements (Tsang 2007). Phase three was identifying and documenting experiences. These experiences were manually analysed, allowing the authors to remember and engage directly with their experiences rather than applying a detached approach.

3. Promoting Research, Sustainability, and Practice Skills Using Online Technologies

Contemporary qualitative, co-designed research methods are increasingly engaging participants and researchers as equal partners in research. Participatory, qualitative research approaches, like co-operative inquiry, can occur online and can facilitate genuine research collaborations with students (Russ et al. 2024; Halton et al. 2023). These participatory approaches to learning and teaching in higher education require the establishment of an inclusive learning environment where trust between participants is established (Kanaris et al. 2004; Schön 1983 in Halton et al. 2023). This inclusive environment can be created online (Whitaker et al. 2022; Duncombe et al. 2024)

Inspired by Freire's concept of praxis, the authors contemplated how through an inquiry teachers and students can be subjects who together can stand back and observe reality, reflect retrospectively and/or contemporaneously on their learnings, and subsequently take transformative action. Engaging in reflection supports consciousness leading to action, this time regarding the use of technology in research (Freire 1974; Au 2007).

As Russ et al. (2024) suggest, the application of values of social justice, respect for individuals, and professional integrity are expected to be embodied in social work research (Pascoe et al. 2023a). The assumption is that social work researchers use approaches that reflect the ethical foundation of their field and are congruent with co-operative inquiry methodology. The inquiry projects cited in this article align with social work principles of respect for persons, social justice, and professional integrity (IASW 2023; AASW 2020; SWRB 2019; IFSW 2018). This can be observed through the examples, which demonstrate the context, processes, and strengths of innovative technology-enabled, collaborative, cross-institutional, transnational social work placements that support attaining research and professional skills.

For instance, in example 1, the students who led the transnational co-operative inquiry projects were introduced to online video-conference meetings with associated chat capacity. In developing a co-designed learning environment of trust and openness, the rules of engagement were set out at the commencement of the projects, and participation agreements were established (Doyle et al. 2023; Lomas et al. 2022; McLaughlin et al. 2024; Short et al. 2023). Agreements included participants being "present" by having their cameras turned on during meetings so all could contribute to the in-person dialogue. The students opened a shared document platform where meeting notes, links to literature, and other resources were shared and collated. They shared documents live and simultaneously during meetings, which assisted with discussions, supported equitable access to information, inclusive participatory processes and gave all participating in the inquiries power over the data collected and analysed. All were prompted and encouraged to contribute to the shared document. Establishing a learning culture that valued creativity, reflexivity, democracy, inclusivity, and trust was essential for ongoing engagement and learning throughout the collaborative projects.

3.1. Designing a Learning Environment Based on Trust

In considering Schön's scholarship, a practicum is designed to encourage learning in an environment where participants can gain specific skills. The practicum setting is encouraging and can exemplify the values of developing trust and learning by doing. These student-led research projects, like Schön's scholarship indicates, facilitated the reconciliation of divisions between social work practice and research and social work theory and practice

instruction during a time of forced division. A secure collaborative environment was established to support academic mentors and students to co-operate, exchange ideas and information, and gain a shared understanding of the research process. All the characteristics of a democratic and trusting learning environment, where roles are given equal weight and responsibilities, were present in the collaborative space (Schön 1995; Schön 1983 in Halton et al. 2023; Freire 1974).

Kanaris and Mujtaba (2024) theorise that trust is a necessary glue for diverse groups to collaborate effectively. The challenge for an online learning environment is to attain engagement from participants and establish trust particularly as there is limited access to the broader context of communication such as body language.

In the beginning phase of both examples, academics mentored the students, role-modelling social work ethics and providing encouragement and support to enable students to lead in conversations and voice their opinions. Over time, trust developed, and with consistent encouragement, and persistence, students reported that it became easier for them to contribute to and lead the dialogue. The dialogue abided by social work ethical principles (AASW 2020; IASW 2023) and was enriched as students exchanged their ideas with one another. Students reported that they experienced the online space as a safe, open environment that promotes creativity and provided students with a platform to share their knowledge within the context of a "safety net" if they became stuck (Halton et al. 2023, p. 79).

Like the co-operative inquiry projects, Wiske (1998) describes a collaborative research project on Teaching for Understanding with the goal of engaging students in performances of understanding that require them to apply, extend, and synthesise what they know. According to Wiske (1998, p. 63) students must be engaged in "continuing spirals of inquiry" that lead them to more significant insights and highlight the connections between the subject and other concepts, issues, and questions. When a topic is "central to the discipline, accessible, interesting to students, excites the teacher intellectually, and is easily connected with other topics within and external to the domain", researchers found that it is likely to be generative (Wiske 1998, p. 64). This occurred in examples 1 and 2.

3.2. Example 1: Three Interinstitutional, Student-Led, Rural-Focused Co-Operative Inquiries

COVID-19 lockdowns during 2019–2021 made student placements with a rural focus challenging to source. At the time, members from INCInq nominated themselves to support one national and two interinstitutional, transnational rural-focused student inquiry projects. One inquiry was conducted each year over three years, with each progressively building on learning from the prior project. The social work students engaged with extant literature available through their online libraries, which were in the public domain. The team consulted with ethics committees, with the outcome being that these were deemed to be nil to negligible risk due to their literary focus.

The inquiry projects sought to identify challenges that impact rural populations and their access to services, interrogate the literature regarding these challenges in different cultural and geographic contexts, and learn about the social determinants of a health framework (McLaughlin et al. 2024). All three inquiry projects involved students developing skills and knowledge in research and practice, in addition to creating understanding and capacity for rural social work practice. Each group selected a unique focus area for their inquiry. Figure 1 below presents the three different research questions and fields addressed.

To help people engage well with their research field and question, each student was assigned a supervisor from their university. The inquiry project groups were established through weekly online video conference meetings, where students would meet jointly with supervisors for the first half, and then met without their supervisors for the remainder of the meeting (Doyle et al. 2023; Lomas et al. 2022; McLaughlin et al. 2024; Short et al. 2023). Students also met individually with their supervisors outside the inquiry project group meetings. In addition, students had access to a research officer and a support person from the University Centre for Rural Health. All contact and access to support

occurred via online platforms, email, and/or phone. Additionally, students took it upon themselves to use chat platforms to maintain connections between meetings. This enabled the development of transnational relationships and inspiring partnerships across multiple institutions.

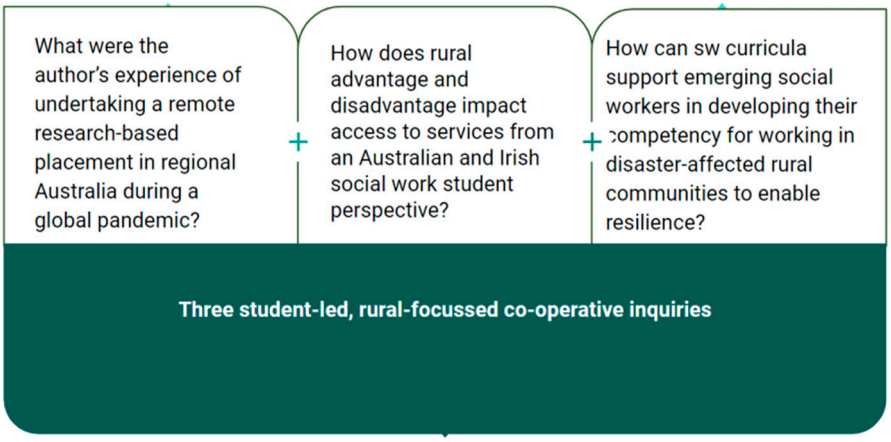


Figure 1. The three inquiries' research questions (Pascoe et al. 2023b, p. 13).

The first inquiry was initiated as a response to supporting student placement learning during the pandemic. Students critically examined their reflections on the benefits and challenges of remote research-based placements (Lomas et al. 2022). The students reported that their experience was valuable. They concluded that participating in an online research placement improved their communication and research skills, reinforced their sense of professional identity, and helped them develop an understanding of the importance of research in social work, reflecting Freire's concept of consciousness-raising in pedagogy. These results demonstrate that online research-based placements can provide worthwhile and productive placement experiences that can influence social work field-education heutagogy (Lomas et al. 2022)

The purpose of the second inquiry was to define rural advantages and disadvantages. The students sought to raise awareness of the problems affecting remote communities and their access to social work services, by concentrating their research on rural disadvantage. Additionally, they were curious to investigate these topics in other cultural and geographic contexts, specifically in Australia and Ireland (McLaughlin et al. 2023).

Early in the third inquiry, this group discovered that several members had lived and/or worked in a disaster-affected area and questioned their readiness as aspiring social workers to respond in emergencies, especially in rural locations. This prompted them to focus their research question on how social work programmes can help prospective social workers acquire the knowledge and skills needed to practice in disaster-affected regions, to foster resilience (Doyle et al. 2023).

Academics found that the students responded well to the challenge and were exceptional participants, leaders, and researchers. Students demonstrated their established trust in their teamwork skills and learning by presenting at international conferences and producing high-quality publications (McLaughlin et al. 2023, 2024; Doyle et al. 2023; Pascoe et al. 2023a; Donnarumma et al. 2022; Lomas et al. 2022; Lawson et al. 2021).

3.3. Example 2: Two Reconfigured Online Social Work Placements, USA

The pandemic forced social work educators to focus and adapt new online strategies for teaching. The social work curriculum and fieldwork staff involved in these placements adopted a strengths-based approach in their interactions with students, the social work agency, and their regulatory body (Short et al. 2023).

Students undertaking placements were prepared via online pre-placement preparation sessions. This included material on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

(Burns et al. 2021), working online and remotely, online supervision, self-care, and skills-based knowledge using online communication platforms. Best practices were shared with practice teachers through webinars and online continuing professional development activities (O'Brien et al. 2023). Following discussions around issues like digital exclusion and isolation, the idea of re-configuring two placements into two online (distance learning) student placements was generated. The agency practice teacher based in the USA and the placement coordinator based in Ireland were key to this process. The practice teacher believed that it was possible to reconfigure two programmes to online placements. The first was a memory support programme for older adults, and the second was for children with intellectual disabilities.

Several challenges were identified, including managing the time difference between the USA and Ireland. As with example 1, there was increased student anxiety at the outset. These anxieties related to the online placements being innovative and subject to regulation standards and formal assessment. Concerns were also raised regarding restricted face-to-face interaction with children, their families, older adults, and agency colleagues. These challenges were managed using technology. Students were provided with laptops, and the university provided pre-placement preparation, training, and assistance for the students, focusing on online communication platforms such as MS Teams©. Professional development was provided to practice teachers to support their transition to online practice teaching and orient them to online communication and supervision (O'Brien et al. 2023). The foundation of the practice teachers' teaching and evaluation methods was weekly online peer supervision and online individual supervision. Critical reviews, debriefings, and reflections formed the construction of their online supervision learning environment, allowing students to articulate their emerging social work research and professional skills. The practice teachers' facilitation of student peer review and feedback within the online supervision space encouraged ongoing reflection and communication skills development and provided alternative viewpoints. Relationships and trust were established, and a strengths-based approach was adopted in response to the challenges and opportunities that online placements presented, as demonstrated in the following narratives.

Placement 1. Older adults with mild-to-moderate memory impairments can benefit from meaningful socialisation and cognitive stimulation through a Memory Support Programme (MSP). A former student had helped develop and implement this pilot project, progressively assuming increased responsibility for leading groups. This first placement involved a student researching the potential benefits and challenges of delivering the (MSP) programme online. In the reconfigured online placement, the social work student researched how other agencies had pivoted to working online with older adults and helped identify important considerations to inform the delivery of the aims of the MSP programme's transition to online delivery.

Placement 2. The second placement involved reconfiguring a club for children with intellectual disabilities. The club supported inclusion for children with intellectual disabilities within their community and promoted their engagement with their Irish culture and heritage. Before the pandemic, club members met weekly in person. During COVID-19 lockdowns, weekly online meetings proved unsuccessful for the children, who experienced engagement challenges. The social work student collaborated with agency staff and parents to assess the interests and needs of their children, and this informed the reconfiguring into a spring break week-long format. They produced a research paper outlining best practices for engaging online with children with intellectual disabilities. The research findings influenced the design of the week-long online spring camp. They sourced outside presenters and observed and facilitated the online sessions. The student also designed an evaluation form to assess the impact of the online spring camp on participants.

Consequently, technology was successfully applied to reconfigure these two international professional social work student placements. Technology helped overcome the physical distances involved: (i) between Ireland and the USA; and (ii) between the agency and the children, families, and older adults accessing their services. They evidence the po-

tential for engaging in research online, and for working in a participatory way with people receiving services. The integrity and calibre of the learning was interrogated. Feedback from participants, and formal evidence from the students' placement portfolios, evidenced their compliance with regulatory and university requirements.

4. Placement Experiences and Outcomes

In example 1, in the three inquiry projects, the students and their academic mentors progressively established a positive group relationship built on mutual benefit, co-operation, and trust. Like Schön's construction of "the practicum", the online environment was designed to scaffold students' learning thus encouraging them to engage in the learning process safely. In the safety of the protected "practicum" environment, students were supported to engage in open dialogue, promoting critical reflection "in" and "on" actions. (Schön 1983 in Halton et al. 2023). Zoom© was used to record meetings and produce transcripts so participants unable to attend a session could participate by reviewing the recorded videos. To ensure information was not lost, minutes were compiled and distributed via email containing the Google Docs© link. Crucially, ensuring easy access to research documentation and simultaneous, real-time use during meetings and journal writing was essential to ensure that continuity and inclusion was preserved throughout the project. All participants engaged in the writing-up process; this included writing meeting minutes in Google Docs© and written reflections, remarks, or observations during or after meetings (Rose et al. 2024). The notes contained in Google Docs© and the author's discussions via Zoom© became the research data and were coded using NVivo©, (McLaughlin et al. 2023). Through these various processes students reported a changed understanding of research and practice and were able to see clearer connections between how theory and practice aligned with ethical standards in professional practice. As one student stated:

> "What I have learned . . . is that for me, I think of research as being away from practice and excludes people. It was, to see through this process, that research doesn't have to be removed from practice and people, but rather with people" (Lawson et al. 2021, para. 12).

The inquiry projects received positive feedback from students and staff involved. Using technology and communicating with each other online was a rich learning experience, and the pedagogical impact of each of the three inquiries went further than understanding the relationship between research and practice (Lomas et al. 2022); for example, students experienced being both teachers and learners while participating in the inquiries. Gaps were thought to have been bridged between students and staff, with both experiencing being learners and teachers at various points throughout the projects. The project proved to be a transformative skills-based learning experience that was reported to have continued beyond the placements (Freire 1974).

4.1. The Experience of Learning Professional Skills on Placement and Within a University Context

Schön (1995) identifies communication skills as essential in the promotion of reflection in professional practice. However, online communication skills are not what a research university traditionally considers to be essential learning skills. For instance, the "Veblenian bargain" highlights this. Veblen argued for the separation between "higher learning"—which he saw as the true scholarship—and "lower learning"—which for our purposes can be considered professional practice skills. Veblen's argument was challenged, and the professions now populate university campuses. In doing so, Schön (1995) explains that the professions took on board the Veblenian bargain, and now deliver programmes that teach students the basic science of their subject and then the relevant applied science with a fieldwork practice experience. In our first example, we have furthered the students' experience of fieldwork practice experience by providing practice research opportunities online. When working online with students, academic mentors promoted the concept of "teaching for understanding" by engaging in contemporaneous and retrospective reflection throughout the online research process. Reflection in and on action prompted students to

engage in the dissemination of knowledge arising from their research. They published their research and engaged in conference presentations. The conference presentations mostly occurred online, providing opportunities to share learnings but also apply their online skills. These experiences and actions resulted in improved written and verbal communication skills resulting in an enhanced sense of professional identity for all participants, as the following student quote explains:

> "This experience has forged a greater appreciation for the role that research plays in social work, enhanced our ability to communicate effectively and developed our skills in research and strengthened our developing sense of professional identity" (INCInq 2024, para. 22).

4.2. Placement Benefits and Impact

Students when online were required to apply increased effort to develop and hone their active listening, group, and online communication skills, which resulted in increased competency in communicating across new and diverse platforms and navigating different cultures of practice. They created person-centred and creative online interventions and had the benefit of gaining a transnational understanding of social work processes and research skills. Students required equipment—particularly laptops, access to internet services, preparation support, and assistance using the technology platforms. Students also accessed library services online. The application of technology to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous engagement gave students confidence and the support they needed to develop their online technological skills and to lead and manage their research:

> "...[The project] gave me the opportunity to learn how ...[to] do research and have a go at it in a supportive, stimulating and collaborative environment with fellow students coming from different backgrounds" (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para. 22).

Further, important process elements included mentoring students in trust-building to support and encourage their online engagement. The development of their online interpersonal and communication skills supported them to engage in peer feedback thus enhancing the learning experience. Reminiscent of the concept of teaching for understanding, in example 1, guiding students through the process of co-operative inquiry involved a skilled interplay of actions. This approach has some similarities to Wiske (1998), the guiding framework regarding Teaching for Understanding (TFU) that provides a way for students to apply, extend, and refine what they know. This is not dissimilar to the co-operative inquiry process in example 1, as aforementioned.

Regarding example 1, throughout the process, the students became more connected and had the benefit of forming a supportive online community using WhatsApp©. Students said that receiving peer feedback helped them generate new ideas and alternative perspectives:

> "[CI] is concerned about the person and understanding what the person went through, CI was made for social workers and as we wanted to hear others stories we became immersed in it" (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para 18)

At first, students required more guidance and assistance. Each participant explained their cultural background and the various languages and perspectives they offered to the ongoing conversation, as part of the contextualisation process. Positive professional relationships supported positive outcomes informed by a strengths-based approach (Short et al. 2023).

> "we weren't just students and academics, we were all researchers" (McLaughlin et al. 2023, para 6)

Initially, students were taught about co-operative inquiry as an experiential process and encouraged to apply what they understood and had experienced to the topics being studied. These included rural social work in Australia and Ireland (McLaughlin et al. 2024), disaster management (Doyle et al. 2023), and social work practice and education

(Lomas et al. 2022). Engaging with the innovative application of technology to online research can cause student participants to hesitate and increase their anxiety because this is a novel approach to learning. Students found it challenging to see how the results would come together but reported that becoming immersed in discussions about the topic in a thoughtful way generated a lot of ideas. One student participant reflected that they found it challenging to establish a clear sense of what the group wanted their research article to be when more and more suggestions were generated:

> "sometimes it seemed that the more ideas we had, the harder it was to get a clear picture of what we wanted our article to be" (Halton et al. 2023, p. 78).

During times of uncertainty, academics, and the more experienced group participants, provided reassurance and encouraged colleagues to "trust in the process": to use technology asynchronously, keep writing, engage in reflection and maintain their connection to the group outside of meetings. Students without prior experience of co-operative inquiry, or the application of technology to online research, reported that they felt supported and secure in the group and in the relationships they had established online with their academic mentors (Halton et al. 2023).

> "The process of doing is just as important as the process of learning, which is why [this] is such an enriching experience for students" (Halton et al. 2023, p. 79).

> "The best part is working collaboratively" (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para 20).

Students brought their experiences and learning forward into their professional practice. This impact is exemplified by one student who said:

> "[I gained] a keen sense of my social work identity and renewed strength in my social work values and the unique insights the social work lens brings into the diverse settings in which social workers practice" (Lomas et al. 2022, p. 1154).

The online learning projects offered a different practice experience than in-person direct practice. These students have also benefited from working across transnational contexts and their reflections on the different values, cultures, and experiences this brings. As one student states:

> "I valued learning from others and developing my knowledge. . .I also enjoyed the cultural experience of working with students and academics from different backgrounds." (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para 21).

The students worked across time zones. They experienced independent reading and writing; co-writing contemporaneously and online between meetings; preparing and presenting online at international conferences; and using technology to record their contributions to the inquiry (Lawson et al. 2021; Pascoe et al. 2023b).

> "I had not had the opportunity to do collaborative research before and I learned a lot about myself and how I work as part of a group. . . . I learned skills from this project that I wouldn't have had by doing research on my own. I felt more confident about doing research, as this experience made research accessible to students in a very non-intimidating way. . ." (Halton et al. 2023, p. 81).

4.3. Relational Engagement Transnationally

One of the biggest challenges for student participants was gaining the courage to lead their learning and work with academics as equals. At times, it seemed natural for students to take a back seat during research discussions when academics were present. However, valuing the student's voice was central to university staff who created safety and supported students' confidence (Halton et al. 2023).

> "It's a really safe space because it's embedded. I wonder about hidden power dynamics in other research models?" (Lomas et al. 2022, p. 1155).

The research methodology applied was a departure from anything the students had engaged with previously. The Irish student participants were physically on placement in both inquiry projects in contrast to their Australian colleagues. Participation provided students with additional learning experiences engaging in research, the opportunity to interact with peers, university staff, social work agencies, and people using services of various ages, nationalities, backgrounds, and cultures. Students regularly discussed their different experiences, understandings, language, and terminology. For example, the definitions of rural in each country differed. The application of technology created an online space for students to gather and express their ideas and experiences in a way unique to their group, regardless of their backgrounds. Used to smaller tutorial groups, the inquiry research projects comprised larger participant numbers than they were used to. The benefit of this was that each member brought a unique set of skills and knowledge to the project. Students had a highly collaborative experience as reflected in the following comment:

> "I really like the continual journey of it. . .when I think of what we have achieved collectively I was really proud of everyone" (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para 19).

Students reported the impact of their experience as increased self-reliance, confidence, and autonomy:

> ". . .before this my confidence would have been low, but after. . .my confidence is high" (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para 17).

4.4. Confidence to Drive Processes

For students, finding their confidence took weeks because, initially, they considered themselves students rather than students and researchers. The academics on the team encouraged students to safely step out of their comfort zones, encouraging them to broaden their concept of what a student is and can be. Students were co-collaborators during the research process and over time they came to understand that their voice was considered significant and deserving of emphasis. These were student-led inquiry projects, and the focus remained on prioritising the student participants' voices as they collaborated as a team (Halton et al. 2023). For students based in the USA, their professional development, creativity, and ability to work independently was promoted through online engagement. One student stated they "*had to get on with it*", (Short et al. 2023, p. 1157) resulting in feeling increased assurance to work more independently, trust themselves, and in doing so increased their confidence. They became more proficient in IT, person-centred practice, creative solutions, communication, and research and reported they became more aware of the social work "process" due to their online placement experiences.

4.5. Benefiting by Bridging Gaps in Knowledge and Communication

The online placement inquiry projects provided opportunities for students to develop practice skills. Students were required to establish effective communication and relationships across transnational contexts, using technology, and they needed to be highly organised to achieve this. The inquiry projects aligned with social work values, with respectful and participatory engagements, which maintained individual dignity in the research. Co-operative inquiry, as a collaborative and co-designed research approach, works well within placement education research (Rose et al. 2024). In contrast, placements within the USA involved a consultation needs assessment and programme delivery skills to support student learning.

The co-operative inquiry projects like the USA examples involved the development of interpersonal skills and extended students' learning through teamwork, peer feedback, and support, with students leading elements of the projects. Students developed their online group work skills by rotating meeting facilitation. One student indicated the following about their development of leadership and teamwork skills:

> "When people form into a team together there [are] better outcomes. I really like the continual journey of it. . .When I think of what we have achieved collectively I was really proud of everyone" (Pascoe et al. 2023a, para 19).

5. Discussion

This article has reflected on two examples of technology applied to online cross-institutional research and transnational placements, which have cultivated student research and professional skills. Universities used technology in response to the pandemic to ensure that online learning could continue for academic and placement purposes. In their publications and online conference presentations, students shared the impact of how their application of technology supported the development of their research and practice skills, while simultaneously responding to the ongoing need for social work to become more sustainable in teaching, learning, research, and practice (Doyle et al. 2023; IFSW 2022; Lomas et al. 2022; McLaughlin et al. 2024; UCC 2024).

Before the pandemic, online teaching was an emerging practice norm in many universities, especially in Australia. Here, the blended delivery of in-person and online teaching has become a regular feature in higher education. This pre-existing online methodology and content, with modifications to assessments and online skill training, meant COVID-19 became a catalyst for a shift to online teaching. In other international jurisdictions, including Ireland, online teaching within university and placement settings was new. Rapid change processes were engaged at the micro- and meso-system levels including staff training, concerns with students' internet accessibility, and device access (McFadden et al. 2020).

While there were challenges for institutions in Australia and Ireland, the use of technology allowed students to engage transnationally. To be outward-looking in their engagement within the context of a society subject to social distancing when working and studying from home was mandated. The application of technology enabled and supported their online relationship-based practice (O'Brien et al. 2023) and promoted their engagement with social work transnationally, further expanding their learning experiences from beyond the limits of their physical location and contexts (Rose et al. 2024; Halton et al. 2023).

In the first student-led inquiry project, the students demonstrated that participating in a distance-learning, research-based placement was a successful and transforming professional learning experience (Lomas et al. 2022). They shared how flexible and online research placements provided the opportunity to gain greater awareness of social work values and increase their understanding of how research can strengthen social work practice. For Ireland, a country without a tradition of online teaching and research, the abrupt ending of fieldwork placements at the outset of the pandemic is cited as contrasting with social work values (McFadden et al. 2020). The formation of a professional identity and the acquisition of skills that adapt to the constantly changing nature of social work in contemporary contexts was made possible by student participation. The benefit of online supervision is the elimination of travel time providing increased flexibility. This enabled students to attend more often and in creative formats thus enriching their supervision experiences. Students felt they were adequately encouraged to reflect on their placement learning experiences. This improved their placement learning and allowed theory to be applied in real-world settings (Lomas et al. 2022).

In the second student-led inquiry project, the students came away with a more comprehensive, in-depth, and global understanding of what it means to live and work in a rural setting. To connect with the issues, using the resources and capacities of communities and establishing connections with locals can contribute to generating successful outcomes. These skills, including online engagement, can help support the sustainability of rural communities (McLaughlin et al. 2024).

In the third inquiry project, students identified gaps in social work education curricula regarding training social workers to work in rural areas, within disaster management. The students' findings resulted in their recommendation that disaster management curricula be added to courses in all jurisdictions so that adequate skills could be developed, social work

principles could be upheld, and communities could be successfully supported. This aligns with the focus on ethics, virtues, principles, and values in social work degrees, which are embedded in international professional standards (Doyle et al. 2023). The social work value base of social justice, inclusion, and diversity is supported by the methodologies applied, and the testimonials of students have demonstrated the importance of the enactment of these values in assisting with sustained online engagement with the process.

The second example, two online placements in a community-based agency in the USA where students remained physically located in Ireland, also evidences the successful and worthwhile placement experiences. Regular online communication between the parties was a crucial indicator of quality, guaranteeing the integrity of the placements, their compliance with regulation and university requirements, and consideration for the educational needs of the students. These aligned with accomplishing the best outcomes for people and families working with the students online during their placements. In considering the placement examples, the ways in which they met the markers of quality learning are identified by Short et al. (2023), and how this was achieved is outlined in Figure 2.

Markers of Quality Learning (Ireland)
• Student supports [training] and resources [laptop] provided. • Regular [online] communication between stakeholders, standards, IT Skills developed. • [Online] pre-placement preparation provided. • [Online] peer group supervision delivered. • Strengths-based practice to overcome challenges developed. • [Skills development included students becoming more] self-directed, independent, creative, [and] innovative [in their practice and learned to effectively] manage their workload

Figure 2. Markers of quality learning in USA placement (adapted from (Short et al. 2023, p. 1540)).

5.1. Practice and Professional Skills

It is the social worker's job to establish and uphold boundaries. Therefore, when interacting with people, students must define and communicate these professional limits. Increasingly, online resources and technology are being used by social workers to guide their work. The implication is that students need to understand the advantages and possible drawbacks of utilising technological advancements, such as telehealth services and the use of app-based video conferencing tools to connect with social work services, which are becoming more popular (Zuchowski et al. 2017). Providing online opportunities for students to use reflective practice to further deepen their critical inquiry skills and apply these to qualitative research methods provided them with an impactful, transformative experiential learning experience. The application of experiential research skills on placement was a new development and expanded our understanding of how placement learning can be enhanced and become more meaningful through relationships forged online. This allowed students to overcome time and geographical distances while developing required practice skills.

Adding to these practice skills, students had direct experience in working across cultures, drawing on different perspectives and experiences and on the different practice settings of each country. In addition to the development of core communication skills, another core social work area is the broader knowledge of global issues and how they impact different demographic groups. The student inquiry projects aided this learning in several ways: first, through the dialogue that took place within a context of safety; and second, through building confidence in online transnational practice forums with other students and academics. Students were able to build their confidence by using technology

as a tool for practice. The guiding concepts of the methodology applied (co-operative inquiry) are equality, participation, cooperation, and social justice.

The innovative USA placement examples in this article required the student participants to use their initiative, and this aided in their professional skills development. Increased student anxiety at the outset about meeting regulatory requirements for practice was offset later in their experience when they understood that part of their learning process is to practice applying the skills and competencies necessary to respond reflexively to new and challenging situations. Informal learning opportunities, however, relating to agency culture could not be fully replicated online as students could not be physically present onsite. To address potential isolation, technology was used to promote their engagement online with their peers. This required additional effort to develop and hone their communication skills; however, this in turn did increase their online engagement and communication competency.

To help us understand how the benefits came to be, it is useful to review the supporting elements for and implications of their high-quality online learning. The agency provided the learning opportunities, supervision, and technology, and the university provided preplacement preparation, training in using technology, and guidance to ensure regulatory standards for the university and profession were adhered to throughout. The academic mentors applied theoretical underpinnings collectively, promoting democratic learning and helping students to develop deeper critical inquiry and to improve their research writing, dissemination, and presenting skills before they entered professional practice. The practice teacher's approach to teaching and evaluation was embedded in weekly formal online supervision supplemented with online peer supervision. The group setting provided opportunities for trust-building and peer learning while improving students' communication skills. Students reported that receiving feedback from their peers helped them to generate ideas and see things from a different angle. Their communication skills were further developed, as they had to explain what they were doing. Positive professional relationships between the university and the placement agency supported positive outcomes informed by a strengths-based approach (Short et al. 2023).

5.2. Teaching Ethical Research Skills

Social work research is required to uphold ethical standards that place a high value on respect for individuals, social justice, and professional integrity (IFSW 2020; IASW 2023; AASW 2020; SWRB 2019). The research methodology applied to the first example, in line with social work values, is respectful and participatory, and maintains the individual dignity of each participant in the research. Co-operative inquiry is an example of a collaborative research approach appropriate for field education research. According to the International Federation of Social Workers' Global Definition of Social Work, the foundation of values in higher education is a shared responsibility for everyone's human rights (IFSW 2020). The academic staff and practice teachers had to make significant adaptations to develop and support these unique technology-enabled online inquiry projects that differed significantly from traditional placements. An element of this was ensuring that educational and professional requirements in each country were met, providing students with appropriate practice learning. Flexibility, problem-solving, and adaptation of processes were required throughout, with regular communication between international partners critical to this process. Promoting teaching and learning scholarship that maintains equitable power distribution was necessary throughout the research process. The transnational student-led project design can be improved upon and reproduced to assist change in how practice research and teaching are conducted in social work education on placement (McLaughlin et al. 2023; Rose et al. 2024).

In the second example, a student participant demonstrated person-centred interventions online while also gaining an understanding of the "process" of social work by applying and developing their research skills (Short et al. 2023). While this example adheres to a more traditional research approach, the co-operative inquiry examples

demonstrate that qualitative research can be undertaken online when the process is underpinned by values, power equalisation, relational engagement, and trust congruent with the student experience.

5.3. Transnational Awareness and Cross-Cultural Understanding

Through the group processes, the students broadened their transnational awareness and cross-cultural understanding. Rather than this being achieved through teachers educating students, it was experienced and achieved through the dialogue that took place between students. Online dialogue provided the space for students to compare the different contexts between Ireland and Australia and the USA: for example, through comparing the definitions and terms that have been adopted by the different countries; also, by sharing their lived experiences of the different contexts. The strengthening of relationships is a valuable outcome because it provides the basis for the further development of working relationships in the future. From a professional perspective, this is an important part of information sharing and professional development.

5.4. Sustainable Education and Research

The United Nations General Assembly voted in 2015 on a resolution to establish 17 sustainable development goals (United Nations 2015). To help achieve these objectives, the concept of sustainable citizenship has been integrated into university strategic goals (UCC 2024). Universities committed to sustainability principles can achieve broad objectives related to sustainable practices in teaching, learning, and research by using technology, as demonstrated by our examples. The university's values of leadership, excellence, accountability, collaboration, integrity, innovation, and diversity are reflected in our examples, which demonstrate how to incorporate sustainability goals and targets into research, education (particularly placement learning), and community interactions to promote a sustainable citizenship culture. Our examples also evidence how newly qualified social workers can bring sustainable research methods experienced and learned on placement into practice contributing to the advancement of eco-social work practice (IFSW 2022).

6. Recommendations

We suggest educators note the changing global circumstances and engage with technology-enhanced innovative teaching and learning practices, such as those outlined in this article, both in the university and the placement setting. Further, we recommend that educators develop their understanding and application of learning and teaching practices to reflect the needs of contemporary society and social work practice which includes increasing delivery of services online.

7. Conclusions

The examples outlined above represent the progressive learning for all participants engaged with online placements and research. The examples demonstrate how social work practitioners and educators responded reflexively to the challenges that COVID-19 presented for social work education and placement continuation and development and continued to use and expand these approaches underpinned by theories promoting reflective relationship practice and social learning. The examples bridge the boundary between higher education research and placement in online environments.

This article asked the following: How can technology-enabled, sustainable, transnational collaborations support the attainment of research and professional skills by social work students on placement? In addressing the research question, we noted that when operating in an online environment, the value of learning progressively and in collaboration with others cannot be underestimated. The three inquiry projects from example 1, which involved different student and academic participants, were successful because of the significant contribution that all participants made to the ongoing development, progression,

and sustainability of the projects, including the organisations supporting the projects with the necessary infrastructure, technology, and funding.

Co-operative inquiry provided the foundational value base for the construction of these projects. Participants engaged voluntarily, and this was an important contributory factor in their motivation to engage and sustain their involvement over time. The establishment of democratic, participatory, and reflective group cultures of openness, trust-building, and acceptance was modelled and mentored in the first instance by the academic participants. This has been identified as essential to the impact and ongoing continuity of participation and to the sustainability of open, inclusive dialogue in the groups throughout the inquiry projects.

The co-design approach of the projects sought to encourage participation through comprehensive engagement with students as active co-researchers and co-participants throughout the research process. Technology is essential to this engagement to overcome geographical barriers and international time zones. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the necessity of adopting technology swiftly in Ireland, developing new skills, and placing academics delivering social work education in the role of "learners" simultaneously (O'Brien et al. 2023; McFadden et al. 2020). Therefore, those who provide education and those who receive it were impacted by the changes. The use of online platforms for communication and writing collaboration that is both synchronous and asynchronous promotes participation and reflection during the process as students manage their education and the personal and professional demands of placement. The use of technology did not affect the quality of the learning experience (Short et al. 2023). The students' experiences suggest they can successfully satisfy the learning outcomes and practice standards mandated by professional bodies while participating in online placements with research-based assignments (Lomas et al. 2022).

Students developed a range of practice skills including communication and interpersonal skills, collaboration, teamwork, group work, and organisational skills consistent with international social work standards (IFSW 2020). They benefited from the transnational experiences enabled by online technology, in developing skills in collaborating with people from diverse backgrounds, adapting to the varied experiences of people from other countries and cultures, and developing a broader understanding of social issues and social justice in the context of online forums. These experiences have an impact beyond the placements as they are important preparation for newly emerging professional social workers working within sustainable citizenship contexts, with a society increasingly impacted by climate change.

The application of accessible technology to advance more innovative and varied student learning and placement experiences is essential (Halton et al. 2023). As shown in this article, the implication of using technology this way is that the transnational reach of social work education becomes possible. Although it has been easier to access technology in recent years, the challenge is to maximise its potential for improving educational and learning outcomes to improve the experiences of people and communities engaged with social work services.

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