Social Work Education in Qatar: Status and Future Prospects

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

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ABSTRACT

The Social Work Program in Qatar University is one of three programs, together with the Sociology and Psychology programs, in the Department of Social Sciences, which is part of the College of Arts and Sciences. Due to the lack of evidence on the current program efficiency, quality, and the criteria of reflecting the needs of Qatari society, this study aims to present the current status of the Social Work Program with reference to meeting the needs of Qatari society and future prospects. Structured individual interviews and focus group discussions are employed to address the research problem. The learning outcomes and the syllabi of the courses are qualified to meet the requirements of the Social Work Program in Qatar University; however, the need for improved research courses and topics are highlighted, which will promote students' engagement in research activities to address the needs of Qatari society. The results indicated that improvement in the program's physical environment (i.e., classrooms, offices) would help facilitate the quality of the courses and communication among students and faculty members. The findings of this study will inform the social work program future enhancement plan, and will improve on its local presence and in achieving international accreditation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social work as a profession and academic discipline seeks to help individuals, families, groups, and communities to increase their individual and collective well-being such as developing their skills and their ability to use their sources and those of the community to resolve problems. According to the International Federation of Social Workers' (2014) global definition.

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing [1]. The role of social workers, therefore, is highlighted as a crucial factor to achieve the objectives mentioned above. According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers [2], "[i]n a socio-political-economic context which increasingly generates insecurity and social tensions, social workers play an important and essential role" .

In that respect, social work education as an academic discipline has carried increasingly significant weight in order to equip social workers with core values that are defined by the USA's National Association of Social Workers [3] as "service, social justice, dignity, and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence''. Correspondingly, in the USA, the Council on Social Work Education [4], which is a well-known national organization, stated that "social work education—at the baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels—shapes the profession's future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community".

To begin, Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) states of any social work program mission and goals that address the profession's purpose are to be (a) grounded in core professional values and (b) informed by context, and that the explicit curriculum constitutes the program's formal educational structure and includes the courses and the curriculum. Regarding the implicit curriculum,

EPAS (2012) says "it is composed of the following elements: the program's commitment to diversity; admissions policies and procedures; advisement, retention, and termination policies; student participation in governance; faculty; administrative structure; and resources"[5]. Finally, to evaluate the extent to which the competencies have been met, a system of assessment is central to this model of education: "data from assessment continuously inform and promote change in the explicit and implicit curriculum to enhance attainment of program competencies" [5].

This paper supports the global efforts in examining the role local experience plays in social work education in its search toward international accreditation and recognition. In recent decades, many countries have experienced significant socio-economic development coupled with environmental changes. These changes come with many pressures and challenges to local settings. Local and traditional mechanisms proved to be insufficient to respond to the accelerated challenges. Thus, professional responses were called for to tackle the challenges. It is customary to evaluate social work programs using accreditation frameworks and quality assurance procedures designed for Western programs [6]. According to Moorhead et al. (2013). "In recent decades, the international/global context has been identified as an important level to integrate into social work theory, practice and curricula. This process of internationalization recognizes the interconnected world we share and experience, including social problems" [7]. Many academic institutions modelled their social work schools along Western guidelines, mainly the USA and Canada. These developments have paved the way for research on the experience of social work education in specific countries [6,8,9].

1.1 Literature Review

Reviewing the literature indicates that, despite the importance given to social work education, it is quite challenging. For example, Flexner [9] stated that lack of specificity in the aim of social work is affect training social workers as "occupations of social workers are so numerous and diverse that no compact, purposefully organized educational discipline in feasible".

Apart from the curriculum elements mentioned above, social work education is an arena that

has to be responsive to the needs of the changing circumstances in society. New socioeconomic conditions, cultural changes, and more importantly globalization have pushed social work education to adopt new adjustments in the curricula in some countries [10]. To enhance environmental issues in social work education, Miller and Hayward [11] argued that it is crucial to develop an interdisciplinary approach to other fields and to cooperate with other educators who have knowledge of the environmental sciences. Environmental issues, for instance, have gained importance in recent years in the field of social work as they play a significant role in the wellbeing of people and societies. Therefore, as environmental and ecological disasters prevail, many scholars mention including an environmental dimension to the social work curriculum and practice [12-17]. Ring [1] argued that the curriculum design in social work education in England should go beyond merely training students and should equip them with the ability to think critically: delivering such a curriculum is an educational enterprise: it goes beyond training students to exercise a range of capabilities. It also involves preparing them to do so according to an understanding of the core and enduring purposes of the social work profession, an allegiance to its central values, and an appreciation of the local and global context of practice, which only education can provide.

Nevertheless, one of the most significant challenges in preparing a social work education curriculum that is fully in line with the international standards and values of social work is faced in multicultural, multireligious, and multiethnic societies. The different understanding of social work and its core values across countries with different cultures (i.e., Eastern traditional cultures put more emphasis on the collective goals rather than the individual) hardens to embody a universal social work education around the world. Given the difficulty in achieving a global social work consensus with regard to having universal values, Gray and Fook [18] argued that attaining an international orientation in social work without necessarily embracing universal standards can be quite beneficial as it "can serve political ends in raising standards and expectations of good service, especially in countries less inclined to value social services".

Another challenge in social work education is the enhancement of social workers' commitment to their work. Given its importance, work commitment has emerged as an important research field in social work because of its effect on retention [19] and job performance [20]. Recently, Clements, Kinman, and Guppy (2012) found that relationships with practice educators, poorly motivated peers, and the demands of the course are the main challenges that social work students find in enhancing their commitment [21].

Regarding social work research, Howard and Garland [22] showed the challenges in that field and noted that, despite the significant improvement in social work research from 1984 to 2014, identity crisis in social work as a scientific field poses great difficulty for research. In their forecast for the next 30-year period, they added: apart from our identity conflict, social work research simply needs to be improved. Non-empirical and methodologically weak studies are far too prevalent in our scholarly literature, whereas we have far too few studies that use systematic review and meta-analytic methods, fully randomized and quasi-experimental designs, longitudinal follow-ups, and other rigorous research designs, including well-conceived and well-conducted qualitative studies. In conjunction with improved research methods, we need to double or triple the number of social work researchers by 2044; achieving this goal will require stable research funding, which should be one of our top priorities.

1.2 Social Work Program at Qatar University

Qatar University is the only social work training Institution in Qatar. The Social Work Program (SWP) at Qatar University is under the Department of Social Sciences, together with the Sociology and Psychology programs, in the College of Arts and Sciences. To earn a major degree in the SWP, students are required to complete a minimum of 120 credit hours with the following minimums: 33 credit hours in Core Curriculum Requirements, 54 credit hours in Major Requirements, 18 credit hours in Major Supporting Requirements, 9 credit hours in Major Electives, and 6 credit hours in Free Electives. The SWP's Study Plan 2014 envisages that "students must complete a minimum of 6 credit hours in University Free Electives from courses outside the Social Work major" [23]. Given the curriculum and the requirements, the SWP aims at preparing students to "develop an overview of social work as a profession historically, globally, and culturally, introduce a perspective on social

work theoretical frameworks, provide perspective in social work on core values, social justice and ethics and develop a perspective on basic professional skills in social work" [24].

The SWP puts great emphasis on the Qatari culture and the needs of Qatari society. In the program's objectives, it is stated as the "knowledge-base, skills, and values necessary for entry-level generalist social work practice will be taught in an environment that fosters sensitivity and integration of Qatari culture, professional ethics and values" [23]. Moreover, "as part of Qatar University's mission to contribute to the development of Qatar and Qatari citizens' well-being, the Bachelor of Social Work Program prepares graduates for entry-level social work practice entrenching them in social work knowledge, research techniques, skills, and values". The program also claims that the content, objectives, and teaching methods are in line with international standards and norms in the social work field such as those stipulated by NASW and CSWE in the United States. The social work program in Qatar in its recent revival was modelled along the US social work schools. The Program is making every effort to attain international accreditation and recognition. Thus, presenting the local experience is beneficial to both local and international social work educators.

Because of a lack of evidence, the efficiency, quality, and the criteria reflecting the needs of Qatari society of the SWP at Qatar University are not known. This study aims to present the current status of the Social Work Program with reference to meeting the needs of Qatari society and future prospects.

1.3 Purpose Statement

In the analysis of the status of social work education in Qatar, I found the following gaps: (a) students are pressured by having field education/practicum in only one Semester. They are also to take two courses with field education. This is done afternoon. This situation creates difficulties for students in keeping up with the demands of field training and courses. Therefore, we propose to have field practice in two consecutive semesters in three days sequence. This will provide students with the opportunity to fulfil the requirements with relaxed time that permits proper education, (b) the second gap that was found relates to the content of the curriculum. Important issues of concern to social

work education were missing from the curriculum. Some of these are program evaluation, social protection, social work with disability and rehabilitation, to name but a few. Thus, we proposed to add several courses to bridge this gap and (c) the third major gap related to faculty qualifications. Large number of the faculty members were graduated from universities that divide social work into dichotomous areas such as individual, groups and community. This creates a fragmented conception of the social work profession. Accordingly, students may not receive proper education and guidance from their instructors. We propose more professional training to faculty members and further to involve them in interaction with colleagues of modern thinking in social work.

As shown by the literature review, social work education in Qatar lacks scientific scrutiny and rigorous studies. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explore the current status of the Social Work Program in Qatar University. The study also aims at eliciting the opinions of the SWP academic staff (i.e., faculty members) and students. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the current status of social work education in Qatar University?
2. What do academic staff and students think about the Social Work Program in Qatar University and its future prospects

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This is an explorative study that describes the current status of the SWP. In this context, qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse relevant data. Structured individual interviews and focus group discussions with faculty members and students were conducted consecutively. Five key concepts described below, were explored to understand the structure and function of the social work program at Qatar University, this study uses qualitative methodology.

2.2 Subjects

The study subjects were recruited from the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University. All faculty members took part in this study. In this study, 10 university faculty

members responded to a series of questions assessing their opinions on the status of the social work program and the extent to which the program complies with international standards.

2.3 Measurement

The questions for the interviews cover major issues to gauge the social work quality and accreditation standards. For example, issues such as program compliance with international accreditation standards, research, community linkages, interaction with students, communication among faculty members, quality of curriculum, syllabi and course material, job opportunities for students and the challenges facing the social work program.

2.4 Focus Group Discussion

The study utilizes focus group discussions with ten senior female[1] students in the social work program. Students' participation in the focus groups was optional and that they can withdraw at any time, and were encouraged to express their views freely and openly. Identical questions used in the interviews were used in the focus groups discussion with some modifications.

The content of the discussion was recorded instantly by one senior teaching assistant who is fluent in both Arabic and English. Later on, the content was reviewed and organized according to the major themes of the paper.

3. DATA COLLECTION

The first type of interview questions was sent through e-mail on 2015-28-04 to the 10 academic staff who had agreed to participate in the study; their responses were received through e-mail in Arabic and translated into English. The 10 SWP students met in the SWP office and were asked the related questions. The language of the conversation was Arabic; the notes taken in the interview were in Arabic and were translated into English for the analysis.

3.1 Data Analysis and Themes

This study is a directed content analysis using both interviews and focus group discussion.

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[1] *All of the students were female that is because the program was opened only for female, and just recently, sections for male students were opened. However, male students in general prefer to either study abroad or select other majors, or work early at various government agencies. Currently only five male students are enrolled at the social work program.*

In this analysis subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identify in themes or patterns.

3.2 Themes

3.2.1 Social work program

This concept refers to the undergraduate degree that is taught in the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University. The SWP aims at equipping the students to be critical thinking social workers along with claiming that "the knowledge-base, skills, and values necessary for entry-level generalist social work practice will be taught in an environment that fosters sensitivity and integration of Qatari culture, professional ethics, and values [24].

3.2.2 Structure and content of the SWP

This concept includes the availability of reading material, the means/methods of teaching and use of technology, the clarity and relevance of the syllabus to the courses taught in the program, the relationship of assignments to the outcomes of the course, class sizes, timing, environment and design, and the privacy setting.

3.2.3 Quality of the SWP

This concept refers to the program's adherence to international standards, the quality of the academic staff's research, and the quality of the students' research.

3.2.4 Professional communication in the SWP

This concept refers to the communication status/channels between the academic staff and the students in the program.

3.2.5 Program administration

This concept refers to the situation of the program affiliation (its academic home in the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University) and inter-program communication.

3.2.6 Sampling and procedures

To address the objectives of the study, a non-probability sampling method was used. Purposive sampling was used to reach the study's population, which was both the academic staff in the SWP at Qatar University and the

students enrolled in that program. First, all academic staff members were sent e-mails in which they were informed briefly about the research and asked for their permission to conduct interviews with them through e-mail. Ten faculty members responded and formed the sample for this study. Second, ten senior students (all female because only female students are allowed to enter the program) were selected and asked by e-mail to participate in the study. The senior students were targeted for this research as they have more experience and knowledge in the SWP. Students were allowed to interact with each other during their group interview.

Two different drafts (one for the academic staff and one for the students) of the interview questions were prepared in English and then translated into Arabic. Questions for the academic staff started with a grand tour question, such as What is your general view/assessment about the Social Work Program at Qatar University? The next questions focused on the quality of the SWP, such as Does the program adhere to the international standards? What are the positive and negative aspects of conducting research in the program? How would they evaluate the research facilities provided for the students? In the last part, the current status of professional communication of the SWP was highlighted: How was academic staff–student communication conducted in the program? Are the current channels adequate to establish efficient communications among academic staff–student relations? What can be done to increase the effectiveness of the academic staff–student relations?

The second draft for the interview questions targeted the focus group of selected students. The first part of the questions was devoted to the students' opinions about the content of the SWP, the second part focused on the students' thoughts about the SWP administration, and the final part on the community engagement in the SWP. The prepared questions for the interviews were discussed and reviewed prior to conducting interviews.

4. FINDINGS

What follows is a brief exposition of both the in-depth interviews with academic staff members and the focus group discussion with students. Presentation of the findings is tailored on the basis of the major issues of concern relevant to the purpose of the study.

4.1 Focus Group Discussion with Students

On April 1, 2015, a focus group meeting was conducted in the Department of Social Sciences Conference Room from 12:00 PM to 1:45 PM with ten 4th-year students currently enrolled in the SWP. The author and his assistants facilitated the focus group. There were seven points discussed during this focus group session, and the main points taken from these discussions are described below.

4.2 Interaction between Faculty and Students

The students stated overwhelmingly "most of our professors ensure they are available to meet and are open to discussing matters in class." However, other students commented that there are still some professors who "are not open to any challenging points posed by students." All the students stated that the primary involvement of the faculty and students was strictly academic. Most of the students agreed that they found the Social Work faculty to be excellent in reviewing subject matters with students and that students from other specializations spoke highly of the Social Work professors.

However, they felt there were barriers to discussing any personal and non-academic matters because many professors share offices and privacy cannot be ensured. A student said, "How can we feel comfortable to discuss any personal concerns and there are so many people around?" The students emphatically stated that, with the current office arrangement of 4 to 6 faculty members sharing a room, they felt they could not comfortably communicate any personal matter.

The students indicated that there are few social events in which faculty and students are involved together. The students unanimously responded that they felt that faculty actively engaged with students and would go out of their way in providing students guidance. One student stated, "All of our professors complement one another."

4.3 Student Participation in Research

The students offered some insights in their discussion on research. One student spoke positively about the opportunities provided by

faculty for students: "I've participated in two research projects with Dr. X." Other students, however, stated that the "research courses were not enough" in promoting student participation in research projects. Still, others commented that the greatest barrier for them was that, while there were opportunities to participate in international conferences, these conferences required English proficiency. She complained that as the SWP is taught in Arabic social work students were at an automatic disadvantage in being considered for these kinds of international conferences. Other students noted that the Department administration did not share information with social work students about the various research projects and conferences, and that they did not receive emails about such opportunities. Other students complained, "Professors do not have time to meet with us, as they are overwhelmed with teaching and other things." Many students echoed the concern for the lack of lecture rooms and the time for classes. One student said that with "there only being a few hours a week that a professor can meet with us and our classes being scheduled in such a way that we are busy throughout the day … until late afternoon … how can we meet with our professors!"

4.4 Engagement of Students with Community Agencies and Organizations

This topic brought forth a great deal of discussion. All of the students stated that most schools and agencies were unaware of the SWP and/or were not familiar with the social work profession. One student stated that, while students from the pharmacy program or the engineering program were received positively by agencies and given the opportunity to work upon completion of their field placement, no such reception was extended to social work students. Another student said, "They (schools/agencies) seem not to hold such high regard for our program." One suggestion put forth was "a conference be held in where students and faculty invite agencies and schools so that they know about our program." Also, one student suggested "there should be a formal agreement between the Social Work Program and agencies that promote students being sponsored and ideally hired upon completion of the field practicum hours." Another student stressed the need "for schools and agencies to recruit actively social work graduates; they can do this by visiting us at university."

4.5 Relevance and Availability of Social Work Literature

All participants were unanimous in their view that there are very few academic references in Arabic available for students. Two students pointed out that in some classes students were asked to explain theories to the class as a group assignment; they stated that in their view this was not helpful.

4.6 Quality of Teaching and Course Requirements

Students stated that the course instructions were clear but said that some of the faculty teaching styles differed from others and that they would appreciate if there was consistency in how the same course is taught. Students said that the period of the course term was sufficient and the time for each lecture was appropriate.

All of the students asserted that the learning outcomes as defined in the syllabus were indeed being reflected in course material, assignments, and readings. However, students said that "class sizes are unacceptable too many students … over 50 … we should have a maximum of 35 students and the lecture rooms should be large enough to accommodate the numbers."

4.7 Employment Opportunities

The discussion around this topic focused on students articulating that they did not feel any reassurance that there was a transition from graduation to employment. One student stated, "we do not have sponsors except with Hamad Hospital … we have no job placement process, no recruitment, no alumni support." Further discussion focused on the desire to find employment in the SWP as research or teaching assistants. The students said that they knew that they could greatly benefit from being mentored by the professors while at the same time being able to develop their academic and research skills. Another student stated, "we would like to meet graduates from this program and know them … to know their experiences … to see where and if they found employment."

Most of the students identified government schools and the hospitals as the most likely place for employment upon graduation. However, it was noted that positions in the areas of human rights and law needed further promotion in the SWP for social work students to consider

employment in that field. Students discussed the need for the College of Arts and Sciences to be clear about their expectations for student employment opportunities and that it should also be promoted at the University level. The discussion explored the need to emphasize the employment needs of the SWP to precede the expectations of the College expectations.

4.8 Challenges Facing the Social Work Program

Many of the students identified that there were minimal social activities for them. Others added that social work activities (both social and academic) took place during class hours and, therefore, they were unable to attend. One student articulated that they felt that the Department administration was not informing them via email of announcements and events. Most students stated that the Social Work Club was inactive this year with next to no activities. Discussions focused on the need for greater communication between the Department administration and the social work students, with one student stating, "sometimes we receive an announcement of an event or activity one day before." Students suggested that perhaps a student selected by social work students could handle emailing announcements to all students. There was a lengthy discussion surround the need to emphasize visits to agencies as part of learning in social work courses. Students stated that this should be planned and coordinated by faculty, students, and agencies throughout the year. Other suggestions included having the field practicum provided for two terms, which would provide more opportunities to experience different placements.

Students voiced their dismay at the fact that there was no student budget or student 'purse' supplied by the Department in order that they could coordinate social events such as a graduation party or Qatar National Day celebration. They cited other programs in the University that provided their students with a monetary budget in where they could use funds to coordinate social events within their program. One student complained, "our program is in Arabic, and we are expected to take a Human Biology course that is taught in English … this is not fair" Another student commented, "I feel that the University administration does not respect social work students … we are not invited by them when we have social work students achieving Honors with Distinction." A student

also argued that "there are more barriers for Qatari students than non-Qatari students … non-Qataris are treated better than Qataris." As part of the discussion, some students suggested that additional teaching assistants be provided to faculty in order that the faculty has more time to meet with students. Another student stated the interests of faculty and students were not protected by the Department administration. One student stated that the primary concern she had was the decision making by Administration, and the Department did not protect the interests of the students.

4.9 Interviews with Faculty Members

The following information was ascertained from individual interviews conducted by the author in an interview room that ensured privacy and confidentiality. The following are the thoughts and opinions of faculty who were interviewed; their identities have been made anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

4.10 Program Adherence to International Standards

All of those interviewed stated that the SWP was meeting international standards that define the social work profession. One faculty member said that the SWP met the international standards "because the courses being taught, the syllabi being used, and the course descriptions are diverse and comprehensive." Another participant cited "faculty participation in community events, providing community consultation to different social service organizations, and also working with the different community stakeholders in addressing societal problems" as supporting evidence of the SWP meeting international standards for the social work profession.

4.11 Engaging in Diverse Research Projects and Studies

There were different responses to this question. One faculty member answered, "we do not have enough time to conduct research projects and studies as we are overwhelmed with the workload and commitment to tasks allotted to us in our university committees." Others stated that they felt that there was a need for research projects and studies that "reflect Qatari society" rather than continuing to use as is the case with present references that do not accurately depict the needs of Qatari society challenges and problems. Another member articulated, "research

projects and studies were needed to help define the needs of Qatari society." Another noted that it was vital for more current research studies to be undertaken in order that social work students in their research thesis project could choose from relevant topics that related to the social needs of Qatari society. Another participant stated, "there was a dire need for different research studies." Another concern noted was that the SWP "lacked vision for the program that outlined future planning and efforts in research and how the program could best serve the challenges facing Qatari society." In contrast, one participant cited that the faculty was involved in research projects and activities. More specifically, a participant noted that faculty in the program continue to attend local and international conferences and have put forth scientific papers, research projects and studies, and added, "through this participation and contribution, faculty have been able to identify and focus on understanding the challenges facing the social work profession." Another participant stated that social work students attended the National Conference on Undergraduate Research 2014 and 2015 and that this coordinated effort between the Department of Social Sciences, the Social Work Program, and the respective students serves in promoting research and the social work profession.

4.12 Interaction between Faculty and Students

One of those interviewed stated that there were excellent communications on both a formal and informal level between students and professors: "We have active relationships with our students in class and outside our classes where we can meet during our work hours. Our students are open and don't hesitate to talk to us." It was noted as well from many of the interviewees that they felt that students interacted openly and regularly with faculty in their field placements and that students and faculty worked closely together to host the 2015 International Social Work Day Symposium that was held on April 21. Another participant pointed out that students and faculty engaged with one another during seminars and conferences. While most of those interviewed reinforced this view, there were others who held a more critical perspective. One person noted that there was a need for improvement in the relationship between professors and students; more specifically, "there are too many students in our classes and the not enough space in our lecture halls … how can we communicate with

them." Others noted that many of the students were not full-time or that there were classes one after the other, and this did not allow enough time for students and professors to meet after class. The interactions between students and faculty "needed improvements to promote exchanging views and to curtail misunderstandings." A participant noted as well that there was to a certain extent "a lack of highly capable and qualified social work faculty in the Program and this adversely impacted the relationship between faculty and students— especially when the faculty lacks communication skills."

An important concern related to faculty-student interaction and communication is the lack of privacy. Nearly all the participants stated that there was no privacy between students and faculty. One participant questioned, "How can you have privacy with a student where there are four or five other faculty sharing the same office with you?" Another concern noted was that "students will not feel comfortable in speaking about personal matters or matters related to challenges faced in their field practicum or research projects if there is not a safe place for them to talk." A participant suggested that one office should be shared by at most two faculty and not more than this and that there should be a meeting room that could be used for students and faculty.

4.13 Interaction between Faculty Members in the Swp

Most of the faculty noted that there was positive engagement with one another. One participant stated, "faculty work closely with one another through their participation in academic committees, shared research projects, and through informal interactions during seminars and conferences." However, one participant noted that "we do not have enough social and informal activities that promote team building." Another commented, "With all of the responsibilities placed on us and seemingly endless tasks, we really do not have time to meet with others."

4.14 Communication with External Organizations

The majority of participants stated that the faculty was actively involved with external social service agencies. However, one participant said, "most of the external activities with social agencies

were initiated at an individual level and not one that was incorporated as a program strategy … we need to encourage a program strategy that promotes the faculty at large at becoming more involved with external organizations and agencies." Another concern was "students placed greater emphasis on their grades instead of academic learning." Still another concern was "students lacked the skills needed in applying theoretical approaches." Another participant noted "students were not open to academic and institutional guidance." Moreover, another concern noted was "there were no visits arranged for students to social service agencies."

4.15 Availability of Course Materials and Readings

Some of the participants felt that there was sufficient social work reading materials and references for students. One participant stated that, because students had access to online academic literature, they had sufficient reading materials. However, many of those interviewed voiced concerns in this regard. For example, a common concern mentioned was "there was not enough current social work research in Arabic and that most of the strongest social work research was in English." Other concerns noted were "we do not have a social work library in our social work program that would help faculty have access to the most contemporary academic materials." … "there we needed to have someone from the faculty to coordinate with the main library for the purpose of developing a specific section for social work literature that could be made available for social work students. The social work program has not provided a comprehensive list of requested reading material to the library." … "there was a lack of interest from faculty in developing and collecting the most current social work research literature." One participant stated that "there was a regression in the curriculum, as social work community models being used [at present] do not reflect the unique needs of Qatari society." In regard to the field placements, concerns noted included the lack of qualified social workers who take positions as social workers in social service agencies, the lack of qualified social workers who are able to provide field placement supervision, not being able to provide ample training and workshops for field placement supervisors, and the need to be selective in field placements that will meet the learning needs of the students."

4.16 Courses, Syllabi, and Course Structure

The majority of participants spoke very positively about the course learning outcomes and the course syllabi. However, a concern was "there is no ongoing review of the course syllabi and the curriculum." Another concern was "there is no continuous updating of the syllabi based on the most recent current social work research findings." For most participants, the learning outcomes and the course work corresponded positively with each other. One concern cited though was "some of the learning outcomes were unclear." Still other concerns included "the learning objectives emphasized the theoretical approaches more heavily than social work practice."

All the participants stated that the class lecture times of 50 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes were sufficient. There were concerns discussed that included one faculty stating "the academic term was too long." Another concern was that some of the classes have "50 or more students" and that this was too much. A participant suggested "class sizes should be limited to 25 to 30 students or perhaps a standard of 35 students could be considered."

4.17 Job Opportunities for Graduates

Nearly all the participants felt that there were many opportunities for social work graduates from the SWP. One participant stated that "each social service agency and organization is looking to hire social workers and what we have seen in most social service agencies is a lack of qualified social workers that explained this perception. Hence, our social work graduates are in a proper position." Another participant, however, stated, "further research has to be taken … perhaps a five-year longitudinal study that studied the job market for social workers and only then could would we be able to determine the demand for social workers."

4.18 Challenges Facing the SWP

The primary concern in the SWP that was cited in the interviews was "the social work program does not have a clear strategy for development and growth." The other issue was that there were too many students being accepted into the program without the sufficient number of faculty and lecture halls. "There is no ceiling or limit being set on the number of students being

accepted into the program!" stated one participant. Other individual comments included: "there are not enough desks at times in our classes." … "logistics of number of students in the program and how best to accommodate them should be a primary goal." … "there was a lack of teaching assistants for faculty." One participant said that the social work student club this year had no office space provided. Other concerns noted were that students were reluctant to participate in scientific research and professional development and that many students, as one participant stated, "lacked the ability to apply social work theories." One participant complained that the SWP lacked their scientific journal that could ideally function in providing the highest quality of research studies.

A concern that was echoed by many of the participants was that they felt that decisions related to the SWP were made "top-down" and not "bottom-up." A participant explained that "most decisions about this program are dictated from higher administration such as the Dean or the Head of Department" and added that "the Dean for example, after the winter term had begun, decided unilaterally that the field practicum was going to change and that each social work faculty had to take ten students …. We had no say … no preparation … no input." Another concern noted in the interview was that "the social work program does not promote research skills for the students." Furthermore, one participant said that "some of the courses share a great deal of overlapping material." Others pointed out that "very weak academic references were being used and most courses used various articles that were collected and that were typically no more than 70 pages."

5. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the current status of the Social Work Education Program in Qatar University from the perspectives of the students and academic staff to obtain information on how to improve social work education in Qatar to serve better the needs of Qatari society.

The responses of the students who participated in the focus group interview demonstrated different points that must be addressed to improve the SWP. The overall results of this study show that many of the students underlined there are certain limits on engaging in research such as inadequate research courses offered by the program, the

English language barriers they face in the international research projects, the indifference of the Department administration for informing students of the research projects, and the limited time devoted by academic staff for student development on the research areas. The complaints of these students have proven to some degree the study of Howard and Garland [22], who noted that non-empirical and methodologically weak studies were abundant in the social work research.

Apart from that, the challenges that are highlighted by these students are the following: the lack of enough physical facilities (i.e., office arrangements of the academic staff as 4-6 faculty sharing the same room) to ensure privacy in student-faculty interactions, limited recognition of social work as an academic field and as a profession in other community agencies and organizations, and communication problems between the Department administration and the social work students in Qatar University. The students also emphasized the need for visiting agencies as a learning process such as having a field practicum; such a design in the curriculum would help students to think critically [1]. While most of the students agreed that course instructions and learning outcomes are clear, crowded classes and limited literature on social work in Arabic are the main problems they face in their courses. On job opportunities, students highlighted the lack of a job placement process after graduation and alumni support in that regard.

All of the faculty members of the SWP who were interviewed agreed that the program meets the international standards as claimed by the program and that the content, objectives, and teaching methods are in line with the international standards and norms in the social work field (e.g., NASW and CSWE). On the research projects and studies, the faculty members highlighted there is a gap in research projects that accurately reflect Qatari society, its needs and challenges.

Regarding interactions among students and faculty members, there is a similarity with the students' concerns that there are too many students and very limited space to interact with each of them. A top-down decision-making structure and the unilateral acts taken by Department administration is another concern raised by the faculty members.

On the research skills of the students, interviewed faculty members said that, while the program does not promote the research skills of the students on the one hand, students also put more emphasis on their grades rather than engaging in research activities and developing their theoretical approaches. The limited course material in Arabic, as shared by the students, is another concern of the faculty members. While most of the faculty responded positively about the learning outcomes and the course syllabi, large class sizes and lack of privacy in communication among faculty members and students due to shared offices with many colleagues were highlighted as negative points that limit achieve learning outcomes entirely.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study shows that the Social Work Education Program in Qatar University could be improved in certain areas by adopting an international orientation along with the needs of the local society to increase "standards and expectations of good service, especially in countries less inclined to value social services" [18]. In light of the findings of this study, the SWP requires better administrative structure to facilitate the communication among students and other institutions related with to social work in Qatar with better informing measures. Furthermore, the Department can focus on improving the students' research skills with more methodology and English language courses so that they would engage in research projects nationally and internationally, which would help address the needs of the Qatari society.

To enhance the relations among students and faculty, physical conditions of the program can be improved. Reducing both class sizes and number of students would help the program to achieve course learning outcomes. It can also encourage the faculty members to focus on research that addresses the challenges and the needs of the Qatari society as it would alleviate the workload on them. Rearrangement of the office designs to reduce the number of faculty in a room may help ensure the privacy in student– faculty communication, which would eventually improve the quality of the program.

Finally, as the language of the instruction is Arabic in the SWP, the Department administration in collaboration with the faculty members can offer more resources for the students. Asking the Qatar University Library administration to provide wider social work sources in Arabic can be another option to help students in their research throughout their academic life in Qatar University.

7. LIMITATIONS

The size of the sample (10 students and 10 faculty members) prevents the generalization of the study's results; therefore, the findings remain specific to the participants of this study. Moreover, the interviewees are senior students in the Qatar University Social Work Program; therefore, students from other postsecondary levels and from other universities in Qatar are ignored due to the certain practical limitations. Another concern about the participants would be that the all of the female participants knew the researchers conducting the interview; therefore, they may have answered the questions with bias.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Social Sciences Committee overseeing research. Before conducting the interviews, respondents were orally presented an introductory statement clarifying the purpose of the study, affiliation of researchers, confidentiality of provided information, and respondents' willingness to participate or not in the study.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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