Social Work in the Asia Pacific Region in the 21st Century: Challenges, Opportunities and the Role for Social Work Education

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Abstract
The recent pandemic is an example of the major global challenges that impact locally and globally including war and conflicts, climate change, ecological damage, human and natural disasters, gender-based inequality and violence, poverty and inequality, and global movements of peoples. The Asia Pacific Region incorporates a vast geographic area of the world with a diverse range of countries at various stages of social and economic development, but all of which share the impacts of many of these global challenges. Social workers are a key workforce that can contribute to social development and work at the interface of the local with the global across the region. Drawing on literature, policy documents and observations some of the current challenges facing the development of the social work workforce in the region will be discussed as well as the opportunities for social work to contribute to social development and to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The critical role of social work education in developing the social work workforce to meet these global challenges is also discussed.

Keywords: *Asia Pacific, Social Work, Social Work Education*

Introduction

The Asian Pacific Region, which includes the ASEAN countries, is the most populated region of the world and includes a diverse range of countries with many different cultures and vast differences in levels of development (Chi et al., 2019). It is also a rapidly changing and developing region with great potential to meet the human needs of over half the world's population. Within this context, it is also a complex and interconnected region with many shared challenges including the impacts of global geopolitical tensions, global movements of peoples, global economic downturns as well as the impacts of climate change and associated disasters, the digital revolution and socio-economic factors such as poverty, inequality and food insecurity (UNDP, 2023).

Social work and social work education in Asia Pacific, in many respects, mirrors the diversity and complexity of the region. Some countries have a long history of social work while in others it is in its infancy and there are debates about the extent to which western models of social work are, or can be, localized or indigenized to meet the social development needs of local populations (Das et al., 2022). What is clear is that governments in the region are increasingly seeing the need to strengthen the role of social work and other social development related professionals if they are to address some of the key interconnected challenges facing the region such as climate change. For example, the ASEAN 'Roadmap' for strengthening social work in ASEAN countries notes that of the 169 targets underpinning the UN Sustainable Development Goals, ASEAN countries will need to have effective social services including a well-developed social work workforce to achieve 65% of these targets (ASEAN, 2021b). This paper firstly aims to examine the role of social work in the Asia Pacific region in the 21st century, given social work's focus on social development and the person in the environment and intervening with the individual, family, community and the broader society. Secondly, if social work is to play a key role in meeting the needs of people and communities, the paper aims to explore what role social work education can play in the preparing and developing the social work workforce.

Methodology

This paper explores some of the opportunities and challenges for social work and social work education in the context of the diverse and rapidly changing Asia Pacific Region. It is based on a critical review of relevant literature, policy reports and government and non-government organization reports. Further, general observations from the work of the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) as a peak body for social work education institutions in the region are incorporated

Result

Challenges facing the Asia and Pacific Region

There are many challenges facing the Asia Pacific region that are of critical importance to social work. The region includes over 60 % of the world's population (over 4.3 billion people) and includes two of the world's most populous nations (China and India) as well as some of the world's least populous nations in the Pacific Island Countries. Within this great variation in country populations there are some key demographic trends. Across the region the overall population is aging with estimates of the number of people aged 60 years and over likely to double by 2050 to 1.3 billion people presenting massive challenges for social and economic support of the elderly, many of whom will not have access to social protection or government provided assistance or pensions. Migration and forced movement of peoples is also significant across the region with over 40% of all migrants globally originating in Asia Pacific. At the same time, as countries develop economically there are increased movements within countries with many experiencing increasing urbanization. Through urbanization there are mass movements of people from rural to urban environments for socio-economic reasons along with resultant massive challenges for urban mega cities to support individuals and to develop sustainably (UNFPA Asia Pacific, undated).

Climate change and sustainability are also of critical importance for the region. As the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Asia Pacific argues, climate change is one of the most critical challenges facing the Asia Pacific Region with the wellbeing of millions of people at stake. The region is the most disaster prone in the world, with many people across the region living in low lying coastal areas highly susceptible to rising sea levels and flooding. Global warming is likely to lead to increasing heat waves, flooding, landslides and drought impacting many countries across the region and on average 43,000 people in Asia Pacific are killed by floods and landslides each year (UNDP Asia Pacific, 2019). In the ASEAN countries alone, in 2020 there were 405 disaster events impacting 19.3 million people with future predictions of more intense and damaging impacts of climate change such as heatwaves and stronger monsoons (ASEAN, 2021a).

Social work has traditionally had a focus on the "person in the environment" and as has been argued there is a need for social work to broaden notions of the environment from the family, cultural and community context of a person to the physical and geographical environment in which they live (Chi et al., 2019). In this construct, it is important for social workers to consider both the impact of the broader environment on people, and how people impact and shape the environment around them. For example, in Indonesia it has been suggested that community-based and community involved actions can be effective in strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Fatkhullah et al., 2023). Similarly, Simarmata et al. (2023) examine how destruction of coastal mangroves in Indonesia for income generation contribute to environmental degradation along with climate change which then impacts on the most vulnerable groups such as disadvantaged women. The seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals provide targets and a plan for addressing many of the key global challenges facing the Asia Pacific and social work as already noted has a key role to play in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Chi et al., 2019; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, undated). The UNDP notes the very substantial improvements in human, economic and social development that have taken place across the region over the last 3 decades. However, challenges remain with these improvements being unequally shared across societies with there still being substantial inequality in access to income and resources. In terms of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, it is estimated that none of the goals will be achieved in the Asia Pacific by the intended 2030 with a more realistic timeframe being achievement of all the goals by 2065 (UNDP, 2024).

Social Work in the Asia Pacific Region

While, as has been outlined in the previous section, global and regional challenges impact on the local context in individual countries, the development of social work and social work education also takes place within a broader regional and global context.

The Global Context

The current Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2020-2030) is the second Global Agenda developed through IFSW, IASSW, and ICSW. The annual themes for the Agenda since implementation include:

Theme 1 (2021): Ubuntu: Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness
Theme 2 (2022): Co-Building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind
Theme 3 (2023: Respecting diversity through joint social action
Theme 4 (2024): Buen Vivir: Shared Future for Transformative Change (IFSW, undated).

The Global Agenda is intended to bring a focal point for social work and social development globally within the context of a rapidly changing global situation and challenges that impact globally. It also aims to bring together social work, social development and social work education with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and to highlight the common issues and possible strategies for social work globally (Jones, 2024; Palattiyil et al., 2024).

In practice, the Global standards provide a touchpoint for social workers across countries and regions to articulate similarities and, just as importantly, differences. APASWE and IFSW- Asia Pacific undertook consultations with social workers and social work bodies across the region on the extent to which the Theme 1: Ubuntu: Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness on behalf of the Global Agenda Taskforce. There were many examples provided of how the principles of Ubuntu, while originating in Africa, could be applied to social work in the Asia Pacific particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where the importance of connections and working at both the global and local level were highlighted.

The Global Agenda potentially has many strengths in unifying social work direction in the context of a rapidly changing global context, but also presents challenges when applied at both the local and regional level. For example, it needs to be recognized that even the concept of a global agenda for social work is critiqued by some as promoting only Western models of social work often in the context of many countries having established social work as part of a history of colonization, which is particularly the case with many countries in the Asia Pacific. Furthermore, social work tends to be strongly influenced at a national level by governments and by social work models originating from Western models of social work which have then been 'localized' to country contexts. Despite some of these challenges the potential for the Global Agenda is to find the common points of social work and its potential to bring about change particularly in the context of complex global challenges that impact all countries and regions of the world (Jones, 2024).

The Asia Pacific Context

Like the great diversity of countries across the vast Asia Pacific, social work in the region has substantial diversity in its history, stage of development and status in different countries. For example, social work roles and associated social work training courses were established in countries such as Australia and India from the 1930s and 1940s, in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka from the 1950s and in countries such as Nepal and Vietnam from the 1990s, in nearly all cases as part of a colonization process (UNICEF, 2018). Recent rapid growth in social worker numbers in some countries in the region has also been a key feature, with for example, China having trained over one million people in social work in the decade from 2010 to 2020 (Höjer & Shardlow, 2022).

Thus, given these variations it is difficult to generalize about the status of social work across the region but there can be little doubt that many countries are seeing renewed focus on the development of social work- often in the context of increasing attention to social development and global challenges- and that in many contexts this is being driven by governments. A regional peak body for social work education such as APASWE, which has a role in connecting social work educators across the region, sees many commonalities but also key differences in social work practice and education in different parts of the region.

In some cases, a sub-regional approach to the development of social work has been adopted. For example, the ASEAN 'Roadmap for Strengthening Social Work' is an example of a sub-regional approach to developing social work across the ASEAN countries (ASEAN, 2021b). The 'Roadmap' was generated in response to the Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work Towards Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community made by ASEAN countries in 2020. The Ha Noi Declaration affirms the importance of social work in achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and social development generally and notes:

'*RECOGNISING- the critical role of social work in mitigating the impacts of economic and social crises, and risks and vulnerabilities on individuals, households and*

communities, mitigating risks and improving stability and the overall resilience of vulnerable groups to withstand the impact of these crises, and addressing vulnerabilities arising from natural and human-induced disasters, conflict, climate change, rapid urbanisation, disparity and inequality' (ASEAN, 2020).

The ASEAN 'Roadmap' for strengthening social work responds to the Ha Noi Declaration by identifying 7 key priority areas for the development of social work in the member countries including establishing the legal and policy framework for social work, enhancing social work education and regulation, improving professional recognition and support for social workers, and increasing national, regional and international collaboration and connection for social work (ASEAN, 2021b). The 'Roadmap' notes that, even within the ASEAN countries covered by the plan, there is significant variation in the stages of development of social work and the associated policy/legal frameworks and social welfare/social systems to support the development of social work. What is clear is the central role seen for social work for improving the wellbeing and social development of individuals and communities as well as responding to the socio-economic impacts of global challenges such as climate change as evidenced in the intentions of the Ha Noi Declaration. For example, social workers can work with individuals and families to mitigate the impacts of socio-economic challenges and build resilience, while also working with individuals and communities to develop resilience and readiness to respond to natural and man-made disasters. This presents significant opportunities for social work across the region going forward.

At the same time, there are key challenges facing social work as it continues to develop. While repeating the caution that the situation is very different in the many countries of the region so generalizations are difficult, some common themes emerge from the literature (ASEAN, 2021b; Shek et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF/GSSWA, 2019) and observation including:

1. *Varied history of development-* the varied history of development of social work in various countries, from many decades to more recent establishment, means even where a sub-regional approach to developing social work is taken such as in ASEAN, individual countries will often be operating from a very different base.
2. *Definitions of social work and social work roles-* because of the variation in histories of development and different cultural and social service system developments in countries there can be differing definitions and role structure for social workers.
3. *Social services workforce-* the complete social services workforce in many countries includes a mix of professional social workers, paraprofessionals and volunteers with sometimes considerable role overlap between these different groups.
4. *Recognition in legislation, policy and accreditation systems-* across the region there is great variation in the extent to which social work as a profession is included in government policy and legislation ranging from little or no incorporation into law/policy through to quite extensive legislative systems of recognition and formal accreditation of social worker requirements.
5. *Cultural contexts and cultural diversity-*there is considerable cultural diversity across the region as well as significant cultural diversity within many countries which can lead to differing interpretations of social work and the social work role as well as different levels of tolerance and understanding for key social work focus areas such as gender equality, human rights, mental health and wellbeing and disability.
6. *Tensions between practice with individuals/families or social development/community work-* a tension not unfamiliar to social work globally, as social work develops in some countries in the region there are key questions about the focus of social work practice as being more individualized case work with individuals and families or broader social development and community work with communities.
7. *Low pay and recognition for social workers-* while there is strong support for the development of social work and social work education from governments in many countries, for social workers in practice there is not always the same level of development of social service organizations and networks which can result in low pay and limited recognition for qualified social workers in many situations.
8. *Negative public perceptions of social work-* where the development of social work is relatively new there can negative public perceptions of professional social work such that it is seen as 'charity' work or even taking the place of volunteers or others who do charity work voluntarily.

Social Work Education
Social work education understandably mirrors the development of social work practice in the Asia Pacific region. Where social work has been established longer in a country, associated social work

education tends to be more established. Conversely, where the development of social work is more recent, social work education also tends to be in its infancy, albeit being a very necessary element for the growth of the social work workforce. Mirroring the rapid expansion of social work in some countries in the region there has been rapid growth in social work education providers to develop the workforce needed for the expansion in social work roles. For example, in the year 2000 it is reported that China had 28 universities providing undergraduate social work education while by 2019 there were 430 universities providing undergraduate social work courses and 150 universities providing graduate MSW programs (Höjer & Shardlow, 2022). In examining the development of social work education there are documents such as the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training that aim to articulate what the common elements of social work education and training courses should be while at a regional level plans such as the ASEAN 'Roadmap' for strengthening social work also speak to the development of social work education. In practice, many social work education providers in the region develop also collaborations with more established social work programs, either within the region or internationally to support their development.

Global Standards for Social Work Education & Training
The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training were released in 2020 by IASSW and IFSW following an extensive period of consultation with 125 countries, 5 regional associations and 400 universities and other education providers (IASSW/IFSW, 2020). The standards note that:

> 'The Global Standards aim at capturing both the universality of social work values and the diversity that characterises the profession through the articulation of a set of standards that are divided between compulsory (those that all programmes must adhere to) and aspirational (those standards that Schools should aspire to include when and where possible)' (IASSW/IFSW, 2020).

As encapsulated in this quote, the standards attempt to incorporate what is seen as the common elements that should be included in all social work courses as well as recognizing the great diversity of cultural contexts and stages of development when considering social work courses globally. The standards are divided into three groupings: (1) The School- including standards related to resources and facilities, curriculum, practice education and research and scholarly activity; (2) The People- including standards related to the educators, the students and service users; and (3) The Profession- including standards related to developing a shared understanding of the profession, ethics and values, equity and diversity and human rights and social, economic and environmental justice.

Despite the obvious tensions in balancing global core standards for social work education while also incorporating the local cultural context, the global standards do provide some opportunities to assist the development of social work education across the region. The standards provide a universal social work approach to complex global issues such as climate change, globalization, human made and natural disasters, global movements of peoples and how social work can contribute to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The standards also provide a globally agreed set of standards for social work education that provide directions for important curriculum content in social work courses. In the context of Asia Pacific, the Global Standards can be used in their own right to assess a particular social work course or can be important in assessing national and regional (eg. ASEAN) standards and frameworks for social work education. Social work education providers can also use the standards as an internal advocacy tool within their own institutions to advocate for necessary resources (IASSW/IFSW, 2020; Ioakimidis & Sookraj, 2021).

As a tool for use in the development of Asia Pacific social work education, the standards have great potential but shouldn't be used uncritically. For example, careful consideration is needed as to how the Global Standards integrate with national and sub-regional social work accreditation frameworks where they exist. While the Global Standards incorporate both compulsory and optional (or aspirational) standards, it may be very difficult for new and developing social work courses to meet the compulsory standards. Furthermore, some compulsory standards (eg. those related to human rights) may need careful adoption in the political contexts of some countries where the standard may be controversial, and adoption may present risks for educators and students. In Asia Pacific where in many countries the social work profession and social work education courses have been established historically as part of colonization, it becomes critical to ensure that adoption of global standards does not in part continue the colonization process and that there is still opportunity left for the decolonization or localizing of the social work curriculum (Das et al., 2022).

Challenges for Asia Pacific Social Work Education
As already noted, the position of social work education in Asia Pacific is one of great diversity often related to the extent to which social work as a profession has developed in a particular country.

While relatively new in some countries, increasingly there are national social work education peak bodies being established to connect and resource social work educators in particular countries. Regional social work education bodies such as APASWE which has been established for 50 years, and global bodies such as IASSW which has been operating for almost 90 years, provide connections for Asian Pacific social work educators across countries and globally. Both APASWE and IASSW have strong memberships from educational institutions in the Asia Pacific region, however these are often concentrated on certain countries with high membership rather than evenly spread across the region, indicating further potential to collaborate and resource social work educators.

The example already discussed of the ASEAN countries approach to developing social work through the Ha Noi Declaration and 'Roadmap' for Strengthening Social Work (ASEAN, 2021b), has as a key focus area the development of social work education. Priority Area 2 of the 'Roadmap' is focused on expanding and strengthening social work education through a number of strategies including establishing advanced social work education programs for training professional social workers while also establishing post qualifying in-service training and development for social workers; developing education programs that incorporate the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training and which also address local issues, needs and approaches; developing training and standards for qualifications and experience of social work faculty; linking developing social work education programs to more established social work education providers either nationally or regionally; and, ensuring social work education courses are provided by appropriately experienced social work educators qualified as social workers. This is an example of governments taking a direct role in facilitating the further development of social work and social work education to meet perceived needs for future strong social services workforces. Similarly, some global organizations such as UNICEF and UNFPA take a direct interest in developing social work and social work education in Asia Pacific countries often in the context of improving practice in key areas such as the wellbeing of children and gender equity (UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF/GSSWA, 2019).

Despite the positive aspects of both government and international organizational support for social work education in the region and many examples of beginning social work courses collaborating with more advanced education providers, there are some common challenges. Drawing on literature (ASEAN, 2021b; Shek et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF/GSSWA, 2019) and observation, some key themes for social work education in the region can be identified including:

1. *Global experiences of social work education*- all social work education providers globally, as well as in the Asia Pacific, have been experiencing a range of changes in how social work education is provided. This includes the often-radical changes in how social work education was delivered during the pandemic in many countries, such as moving to fully online course delivery and alternative ways of providing practice placements in social work organizations (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020). Technological changes are also impacting education globally including how curriculum is delivered, use of simulation and the more recent advances in use of AI.

2. *Enough courses to meet future workforce demands*- as social work develops in many countries in the region and the demand for social workers increases, often driven by government policy, there is a need for concurrent development of social work courses to train social workers to meet this demand. This can be a "vicious cycle" though, as until the social services system develops and matures there may not be the positions available to initially provide jobs for social work graduates (ASEAN, 2021b; UNICEF, 2018).

3. *Employment pathways for current graduates and status of professional social work* – linked to the previous point about enough social work courses to meet demand, in some country contexts where the social development/ social welfare services system is not fully developed graduates can struggle to initially find work as a professional social worker. Related to this issue is that across different countries the status of social work as a profession may be poor which also discourages graduates from wanting to, or continuing to work as a social worker (ASEAN, 2021b; Baikady & Cheng, 2022; Hossain et al., 2024; Riaz & Granich, 2023).

4. *Developing social work academic workforce capacity*- a key challenge for social work education in the region is developing the social work academic workforce to teach in social work courses. Social work academics often must attend universities in other countries with more established social work programs to attain specialist social work qualifications (eg. MSW) or higher academic qualifications (eg, PhD), although this is rapidly changing as many social work providers in the region develop the capacity to offer higher degrees in social work. It is also the case that in countries where social work education is in the early stages of development often many of the faculty teaching in social work courses do not actually have social work

qualifications themselves which can then impact on the quality of courses and knowledge and skills attained by graduates (ASEAN, 2021b; UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF/GSSWA, 2019).

5. *Field/practice education-* practice education or placements are a key feature of most social work courses where students get practical experience in a social work role. The Global Standards note that practice education is a critical component of professional social work education courses and that education providers should aim to structure at least 25% of the social work course as practice education/ placements (IASSW/IFSW, 2020). While the important role for placements in preparing social work students for practice is almost universally recognized, placements present particular challenges for most social work courses even in contexts with long histories of social work course provision and where there are well established social services systems with linkages to education providers (Hodge et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2023). This is no different for social work education providers in many of the Asian Pacific countries where social work education is less developed but the often-concurrent lack of social services system developments to provide quality placements for students make placement a particular challenge. Social work educators from several countries in the region have noted the challenges of quality placement provision to include lack of a developed social services system to provide placements and/or lack of qualified social workers in those services to provide supervision for students, lack of established connections between education providers and service providers and the capacity of education providers to support placement providers with students. In countries where this is a particular challenge, it is unlikely to change until there are enough qualified social workers and a well-developed social services system that has the capacity to provide quality placements (Höjer & Shardlow, 2022; Hossain et al., 2024; Lee & Yan, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF/GSSWA, 2019).

6. *Social work course quality-* in some counties in the region that have long established social work education programs and associated national accreditation systems and/or social work is strongly embedded in law and/or policy there is often then substantial review and monitoring of social work courses for quality. However, where social work courses are developed prior to there being strong national law or accreditation systems this can mean variable quality of social work courses, particularly where, as already noted, the course faculty lack formal social work qualifications (ASEAN, 2021b; UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF/GSSWA, 2019).

7. *Western models of social work-* debatably one of the greatest challenges for developing social work education in the region is the tension between utilizing Western models of social work (as is usually the case) and drawing on global standards for social work while at the same localizing the curriculum and ensuring it is consistent with the local cultural context for social work practice. As Das et al. note drawing on the experience in Bangladesh, while indigenizing and localizing the curriculum is frequently a topic of particular focus of social work educators in the region, it is much harder to do in practice (Das et al., 2022). Many developing social work education and practice approaches in countries will initially commence from a Western model of social work and the faculty, if they have social work qualifications, will often have obtained these qualifications internationally from universities teaching a Western model of social work. Many of the key texts and resources used in social work courses are English language materials from the US, UK and Europe which also makes localization a challenge. Long established social work courses in many countries in the region have also begun through historical colonization and the continuing influence of Western models of social work in the diverse cultural contexts of the region needs to be critically examined (Baikady & Cheng, 2022; Das et al., 2022). At the same time, a challenge of localization or indigenization of the curriculum can be that core elements of social work values and practice such as social justice and human rights may be lost in developing curriculum consistent with a countries political context (Ekoh, 2024).

Discussion

Overall, while there are many challenges, it is a time of great opportunity for social work and social work education in the Asia Pacific region. The history of development of social work in the region is diverse with it being established in some countries for many decades, while in others it is only recently emerging. Regardless of the diverse history of social work development across the region, what is clear is that there is likely to be increasing demand for social workers given the social development challenges the region faces. Increasingly, global challenges like climate change, natural and human made disasters, global movements of peoples and poverty/inequality in a globalized economy will need to be addressed on a regional and global level while also addressing the localized social impacts on individuals and families. At the same time, global initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals focus on the need for planned and sustainable development that improves the health and

wellbeing of peoples and recognizes the two-way impact of the environment on people and people on the environment. The UN SDGs also focus attention on critical social development issues such as health and mental health, child wellbeing, inequality and gender equity that should be a key focus area for social work. Clearly social work has a key role to play in responding to the impact of various global challenges and to achieving the aspirations of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which is evidenced by the increasing role government is playing (eg. the ASEAN 'Roadmap') in developing and promoting social work in countries across the Asia Pacific region.

The focus on social work as a key element of the response to global challenges and achievement of the UN SDGs in the region has several implications for social work education. Firstly, a well- qualified and developed social work workforce will be critical for addressing social development challenges and the local impacts of climate change and social work education will need to play a key role in providing this social work workforce. Secondly, many of the social development challenges such as the impact of climate change and disaster response have cross national impact and need cross national responses and ways of working. Social work education is well placed to develop collaborations and connections across the region to research new ways of responding. Thirdly, some of the social development challenges such as mental health and wellbeing and child wellbeing require social workers who can intervene at both the micro (individual) and macro (community) levels and key role for social education is equipping graduates with the necessary skills to do this. Fourthly, social work education has a key role to play in increasing the recognition and public perception of social workers in countries where it is an emerging profession.

At a local level, social work education providers in the region will have to continue to work through several issues. Recognizing the colonization history and its impact on the development of social work and social work education in many countries in the region, a key challenge is incorporating global social work elements such as the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training 2020 while at the same time developing curriculum and social work models and ways of working that decolonize, localize and indigenize social work practice. Linked to this is the great opportunity for social work educators in the region to further progress the teaching- research interface and contribute to researching and developing the social work evidence base in the context of Asia Pacific social work. Tensions in the focus of social work education (which are not just apparent in the region but globally) will also need to be considered and sensitively addressed. For example, to what extent social work education and practice should be focused on working with individuals and families or more broadly on social development at the community level. There can also be tensions in how core social work values and principles such as social justice, human rights and gender equity are incorporated sensitively in different cultural contexts. Finally, given the diverse nature and stages of development of social work education in the region, there is great opportunity for collaboration and learning from colleagues across the region either directly or through national, regional and global social work education bodies.

Conclusion & Suggestions
Conclusion

Social work education, like social work practice, has a long history in many countries across the Asia Pacific region but there is now considerable diversity in the stages of development and how it is structured in different countries. Increasingly, social work is being recognized by governments and others as having a key role to play in responding to global challenges such as climate change and in assisting the Asia Pacific region to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

For social work to continue to play a major role in responding to global challenges a robust and well-trained social work workforce will be crucial, therefore signifying the important place of social work education. This paper has identified some key challenges for social work education in the region including the various issues facing social work education globally in the post-pandemic context such as alternative models of course delivery and technological changes. There continues to be difficulties in some countries to establish enough social work courses to meet future workforce demands while at the same time to provide adequate employment pathways for current graduates, particularly where the status of professional social work is not yet high. Developing the social work academic workforce training and capacity is a critical need and a very necessary facilitator of high-quality social work courses. Field practice education placements, a crucial element of social work courses, are often difficult to access, particularly in contexts where the social services system is less developed. Finally, the challenges of balancing global standards of social work education and Western models of social work with the indigenization and localization of the social work curriculum continues to be a focus for social work educators in the region.

Suggestions

It is suggested that social work education in the region has a key role to play in: (1) Responding to the increasing needs of governments to develop and expand the social services workforce to address the pressing social development priorities; (2) Providing the qualified social work workforce and the research to address complex social development issues and progress towards achievement of the UN SDG; and (3) Developing models of social work education that incorporate global standards and which importantly indigenize social work education and practice to local contexts. For ASEAN countries specifically, the Ha Noi Declaration and associated Roadmap provide the opportunity for a coordinated and connected approach to social work and social work education with great potential to collaborate on the development of distinctive approaches and models of Asian Pacific social work and social work research.

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