

**Social Work Educators' Perceptions of Instructor Characteristics, Student  
Characteristics, and University Supports Critical for the Creation of an Effective  
Learning Environment in Social Work Distance Education.**

By

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## **Abstract**

Social work education is increasingly changing, and instructors are experimenting with new methods to deliver social work curricula to reach a larger population of social work students. Students previously excluded from university education based on their geographic location, financial limitations, family or work demands now have an opportunity to access social work programs in Canada using distance education, and distance education has become an emerging field of research.

The current study identified instructor and student characteristics and university supports that were assessed as critical in creating an effective learning environment for delivering an entire undergraduate program of social work via distance education. The exploratory-descriptive study utilized a mixed-methods design to examine the perceptions of social work distance educators from four universities that offer a complete BSW degree accredited by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS) through distance education: the University of Calgary, the University of Manitoba, the University of Victoria and Dalhousie University.

Thirty-four social work distance educators completed a survey questionnaire, and 24 of these participated in qualitative interviews to identify the critical characteristics and university supports. Study findings suggest that effective performance of five distinct roles by both instructors and students are essential to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. The required university supports to maintain those roles are also identified. Based on these results a conceptual model for achieving effectiveness in social work distance education is identified. The study suggests what is needed to establish an effective learning environment in social work distance education and confirms the benefits of distance education in social work undergraduate programs. Suggestions for future research are included along with recommendations for building an effective distance learning environment in social work education.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation research is dedicated to social work educators and to everyone who supports them in exploring new ways of sharing knowledge and educating social work students using the most appropriate, accountable, available, accessible, acceptable, applicable, and adequate ways to promote social work values and professional education in Canada and around the world.

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## CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Social work distance education is rapidly becoming a new area of social work education research as many North American post-secondary institutions offer social work courses online (Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Moore, 2005; Moore et al., 2015). Cummings, Foesl, and Chaffine (2013) and Abels (2005) argue that distance education can be used in social work teaching to reach a population of social work students who have previously been excluded due to geographic location (remote areas), financial limitations, family or work demands. Distance delivery methods have also prompted social work educators to examine new ways in which to promote a reciprocal relationship between the instructor and the student for effective teaching and learning (Fielding, 2008). Studies highlight the benefits of distance education in social work, and research that has compared distance learning with traditional on-campus learning suggests no significant differences in areas such as content delivery, lesson quality, and student satisfaction (Russell, 1999; Rasmussen et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2015).

There are limited research studies on what makes distance education in social work an effective way to design and deliver an undergraduate social work curriculum. However, there has been much research done on effective teaching in the area of distance education in general. For example, instructor and student characteristics have been identified by some researchers as critical success factors that influence the effectiveness of distance education course delivery (Bates, 2015; Bathaeian, 2009; Grasinger, 1999; Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Volery & Lord, 2000). Selim (2007) also suggests that the quality and quantity of university support is an extremely important success factor for online course delivery. A document compiled by the Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2000) entitled *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate*

*Programs*, also suggests that faculty support and student support are critical areas that contribute to effective online teaching and learning.

Social work distance education is different from distance learning in general; therefore, a unique study is required to identify the critical instructor and student characteristics, and the university supports that foster the development of the identified critical characteristics. In April 2015, the Indiana State University School of Social Work hosted the first international social work distance education conference to bring scholars from around the world together to think critically about how to maintain quality social work education in an online learning environment. More than 400 social work distance educators, primarily from the United States, attended the conference to learn from each other's successes and challenges as they searched for ways to best use technology to address the special needs of social work education. The conference focused on five major themes that are critically important for social work distance education: (1) developing online or hybrid/blended social work distance delivery programs; (2) teaching and learning social work online; (3) field issues and distance placements; (4) administrative strategies and issues, and (5) online practice issues. Researchers in each theme shared best practices that aimed to create innovative and engaging learning environments for social work students through distance education (Indiana State University, 2015). A second international social work distance education conference is planned for April 2016 as social work educators recognize the importance of research in this new and rapidly emerging field of social work education.

University social work education in Canada is required to meet educational standards as determined by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education-Association Canadienne pour la Formation en Travail Social (CASWE-ACFTS). In the CASWE-ACFTS Standards for Accreditation (2014), social work curriculum is expected to foster the mastering of core learning

objectives for students. The core learning objectives are statements of what students are expected to know and to be able to do to promote the “excellence in social work education, scholarship, and practice with a social justice focus” (p. 2). Social work educators are important actors in ensuring CASWE-ACFTS accreditation standards are met. CASWE-ACFTS also requires Schools of Social Work to employ reflection as a critical factor in “safeguarding program quality and relevance...to ensure ongoing program development and renewal in response to social change and new knowledge” (p. 18). To accomplish such tasks in online learning environments, Schools of Social Work need to determine what are the critical instructor and student characteristics and university supports required to create an effective learning environment. This research will contribute to that knowledge.

The remainder of this chapter describes the challenges of teaching social work degree courses in online learning environments and defines what constitutes an effective learning environment. A statement of the problem is provided, and the purpose of the study is briefly presented. Also, this chapter includes a discussion of the significance of this research as it relates to the issue of identifying what instructor and student characteristics and university supports are necessary to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs. The chapter concludes with an overview of the nature of the study, research questions and study limitations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Teaching Social Work via Distance Education**

Social work is a human service profession based on the principles of human interaction and requires intensive face-to-face communication between social work professionals and their clients (Moore, 2005). As a consequence, social work educators use many face-to-face

interactive techniques to transfer essential skills and knowledge. Instructors who teach social work practice courses are expected to be able to demonstrate appropriate techniques to highlight micro, mezzo, and macro systems social work professional roles, such as case manager, counsellor, advocate, etc. (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). Demonstrating these roles promotes social work values and ethics, and encourages students to incorporate these in professional practice.

The emphasis on the human interaction component in a social work curriculum has resulted in resistance by some educators and practitioners to the implementation of distance delivery of social work education. The concern is that social work distance education students may not acquire the needed skills necessary to perform professional roles and effectively establish face-to-face communications to help their clients. The online learning environment is perceived to lack a certain connectivity that positively impacts learning (Coleman & Collins, 2008; Kreuger & Stretch, 1999; Kreuger & Stretch, 2000; McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Smith & Wingerson, 2006; Zidan, 2015).

In addition to concerns raised by social work educators, other challenges have been voiced about the quality of distance education and faculty compensation for teaching in an online learning environment. In an early survey by the National Educational Association (NEA) (2000) the distance learning faculty in the United States identified three equally important concerns: distance learning will result in more work for the same amount of pay; the quality of education for students will decline; and faculty members will not be fairly remunerated for their academic work. In contrast, faculty members who are teaching on-campus courses rank one concern above all others, with 80% predicting the quality of education for students will decline. Weigel (2002) suggests that online courses are considered to be of lesser quality because the language which is

used to promote online education programs, describing it as “accessible, easy to follow, flexible and affordable for everyone,” may also result in misleading messages about lower educational requirements for distance education students when compared to students who receive classroom based education. The NEA (2000) argued at the time that university should take more responsibility to ensure that the quality of distance learning is protected by providing adequate supports to instructors and students.

Some researchers suggest face-to-face course design as a primary way to deliver post-secondary level courses. Besser and Bonn (1996) claim that physical attendance in post-secondary institutions enriches students’ life experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, and they state that being physically present in the face-to-face classroom provides an advantage for building necessary interpersonal communication skills for their future professional careers. More recently Hellman (2003) notes additional challenges in distance education, such as the loss of face-to-face presence, the lack of reactive interaction between students and instructors, difficulty in standards maintenance and problems with the credibility of grading.

With all of the challenges that educators face while teaching online courses, it is easy to understand why some educators question the benefits of delivering courses in that format. These challenges are complicated by further criticisms that online education courses and programs are primarily designed from a business-oriented perspective, where knowledge is being traded out for the ability to globalize the classroom and obtain profits from possible sources (Hellman, 2003). Needless to say, this approach is not very appealing for the social work profession that maintains principles of providing educational services that should be accessible and available to everyone who meets post-secondary admission requirements. Due to the reluctance of social

work to adopt new technology, distance education has developed more slowly in this field than in other degree programs (Moore, 2005; Cummings et al., 2013; Zidan, 2015).

### **Defining an Effective Learning Environment in Social Work Distance Education**

There are many attempts to define what constitutes an effective learning environment. A number of studies (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Bates, 2015; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Chickering & Ehrmann, 2003; Dennison, Gruber, & Vrbsky, 2010; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; McLean, 2006; Patti, 1987; Perron, Taylor, Glass, & Margerum-Leys, 2010; Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001; Saitow, 2009, Shelton and Saltsman, 2005) have identified factors that can help to create an effective learning environment. For example, Saitow (2009) emphasizes context and participation and suggests that a "positive learning environment takes place in a safe, caring, respectful social setting that entails active participation" (p. 7). In contrast, Perron et al. (2010) focus on technology and state that information and communication technologies "have the potential to help facilitate a more productive and effective learning environment for both social work students and professors" (p. 71). This position is echoed by McLean (2006) who notes that to create an effective learning environment, course instructors should understand distance education technology and redesign their instruction to fit that medium. Chickering and Gamson (1991) and Chickering and Ehrmann (2003) suggest seven principles that help to create an effective learning environment: strong student-faculty and student-student collaboration, active learning, timely feedback, task orientation, high expectations, and mutual respect.

Although many factors are identified in the literature that can contribute to creating an effective learning environment for distance delivery courses, there is no commonly accepted definition in the research on distance education about what constitutes an effective learning

environment. A number of success factors that influence the effectiveness of distance education course delivery have been identified and these include instructor and student characteristics and university supports (Bates, 2015; Bathaeian, 2009; Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2000; Grasinger, 1999; Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Selim, 2007; Volery & Lord, 2000).

Social work distance education literature also lacks a common definition of what constitutes an effective learning environment. Despite the existence of online degree programs in social work, there remains a lack of research into what makes them effective. For example, in Canada, one can obtain a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree online at four CASWE-ACFTS accredited universities. They are the University of Calgary, the University of Victoria, Dalhousie University and the University of Manitoba (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014). No studies have been conducted to date on what instructor and student characteristics and university supports are necessary to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs. Both instructors and students who are involved in the social work distance education environment could benefit from the identification of success factors in teaching social work undergraduate curriculum via distance delivery methods. A comprehensive list of instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports should help social work instructors, students, and university administrators to understand their roles within the distance education learning environment. It also prepares them to teach, to learn, and to administer the creation and maintenance of an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs in Canada.

Until recently, research in the field of social work distance education has concentrated primarily on end results such as “did the student achieve the educational objectives?” Repeatedly,



studies have found that social work distance education methods achieve similar, if not superior, results when compared with traditional teaching methods (Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Moore, 2005; Pelech et al., 2013). Since the questions around end results have been studied and addressed extensively, research should now shift toward questions of process in the learning environment to ensure that students effectively master course objectives by creating an environment that is conducive to learning.

### **Study Purpose and Method**

The purpose of this study is to identify those critical characteristics that are essential in social work distance delivery programs for instructors and students and the related university supports that are necessary for creating an effective learning environment. This exploratory-descriptive study utilizes a mixed-methods design to examine the perceptions of social work distance educators regarding instructor and student characteristics, and university supports required to create an effective learning environment. According to Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, and Hanson (2003) the mixed methods approach for an exploratory-descriptive study is more appropriate than a quantitative approach alone as it provides an opportunity for the researcher to gain perspectives from different types of data. This study is intended to enable the researcher to explore and describe instructor and student characteristics, and university supports from a social work distance educator's perspective. The study uses two data collection methods: first, a quantitative survey questionnaire based on literature review findings, and second, follow-up qualitative interviews to examine in-depth, participants' perspectives on characteristics and supports they viewed as necessary to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

### **Research Questions and Significance of the Study**

The research questions focus specifically on student and instructor characteristics as well as university supports. The study's participants, social work educators, will be asked to offer their perspective on the characteristics and supports necessary for effective distance education.

The questions are:

1. What are the critical instructor characteristics for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?
2. What are the critical student characteristics for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?
3. What are the critical university supports for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?
4. Can a model be identified which integrates answers to the first three research questions for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?

This study seeks to make a contribution to the social work education knowledge base about the current state of social work distance education in Canada and to make recommendations for change based on the findings. It is intended to provide current data to these academic institutions that are preparing social work students for future social work practice using distance education delivery methods. Potential benefits of the study's findings include the development of recommendations and policies to guide university administrators in designing and delivering effective social work courses using distance education delivery methods. The findings related to the critical instructor and student characteristics, in particular, should determine what key university support services are needed to foster those identified

characteristics. The results of this study may also be utilized by university administrators to address accreditation standards and ensure excellence in social work education.

The results may be beneficial not only for academic institutions but also for social work students who plan to take courses online. For students, findings from this research may result in an awareness of what constitutes an effective learning environment in social work distance education, so that they can make informed decisions about whether or not to take social work distance learning courses. If students decide to enroll in a distance learning program, this study will provide information on what type of supports they might need and what kind of characteristics they require to master social work knowledge and skills within an online learning environment.

The research findings have the potential to inform instructors of the characteristics that promote effective teaching and learning. Findings on critical university supports required for instructors in social work distance education may result in increased instructor satisfaction, should those findings be implemented, and enhance their preparedness for teaching in an online learning environment.

This study also seeks to make a contribution to the development of social work distance education as a field of research and pedagogical practice in general. By identifying instructor and student characteristics and necessary university supports to foster distance learning, social work education can further its mission to provide high-quality educational opportunities for social work students that are based on the most current knowledge of what constitutes an effective learning and teaching environment in distance education. To this end, this study aims to uncover the experiences of social work distance learning instructors and capture their perceptions of the instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports required for social

work distance education. The results of this study can also serve to build a foundation for similar future research on social work distance instructor characteristics and student characteristics necessary to create an effective learning environment. In addition to its immediate relevance to the Canadian accreditation body (the CASWE-ACFTS Commission on Accreditation), the findings of this study might have implications for similar distance education programs around the world in developing and implementing quality social work distance learning programs.

### **Definitions**

Some terms require a precise definition to guide the research process. DeNeui and Dodge (2006) suggest that because distance education is a relatively new field of study, there is no widely accepted definition of what it constitutes. Regarding usage in this dissertation, the definition provided by Coe and Youn (2008) fits best. The authors state that distance education in social work includes any form where social work content is learned when “the majority of the instruction occurs while the educator and learner are at a distance from one another” (p. 95). For this research, an important classification criterion for social work distance education courses is that the instructor does not deliver the course entirely in a face-to-face format during a regular academic term. While there are some subtle differences between the terms *distance learning*, *distance education*, *e-learning*, *blended learning*, *web-based education*, *distance delivery education*, *distributed learning*, and *online learning*, they will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. Cummings et al. (2013) suggest that no matter what definition is used, online education is becoming an important aspect of many social work degree programs.

Social work distance education in this study is contrasted with traditional on-campus education. For the purpose of this research, the key terms are defined as follows:

- A distance delivery academic course is any BSW degree course that is not taught using traditional classroom format.
- A social work distance instructor (educator) is someone who has experience teaching in the social work distance education programs for at least one academic term in a CASWE-ACFTS accredited BSW degree program.
- A critical instructor/student characteristic is a characteristic regarded as essential to creating an effective learning environment.
- Critical university support is a support service provided by a university that is considered as critical to creating an effective learning environment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited to an assessment of the perceptions of social work distance educators in Canada, and therefore, it is not possible to generalize to a broader context, including students' perspectives, university administrators' perspectives, and other countries and disciplines. It is possible that differences in modes of delivery, course offerings, and other factors may lead to different conclusions in those contexts.

Identified characteristics and supports may also vary by the institutional setting itself, in addition to the country in which the institution is located. Universities are distinct and complex, as are the online learning environments within these settings. Hence, the data gathered in each setting are very dependent on these contexts. The proposed study is limited to four accredited social work degree programs at Canadian universities, and the findings might not apply to universities that only offer unaccredited programs or related courses using distance education delivery methods. Although limitations in the generalizability of the study's results are noted, this study retains the potential to lead to future comparative studies between countries on social

work distance education effectiveness and characteristics and supports for both instructors and students and to offer some direction or possible solutions to identified challenges.

### **Chapter Review**

This chapter provided an overview of the challenges of creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education and explains the rationale for this research. Since Schools of Social Work in Canada are offering courses online, this research is aligned with the scholarly literature and is intended to create new knowledge, expanding the literature to include social work educators' perceptions of critical instructor and student characteristics and university supports to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs. This study uses an exploratory-descriptive mixed methods design, which allows for both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses. The significance of the study is also linked to the national CASWE-ACFTS Standards for Accreditation, which mandate Schools of Social Work to create an effective learning environment in delivering their programs.

The following chapter provides a literature review of the theory and research about what constitutes an effective learning environment. An overview of instructor and student characteristics follows, and a review of identified university supports needed to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs is discussed. Chapter three focuses on the research design for the current study that is driven by the questions highlighted from the literature review. The researcher provides a discussion of the appropriateness of design, the sample, data collection and analyses procedures. Chapter four provides an overview and discussion of the findings and chapter five continues with a discussion of the implications of this study and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this literature review is to identify key instructor and student characteristics and university supports that are relevant to the field of distance teaching and learning. The literature summarizes key research findings related to these areas necessary for the creation of an effective learning environment. Also, the literature review discusses the theoretical orientation that guides this study on defining effectiveness in social work distance education, including a review of the current debate between positivism and interpretivism, the role of social constructivism, the community of inquiry model and Patti's (1987) definition of service effectiveness. The review of the literature also identifies gaps in knowledge related to these topics and suggests further research directions to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

The three key objectives of the literature review are to:

1. Identify what constitutes an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
2. Identify student and instructor characteristics and university supports that positively impact the creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
3. Identify gaps in knowledge related to factors to create an effective learning environment.

The literature reviewed in this chapter is mainly drawn from the fields of social work education and distance learning that identify instructor and student characteristics and university supports. The review provides the basis for the compilation of these characteristics and supports, which in turn identifies knowledge gaps in this area. It also presents a summary of research findings and synthesises knowledge in this area, informing a research design that will "lead the discipline to higher levels of understanding of the system being studied" (Akasofu, 2007, p. 264).

The review is organized in the following way. First, a theoretical orientation for defining effective learning environments in social work distance delivery programs is presented. Second,

the instructor and student characteristics and university supports for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs are presented and these findings are synthesized. Third the key findings and knowledge gaps are noted, and further research questions are proposed about what helps to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

## **Theoretical Orientation for Defining an Effective Learning Environment**

### **The Positivism and Interpretivism Debate**

As discussed in Chapter 1 there is no commonly accepted definition of distance education about what constitutes an effective learning environment. One of the reasons for not having a unified vision of what constitutes an effective learning environment is attributed to the challenges of measuring effectiveness. Payne (2014) states that the debate on how to measure effectiveness is centred between two contrasting philosophical perspectives: positivism and interpretivism. Positivists believe that the world is organized and follows a particular order that can be objectively measured, as reality is stable and can be observed and described. Interpretivists believe that objectivity is subject to different interpretations depending on the context. They contend that only through subjective interpretation can reality be fully understood. Positivists also believe that it is possible to explain how one action causes another through systematic and rigorous research. This claim suggests the possibility of identifying those factors that help to create an effective learning environment. Interpretivists, on the other hand, believe that it is not feasible to collect all the necessary information about particular phenomena to demonstrate causality, such as an effective learning environment due to limitations in research and that it is better to adapt more subjective and variable ways to measure effectiveness. Interpretivists will agree that many factors can affect teaching social work courses in an online



learning environment, and many of these factors are based on specific context, individual characteristics, skills, and interaction between people that might not be known to the researchers. (Payne, 2014; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012).

Although both positivist and interpretivist perspectives are used in social work and distance education literature, recent knowledge development in social work practice is more aligned with an interpretivist perspective (Payne, 2014). Such alignment is consistent with the distance education research on defining an effective learning environment that focuses on social constructivism theory as referenced in the community of inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000).

### **Social Constructivism**

Social constructivism is an interpretivist theory suggesting that people's understanding of the world comes from their interactions and interchanges in a variety of contexts; e.g., social, cultural, and historical (Payne, 2014). Knowledge in constructivist theory is created through the language and interactions used to understand social experiences within those diverse contexts. This implies that factors that contribute to effective teaching might be different in social work education in comparison to other fields of education depending on the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. Constructivist ideas allow social work practitioners and researchers to look for new ways to improve their practice and promote social change. Payne (2014) also provides an answer to the major criticism of social constructivism that such a view of reality might lead to a situation where nothing can be certain. He suggests that the process of social construction is gradual, that many things do not change, and that experience in many cases reinforces existing social constructions.

Social constructivist ideas have very strong roots in educational research. Herie (2002) argues that constructivist pedagogy shifts the orientation from instructor-centred to student-centred learning. Such an approach focuses on students' experiences and beliefs and highlights skills associated with lifelong learning. Oliver (1999) points out that “theoretically, the strengths of constructivism lie in its emphasis on learning as a process of personal understanding and meaning-making which is active and interpretive” (p. 242). Oliver also suggests that technology-based approaches to learning offer many opportunities for constructivist education through the creation and support of resource-based, student-centred settings and allow learning to be related to context and to practice. A constructivist perspective considers students as collaborators in knowledge construction allowing for learning to occur through interaction with other students as well as self-reflection upon what has been learned throughout the process. Supporters of a constructivist educational theory argue that humans design their personalized versions of reality in an attempt to recognize and make sense of their living conditions (Bellefeuille, Martin, & Buck, 2005).

The computer-mediated approach to education provides an opportunity for the development of knowledge-building communities (Moore, 2003). In such communities, members can share ideas, reflect on the knowledge they construct and learn from the processes they have used. Constructivism "views an educational experience, in its best manifestation, as a collaborative communication process for the purpose of constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 92). This approach allows learners to generate questions, summarize content, clarify points, and engage in other active learning tasks. Educators should become more aware of electronic resources and methods that use constructivist principles to facilitate learning in an online environment (Moore, 2003).

The constructivist perspective applies to social work education research. It encourages social workers to be actively involved with the key concerns that affect the social work profession and education (Witkin, 1990). The relevance of constructivism as a theoretical orientation for educational research is noted by Tam (2000) who highlights that constructivism focuses on four main teaching and learning questions: 1. What is learning? 2. What is the learning process? 3. What is the instructor's primary role in the learning process? and 4. What can the instructor do to carry out that role? A number of researchers (Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Chickering & Ehrmann, 2003; Dumont & Istance, 2010; Johnson & Aragon, 2003) have outlined key principles and strategies commonly discussed in the literature that contribute to effective teaching and help students to engage with course material, comprehend, and learn in effective ways. Those principles and strategies are centered on constructivist ideas that encourage student-instructor contact, cooperation among students, student reflection, and use of active-learning strategies to motivate students and respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Social work is a profession committed to upholding specific values and ethics (Moore, 2003). This includes respecting a person's self-determination, promotion of social justice and service to humanity (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005). One of the attributes of social constructivism is that it recognizes that there are different perspectives on what is considered to be a reality. This recognition can facilitate the integration of values into practice, which can encourage professionals to construct knowledge that reflects human diversity, a commitment to social justice, and participatory involvement in the change process (Burris & Guadalupe, 2003), all of which are consistent with core social work values (CASW, 2005).

## **Community of Inquiry Model**

The community of inquiry model has a strong presence in distance education literature as it forms the basis for a positive learning experience. It is rooted in social constructivism and is one of the most commonly referenced models in distance education literature about creating effective learning environments (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Akyol & Garrison, 2009; Akyol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011; Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Shea & Bidjerano, 2008; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009; Vaughan, 2010; Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). The community of inquiry model has three overlapping elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence is “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, through the medium of communication being used” (Garrison et al., 2000, p.94). Garrison et al. (2001) describe cognitive presence as a process of how learners construct meaning through continuous interaction with their learning environment. Cognitive presence represents the development of critical thinking skills through interaction and communication amongst members in a learning community (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Teaching presence is necessary to balance cognitive and social processes consistent with intended learning outcomes. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) suggest that teaching presence should include "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes" (p.5) to establish personally meaningful and good educational learning outcomes for students. When the three components of the community of inquiry are present in the design and delivery of distance education courses, it increases the chances of positive learning experiences and high levels of satisfaction among students.

The community of inquiry model requires the instructor to design an interactive learning environment to ensure that students are satisfied with the course content. Swan (2003) suggests that three forms of interaction can help to create a positive learning experience. Interaction with content refers to the students' connection with the course material. The interaction between instructors and students include a number of ways that an instructor can support students to meet their course-related cognitive and social needs. Interaction among peers refers to communication among students. Each of these modes of communication is part of the learning environment and can be uniquely performed in online education. In practice, Swan (2003) notes that the three forms of interaction are interconnected. Interaction among students is facilitated through interaction with content and their instructors.

The community of inquiry model provides a helpful way of thinking about the three modes of interactions. Swan (2003) suggests that in the community of inquiry model one can associate cognitive presence with interaction with content, teaching presence with interaction with instructors, and social presence with interaction among students, and that the interrelatedness of three modes of interaction and three components of the community inquiry model provides a good illustration of how all components work together to create and maintain an effective learning environment. Swan (2003) notes that “none of these interactions stand alone and that all of them involve, to greater or lesser degrees, all three sorts of presence identified in the community of inquiry model.” (p.5)

### **Effectiveness for Social Work Distance Education**

Currently, there is no commonly recognized definition of effectiveness in social work distance education. Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf (2008) note that, although many tools are used to measure teaching effectiveness, defining effective teaching behaviour is difficult as

education effectiveness can be achieved in many ways and varies based on specific fields of study.

Patti (1987) provides a useful definition of effectiveness in the context of social work. He suggests that the definition of service effectiveness includes “three not necessarily related aspects of performance” (p. 377). Patti states that the first component of service effectiveness relates to an organization’s success in creating changes for its target population. A human service organization can be considered effective if it meets its objectives and produces intended changes for clients. The second component of service effectiveness is service quality or the degree to which the human service organization meets its objectives for service delivery through the use of specific approaches and methods congruent with those objectives. The third component of service effectiveness, client satisfaction, focuses on the clients' assessment of the quality of the services they received (Patti, 1987). While Patti’s (1987) work on defining service effectiveness is dated, Bhattacharyya, Datta, and Maitra (2013) suggest that the definition is still considered to be a driving definition for current research in human service organizations.

For the purposes of this research, Patti’s (1987) definition of service effectiveness in social work is used to highlight key components for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs that is consistent with the interpretivist view where “social workers enter into relationship with people and engage in mutual exploration of what is happening to gain a full and complex appreciation of the situations we are engaged in” (Payne, 2014, p. 51). By utilizing a social constructivism framework and connecting Patti’s definition of service effectiveness to the community of inquiry model, it is possible to develop a working definition for an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

Universities are considered to be human service organizations, as they provide educational services to people. In the university setting, the first component of Patti's definition (successfully meeting a client's needs) can be translated into the achievement of learning outcomes, or whether students learn what they are supposed to based on curriculum objectives to become effective social workers. Service quality, which is the second component of Patti's definition of service effectiveness, can refer to the ability of universities to be effective in their distance delivery programs in creating an environment where the prescribed learning outcomes can be met. The third component of service effectiveness (client satisfaction) in an educational setting focuses on students' satisfaction with the educational services they have received. Client satisfaction is congruent with the community of inquiry model's focus on a positive learning experience (i.e., student satisfaction) which occurs when the three components of the model: teaching, cognitive, and social presence, are present in the design and delivery of online social work courses. While Patti (1987) believes that the examination of the above-mentioned components of success, quality, and satisfaction all contribute to defining service effectiveness, it is possible to argue that an effective learning environment in social work distance education can be created by focusing on the three corresponding components of outcome, process, and satisfaction, which occur when students successfully master learning objectives within a quality-designed learning environment where students are satisfied with the process and outcomes of learning.

The above working definition for an effective learning environment in social work distance education is consistent with other authors' understanding of effectiveness. For example, the proposed definition includes Herie's (2002) distinction of learning as an outcome versus learning as a process, and Faux's (2000) assertion that effectiveness is not only tied to positive

performance by learners but also to the satisfaction of both students and instructors. Mastery of learning objectives is consistent with Allen et al.'s (2004) definition of effectiveness, which focus on students' performance related to the grades that they receive on tests or other course assignments.

To strengthen the working definition of what constitutes an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs, it is important to identify instructor and student characteristics and university supports as necessary to create such an environment. The next three sections of the literature review examine instructor and students characteristics as well as university supports that are currently identified in the literature as success factors for teaching/learning effectiveness in a post-secondary setting.

### **Instructor Characteristics**

There is no consistent list amongst researchers on what constitutes effective instructor characteristics for teaching in an online environment. This study will use the following list of elements for instructor characteristics: (1) instructor qualities that are common elements of good teaching (Axelrod, 2008) with specific emphasis on the fields of social work and distance education; and (2) instructor core competencies (Pahalad & Hamel, 1990) that refer to a group of skills requiring the ability of an individual to successfully perform a requisite action (e.g., teach social work distance education courses effectively). In order to create a list of instructor qualities and skills for effective teaching in social work distance delivery programs, literature pertaining to the following areas was reviewed: the role of an instructor in creating an effective learning environment, measuring effectiveness in social work and distance education based on professional competencies (knowledge and skills) for instructors, instructor characteristics



captured in student evaluations of the quality of education, and other studies on teaching effectiveness.

Many lists of the skills required by instructors for effective teaching in an online learning environment have been identified in the literature (Egan & Akdere, 2005; Thach, 1994; Williams, 2003). To synthesize those lists of skills, it is important to understand the roles instructors play in creating an effective online learning environment and then to connect each role to a specific skill identified in the literature. A role can be defined as a set of expectations (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). McLagan (1989) suggests that a role can be seen as a major area of functioning which includes a number of competencies that can be defined as the behaviours expected from a person in a selected role.

Berge (2008) developed a model for instructor roles in distance education. He argues that when information becomes easily retrievable by students, the instructor's role shifts from that of an expert to facilitator/mentor. In other words, instructors provide guidance and direction to facilitate a student's learning. Berge (2008) lists some roles that the instructor performs both in class and online. These are "chair, host, tutor, mediator, provocateur, network administrator, concierge, curator, observer, co-learner, community organizer, and even lecturer" (Berge, 2008, p. 409). After synthesizing the data from a number of studies on instructor roles, Berge developed a model for the roles of an instructor. Essentially, this model identifies the functions of instructors in four categories: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. The following describes the four categories of the model for online education:

**Pedagogical Role:** The majority of the duties for the online instructor involve facilitation skills. The instructor should use interpersonal communication skills to focus the discussion on the main course concepts, principles, and skills to achieve course

objectives. One of the primary roles of the instructor is to design an effective online learning environment by using key principles and values.

**Social Role:** The instructor should also create a friendly, trusting environment where learning is facilitated between student and instructor. The instructor should promote human relationships, enhance group cohesiveness, and demonstrate that working together increases success for all students in an online learning environment.

**Managerial Role:** This role requires an instructor to set a specific agenda for the course. The instructor should design objectives for online discussions, create a class schedule, and develop group norms and class policies. In online teaching, it is important to provide strong leadership and a sense of direction for all students through effective communication. Managing class interaction is one of the key factors for creating an effective learning environment.

**Technical Role:** The online instructor should make learners comfortable with using course technology. The key technical goal is to make all course technology transparent to every student. It is highly important that students do not spend too much time learning how the technology works as it will take away valuable time from doing academic tasks and activities that are necessary for completing course objectives. Although this role is currently handled primarily by support staff, the instructor is still seen by students as a contact person when technical issues interfere with their learning process (Berge, 2008, pp. 409-410).

Berge suggests that some of the roles of an instructor and the skills needed to perform those roles overlap one another so that they can be included in more than one category. He also states that not all of the identified roles should be carried out entirely by the course instructor. Whether

teaching online or in a traditional classroom, the four roles outlined in the model are equally important. Each role includes a number of competencies that are important in creating an effective learning environment.

Studies by Thach (1994), Williams (2003), and Egan and Akdere (2005) explored competencies in distance education using information from practitioners and scholars of distance learning. Egan and Akdere (2005) reported that out of the top 30 competencies they identified, when compared with research done by Thach (1994) and Williams (2003), 21 competencies were common to all three studies. Egan and Akdere (2005) share 21 competencies with Thach (1994) and 28 competencies with Williams (2003). These results suggest that, over time, some common competencies have been identified which contribute to successful teaching in an online learning environment. Egan and Akdere (2005) compared the top ten competencies identified in each study and found that respondents from Thach's (1994) and Williams' (2003) studies showed a strong emphasis on communication competencies, such as collaborative teamwork and interpersonal communication skills. The respondents in Egan and Akdere's (2005) study focused on technological skills as the most critical competencies for an online educator. The top five knowledge/skill areas from all three studies highlight that distance education instructors need to have experience in distance learning and basic technology along with skills in collaborative teamwork, interpersonal communication, and writing.

The list of competencies discussed in these studies can be grouped according to Berge's (2008) four roles for instructors. The pedagogical role can include skills such as writing, evaluation, presentation, and providing feedback. The social role can include collaborative skills in teamwork, interpersonal communication, group processing, negotiation, and being an agent of change. The managerial role can include skills in organization, planning, discussion facilitation,

project management, and public relations. The technical role can include basic technology and multimedia usage skills.

In addition to the roles identified for a distance educator, the skills of a social work educator should also model the role of a social work professional. The CASWE-ACFTS (2014) *Standards for Accreditation* state “the overall quality of the program is fundamentally dependent upon the quality of the faculty and professional staff. They are fully competent to fulfill their duties. [They] represent a range of experience and perspectives, and have recognized competence and/or expertise in their respective areas” (p. 7). There is no specific list of skills, education, and experience of social work educators listed in the CASWE *Standards for Accreditation*; however, CASWE core learning objectives for students are similar to the social work generalist practice planned change model (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). This model emphasizes that social workers should have skills that enable them to engage, assess, plan, implement, evaluate, terminate and follow up with their clients in a professional social work setting. This professional list of skills could be added to Berge’s (2008) model for distance educators as a way of engaging all social work educators to identify essential skills for distance educators of social work that can help to create an effective learning environment in distance delivery programs in the field of social work.

In addition to instructor roles that include the skill set required to create an effective learning environment, the qualities of an instructor necessary for effective teaching can also be identified through research using the Student Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ). Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf (2008) conducted a review of existing studies within Canadian universities on student course evaluations. The authors reviewed a number of evaluation forms to measure education quality including Murray’s (1987) “Teacher Behaviours Inventory”. He

grouped sixty instructor behaviours in nine categories: 1) clarity; 2) expression; 3) interaction; 4) organization; 5) pacing; 6) disclosure; 7) speech; 8) rapport; and 9) teaching aids. Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf's (2008) report that key qualities included on student evaluations of education quality in Canada can be summarized as fairness, concern for student learning, organization, communication, enthusiasm, feedback, stimulation of learning, and respect for students.

Some researchers suggest that distance education requires instructors to adapt to new learning environments to change their style of teaching, as well as to learn how to operate multiple communication technologies (Bailey & Card, 2009; Thach, 1994; World Health Organization, 2015). In a Canadian study by Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, and Treslan (2010), students were asked to identify qualities that they believed were critical to effective teaching. Approximately 17,000 graduate and undergraduate students from the Memorial University of Newfoundland completed an online survey. Findings showed that students listed nine qualities that they believe an instructor should possess to teach effectively in both face-to-face and distance education courses: "respectful, responsive, knowledgeable, approachable, communicative, organized, engaging, professional, and humorous" (p. 6). The list identified by students has many similarities with the qualities listed in the Student Evaluation of Educational Quality questionnaires that measure teaching activities believed to improve student learning (Gravestock, & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008).

Currently, there is no established list of qualities that defines an effective social work educator. Professional social workers in Canada are expected to follow the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics. Some of the qualities that can be identified in the literature for professional social workers, in addition to being ethical, include being warm, genuine, and empathic (Shebib, 2014).

As there is no specific list of key qualities for social work educators, the list generated by Delaney et al. (2010), is proposed due to its currency and focus on distance education using Canadian students perceptions as an initial way of engaging social work educators to identify key educator qualities that can create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

This review indicates that the Berge (2008) model can be expanded to include the role of the social work professional, to highlight the importance of professional qualities and skills required to teach in social work program. The model for social work distance educators should have five overlapping roles: pedagogical, social, managerial, technical and professional. Each role can be further expanded to include a number of skills that social work instructors need to demonstrate to create an effective learning environment. Further research is needed to review skills and qualities identified in both the social work and educational literature that can help social work educators to create an effective online learning environment.

### **Student Characteristics**

Students are an integral component of the educational process. To design distance education courses or programs, and to satisfy the educational needs of online social work students, it is also necessary to examine the characteristics of students that help them to succeed as online learners. The elements of student characteristics include: (1) student qualities that are common elements of effective learning with specific emphasis on social work distance education, and (2) core competencies that refer to a group of skills requiring the ability of a student to successfully perform the requisite action (e.g., to learn effectively in a social work distance education environment). In order to create a list of student qualities and skills for effective learning in social work distance delivery programs, literature sources in the following areas were

consulted: the role of the student in an online learning environment, competencies for both the distance delivery student and the emerging social work professional, and student qualities that contribute to success in online learning.

In order to connect student characteristics with distance learning, it is important to understand the roles and expectations that students fulfill in an online learning environment. After identifying key roles, it is possible to identify competencies that can be connected to each role. A review of the literature shows that online students can play a number of roles in an online learning environment.

Borges Sáiz (2008) identified five sets of competencies that he believes comprise the role of the online student. These are operational, cognitive, collaborative, self-directing, and course-specific. Operational competencies represent information communication technology (ICT) skills that every online student needs to have to be successful in an online learning environment. This is an initial set of competencies that the other competencies can build upon. Cognitive competencies focus on how one can learn course content. Collaborative competencies require skills to enhance communication and co-operation. Self-directing competencies focus on skills that are put into practice internally by the learner. And course-specific competencies are the skills and strategies specific to course content, degree, or field of knowledge that can be based on a combination of skills from self-directing, collaborative and cognitive competencies. Borges Sáiz's (2008) model of the online student role can be compared to the Berge (2008) model of the roles for online instructors. For example, the operational competencies for students in the Borges Sáiz's model can be grouped under a technical learner role that is connected to a technical role for the instructors in the Berge's (2008) model. The collaborative competencies can be grouped under a social learner role and related to the social role in Berge's (2008) instructor model. The

pedagogical role for the online instructor identified by Berge (2008) can be connected to “cognitive learner role” for the online student based on the set of cognitive competencies; and Berge’s managerial role for the online instructor can be connected to “self-directed learner role” based on Borges Sáiz’s self-directed competencies. Each online student role maintains the same set of competencies that have been developed by Borges Sáiz (2008). The following summarizes the four categories of Borges Sáiz’s model:

The cognitive learner role for online students includes cognitive competencies. The role focuses on the learner’s ability to efficiently learn course content, apply his or her own knowledge, and ask for help if necessary. The set of skills needed to perform the role includes study skills, skills to find support, critical thinking skills, research skills, organization skills, self-reflective skills, and knowledge acquisition and application skills.

The technical learner role for online students includes operational competencies and focuses on the efficient use of information and communication technologies for student learning, communication, collaboration, and self-direction. The skills required for this role include basic technology usage skills that help to use information, and communication technology tools for communication and collaboration, information searches, retrieval, analysis, dissemination, and navigation in an online learning environment.

The social learner role includes collaborative competencies and focuses on effective communication and collaboration with other students and the instructor in an online learning environment. The main skills needed for this role are communication and group collaboration skills, writing skills, teamwork skills, online discussion skills, and feedback skills.



The self-directed learner role focuses on self-directing competencies that include self-management, self-monitoring, and self-appraisal when learning online. This goal focuses on the learner's ability to study online, stay motivated in an online learning environment, and to be responsible for one's own learning. The essential skills required for this role are organizational skills, time-management skills, negotiation skills, goal-setting skills, problem-solving skills, planning skills, and self-motivation skills (Borges Sáiz, 2008, pp. 3-4).

The model of the role of the online student incorporates some key competencies that are referred to in the literature on online student success. For example, Fresen (2005) suggests that students impact the outcome of learning in a distance education environment through the following processes: communication with other students (the social learner role), critical thinking approaches (the cognitive learner role), time management skills, expectations of efficiency and effectiveness, personal motivation, commitment, level of self-esteem, and problem-solving skills (the self-directed learner role). Moreover Meyer (2002) states that student learning depends on some individual qualities, such as attitude, motivation, preparedness (the self-directed learner role), and acquisition of technical skills (the technical learner role). DeVine (2013) suggests that the students who are best suited for online learning have unique skill sets and certain characteristics that set them up for success. These include:

- Being highly motivated to learn (the self-directed learner role).
- Having strong time-management skills (the self-directed learner role).
- Being highly communicative (the social learner role).
- Having self-discipline (the self-directed learner role).
- Demonstrating strong critical thinking skills (the cognitive learner role).
- Having basic technology skills (the technical learner role).

In addition to fulfilling the identified online learner roles, social work students should exhibit the list of skills that can be grouped in the emerging professional role. As there is no

particular set of qualities and skills for social work students, it is possible to apply a list of preferred competencies for the professional social worker, which is the same as for social work instructors. The new online student role can be called the “emerging social work professional role” to reflect the difference between a social work instructor and a social work student. The emerging social work professional role also incorporates the social work generalist practice planned change model (Engagement, Assessment, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, Termination, and Follow-up Skills) (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010).

Student qualities also help create an effective learning environment. Currently, there is no established list of qualities for an effective social work online student. Professional qualities for the student are the same as professional qualities for the social work instructor, as social work students should also learn how to follow the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and exhibit client-centred qualities of being warm, genuine, and empathic (Shebib, 2014). Student qualities for effective learning online are identified in some studies and are closely linked to the skills required for online learning. Dabbagh (2007) argues that the qualities that have traditionally been associated with being a successful online student (such as being independent, self-motivated, and goal-oriented) have now been expanded to include collaborative learning qualities (such as being interactive, respectful, and collaborative). Other qualities that are discussed in the literature include being knowledgeable, open-minded, and technologically savvy. As there is no specific list of key qualities for social work online students, the aforementioned qualities could be used as an initial way of engaging social work educators to identify essential student qualities needed to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

Further research is needed to review the skills and qualities identified in both social work and education literature that can help social work students to be successful in an online learning environment.

### **University Supports**

University supports are recognized to be one of the critical success factors that help instructors and students to create an effective learning environment. Freddolino and Sutherland (2000) state that by providing essential university supports social work programs "may be able to respond to the challenge of providing needed advanced educational resources for areas remote from social work schools, areas which often cannot afford to send experienced providers away to complete academic degrees" (p. 127). For this literature review, university support(s) will be divided into two areas: 1) university supports for instructors that are defined as services that are provided by post-secondary institutions to social work distance education instructors in order to help them effectively teach in the distance education environment, and 2) university supports for students that are defined as services that are provided by a post-secondary institution to students in order to help them effectively learn in an online environment.

### **Instructor Supports**

The significance of faculty guidance, training, and support to ensure success of any distance education endeavour has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Beaudoin, 1990; Betts & Heaston, 2014; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Dillon & Walsh, 1992; Howell, Saba, Lindsay, & Williams, 2004; Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009; Padgett & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000; Quinn & Barth, 2014; Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Flynn, 1998). Shelton and Saltsman (2005) indicate that the success of online education is highly dependent upon the available supports for instructors. However, because distance learning is still seen as a relatively new

approach to delivering educational services, many faculties are unprepared to address the differences in the support services required to create a successful online learning environment. This section of the literature review includes discussion on faculty motivation to teach online and an overview of university support services that are required to improve faculty motivation and preparedness to teach in online learning environment. The information collected from this examination forms the basis for creating a list of professional supports for distance delivery courses in social work and for identifying key areas in online course design and delivery that need to be included in faculty training programs for distance delivery instructors of social work.

Faculty motivation to teach online can determine the type of university supports that are needed to create an effective learning environment. Gautreau (2011) identifies extrinsic and intrinsic instructor motivation as a key factor for faculty to learn and use technology in their teaching. Giannoni and Tesone (2003) highlight five key *extrinsic* motivational factors (release time, technical support, job security, promotion, and financial incentive) and five key *intrinsic* motivational factors (personal satisfaction, teaching development, professional prestige, intellectual challenge, and recognition) that motivate instructors to teach online. Although the authors state that it is not always easy to categorize motivational factors as either intrinsic or extrinsic (for example, technical support can be seen as a part of the intrinsic motivational factor for overcoming "technological anxiety" as well as an extrinsic factor as a support service for the distance education instructor), the identified factors can increase instructor motivation which may improve teaching effectiveness. Lee (2001) suggests that the type of faculty motivation which improves teaching skills tends to be primarily intrinsic but that it can be enhanced when higher institutions provide instructional support, an extrinsic motivator, to fit instructor needs. If

an instructor's motivational factors are known, it is possible to build a support system around those factors to potentially increase the effectiveness of online course design and delivery.

Wright's (2012) study on faculty who teach online supports the importance of motivation and university support to improve their preparedness for online instruction. He created a questionnaire designed to identify the primary motivational factors and level of preparedness among faculty who teach online. Ten questions presented on an agree/disagree continuum that focused on both intrinsic and extrinsic factors among faculty members who teach online were used along with another ten questions using the same continuum to measure faculty preparedness to teach online. Wright found that flexibility and convenience were the key motivators for online teaching. The next key motivator identified was the ability to reach and teach a wider range of students. Wright concluded that faculty motivation was strongly connected to their perception of preparedness to teach online as most respondents in his study also felt that there were adequate funding and professional development opportunities that increased faculty motivation and level of preparedness to teach online. He also found that the faculty engaged in distance education possessed a high degree of self-efficacy and confidence in their technical skills for teaching online. Despite having strong pedagogical skills already, faculty members emphasized the importance of support that was available to them in further developing those skills identified in Wright's (2012) study.

There are many types of support that universities can provide by focusing on the identified extrinsic and intrinsic factors used to improve faculty motivation and their level of preparedness for teaching in an online learning environment. Delaney et al. (2010) suggest that universities develop a support plan and make instructors aware of various resources and supports in developing and delivering distance education courses and that those levels of support remain

consistent from the beginning to the end of the design and delivery process for any given course. For example, these authors suggest that in order to improve extrinsic motivation, universities could offer release time from teaching responsibilities for faculty members to focus on online course development, technical support for course design and delivery, increase job security for online instructors, promotional opportunities for faculty who teach online, and financial incentives to adequately compensate faculty for teaching in an online environment. In order to improve intrinsic motivation, universities could create an environment in which faculty can enhance personal satisfaction, teaching development, professional prestige, intellectual challenges, and recognition. By having a comprehensive support plan, universities can facilitate the creation of an effective learning environment by improving faculty motivation and the level of preparedness to teach in an online learning environment.

Findings from the review of the literature recommend that instructional training support should be personalized and allow flexibility in its structure to recognize the range of motivations and specific needs of each faculty member. Dickinson, Agnew, and Gorman (1991) and Bower (2001) suggest that universities should provide adequate and effective training for faculty members to address their individual needs for teaching in an online environment. Such training should include faculty development workshops for communication technologies used in the design and delivery of courses and pedagogical practices needed to teach effectively in an online learning environment. Bower (2001) suggests that such workshops can help faculty members learn how to deal with concerns related to the specific nature of online teaching and improve the interpersonal dimension of distance learning, which is a major concern shared by many educators. The need for training is also suggested by Fish and Gill (2009) who argue that most faculty members in the US perceive technology as stressful and have little experience with

distance course delivery. As a result, they do not know how to design courses for distance delivery. Becoming familiar with online instruction is important in developing a faculty's acceptance and utilization of distance delivery options in their teaching.

There are some recommendations in the literature on how to design faculty training programs for effective teaching in an online learning environment. For example, Gautreau (2011) suggests that training should include active-learning strategies to encourage faculty members to collaborate with each other and decide on the training content, dates and duration of each session, as well as the level of instruction. In addition to basic training, advanced sessions should be made available, preferably by individual consultations with trainers. Georgina and Hosford (2009) found that the most preferred training was a one-on-one format where instructors received personal support to meet specific goals. However, the most effective and efficient way regarding cost and time is to conduct training in small departmental groups that are facilitated by professional trainers who understand the learning processes and pedagogical strategies in a particular discipline.

Informational resources for instructors are an important component of university supports. Some universities have created unique online supports (websites) to promote successful teaching. These are divided into content areas that ensure instructors follow best practices for teaching in an online environment. For example, in Canada the University of British Columbia (UBC) (n.d.) has created a dedicated wiki web page, where instructors can locate relevant information about distance delivery options at the university. In the US, the University of Missouri (2011) developed a faculty guide for teaching and learning with technology. Both resources are designed to support faculty members in building their teaching effectiveness in an online learning environment.

University support can also be facilitated by the use of comprehensive evaluation feedback. Park University has developed the Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES) that is based on a comprehensive review of the literature on benchmarks and best practices for online pedagogy (Eskey & Roehrich, 2013). The key areas of instructor support at Park University include course organization and facilitation, building community in the online classroom, discussion management and instruction, assessment, grading, feedback, and managing course climate in an online learning environment. The instructors who complete the professional development program that is offered by the Park University are later evaluated by university administration on their level of preparedness to teach online and supported in areas where they need improvements. Eskey and Roehrich (2013) argue that the OIES model has been successful at Park University in that students receive high-quality instruction and instructors are supported through a mentorship program that involves being evaluated on a regular basis to ensure accountability and the maintenance of high standards for online course delivery.

The OIES framework can be linked to the Berge (2008) instructor role model as each area of support in OIES can enhance one of the four roles of an online educator. For example, in order to enhance the pedagogical role, training is provided on the following topics: discussion facilitation and instruction, assessment, grading, and feedback. Support for the social role focuses on building community in the online classroom, course climate, and the online classroom environment. Support for the managerial role is provided through course organization and facilitation training. And finally, the technical role is enhanced by supporting instructors in learning about online technology.

In addition to having special faculty development programs, instructor supports can also be provided by a number of professionally trained specialists in the field of distance education.



Lee (2001) argues that instructional support in universities usually is provided by professionals who specialize in the certain areas of online pedagogy in which faculty members need training and support to teach effectively. Professionals who provide support include instructional designers, graphic designers, course editors, technicians, audio and visual producers, teaching assistants, and librarians. Instructional professional support in an online learning environment can take different forms; such as support with course design, training in the use and application of communication technologies, workshops in selecting specific teaching methods, media, and technical support.

Professional instructional support is a critical element in creating successful learning environments, and instructional designers are the leading professionals who provide support for online teaching (Olcott & Wright, 1995; Bates, 2015). Shelton and Saltsman (2005) suggest that instructional designers should work with course instructors to adapt complex technological infrastructures to specific course objectives with the aim of developing courses that can be effectively delivered in a distance education learning environment to meet those stated course objectives. In order to be successful, instructional designers should have an in-depth understanding of the program curriculum and provide support that addresses the educational needs of both student and instructor to create and maintain an effective online learning environment.

This literature demonstrates that university support services for instructors are critical to the success of an online learning environment, and it suggests that faculty development programs and other support services should be provided to improve faculty motivation and preparedness for teaching online. However, there is no unified approach evident in the literature on how to design those training programs. Some authors recognize that an instructor's support program

should be designed based on the individual needs of the faculty member. Limited literature exists on the types of supports that should be provided for social work faculty to create an effective learning environment.

### **Student Supports**

Distance education is still seen as a new approach to delivering educational services, and many universities are unprepared to address the differences in the support services required to create a successful learning environment for online students. One way to address the differences is to focus on the types of university supports discussed in the literature that can be applied for distance delivery social work students to improve their learning. The information collected from this section of the literature review forms the basis for identifying key university services to be included in student support programs for distance delivery social work courses.

Several studies suggest that university support services for students are essential for their success in online learning. Ozoglu (2009; 2010) states that providing support for distance education students is crucial for improving student motivation for learning in an online learning environment ultimately improving teaching effectiveness. LaPadula (2003) suggests that support services contribute to the academic, personal, and career development of students and assist them in overcoming the challenges of studying at a distance (which mainly result from feelings of isolation). Mills (2003) adds that support services contribute directly to the two primary concerns of online education: recruitment and retention. Reid (1995) argues that students without proper supports are likely to delay the completion of their degrees or might drop out of online delivery programs.

While literature recognizes the importance of university support services for students, there is no clarity of what supports are needed to create an effective learning environment.

Scheer and Lockee (2003) argue that support mechanisms are often underdeveloped in many online education programs. Some researchers have acknowledged the need for more studies to focus on the development and implementation of quality student support services in distance learning programs (Robinson, 1995; Visser & Visser, 2000; Ozoglu, 2009; 2010). In their review of 107 articles on student support Dillon and Blanchard (1991) argue that the support services necessary to create an effective learning environment will vary according to the university due to the complex interrelationships among the needs of the learners, the requirements of the degree program, the university context, and the given communication technology used to deliver support services.

Student support services are not easy to design as there is no widely applicable list of support services to match individual needs at a particular point of mastering course content. The term *support* can be defined in different ways, and there are wide variations in how universities determine what constitutes student support services (Robinson, 1995; Rumble, 2000; Sewart, 1993). Ozoglu (2009) states that the terms guidance, counselling, advising, support services, student support, and learner support have all been used in distance education research to highlight a variety of activities and strategies designed by academic institutions to support and facilitate the learning process.

It is also challenging to classify all support services available to students. One form of classification proposed by Simpson (2002) placed all learner supports into two main categories: academic (or tutorial) and non-academic (or counselling) support. Academic support helps students develop cognitive and meta-cognitive skills along with resources for improving their performance in achieving the stated course objectives. Tutoring and feedback are two major academic support services provided by most universities. Non-academic supports address the

emotional and organizational development needs of students and assist them with administrative tasks such as registration and fee payment. Student orientation, personal counselling, and technical support are some common non-academic support services available in most distance education systems.

Another way to classify student support services is presented in the LaPadula (2003) study. LaPadula classified support services into three categories: (1) academic advising/career counselling, (2) personal/mental health counselling, and (3) services that promote a sense of community. LaPadula's classification expands Simpson's (2002) classification by introducing a third component of support (sense of community), suggesting that some support services can contribute to both academic and non-academic skill development. For academic advising/career counselling, LaPadula (2003) suggests that each university that offers online programs should have "a Web site that provides general advising information, links to academic counselor pages, online career counseling, online tutoring, and online lectures on study skills...offer online self-assessments to help students with their learning styles, interests, and career topics"(p. 122). In regards to personal/mental health counselling, a university can provide self-help materials, make referrals in the student's community, and offer confidential, online mental health information services where students can post questions and design online pamphlets that cover topics related to a student's overall well-being (such as anger management, depression, eating disorders, etc.). Services that promote a sense of community might include online student groups and dedicated websites that help online learners find study partners, participate in online study groups, chat with other students and faculty members, and access resources related to their programs and career goals. Another way to build a sense of community among online students is to have a

successful online student orientation program or to create a visual/audio yearbook that helps students to “meet” professors and other online learners.

There are a number of recommendations suggested in the literature on how to design support services for students. In order to design effective support services for online learners, Brindley and Paul (2004) recommend that university supports be personalized to respond to different individuals and groups. Student supports should encourage strong interaction among students as well as between students and faculty, tutors, institutional support staff, and academic content. University support services should serve the needs of its learners within its specific context, facilitate learning within courses, and address issues around student skills and personal development. Support services should also change continually to accommodate new learner populations, educational developments, economic conditions, technological advances, and findings from research and evaluation.

Tait (2000) observed that there are six core elements that institutions should take into account in planning support services for distance learners: the characteristics of the students, the demands of academic programs and courses, the geographical environment, the technological infrastructure, the scale of the program, and the requirements of management. These elements interact in complex ways, with trade-offs among them, and support services should address all six key dimensions to ensure that students receive the best possible services.

University support services can be provided to students before they are registered in online classes as well as during their registration in an online course. Herrell (2008) suggests that universities should provide support services to students before they plan to register for online courses in a form of readiness surveys. The author argues that measuring student readiness can be seen as the first step toward increasing the chances of a student’s success in online learning. A

comprehensive online or face-to-face orientation program after students are admitted to online programs should adequately prepare students for online learning. Ongoing support services, while students are enrolled in online courses, can be provided via information posted online (e.g., on faculty websites/course management systems/blogs/wikis), student support manuals, books or other printed resources. Ongoing support services also include face-to-face or online academic and non-academic skills workshops, one-on-one advising and tutoring support and/or peer-to-peer/student mentorship support services (Herrell, 2008).

No research studies could be found which focus specifically on support services for social work distance education students. A generic list of student support services compiled by the University of Hawaii (2013) provides an initial guide on what supports universities can make available to students; however, it does not identify those services needed to create an effective learning environment specifically for social work distance delivery courses. The University of Hawaii's list can be classified using Simpson's (2002) framework in academic and non-academic student support services. Academic supports include technical support, testing centres, bookstores, library services, registrar's offices, academic learning and tutoring services, academic counselling services, disability/accessibility services, and career/employment centres. Non-academic supports can include Aboriginal student centres, international student centres, student life and development centres, university financial aid services, university health services, and mental health, wellness, and personal counselling services. It is often not easy to separate academic support from non-academic support services, as many university student centers (Aboriginal and/or International) provide both types of supports (academic and non-academic). However, the support services listed on the University of Hawaii web page are very similar to the list developed by LaPadula (2003) which includes the following online student services:

admissions, financial aid, registration, prior learning credit evaluation, bursary, academic advisement, textbooks, library, student commons, and technical assistance.

The literature suggests some ways that student support services should be provided to increase student success in an online learning environment. The majority of authors recommend that university support services for students should capture the diverse needs of online learners, however, there is no list of university support services identified to meet the needs of social work students.

### **Summary of Current Findings**

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests a way to define effectiveness in social work distance delivery programs. By combining views from the social constructivism theory, Garrison's et al. (2000) community inquiry model and Patti's (1987) definition of service effectiveness it is possible to argue that an effective learning environment in social work distance education can be constructed by focusing on the three overlapping components of outcome, process, and positive experience, which occur when students successfully master learning objectives within a quality-designed learning environment where students are satisfied with the process and outcomes of learning. The focus on critical instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and available university support services as recognized success factors appear to be essential elements in an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

The findings from the literature review highlight that instructors and students of social work distance delivery programs should demonstrate certain roles to create an effective learning environment. Table 1 provides a comparative view of the roles of both instructors and students

along with the specific skills that are associated with each role to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

**Table 1: Instructor and Student Roles and Skills in Social Work Distance Education**

<b>Instructor Role</b>	<b>Corresponding Skills</b>	<b>Student Role</b>	<b>Corresponding Skills</b>
Pedagogical role	Writing, feedback, evaluation, and presentation skills	Cognitive learner role	Writing, study, critical thinking, research, organization, self-reflection, knowledge acquisition, and knowledge application skills
Social role	Collaborative teamwork, interpersonal communication, group processing, negotiation, and change agent skills	Social learner role	Group collaboration, interpersonal communication, writing, teamwork, online discussion, and feedback skills
Managerial role	Organizational, planning, discussion facilitation, project management, and public relations skills	Self-directed learner role	Organizational, time management, negotiation, goal-setting, problem-solving, planning, and self-motivation skills
Technical role	Basic technology and multimedia usage skills	Technical learner role	Basic technology usage skills
Social work professional role	Engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up skills	Emerging social work professional role	Engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up skills

This table indicates that online instructors and students of social work both fill at least five distinct roles in creating an effective learning environment. The social work professional / emerging social work professional is an added role that is not discussed in the Berge (2008) / Borges Sáiz (2008) proposed models for online instructor/student roles. Nevertheless it is a



required component of social work education as both social work instructors and students need to fulfill this role to meet professional social work requirements. The other four roles share a number of similar skills that are important for both instructors and students to demonstrate in an online learning environment. Although two roles (technical and social) share a similar set of skills for instructors and students, the other two roles are more distinct; instructors should demonstrate skills which reflect both pedagogical and managerial roles, while students should focus more on cognitive and self-directed learner roles. For example, the instructor should be able to design a course and to ensure that course objectives are met (pedagogical and managerial roles) while students should be able to learn course material to achieve the stated course objectives (cognitive and self-directed learner roles).

In addition to similarities between roles, a number of similarities exist among the qualities of instructors and students of social work distance delivery—both instructors and students should be ethical, respectful, warm, and empathic. In addition to exhibiting the core professional qualities, online instructors should be responsive, knowledgeable, approachable, communicative, organized, engaging, professional, and humorous. Online students should be independent, self-motivated, goal-oriented, interactive, collaborative, knowledgeable, open-minded, and technologically savvy.

Motivation is one of the key personal characteristics that contributes to the success of both social work students and instructors in an online learning environment. Although many factors can influence motivation, university support is identified as a key factor for success. Faculty development programs are very important in supporting instructors who teach in online learning environments. There are a number of areas discussed in the literature where instructors need support. Those areas are linked to the roles instructors play in the online learning

environment. For example, the focus on online pedagogy, assessment, grading, and feedback in the online environment is connected to improving the pedagogical role. The focus on building community in the online classroom, course climate and online classroom environment are areas that help improve the social role. Instructors support in course design and organization for online learning, discussion facilitation and online instruction can improve the managerial role. Similarly, the use of communication technology in specific distance delivery programs can improve the technical role of instructors in online learning environments connected to the technical role. Individualized instructor supports include: one-on-one personalized training sessions with a distance educator professional; ongoing mentorship/faculty development program; an online course on instructional support for distance educators in a specific discipline; online wiki resource/web page; peer-to-peer support from a fellow educator in the same field of teaching; small group workshops; and training manuals, books, or other printed literature resources. The ways in which a university can provide support services also include a plethora of options. These support services include information posted online (through a faculty website /course management system/blog/wiki), orientation sessions or workshops (either via web conference or face-to-face), readiness surveys (completed before taking online courses), ongoing one-on-one student advising, peer-to-peer student mentorship, and student support manuals, books, or other printed resources.

The review of the literature also highlights a number of professional supports available for instructors. Professional supports include a course editor, graphic designer, instructional designer, informational technologist, librarian, teaching assistant, or audiovisual producer. For students, supports are usually grouped around the type of services that should be available to allow them to succeed in the online learning environment. They include academic support

services such as technical support, a testing center, a bookstore, library services, the registrar's office, academic learning and tutoring services, academic counseling services, disability/accessibility services, and a career and employment center. Non-academic support services include personal/ mental health counselling, and support services that promote a sense of community, such as Aboriginal student centers, international student centers, mental health, student life and development centers, financial aid and physical health and wellness services for students. Each university support service for students can be also connected to specific roles students should fulfill to be successful in online learning environment.

### **Knowledge Gaps**

The review of the literature identified that there are some gaps in the current research. One of the major gaps is that a comprehensive study has not been done on instructor and student characteristics, and university supports as they pertain to the creation of an effective learning environment. Instead studies have focused on a single success factor, such as instructor characteristics or student supports for online education. As a result of the information gathered through conducting this literature review, it is evident that the professional role of social work educators and the emerging professional role for social work students are critical components for creating an effective online environment. Despite that, there is no established set of required skills, nor is there a list of university supports for instructors or students that promote the development of those professional skills. As well, there is a need to link distance education research with social work education research for the purpose of understanding the components that create an effective learning environment. Canadian universities have recently begun offering social work programs through online delivery, and in order to build credibility for online social

work degree programs more research on the factors to create effective online learning environments is needed.

This review of the current literature suggests that there are ways to organize instructor skills and qualities into a number of distinct roles. The current study would enable further refinement of each role as well as the skills/qualities that are necessary for performing them with the aim of creating an effective learning environment for both students and instructors. By identifying critical instructor and student characteristics and university supports for the creation of an effective learning environment, there is an opportunity to both enhance the working definition of an effective learning environment and to promote the development of social work education in the online learning environment.

A number of questions guide the current study to reduce existing knowledge gaps in social work distance education literature. Questions that help expand the literature review findings and address existing knowledge gaps focus on the critical success factors for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs. The questions that the current study addresses are:

1. What are the important characteristics (qualities and skills) an instructor must possess to be an effective instructor in a social work distance education program?
2. What are the important characteristics (qualities and skills) a student must possess to be an effective learner in a social work distance education program?
3. What are the important supports a university must provide to create an effective learning environment?

4. Can a model be identified which integrates answers to the first three research questions for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?

Responses to these questions provide the basis for compiling updated lists of instructor and student characteristics and university supports that are relevant to social work distance delivery programs. These newly synthesized lists of characteristics and supports then help to strengthen the working definition for creating an effective learning environment and to promote teaching and learning effectiveness in social work distance delivery programs.

### **Chapter Review**

The literature review discussed different theoretical orientations for defining effective learning environments in social work distance delivery programs. The key success factors necessary to create such environments were examined and these were grouped as instructor and student characteristics, and university supports. Key findings and knowledge gaps were identified and four research questions were proposed that should help to identify critical instructor and student characteristics and university supports to create an effective learning environment.

The next chapter outlines the exploratory-descriptive mixed methods research design used to answer the research questions identified above. Chapter three also describes the study population, the sample, and data collection and analyses procedures.

### **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents the research design and methodology for the study. The literature review has served to identify selected instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports needed to create an effective learning environment in distance delivery programs in general. However, there is a lack of knowledge on critical characteristics and supports specific to social work distance delivery programs. This study draws on the perceptions of distance social work educators to address the existing gap in the literature through the identification of such characteristics and supports.

A pragmatic worldview has been applied to guide the selection of research design methods used to answer the selected research questions. The chapter also outlines the study population, the sampling strategies, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis techniques. Ethical implications and the strengths and limitations of the design are also discussed.

#### **Research Objectives**

The overarching goal of this study is to deepen understanding related to those instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports necessary for the creation of an effective online learning environment in social work distance education. The research questions summarized in the last chapter reflect the research objectives of the study. The following research objectives guide the research process:

- To identify instructor characteristics which are critical to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- To identify student characteristics which are critical to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- To identify university supports that are critical to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- To develop a model which integrates answers to the first three research questions for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education.

Based on these objectives, the research questions aim to elicit a greater understanding of social work instructors' perspectives on necessary components of effective social work education in distance learning.

## **Research Design and Rationale**

### **Methodology in Social Sciences**

All research in the social sciences is grounded in philosophical assumptions about the world. Within social work, knowledge creation has been dominated by two contrasting philosophical perspectives: positivism and interpretivism (Payne, 2014). These perspectives on the social world and the problems it faces are commonly viewed as irreconcilable (Stewart, 2011). Payne (2014) and Robbins et al. (2012) provide a detailed review on the debate between these two perspectives, which were highlighted in Chapter 2. However, as research in the social sciences continues to grow in an attempt to answer more complex problems, alternative perspectives are emerging (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Pragmatism is one of the alternative approaches that has emerged to transcend the positivist/interpretivist dichotomy and is associated with mixed methods research. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003, p.713) define pragmatism as:

a deconstructive paradigm that debunks concepts such as “truth” and “reality” and focuses instead on “what works” as the truth regarding the research questions under investigation. Pragmatism rejects the either/or choices associated with the paradigm wars, advocates for the use of mixed methods in research, and acknowledges that the values of the researcher play a large role in interpretation of results. (p. 713)

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) provided a helpful classification of four worldviews typically used in research. Table 2 presents common elements of the positivist (postpositivist), interpretivist (constructivist), and pragmatist worldviews; this list excludes elements of the

advocacy/participatory worldview that can be found in the original table (Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 24). It is not relevant to the current study due to its primary focus on political concerns and the tendency to answer action-oriented research questions.

**Table 2: Common Elements of Worldviews**

<b>Worldview Element</b>	<b>Postpositivism</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>	<b>Pragmatism</b>
Ontology (nature of reality)	Singular	Multiple	Singular and Multiple
Epistemology (relationship between research and that being researched)	Distance and impartiality	Closeness	Practicality
Axiology (role of values)	Unbiased	Biased	Multiple Stances
Methodology (process of research?)	Deductive	Inductive	Combining
Rhetoric (language of research)	Formal Style	Informal Style	Formal or Informal

*Note:* Adapted from *Designing and conducting mixed-methods research* by J. W. Creswell, and V.L. Plano Clark, 2007, Los Angeles, CA: Sage, p. 24.

Pragmatism provides an opportunity to connect ontological, epistemological, axiological, methodological, and rhetorical issues about how one can know the social world, what one can know about it, the role of values, and the process of research. Pragmatists recognize the value in using different, but complementary, strategies to answer selected research questions. By re-conceptualizing ontology in a less rigid way, the use of pragmatism provides an opportunity to uncover critical characteristics and supports by focusing on the “social reality that goes beyond contingent beliefs and interests” (Stewart, 2011, p. 61). A pragmatic worldview also supports the collection, analysis, and integration of as many forms of data deemed necessary for the study. The axiological debate regarding researcher bias in pragmatism is resolved by accepting values as a common component of the research process that needs to be explicitly and reflexively stated. The language and presentation of the research findings in pragmatism is both formal and



informal as the goal is to bridge the gap between positivist and interpretivist worldviews and, in this case, to allow students, instructors, and university administrators to better understand the research findings. Such a combination of methods leads “to holistic answers being generated that are based on multi-dimensional accounts” (Stewart, 2011, p. 62).

A pragmatic approach provides the opportunity to objectively collect data on instruments via quantitative survey questionnaires and to connect with participants during qualitative interviews to best determine “what works” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 24). The researcher can incorporate multiple stances by using some checks to eliminate bias and actively talk about bias while collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. The next section highlights how a pragmatic worldview has been applied in selecting the exploratory-descriptive mixed methods research design for this study.

### **Exploratory-Descriptive Mixed Methods Research Design**

Social work distance education is a relatively new field of study, so to answer selected research questions in an under-studied area, an exploratory-descriptive mixed method design is helpful. Exploratory studies are needed when a new phenomenon is being investigated or when there is little knowledge about specific concepts (Sue & Ritter, 2012). In exploratory studies, the researcher usually looks for individuals who are experts in the area. Descriptive research, according to Sue and Ritter (2012), aims to yield data that does not prove causality between social phenomenon, rather its goals are to “describe people, products, and situations” (p.2).

A mixed methods design allows the researcher to combine quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches. This approach is suggested by Johnson and Turner (2003) who recommend using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to answer research questions for exploratory-descriptive studies. They suggest that “methods should be mixed in a

way that has complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses” (p.299). The goal of mixed methods research is to build on the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both approaches in a single research study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Haight & Bidwell, 2016). With mixed methods, researchers are not restricted to a single method; thus they may expand their choices and use the approaches that are best suited for answering research questions. In addition, mixed methods that include multiple data sources, data collection methods and data collection analyses result in findings considered to be more rigorously obtained. Haight and Bidwell (2016) state: “when information is obtained in various ways and from different sources, there is richness of understanding that would not be available from one type of inquiry alone” (p.8).

The current study uses a mixed methods design several ways. First, the study employs a mixed methods approach to the research questions. Hunter and Brewer (2003) suggest that the types of research questions that are used in distance education research require the use of mixed methods as this type of approach “generates a broad view of the topic while allowing for a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of study data” (p. 607).

Second, methodological triangulation reflects a mixed methods approach to data collection and requires that at least two methods be used in a study to check the results (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Triangulation is helpful for this study as it ensures that the lists of instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports that are generated through the literature review can be verified and expanded upon by using both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. Triangulation, which employs both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in the same study, is known as between - or across - method triangulation (Jick, 1979; Thurmond, 2001). By using multiple methods, the challenges that stem

from the utilization of a single method are decreased, and there is "the potential for counterbalancing the flaws or the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 21).

Another reason for applying a mixed methods design to the current study is complementarity. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) suggest focusing on complementarity when "qualitative and quantitative methods are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon" (p. 258). Specific to this study, the use of a qualitative interview to identify the social work educator's rationale for assigning critical and non-important ratings for selected characteristics and supports complements the use of a quantitative questionnaire to measure these assigned rankings. Hesse-Biber (2010) suggests that qualitative data helps to clarify the meaning of statistical results and adds an expanded perspective to quantitative findings generated through a literature review.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) provide three questions to assist with the selection of an appropriate mixed-methods design. These questions take into account the timing, the weighting, and the mixing for both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The timing decision highlights the order in which the data is used in the research and offers the choice of either a concurrent or sequential design. Concurrent timing is when data is collected in one phase while sequential timing is when data is collected in two distinct phases. In this study, quantitative data was collected first using a survey questionnaire based on the literature review findings. Qualitative data was then collected from those participants who agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews during the second data collection phase. Participants who agreed to be part of the qualitative interviews were contacted soon after the quantitative phase to give them some

opportunity to reflect on the survey responses while avoiding a long delay that might affect their ability to recall reasons for their answers.

The second question, which concerns weighting, is related to the relative importance of qualitative and quantitative data when addressing research questions. For this study literature review findings were used to identify key concepts and variables that might define the characteristics and supports deemed critical to creating an effective distance learning environment. Qualitative data provided a more in-depth understanding of the reasons why those characteristics and supports were identified. This qualitative data was gathered through an interview where questions were based on the information collected from the survey questionnaire. Unequal weighting has been assigned to the two methods of data collection for this study, with priority being given to quantitative data. Based on suggested guidelines by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) and the exploratory-descriptive nature of this study, which includes a strong emphasis on identification of critical characteristics and university supports that will occur during the quantitative part of the study, the study follows a QUAN-qual design whereby the use of upper and lower case letters indicates the weighting with the qualitative component being non-dominant in this case.

After determining the timing and weighting, the issue of mixing is the final decision researchers should make when selecting a specific mixed methods design. Three ways of mixing data are suggested: merging datasets, embedding data at the design level, and connecting data analysis to data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In order to best answer the research questions for this study, connecting the data at the analysis stage was the chosen mixing method. Connecting the data occurs when the analysis of one type of data requires the other type of data. In the current study when quantitative data was obtained on what characteristics and supports are

considered to be critical, qualitative data was gathered to determine the rationale for selecting those characteristics to help understand the reasons for designating certain characteristics as critical.

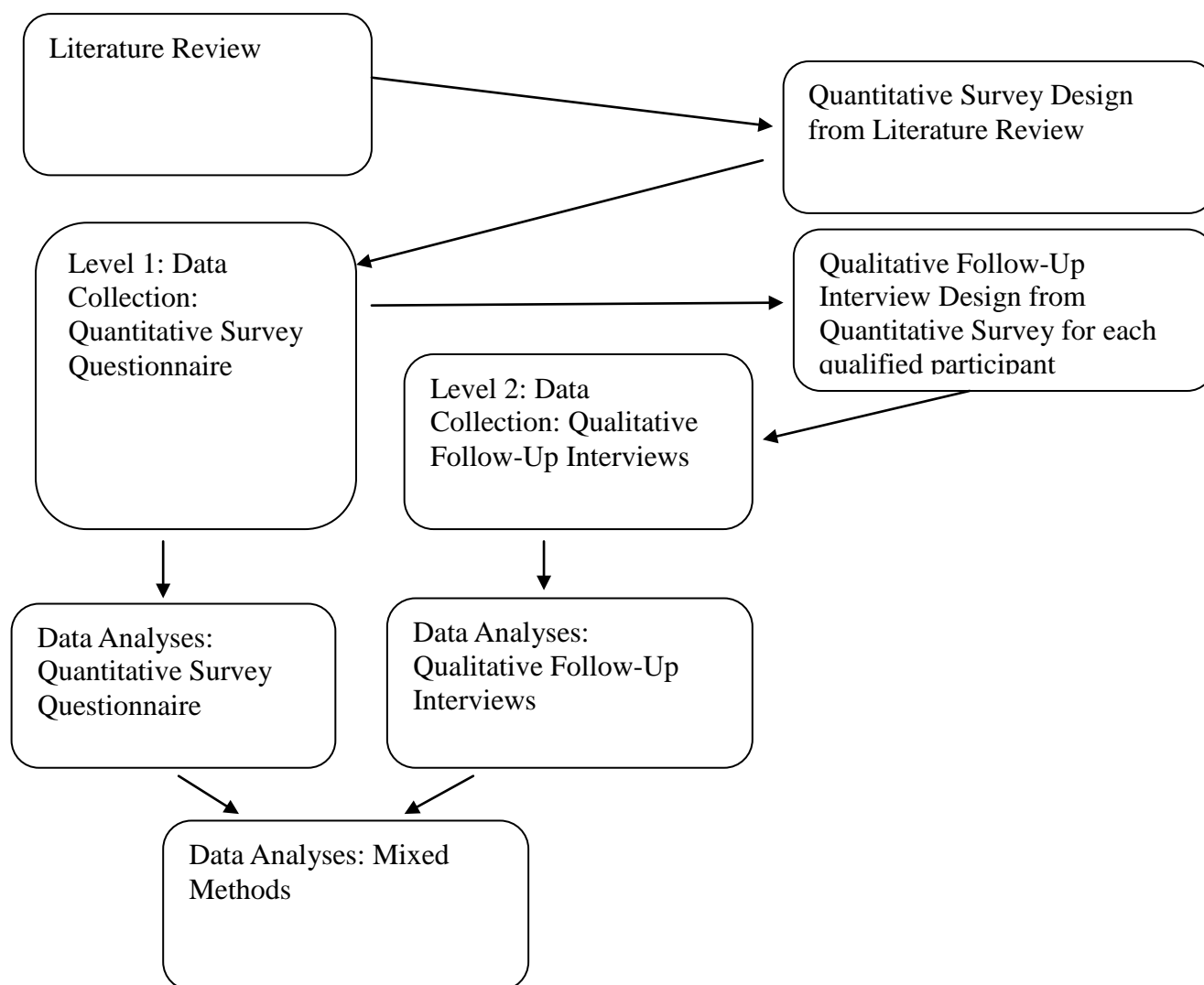
The QUAN-qual mixed methods design has been utilized in some studies to investigate new phenomenon when existing literature was limited and perceptions of experts were required to uncover new knowledge. One study employed a mixed methods design that included a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative focus groups to explore the perceptions of school social workers about the most effective truancy interventions for reducing the level of absenteeism among African-American high-school students (White, 2009). A study by Ivankova (2004), which asked Ph.D. students to identify factors that predict the likelihood that they will complete their studies, used a similar design; after using a quantitative survey to identify those factors, the author used a qualitative multiple case study approach to explain why certain factors were significant. A third study focused on the exploration and comparison of “perceptions of Chinese-American parents of gifted and non-gifted students about their children’s academic achievement, home environment, and Chinese language” (Yang, 2004, p. 49). That exploratory study also used a mixed methods design, which included survey research to gather data about the backgrounds and perceptions of the parents, followed by in-depth interviews. Yang’s (2004) methodology and research design are quite congruent with the design selected for the current study.

### **Data Collection Methods**

In order to implement the selected design, two data collection methods were used. Quantitative data was collected via an electronic survey (Appendix A) using a structured response format primarily, and qualitative data was collected via open-ended follow-up semi-

structured interviews (Appendix E). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the data collection design used in the current study.

**Figure 1: Visual Representation of the Data Collection Design**



The literature review provided information on what type of instructor and student characteristics and university supports are used to create an effective learning environment. Survey questions were designed from the literature review findings. The quantitative survey questionnaire was distributed to eligible social work educators from four universities in Canada.

Once Level 1 data was collected from the survey questionnaire, the qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with those participants who agreed to share the reasons for designating certain characteristics and university supports to be critical in an online learning environment. Quantitative data and qualitative data were analyzed and later integrated using the mixed methods approach.

## **Site Selection and Sample**

### **Overview of Site Selection**

As of 2015 in Canada, four universities accredited by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS) offered BSW social work degree programs via distance delivery: the University of Victoria, Dalhousie University, the University of Calgary, and the University of Manitoba. Except for the University of Manitoba, which offers only a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program online, the other three CASWE-accredited universities offer both an undergraduate and a Master of Social Work degree program (MSW) online.

The University of Victoria's distance BSW program was established over 30 years ago and, based on their website information, continues to "offer a progressive, interactive curriculum that responds to the needs of the profession". The school recently started offering a MSW degree online (School of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2015).

For the Dalhousie University School of Social Work, distance delivery of the BSW degree began in 1995 with the creation of the Cape Breton cohort program (MacDonald & Farry, 2008). This initiative evolved to include nationwide distance delivery of both undergraduate and graduate degree programs, beginning in September of 2001 (School of Social Work, Dalhousie University, 2015).

The University of Calgary designed the BSW Virtual Learning Circle for students who are residents outside of Calgary, Edmonton, or Lethbridge. The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary also currently offers a distance MSW program concentrating on leadership in human services (Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, 2015).

The University of Manitoba has developed a distance BSW degree for individuals who are employed in the social services field and are living outside of Winnipeg, but who may not have had the opportunity to pursue a social work education. The Faculty of Social Work has also offered cohort distance courses since 1994 (Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba, 2015).

Table 3 provides a summary of key characteristics for each (CASWE-ACFTS) accredited university that offers social work programs via distance delivery. Information was collected from the corresponding university websites, the CASWE-ACFTS 2011-2012 member dataset, and through communication with distance delivery program coordinators at each site. It was not possible to know the exact number of social work distance education students in each program, so the total numbers of students are provided (face-to-face and distance education) who had an active registration in the 2011-2012 academic year is identified.

The table describes delivery information for these four distance social work programs in Canada with an emphasis on their BSW programs. The common features of the above-mentioned programs include the option of either full-time or part-time study and the ability to complete an undergraduate degree while living in a remote community. Three out of the four programs have a required residency component for undergraduate students; that is, some course work must be completed on-campus. The residency includes periodic travel to the existing BSW program delivery sites for face-to-face instruction for a minimum of one week at a time. Three out of four



programs used the Desire 2 Learn (D2L) learning management system for courses effective in fall, 2015. The student-instructor ratio ranges from 19:1 at the University of Calgary to 43:1 at Dalhousie University.

**Table 3: CASWE-ACFTS Accredited BSW Distance Delivery Programs Characteristics**

University / Characteristics	University of Victoria	Dalhousie University	University of Calgary	University of Manitoba
Total number of BSW students in 2011-2012	313	232	421	707
Total number of MSW students in 2011-2012	63	223	316	147
Total number of faculty (2011-2012)	16	11	39	28
Student-instructor ratio	23.5:1	41.36:1	18.89:1	29.44:1
MSW degree online	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
On-campus residency requirement for distance BSW	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Learning management system	Course Spaces	Desire to Learn	Desire to Learn	Desire to Learn
Opportunity for full- time and part- time study	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The four selected programs for this study that offer BSW curriculum via distance education are the only programs in Canada accredited by CASWE-ACFTS. The CASWE-ACFTS requires all BSW programs to meet the same accreditation standards. Although there are some variation in course design and delivery among all four BSW programs, the CASWE-ACFTS accreditation requirements to cover the same curriculum areas makes all the selected programs eligible for inclusion in the current study. By selecting all distance education programs that are currently accredited by CASWE-ACFTS, it allows the researcher to conduct a national survey of a complete population of social work distance educators in Canada.

## **Sample Size**

The study's participants are distance social work instructors (faculty and sessional) at the four CASWE-ACFTS accredited universities that deliver a complete BSW curriculum via online delivery. The selected Schools of Social Work have shown expertise in the design and delivery of an array of distance social work courses accredited by CASWE-ACFTS.

Based on personal conversations with deans and directors of the selected universities in May, 2015 approximately 75 instructors including regular tenure-track faculty members and part-time (sessional) staff, were estimated to be teaching social work courses using distance delivery. This total varies each year based on the number of courses that are offered in the online learning environment as well as the number of faculty members employed to teach these courses.

## **Response Rate**

The response rate is an important characteristic of the survey research. Baruch (1999) examined 175 different academic journal studies and found a lower response rate in those involving top management or organizational representatives, including university professors. The average response rate in the North American studies was 36.1%, with a standard deviation of 13.3%. A higher response rate generally leads to a smaller sampling error. An average response rate of 36.1% would require 25 to 30 instructors to complete the survey, and this was the goal in the current study.

The current study achieved a 45.3% response rate based on the 34 completed questionnaires using the estimated number of 75 instructors. The response rate for qualitative interviews was 70%, as 24 out of 34 possible respondents participated in the follow-up interviews, which suggest a strong commitment from survey participants to provide their

rationales for designating individual characteristics and supports to be critical in an online learning environment.

### **Sampling Procedures**

**Quantitative survey questionnaire sampling.** Sampling issues almost invariably force pragmatic choices (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003). To obtain quantitative data for this study, all distance social work instructors at the identified universities were invited to participate. Such an approach involves a survey of the complete population rather than a selected sample. However, certain criteria were identified that imposed some limits. Criteria for the selection of respondents were: 1) teaching at a CASWE-ACFTS accredited academic institution that offers a full BSW degree online; 2) teaching social work courses using distance education delivery methods; and 3) having taught at least one distance delivery course in the last two academic years (i.e., 2013/2014 or 2014/2015). These criteria were established because there are other CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programs in Canada that offer some of their courses using distance delivery methods but do not offer fully accredited social work distance delivery programs and the purpose of this study was to examine the instructor perspective from CASWE-ACFTS accredited BSW distance delivery programs. The rationale for having teaching experience in distance education within the past two years was based on the study's focus on more recent experiences in social work distance education in Canada.

The researcher used some techniques to improve the response rate and to provide the most diverse representation of instructors' perceptions to answer the stated research questions. The first invitation to participate in the survey was sent to deans and directors of the selected Schools of Social Work with the request to forward the information to all faculty members and sessional instructors who met the stated criteria. Follow-up emails were forwarded to all eligible

instructors during the quantitative data collection phase to ensure an optimal response rate. Quantitative data collection continued until the minimum response rate (36%) was reached. The final response rate was 45.3% (34 respondents) based on the total number of 75 estimated participants which is higher than the average response rate reported in the Baruch (1999) review.

**Qualitative interview sampling.** The sample for the qualitative component of the study was drawn from the group of instructors who completed the quantitative survey questionnaire and who indicated their willingness to participate in the follow-up interview. The approach to drawing this sample can be described as purposive. Using purposive opportunistic sampling techniques involves “taking opportunities as they come along” (Kemper et al., 2003, p. 283). These authors also suggest that purposive opportunistic sampling techniques involve using any possibilities to reach as many research participants as possible to increase the response rate. It also allows the insiders’ knowledge to increase the response rate as instructors who have participated in the study can encourage their colleagues to become part of the study.

A minimum of three participants from each university was initially proposed by the supervisory committee for follow-up interviews to ensure that a diversity of perspectives was captured from each participating study site. During the data collection phase of the study, the researcher contacted all instructors who indicated their willingness to participate in the follow-up interview. The total number of completed interviews was 24: nine interviews with instructors from the University of Manitoba, six interviews with University of Calgary instructors, six interviews with Dalhousie University instructors and three interviews with University of Victoria instructors. Interviews were continued until the minimum number of instructors for each site was met, and all those who expressed an interest in being interviewed were given an opportunity to participate within the designated time line for the study.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

### **Quantitative Survey**

**Survey questionnaire design.** A survey questionnaire (see Appendix A) was developed to identify instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports perceived to be critical in creating an effective online learning environment from the perspective of the distance social work educator. On questionnaire development, Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) caution that each item should be designed to relate to a research objective. For this study, initial lists of instructor and students characteristics and university supports that were used in developing questions for the quantitative survey were gathered through the literature review process.

There were several advantages to using a questionnaire in the current study. A questionnaire is useful in securing "information from varied and widely scattered sources; it is a particularly useful method of data collection when the investigator cannot readily see personally all the people from whom he/she wishes to obtain evaluations" (Tracey, 1971, p. 120). A questionnaire is also more time effective than an interview (Bramley, 1991), less expensive to distribute and collect data (Hochstim, 1967), and is useful for isolating and defining elements for reporting. Johnson and Turner (2003) also add that questionnaires are useful for measuring attitude and eliciting other content from research participants. However, there are some challenges; questionnaires should be kept short and might have missing data and non-responses to selected items. Questionnaires also do not elicit detailed information (Hunter, 2012).

The questionnaire designed for this study was organized in a simple, easy-to-read fashion. It was divided into six parts:

- Part 1: Motivating Factors and Faculty Preparedness for Teaching in a Social Work Distance Delivery Program

- Part 2: Distance Social Work Instructor Characteristics
- Part 3: University Supports for Distance Social Work Instructors
- Part 4: Distance Social Work Student Characteristics
- Part 5: University Supports for Distance Social Work Students
- Part 6: Social Work Distance Education Teaching Experience and Demographic Profile

Part 1 of the questionnaire was based on literature review findings; specifically, Wright's (2012) statements, which use an agree-disagree response scale that, in this case, provided information on the motivation and preparedness for online teaching from the perspective of the social work instructor. Parts 2-5 focused on identifying instructor characteristics (Part 2), instructor support services (Part 3), student characteristics (Part 4), and student support services (Part 5) in social work distance education. Each part asked participants to measure the importance of each identified characteristic and to identify support services for both instructors and students. The questionnaire was also designed to allow respondents to suggest any unlisted characteristics and support services they deem critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. Parts 2-5 include the criticality scale that was developed in Thach's (1994) study. The following paragraphs highlight key questions included in Parts 2-5 of the survey questionnaire to answer the stated research objectives.

In the first set of questions in Part 2 on social work instructor characteristics respondents were asked to rate the importance of each instructor characteristic selected from the literature as significant for instructor success in social work distance education. Also, they were asked to make suggestions for additional instructor characteristics (not included in those drawn from the literature review), which they deem critical for instructor success in social work distance education. The second set of questions focused on the perceived level of importance of each

instructor skill identified in the literature as significant for instructor success in social work distance education. Respondents were also asked to identify any additional instructor skills that were not included in those drawn from the literature review and identified by the respondents as critical for instructor success in social work distance education.

Part 3 of the questionnaire on university supports for instructors had three questions. The focus of the first question was on training topics considered to be important in faculty development programs when designing and delivering social work courses in an online learning environment. The second question focused on the professional supports needed for social work educators to teach in an online learning environment. The third question addressed how support services can be provided to effectively meet the needs of distance social work educators.

Part 4 of the questionnaire on student characteristics was similar to Part 2 for instructor characteristics. The first question asked instructors to rate the importance of each student quality that has been identified in the literature as significant for student success in distance social work education. The second question focused on the perceived level of importance of each student skill that has been identified in the literature as significant for student success in social work distance education. For both questions, respondents were also asked to identify additional student skills and qualities (not included in those drawn from the literature review) deemed critical for student success in social work distance education.

Part 5 of the questionnaire on university supports for students had three questions that were similar to Part 3 for instructor supports. The focus of the first question was on academic support services needed for social work students to learn most effectively in an online learning environment. The second question focused on the non-academic support services and the final

question addresses how support services can be provided to meet the needs of distance social work students.

Part 6 of the survey instrument included questions on participant background information, including age, gender, years of experience teaching online social work courses, and current faculty position. It also focused on the teaching experiences of the participants and included questions regarding the types of online courses taught and the modes of delivery used. The data gathered from this part helped to create a demographic profile for social work distance delivery instructors who teach at CASWE-ACFTS accredited universities.

The final two questions of Part 6 gave participants the opportunity to ask questions, provide comments or voice concerns. Respondents were also offered the chance to participate in a follow-up interview to explain their rationale for ranking certain characteristics and supports. These questions allowed for the inclusion of additional information to identify other characteristics and supports critical to creating successful social work distance delivery programs, and an opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview where these perceptions could be shared directly with the researcher.

Some techniques were used to strengthen the questionnaire design. The construction of the survey items follows key principles outlined by Johnson and Turner (2003) to ensure that they match the research objectives, use familiar language without “leading,” avoid the use of double-barrelled questions, and include a mix of both open- and closed-ended questions to enhance the richness of the data. The questionnaire was pilot-tested on a group of instructors who teach distance courses in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba. The pilot test resulted in some wording modifications to the questionnaire (e.g.,



Disability/Accessibility services instead of the original wording of disability services) and changes to the questionnaire layout to improve readability of the survey.

**Survey questionnaire implementation.** A cover letter (see Appendix C) explaining the purpose of the research and inviting all eligible instructors to participate was sent via email along with the survey questionnaire. Gall et al. (2003) suggest that, since a cover letter strongly influences the return rate, it should be designed carefully. The letter emphasized the significance of the study as well as the importance of the respondents' professional affiliation and the value of information that only members with this affiliation can supply.

An informed consent form was also attached to the email invitation, and this was sent to each School of Social Work for deans/directors to distribute to all eligible instructors. Participants were encouraged to contact the researcher by phone or email if they had questions or comments concerning the survey instrument. Respondents were also given the option to return surveys via surface mail or electronically.

A follow-up email was sent two weeks before the completion deadlines listed in the original cover letter. Gall et al. (2003) state that "successful follow-up letters usually take the approach that the researcher is confident the individual wished to fill out the questionnaire, but perhaps because of some oversight or an error on the researcher's part, it was overlooked" (p.234). The follow-up letter (see Appendix D) reiterated the significance of the study and the importance of the participant's contribution, while using a language different from that contained in the original letter. The aim was to collect a minimum of 25-30 completed survey questionnaires before starting the data analysis phase for the quantitative component of the survey. The researcher sent follow-up e-mails two weeks after the research start date and encouraged participants in the qualitative part of the study to promote research among their

faculty members. These strategies resulted in 34 completed surveys over the period of three months (June-August 2015), which met the response rate estimates initially set for the study.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

**Follow-up interview design.** Follow-up interviews were used to collect qualitative data for the study. Johnson and Turner (2003) suggest that qualitative interviews allow probing that is impossible in the questionnaire and can provide in-depth information and good interpretive validity. They are also useful for exploration and confirmation of the data gathered through the questionnaire. In this study, the follow-up interview provided an opportunity to ask research participants about their reasons for assigning a ranking of critical or non-important to selected characteristics and supports. The interview guide questions (see Appendix D) were reworded as needed during the interviews, and were covered by the interviewer in any sequence.

**Conducting the follow up interview.** During the follow-up interview, the questions related to why selected instructor and students characteristics and university supports identified in the literature review were given critical or non-important ratings. Examples of questions that were asked include: (1) Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following instructor quality; and (2) Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following instructor quality (qualities were drawn from the interviewee's responses to the quantitative questionnaire).

Answers to the open-ended questions during the follow-up interview provided an opportunity to develop more in-depth responses to the study research questions. Each participant who indicated their willingness to participate in the interview phase of the study was contacted after the list of critical/non-important characteristics and supports was extracted from their individual survey questionnaire responses. Although some analytical procedures were initiated

while data was still being collected, full analyses of the data was initiated after all data was collected.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

#### **Quantitative Survey Data Analysis**

Since the research design is descriptive and exploratory in nature, evaluation of the questionnaire responses relies heavily on the use of descriptive statistics. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) suggest that data codes should be established at the same time the data collection tool is designed. A codebook was created to facilitate both data entry and analysis. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 17 was used as the primary data analysis tool. Statistical analysis of the questionnaire data produced the mean, mode, and standard deviations of each rating for each identified characteristic and support. Rankings were calculated based on the high and low mean scores of the ratings. Also, a list of the most frequently identified critical characteristics and supports was compiled.

#### **Qualitative Interview Data Analysis**

The data generated from the qualitative interviews were analyzed in several steps, as identified by Holloway (1997):

- (1) Ordering and organizing the collected material
- (2) Re-reading the data
- (3) Breaking the material into manageable sections
- (4) Identifying and highlighting meaningful phrases
- (5) Building, comparing, and contrasting categories
- (6) Looking for consistent patterns of meanings
- (7) Searching for relationships and grouping categories together
- (8) Recognizing and describing patterns, themes, and typologies
- (9) Interpreting and searching for meaning (p.44).

All interviews were digitally recorded. Following this responses were digitally transcribed. A summary sheet for each interview was created, which included information such

as the time, date, and place of the interview as well as the code number of the participant. A brief description of the setting in which the interview took place was noted. Initially interview transcripts were ordered into parts that corresponded to the sections from the quantitative survey. The data from each section of the in-depth interview were then coded using words or short sentences that contained the general idea of the sentence or paragraph (critical or non-important characteristics and supports along with the corresponding reasons for inclusion/exclusion). Commonalities and similar codes (i.e., same reasons for assigning ratings) from all interviews were sorted and grouped together. Recurrent ideas and consistent patterns in the data were identified during the analysis of interview data. Thematically similar data sets were placed together. Links made between categories were described and summarized (Holloway, 1997; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). This process continued until the minimum number of completed interviews required for each sample site has been reached.

### **Mixed Methods Data Analysis**

The data analysis utilized a data reduction mixed-methods technique (Onwuegbuzie & Teddie, 2003). Data reduction occurred after both qualitative and quantitative data had been collected. For the quantitative survey, data reduction included rankings of characteristics and supports and the computation of descriptive statistics. Qualitative data reduction included the exploratory thematic analysis of all those critical characteristics mentioned in the open-ended questionnaire process as well as the identification of reasons for highlighting specific characteristics and supports as critical. In addition, characteristics and supports identified in the literature as critical but rated as non-important by respondents were also analyzed.

After both the qualitative and quantitative data have been reduced, Onwuegbuzie and Teddie (2003) recommend a data display stage to make the information more easily accessible.

The reduced data was presented using a large table to highlight the ratings of critical characteristics and supports generated from the Likert scale questions. Any new characteristics and university supports identified through the survey and in-depth interview were also noted.

The final stage of data analysis involved data integration (Onwuegbuzie & Teddie, 2003). This stage led to the initial data interpretation, where inferences were made and legitimization of the data occurred. The researcher was able to interpret the data using findings from the literature review and connect the identified instructor and student characteristics to the corresponding roles. Onwuegbuzie and Teddie (2003) suggest that once the researcher believes that the interpretation represents the most plausible explanation of the underlying data, then the implications and recommendations for the study can be formulated.

### **Validity and Reliability**

#### **Quantitative Questionnaire**

There are a number of reliability tests that are commonly used in designing survey questionnaires (Burns et al., 2008). Due to time and practical constraints that would have affected the response rate, test-retest reliability was not performed in this study as this method requires the same individuals to answer the same questions within a span of two to four weeks. However, the internal consistency test that assesses whether “different items tapping into the same construct are correlated” (p. 249) was performed. Cronbach's alpha for instructor qualities was 0.941, for instructor skills was 0.874, for student qualities 0.572, and for student skills 0.878. As expected, the majority of the ratings assigned by respondents to selected skills, qualities, and supports are relatively consistent. The lowest alpha score was for student qualities while the highest internal consistency was for instructor qualities.

Four types of validity testing can be used: face, content, construct, and criterion validity. Researchers may apply one or more types to establish validity depending on the current and anticipated uses of the questionnaire. At a minimum, Burns et al. (2008) recommend that the questionnaire's face validity should be assessed. This involves the evaluation by experts and sample participants as to whether the questionnaire measures what it intends to measure.

Efforts to establish the face validity of the quantitative instrument for this study involved questionnaire testing and triangulation. For the quantitative survey, face validity is enhanced by designing the questions based on literature review findings. Questionnaire testing was performed using a small sample to pilot test the questionnaire and reduce the potential for errors during data collection and analysis phases (Bryman, 2012). Triangulation involved comparing findings from different sources for the purpose of corroboration (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). In this study, qualitative findings were used to confirm the results obtained from both the questionnaire and the literature review. Specifically, the instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports deemed critical in the quantitative part of the study were explored in greater depth during the qualitative interview and compared to the data from the literature review. Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) suggest that qualitative data analysis helps to strengthen descriptive precision, while quantitative data analysis provides greater numerical precision. The use of both methods increased the legitimacy of the current study.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

In qualitative research the concepts credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability have been used to describe various aspects of trustworthiness or research rigour (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These concepts are similar to validity and reliability measures used in quantitative studies. Even though aspects of research rigour can

be separated, Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggest that they should be viewed as intertwined and interrelated.

Each follow-up interview was conducted with the aid of guidelines as recommended by Brink (1991). The initial follow-up interview questions to be covered were based on responses to the original survey questionnaire (see Appendix D). A copy of the original questionnaire was provided to research participants to help direct their attention to the critical and non-important answers they had provided during the quantitative survey phase of the study. The digitally recorded data were transcribed, and transcripts were shown to participants to confirm the accuracy of contents.

The credibility of the study refers to the connection between the responses of the participants and the research concepts used to recreate and simplify these responses through interpretation. Baxter and Eyles (1997) suggest that credibility in qualitative interviews is based on the assumption that there is no one way to measure reality, and multiple realities can exist at the same time. Triangulation is one of the most powerful techniques for strengthening the credibility of qualitative interviews. It is based on the assumption that when multiple sources provide similar results, their credibility is enhanced. In addition to methodological triangulation (the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to strengthen research findings), source triangulation was utilized in this study to analyze qualitative data. Source triangulation refers to “the use of more than one report from a data set to corroborate a construct” (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, p. 514). The researcher used source triangulation and examined common trends for designating individual characteristics and supports as critical and non-important.

Another strategy that was used to enhance credibility is member checking, which refers to the accurate portrayal of meaning participants attach to what is being studied and is achieved

through participant feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Burke-Johnson (1997) suggest that this strategy helps to obtain useful information and identify any inaccuracies. After the transcribing was completed, all interview participants had an opportunity to review interview transcripts and submit their comments. Sharing interview transcripts with research participants allowed for clarification in instances of miscommunication.

Transferability refers to the degree to which study findings fit within contexts outside the study area (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). In order to enhance transferability of findings for this research, the study context was described. The four social work distance delivery programs involved in the current study were reviewed and commonalities and differences are noted. This procedure strengthens the transferability of the study as it provides an opportunity to assess what is transferable and what might be not transferable based on the program characteristics included in this study.

Study dependability focuses on the “minimization of idiosyncrasies in interpretation and variability tracked to identifiable sources” (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, p. 514). It included the consistency with which the same constructs (instructor characteristics and university supports) may be matched with the same phenomenon (an effective learning environment) over space and time. One of the strategies used to enhance the dependability of the study is the inquiry audit that combines elements of thick description with those of peer examination. During the inquiry audit, checks on the research status were maintained to ensure that appropriate decisions were made. To a certain extent, Baxter and Eyles (1997) suggest that “the graduate student–professor supervisory relationship functions as a convenient, and often implicit, form of auditee–auditor research relationship” (p. 517). The researcher worked closely with the primary advisor and



asked for clarification if any inconsistencies that were noted during data analyses to enhance the quality of research findings.

The final aspect of qualitative research rigour, confirmability, focuses on the extent to which the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the researcher influence interpretations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Researcher bias, which is the central concern when establishing confirmability in qualitative research, is overcome through the use of reflection; that is, the researcher engaged in critical self-reflection to reduce potential biases and predispositions. Reflective journaling was used in this study. This strategy required the researcher to take personal notes regarding responses to participants, interpretations, and methodological decisions, thus providing a space for processing issues that may impact or bias findings (Walker, Read, & Priest, 2013). Throughout the analytic process, memos and notes were written to track the researcher's reflections and responses to participants' comments. Also, before data collection, the researcher reflected on his perspective on the topic, which involves personally responding to the questionnaire and interview questions.

The use of the above strategies throughout each research phase (i.e., design, data collection, and data analysis) helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

### **Legal and Ethical Guidelines**

This research study followed the protocol based on a tri-council policy statement related to the ethical conduct of research involving humans, established by the Canadian Institute of Health Research, the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2010). The guiding principles of this policy include respect for persons and concern for the welfare and justice.

Research participants in this study presented no vulnerable characteristics. The study presented minor harm to participants (the inconvenience of participation in the research) and represented minimal risk research (there are no known risks associated with this study). Study participants are professional social work educators who could terminate their participation at any stage of the research process at any time. Participants might be intrinsically motivated to complete the questionnaire and take part in the follow-up interview.

Consistent with the University of Manitoba requirements for studies involving human subjects, the legal and ethical rights for every participant in this study must be assured and preserved. The ethics approval form was approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba before the research data was collected. As well, to ensure fulfillment of the tri-council policy requirements for multi-jurisdictional research, permission was also obtained from research ethics boards at the University of Victoria, Dalhousie University, and the University of Calgary to contact potential research participants.

The confidentiality of all participants was guaranteed through the informed consent form (Appendix B). Participants were also informed that their names will not appear in any research-related publications.

In most educational studies, respondents are asked to identify themselves (Gall et al., 2003). In this study, the researcher made a commitment that identifiable information will not be disclosed in any publications/reports. The research participants had the option of choosing to submit their completed survey questionnaires via mail with no identifiable information provided on the questionnaire. To ensure confidentiality, the consent form was separated from the data and a respondent code was assigned. The code sheet was held in electronic form only in a password-protected folder. The same procedure was used for the secure storage of interview transcripts. All

confidential data was securely stored, electronically and on paper, and will be destroyed at the end of the project.

There was no deception involved in this study, and there was minimal to no risk to participants. Instructors were provided with all information about the research study before they became participants. All research participants have the opportunity to receive a summary of the research findings, and the process of obtaining the summary was clearly indicated on the consent form. Participants in the in-depth interviews had the opportunity to review their transcript and suggest any revisions, and to withdraw from the process at any time. Every effort was made to ensure that consent was given voluntarily and could be withdrawn at any time. The consent was informed and ongoing from the point of initial contact (recruitment) until the end of the participant's involvement in the project. No participants chose to withdraw.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Research Design**

The major strength of this study is that it is the first comprehensive Canadian study in the field of social work distance education that focuses on the four CASWE-ACFTS accredited universities that deliver undergraduate social work degrees using distance delivery methods. As well, the current research design reaches a geographically dispersed population (i.e., social work distance education instructors in four Canadian universities). The study uses a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis which help to improve the validity and reliability of the information. The opportunity to reach the total population of social work distance delivery instructors who teach in the four accredited schools of social work helps to strengthen research findings by including the voices of all social work distance educators who are willing to share their perceptions.

Limitations of the study are related to methodological generalizability and geographical focus. One of the key challenges of the research design is the relatively small sample size for the survey questionnaire, which threatens the reliability and the external validity (or generalizability) of the study (Kemper et al., 2003). However, steps were taken to reach as many of the sample population as possible. The study is limited to the four CASWE-ACFTS accredited universities that offer a BSW degree online; thus it does not include participants from Canadian universities that offer social work courses using distance delivery methods but do not offer BSW degree programs (e.g., the University of Regina) or only offer an MSW degree online (e.g., Memorial University).

Establishing an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs is a challenging task. This study, by identifying and carefully organizing lists of instructor and student characteristics and university supports that are designed to develop and/or maintain those characteristics has the potential to enhance the creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

### **Chapter Review**

This chapter has provided a discussion of the methods used to conduct this study. Topics included the research design and its appropriateness, characteristics of the study population, sampling strategies, and collection and analysis procedures for both quantitative and qualitative data. The chapter also highlighted a discussion on validity, reliability, and ethics and their application to the current study. The next chapter will outline findings from the current study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the findings regarding the research participants' perceptions of the instructor and student characteristics, and university supports needed to create an effective learning environment. Results were analyzed for patterns and themes and synthesized to provide evidence to address the research questions.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section provides an overview of the demographics and teaching profile of the sample; the next three sections present survey ratings organized in tables based on responses from the 34 participants, along with selected qualitative interview quotes to highlight the reasons for the assignment of a critical rating for selected characteristics and supports. These quotes are included not only to clarify dominant themes but also to highlight the diversity and complexity of perspectives. The last section presents challenges raised by research participants during the interview phase, as well as proposed solutions to address those challenges. Each section of this chapter ends with a discussion of findings from this study and connects these to current literature in the field of social work distance education.

### **Sample Demographics and Teaching Profile**

Background information on the research participants, which was collected via the quantitative survey, is summarized below. The demographic data include participants' gender, age, and employment status. Of the 34 instructors who completed the questionnaire, 91.2% (31) were female and 8.8% (3) were male. The majority of participants, 79.4% (27), were 45 years of age and older; 14.7% (5) of the instructors identified their age as being between 30 and 44. Two individuals did not answer this question. Participants who were employed full-time made up

58.8% (20) of the sample, while 41.2% (14) were employed on a part-time basis. Table 4 contains the demographic breakdown of the survey participants.

**Table 4: Demographic Profile of Research Sample**

<b>Category</b>	<b>N (34)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	31	91.2
Male	3	8.8
<b>Age</b>		
30-44 years	5	14.7
45+ years	27	79.4
Prefer not to answer/no answer	2	5.8
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Full-time	20	58.8
Part-time	14	41.2

Information on the individual teaching profiles of research participants was also collected through the quantitative survey and included the information about the university employing them during the last 5 years, their current professional academic rank, types of courses taught, course delivery methods, number of years of distance teaching experience, and the level of courses taught. Table 5 illustrates the teaching profile of survey participants.

The number of instructors who completed the questionnaire from each of the universities represented was relatively equal in number: 26.5% (9) of respondents came from the University of Victoria, the University of Manitoba, and the University of Calgary, and 20.6% (7) came from Dalhousie University. The professional academic rank of full professor was held by 8.8% (3) of the participants, 26.5% (9) were associate professors, 11.8% (4) were assistant professors, 32.4% (14) were instructors, 11.8% (4) were lecturers, and 8.8% (3) listed themselves as “other” (the “other” category included sessional instructors and contract lecturers). Study participants had experience teaching a variety of courses: 79.4% (27) of the participants had experience teaching

practice courses, 58.8% (20) had experience teaching theory courses, 35.3% (12) had experience teaching research courses, and only 26.5% (9) had experience teaching social policy courses.

**Table 5: Teaching Profile of Research Sample**

<b>Category</b>	<b>N (34)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>University taught in last 5 years</b>		
Dalhousie University	7	20.6
University of Calgary	9	26.5
University of Manitoba	9	26.5
University of Victoria	9	26.5
<b>Professional Academic Rank</b>		
Professor	3	8.8
Associate Professor	9	26.5
Assistant Professor	4	11.8
Instructor	11	32.4
Lecturer	4	11.8
Other	3	8.8
<b>Type(s) of courses taught in the last 5 years</b>		
Theory	20	58.8
Practice	27	79.4
Research	12	35.3
Policy	9	26.5
<b>Delivery method(s) for courses taught in the last 5 years</b>		
Classroom learning (face-to-face, non-traditional format; e.g., cohort groups)	16	47.1
Online learning, synchronous (live, real-time)	19	55.9
Online learning, asynchronous (no set time)	30	88.2
Hybrid, blended, mixed-mode (face-to-face, online, synchronous, and/or asynchronous)	17	50.0
<b>Number of years of distance teaching experience</b>		
Less than one year	1	2.9
More than one year but less than two years	1	2.9
2-5 years	11	32.4
6-9 years	6	17.6
10+ years	15	44.1
<b>Level(s) of distance social work courses taught</b>		
Undergraduate	34	100
Graduate	13	38.2
Certificate	4	11.8

Study participants had experience with a number of delivery methods: 88.2% (30) taught online courses without a set time (asynchronous learning) while 47.1% (16) had experience teaching in a classroom setting (face-to-face non-traditional such as cohort groups). Exactly 50% of participants (17) experienced teaching hybrid, blended, mixed-mode courses (face-to-face, online, synchronous, and/or asynchronous) and 55.9% (19) had experience teaching online using live, real-time technology (synchronous learning).

The length of time participants taught distance social work courses varied: 5.8% (2) had two years or less experience, 32.4% (11) had two to five years of experience, 17.6% (6) had five to nine years of experience, and the majority, 44.1% (15), had 10 or more years of experience. All study participants had experience teaching undergraduate social work distance education courses while 38.2% (13) also taught at the graduate level and 11.8% (4) taught in certificate programs.

In summary, the demographics and teaching profiles demonstrate that the majority of instructors who completed the survey questionnaire are females, 45 years of age or older, who work primarily full-time. All professional academic ranks were represented by the participating distance social work educators (except for professor emeritus). Study participants taught a variety of courses using diverse delivery methods but had the most experience with teaching practice courses in an asynchronous online learning environment.

The demographics and teaching profiles help to identify respondents' context for answering the three research questions on what instructor and student characteristics and university supports are critical to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education. Each of the following sections includes a summary table that provides information on the total number of critical ratings out of 34 possible respondents. The total numbers of



respondents on the importance scale do not always reflect the sample size as some respondents only rated items on the criticality question and did not include an individual rating on the importance scale question. The mean and standard deviation are used to report the importance ratings for each survey item. The following section highlights the findings about the first research question.

### **Findings Pertaining to Research Question 1: Instructor Characteristics**

The first research question focused on what instructor characteristics are critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. Instructor characteristics include the qualities and skills that are important for an instructor to possess in order to establish such an environment. The survey questionnaire included two questions asking research participants to rank qualities and skills of distance social work instructors on a scale of importance. Participants also had an opportunity to add any qualities and skills not identified in the questionnaire that they perceived to be critical for online social work education. Direct quotations from interview participants are used to highlight the rationale underlying a rating of critical for a given skill or quality. In some instances, more than one quote is used to demonstrate the complexity and variety of the perspectives of participants on rating a particular skill or quality as critical in social work distance education. In the summary for each section, study findings are synthesized, and selected literature is added to highlight the importance and relevance of results in answering the research question.

#### **Critical Instructor Qualities**

Instructor qualities are listed in descending order based on the number of times respondents assigned a critical rating to the items identified in the question. The highest rated quality, being responsive, received 22 critical ratings out of a possible 34. The other qualities

(followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) are: knowledgeable (20), organized (19), respectful (18), communicative (17), engaging (16), approachable (12), ethical (11), professional (11), genuine (6), empathic (4), humorous (4), and warm (4). Table 6 provides a summary of instructor qualities deemed critical, the level of importance of each quality based on the four-point Likert scale, as well as mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) for each item.

**Table 6: Critical Instructor Qualities**

<b>Instructor Qualities (n=34)</b>	<b>Critical Counts</b>	<b>NI</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>VI</b>	<b>Mean (M)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (SD)</b>
Responsive	22	0	1	5	16	3.68	.568
Knowledgeable	20	0	2	4	19	3.68	.627
Organized	19	0	1	3	17	3.76	.539
Respectful	18	0	1	8	15	3.58	.584
Communicative	17	0	1	6	16	3.65	.573
Engaging	16	0	3	7	13	3.43	.728
Approachable	12	0	1	10	16	3.56	.577
Ethical	11	0	1	7	17	3.64	.569
Professional	11	0	1	7	18	3.65	.562
Genuine	6	0	2	10	17	3.52	.634
Empathic	4	0	6	14	10	3.13	.730
Humorous	4	4	7	14	5	2.67	.922
Warm	4	0	8	14	6	2.93	.716

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

The average score for the importance rating for each quality is closely related to the critical rating. For example, the three highest rated critical qualities also received the highest mean scores. The majority of qualities received an average score above 3.0, indicating a highly

perceived level of importance for those particular qualities. The items that received the average score 3.0 and higher and at least four critical ratings are considered both critical and important for creating an effective learning environment. The items that received more than four critical ratings but mean scores of less than 3.0 are considered essential but less important than other qualities that received an average score of 3.0 and above for creating an effective learning environment.

The following qualities (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) were added to the list of essential qualities by more than one instructor: flexible (6), creative (4), computer/technologically savvy (4), and patient (2). Additional instructor qualities that were mentioned once include collaborative, efficient, prompt, democratic, reflexive, constructive, available, tolerant, participatory, persistent, firm, facilitative, and interested.

During the qualitative interviews, participants elaborated on the qualities that they assigned as critical or not important (if applicable) for creating an effective learning environment. Some interviewees indicated that many of the qualities necessary for online social work instructors are the same as those for on-campus social work instructors, with the main differences relating to how those qualities should be demonstrated online to reflect the nature of distance social work education.

The top three rated qualities identified by instructors were: being responsive ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ), being knowledgeable ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ), and being organized ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ). Those participants who gave the quality of being responsive a critical rating indicated the importance of strong communication and relationship-building for demonstrating an instructor's online presence. One participant shared that being responsive is critical: *"As timely, sensitive communication demonstrates an instructor's commitment, empathy, and concern for students."*

Some instructors noted that being responsive to a student's needs is critical to the promotion of students' success online.

Twenty instructors in the survey suggested that being knowledgeable is a definite prerequisite for creating an effective learning environment. Research participants defined being knowledgeable as having a thorough knowledge of the subject they are teaching. One participant emphasized that:

*Students will look for their instructors to be able to answer questions that may not necessarily be in the text or that would be extra...they ask me for many examples that were not in the text and so it was very useful that I rely on my own experience to be able to give them those examples.*

The majority of interviewees stressed the importance of being knowledgeable about course content, as well as course technology, to ensure specific learning objectives are met in the online learning environment.

Being organized ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ) ranked third on the list of critical instructor qualities and received the highest mean score on the importance scale. A number of interviewees stated that instructors should be better organized in the online learning environment in comparison to face-to-face teaching, as they should prepare an entire course in advance before the class even starts. One instructor stated that: *"Being organized is arranging your course material in a methodical, ordered, and efficient way. The teaching and learning environment depend on instructors creating a well-organized course content that is systematic, focused, with detailed instruction."* Some instructors also stated that distance teaching is much more time-consuming in comparison to on-campus teaching and being organized helps to manage time more efficiently.

Because there is no physical classroom space, all course organization and delivery must be conducted online, which requires extra time for the planning of all course-related activities.

The next four qualities rated as critical are respectful ( $M=3.58$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ), communicative ( $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ), engaging ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ), and approachable ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ). These qualities help to build relationships between distance social work educators and students.

Interview participants emphasized that for instructors in social work education it is critical to build relationships with students on different levels, such as with individual students, groups of students, and the class as a whole. One instructor stated that: *“If you can get to know your students and your students can get to know you, I think the learning actually happens much better.”* Another instructor added that: *“Once you model [communication] and get people involved, it’s easier.”*

Some participants also emphasized the importance of different forms of interaction in the online learning environment: interaction with students, interaction with content, and interaction among students. One interviewee stressed the criticality of interaction in the online learning environment:

*If there is no video and it is not face-to-face, you have to be very specific, very explicit, very direct, so that students will understand what you are saying. I think that the more communication you have with your students and the more that you are able to communicate even by email is important. I have gotten feedback from students that have said that because I am very quick to respond with my email they really appreciated it because they were able to get their answers and then continue to work instead of waiting.*

The importance of interaction for engaging online learners was mentioned several times when relationship-building qualities were rated as critical by research participants. Engaging students

through respectful communication was deemed critical due to the lack of non-verbal cues in an online learning environment and heavy emphasis on written communication with limited verbal interaction. Sixteen interviewees raised the concern about the disembodied nature of distance education in its lack of physical presence.

Such challenges strengthen the need to focus more attention on relationship-building qualities to prepare students for future social work practice. Distance social work educators have been forced to find new ways to model relationship-building qualities in the online learning environment. One instructor included an observation that addresses this criticality: *“More attention and emphasis has to be placed on that engagement, because the physical engagement isn’t necessarily there.”* Another instructor commented that, in comparison to on-campus students who attend weekly classes, distance social work students seem to need more attention and require ongoing engagement to feel that the instructor is accessible.

Being ethical ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ) and professional ( $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ) were also identified as critical characteristics for online instructors. Participating instructors referenced the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) when emphasizing the responsibility of social work educators to model ethical behaviour in the online learning environment. In such an environment, communication between the instructor and student relies heavily on written language, which requires the instructor to find creative ways to model ethical behaviours needed for professional social work practice. One interviewee stated that:

*Ethics [are] really important because you can say something that’ll be taken the wrong way and so, you have to think ahead of time how you’re going to put something. The person’s not in front of you, you can’t see them, you can’t assume things. All they’re*

*hearing is your words. So, there's a lot of ethical issues that come up; everything from an individual's sensibility to also the way that you talk to them.*

The instructor's responsibility to uphold professional ethics and demonstrate appropriate ethical behavior was rated critical by fourteen interview participants.

The core conditions for an effective counselling environment, which include being warm ( $M=2.93$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ), genuine ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ), and empathic ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ), were rated at the bottom of critical instructor qualities for online learning. However, being genuine and empathic both had mean scores above 3.0, which suggests they are still important qualities for creating an effective online learning environment. One participant described what it means to be genuine: *"I mean to be honest, truthful, to walk your talk, meaning you are consistent with what you say and what you do. Students, in my experience, recognize this quality in an instructor early on. I believe being genuine suggests to students that the instructor is trustworthy."* Another interviewee added: *"Sometimes I have students say to me, 'Oh, you're such a nice person, you're so warm and inviting,' and I find that really fascinating because I don't know how they understand that through [an] online context."* Despite the challenges of demonstrating warmth in an online context, four instructors still rated it as a critical quality for success.

Being humorous was the only quality on the list that received both not important (non-critical) and critical ratings. This quality received four ratings of not important and had the lowest mean score ( $M=2.67$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ). One participant who rated humorous as non-critical stated that, from their personal experience taking an online class, it was still possible to master course objectives when the instructor was not humorous, so that quality did not add educational value to the course. Another interviewee stated that being humorous is not a quality that everyone can develop, and that instructors who are not humorous can still create an effective

learning environment. Still another participating instructor commented: *“I tend to be humorous in my engagement, but I think it’s also unfair to suggest that instructors need to be performers.”*

Being humorous was also rated as a critical quality four times. A participant who suggested that being humorous was a critical quality pointed out that: *“It has to be appropriate humour, but I think if you can bring that into your class with stories, you engage them, you show that you’re a real person.”*

Four additional qualities were each suggested more than once—being flexible (six times), being creative and being computer/technologically savvy (four times each), and being patient (twice). The key reason for adding flexibility to the list of critical qualities is that the online learning environment is very unpredictable, and technology does not always work as planned (e.g., a microphone malfunctions or files do not upload). One instructor noted: *“You can’t get anxious... things happen that are completely out of your control and you have to be able to roll with it.”*

Another reason for adding being flexible to the critical list of qualities was related to the geographic realities of distance education social work students in Canada. One instructor explained that because students in online programs live coast to coast, an instructor should be flexible in connecting with those students who live in different time zones than the instructor to meet students’ learning needs. Ensuring that students know the instructor is flexible provides an opportunity to create an inclusive learning environment.

Being patient was added by two instructors as a critical quality for social work distance education. Patience allows instructors to cope with online teaching challenges that might otherwise be overwhelming; i.e., it makes it easier to deal with the many components of online



social work education, such as the disembodied nature of distance learning, the facilitation of online discussion, and the creation of new techniques to teach direct practice skills online.

Four interview participants felt that it is critical for instructors to be computer/technologically-savvy to be able to troubleshoot and find creative solutions to challenges. One interviewee noted that it is important to: *“Understand your course site; you need to understand all of the little technical pieces of it. It is important to be able to help students with the things like, how to download a paper.”* Participants emphasized that one does not require extensive knowledge of technology to teach online as universities offer IT support, but having at least basic technology knowledge of computers, and ideally being technologically-savvy in all aspects of the use of technology in online learning, provides an opportunity to strengthen other qualities that help to create an effective learning environment.

Four participating instructors emphasized the importance of being creative with such things as presenting course material or finding new ways to start online group discussions, one of whom offered a couple of examples of creative exercises:

*I think that creativity is important but use it well; not to defame and not to put any bad light on things but to be able to use examples creatively, to be able to construct creatively, and have students also do things like make videos to express themselves, to express their ideas. And even draw, and even do collage online ‘cause I’ve learned that you can do these things.*

Another participant added that being creative is critical: *“Because it is so easy for most of distance education to be almost all text-based. You can only read so much so that’s why I think it’s important to take advantage of what the electronic world has to offer us.”* Being creative

helps instructors to find new ways to engage and adapt more effectively to the challenges involved in teaching social work content online.

Some qualities were suggested only once. They include collaborative, efficient, prompt, democratic, reflexive, constructive, available, tolerant, participatory, persistent, firm, facilitative, and interested. One interviewee stated that:

*Online, you've got to bring the group together, and it's more challenging to do because of the nature of online learning, because people are in silos in their own homes too, doing a lot of the work. And part of what's really important for instructors is to know that they care about teaching, they care about reaching out to the students, and they're passionate about the subject matter and about social work in general.*

The instructors who were interviewed believe that possessing such qualities helps to enhance the online learning environment.

On the list of suggested qualities, one instructor highlighted the importance of being democratic as a way: *"To create an equal playing field"* and *"To minimize the power imbalance as much as possible between instructor and students [to] empower them."* Another instructor added that it might require more work on the instructor's part to demonstrate openness and commitment and to let students know that they are accessible, open and willing to engage in conversation on topics that are interesting for students to discuss. However, in contrast one instructor added that in comparison to face-to-face teaching, online discussions can become more disrespectful more quickly, and it is critical for social work distance educators to stay firm. Based on the experience of one educator some online students place a lot of demands on online instructors, in terms of moving deadlines, requests to reread papers and expectations to spend

more time explaining the course content. As one instructor noted: *“You only have a limited amount of time in a day and I’m not on that computer 24 hours a day.”*

Being facilitative was also added to the list of critical qualities. One instructor noted that it is critical to help students to facilitate their learning by modeling certain behaviours and traits (e.g., a willingness to learn) and establishing a certain environment that allow students to acknowledge their vulnerabilities and discover their strengths through sharing their knowledge with others. One instructor noted within the context of sharing that it is important to facilitate a respectful learning environment:

*If you don't have a prof that is willing to look at their own selves, is willing to be challenged, is willing to sort of journey with the students in that unpacking, it becomes almost an adversarial relationship. If you can demonstrate through your own vulnerability sometimes as a prof that there are areas where you need to learn and if you haven't facilitated a respectful environment in knowing how to embrace that story, then it's dangerous for the student, and it's dangerous for the learning.*

When answering the survey questionnaire, some instructors added suggestions about how to demonstrate critical qualities in an online learning environment. Their written responses are noted here. Although these responses are not linked to a particular quality they provide valuable suggestions on how to create an effective online learning environment. These included the following: respond quickly to student requests, be willing to learn new technology, debrief with students when discussing areas that are difficult to process, use current information/events, soothe student fears, plan group interactions online, set clear boundaries and time availability, provide timely feedback on assignments, and be a mentor. One instructor commented that the

importance of the qualities listed in the survey questionnaire varied, depending upon the content of the course being taught.

During interviews some participants added that it was hard to rate one particular quality as critical without grouping them with other qualities. For example, it was noted that assigning a critical rating for being engaging requires one to assign a critical rating for being communicative as it is hard to be engaging without being communicative. As one participant pointed out during an interview: *“I couldn’t see separating them out and I couldn’t find one as more important than the other because I think they are all quite significant.”* The importance of viewing groups of the identified qualities as critical is useful for creating an effective learning environment. Such an approach provides an opportunity to explore interconnectedness among all of the qualities. However, it can also create a challenge in ranking the selected characteristics on their perceived level of importance to create such an environment.

Some instructors assigned critical ratings to a set of specific qualities based on the courses they were teaching, and this may be an important distinction. One educator noted that: *“The content in the pedagogy needs to be somewhat congruent.”* Another instructor provided an example that in some direct practice courses: *“If you’re deliberately disrupting students, which is some of what the transformative pedagogy does... I think those qualities of responsiveness, accessibility, warmth, support are probably even more important with that particular kind of content.”*

During interviews, instructors shared many reasons why they deemed some qualities as critical and others not. Two educators shared that in identifying key instructor qualities, they tried to remember what qualities they valued in their instructors as online students, themselves. Other instructors relied on comments from their course evaluations to highlight qualities students

identified as making an impact on their learning. Another instructor synthesized all the comments from course evaluations and found out that students want “*an instructor who is present*” and that to be present means:

*You’re communicating quite regularly, that you’re engaged in what people are having (sic) to say, you seem interested, that you’re offering feedback. And that the site you’ve created is very well organized, it’s displayed in a way that makes sense for folks. That how you offer your own feedback, how it’s organized, again, in a way that makes sense.*

The importance of instructor presence was mentioned by a number of social work educators during the qualitative interviews.

Some instructors also shared that their experience of teaching online helped them to select critical qualities. Some educators shared personal anecdotes about comments from former students that helped them determine the essential qualities for enabling effective learning in the courses they taught. For example, one instructor shared a personal experience that helped him/her to re-evaluate the importance of instructor qualities. It was an unexpected encounter in a coffee shop with a former student who said: “*You were my online instructor for a social work course. I was continuing on in an arts program and took your online course as an elective, and from that course and from getting to know you, I changed my career path.*” Before that experience, the instructor had assumed that it was only possible to engage and be responsive to those students with whom the instructor checked in personally, by email or phone. In this case, the student had been receiving only group emails from the course, yet somehow he or she still felt engaged, felt the instructor was responsive, and felt he or she knew the instructor. The student recognized the instructor in a physical setting. Based on this experience, the instructor

concluded that it is possible to create an effective learning environment by being: *“Intentionally responsive within the online course design.”*

Another instructor added to the point on how to know whether the environment was effective or not. The instructor stated that: *“In the long run people leave the course, I see them in the community. And they will tell me that the course was difficult at the time, but then they loved it.”* The instructor noted that over time students re-evaluate their learning and after finding new meanings in what they learn students become more appreciative of the process. Overall, some instructors mentioned that it is critical for students to re-evaluate their learning over time to know what instructor qualities were essential to their success in becoming a professional social worker.

### **Critical Instructor Skills**

The second question with a focus on instructor characteristics was related to the skills necessary to create an effective online learning environment. Many instructor skills generated from the literature review findings were rated as critical by respondents. Interpersonal communication and organizational skills were rated as the most important, receiving 17 critical ratings out of a possible 34. The list of skills, presented in descending order (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses), includes engagement (16), feedback (15), basic technology (13), discussion facilitation (13), presentation (12), and writing skills (10). The skills that received fewer than 10 critical ratings were: planning (8), assessment (7), group processing (7), collaborative teamwork (6), evaluation (5), multimedia usage (4), implementation (3), project management (3), termination and follow-up (3), change agent (2), and negotiation (1) skills. Public relations skills were not deemed critical.

Table 7 provides a summary of critical instructor skills. It also includes a four-point Likert scale to assess the perceived level of importance for each identified skill, as well as mean scores and standard deviations. Similar to the identified instructor qualities, mean scores for skills are closely connected to their criticality ratings; skills that achieved a high mean score on the importance scale also received the largest number of critical ratings.

**Table 7: Critical Instructor Skills**

<b>Instructor Skills</b>	<b>Critical Counts</b>	<b>NI</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>VI</b>	<b>Mean (M)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (SD)</b>
Interpersonal communication skills	17	0	2	6	15	3.57	.662
Organizational skills	17	0	3	3	17	3.61	.722
Engagement skills	16	0	3	7	12	3.41	.734
Feedback skills	15	0	2	7	16	3.56	.651
Basic technology skills	13	0	4	7	16	3.44	.751
Discussion facilitation skills	13	0	3	10	13	3.38	.697
Presentation skills.	12	0	6	9	12	3.22	.801
Writing skills	10	0	5	8	11	3.25	.794
Planning skills	8	0	1	12	14	3.48	.580
Assessment skills	7	0	4	12	15	3.35	.709
Group processing skills	7	1	6	13	8	3.00	.816
Collaborative teamwork skills	6	4	8	10	8	2.73	1.015
Evaluation skills	5	0	2	10	18	3.53	.629
Multimedia usage skills	4	0	10	9	14	3.12	.857
Implementation skills	3	1	7	12	9	3.00	.845
Project management skills	3	2	9	10	10	2.90	.944
Termination and follow-up skills	3	4	7	11	8	2.77	1.006
Change agent skills	2	1	11	13	5	2.73	.785
Negotiation skills	1	2	12	9	10	2.82	.950
Public relations skills	0	6	10	10	7	2.55	1.034

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

The majority of skills that received a critical rating of four or higher also received a mean score of 3.0 or greater, which suggests that they are perceived to be both critical and important in

creating an effective learning environment. Some skills received less than four critical ratings and a mean score lower than 3.0 suggesting they are less important and less critical in social work distance education, at least as perceived by the instructors who participated in this study.

As with instructor qualities, survey participants suggested a number of additional skills that they thought were critical to the creation of an effective online learning environment but were not included on the original list of skills. These additional skills (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) include: facilitation (3), time management (3), and multi-tasking (2), course design (1), grading (1), teaching (1), class management (1), improvisational (1), critical analysis (1), conflict resolution (1), editing skills (1), as well as skills for dealing with inappropriate discussion posts without humiliation (1), and skills to deal with discrimination by students (1).

Many interviewees stated that all listed skills are important and that many of them are critical for both face-to-face and online teaching. Some instructors said that what makes certain skills more critical for online learning is our limited knowledge of how to teach social work content without a physical presence. The challenges of teaching in a disembodied learning environment require instructors to spend more time researching best practices on how to transfer social work content to a distance education setting.

Interpersonal communication skills ( $M=3.57$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ) and organization skills ( $M=3.61$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ) were rated the most critical and received the highest mean scores for a number of reasons. One instructor suggested that if an instructor cannot communicate, a student will not get much out of the course whether it is delivered online or face-to-face. The online instructor should be very well organized as one participant noted that: *“Course organization communicates to students that the instructor spends time to carefully design the online learning environment.”*



Another interview participant suggested that when the instructor does not communicate course expectations clearly: *“Students can be confused, frustrated, disengaged, and they can drop out if they don’t understand what they are learning, and when and what is expected of them right away, and how are they going to be graded.”* Many instructors commented that it is critical to be highly organized for teaching online, as instructors might not have an opportunity to see their students in person, so everything needs to be laid out clearly in advance. A course that is organized well in advance of the start date builds a strong foundation for fostering an effective learning environment throughout the course.

Engagement skills ( $M=3.41$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ) received the third highest critical rating for creating an effective learning environment. Instructors emphasized that engagement in an online environment is different from face-to-face engagement. One instructor suggested that:

*We have more of a history of literature that helps with face-to-face teaching [and] we’ve been studying it for a long time. But then the online teaching there is literature out there but it’s new. So you have to kind of have a Google alert to keep up to date with those things.*

Instructors who stay current with research on how to build relationships with students knew of more ways how to connect online. One instructor emphasized that, based on the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), social work educators have an ethical responsibility to stay current in all aspects of online education and should constantly be working on developing their engagement skills for teaching both online and face-to-face.

Feedback skills ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) and writing skills ( $M=3.25$ ,  $SD=0.79$ ) were also rated highly by instructors. Regular positive feedback on student work was suggested as an essential component of effective teaching. Skills for delivering feedback are important in the online

learning environment. One instructor recommended phrasing feedback in a way that helps students to improve, such as highlighting areas to change and providing suggestions on what can be done to avoid the grade deductions on future assignments. The emphasis on the criticality of writing skills was based on the fact that the majority of communication in the online environment is done in a written format.

Discussion facilitation skills ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ) were rated as critical by 13 instructors. Instructors should be able to help students to reflect on and discuss their feelings, thoughts, and behaviours on different social issues. One educator noted that discussion facilitation skills in an online forum allowed for the exploration of *why* questions “*in an inquiring, engaging, not threatening kind of way.*” It is more challenging to ask *why* questions online than face-to-face because: “*You don’t have the body, the cues, you don’t have the non-verbal kind of stuff to help you out. So, that disembodiment of the medium makes a real difference.*”

Some skills that received critical ratings were connected to the use of technology in the online learning environment. Basic technology ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=0.75$ ), presentation ( $M=3.22$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ), and multimedia usage ( $M=3.12$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ) skills were highlighted by instructors as critical for ensuring that distance social work educators know how to present their course material using course technologies. One interview participant suggested that distance social work educators should stay up-to-date with constantly changing education technology to determine the best practices for applying it in teaching social work curriculum online. Another instructor suggested that if an online educator relies solely on university support with the use of course technologies, and does not have needed skills, it creates a delay in course design and delivery as both instructor and student will likely need to contact IT support with any issues. Some interviewees explained that having to learn technology to present course material takes time. As

a result, the online instructor must devote more time than classroom instructors to ensuring appropriate methods are used to achieve specific learning objectives. One educator suggested that: *“If you don’t know how to navigate the system, you will fall behind.”* The ability to use technology was also linked to all other critical skills for effective teaching as this expertise allows for the most engaging online communication and the most efficient course organization.

Presentation skills were rated critical by 12 instructors. Presentation skills are necessary in many aspects of social work distance education. Some instructors emphasized that the use of presentation technology to deliver course content is critical in an online learning environment. One educator noted that a carefully prepared PowerPoint presentation that includes personal stories and allows students to engage is important for maintaining motivation during web conferences. Another way instructors can use presentation skills is in designing course material. One instructor emphasized that a course syllabus should be: *“Succinct and clearly written and easy to understand.”* A different instructor reflected on another aspect of presentation skills, such as the use of oral presentation in the online environment, which becomes more critical than in the classroom:

*In the classroom, I can stand and I can present material and I can do a lot of ‘ums.’ Do a podcast with some ‘ums’ in it, and you’ll get responses! ‘Yeah, I really liked your podcast, but you did a lot of “ums”.’ So now I have to write a script. And I really do scripts, so that I can create a podcast without a lot of ‘ums.’*

Some instructors emphasized that preparing course material for presenting content requires much more time in the online environment in comparison to face-to-face teaching, hence the necessity for very well-developed presentation skills.

Another set of skills focuses on the centrality of group work in social work education.

Three group-work related skills received a number of critical ratings: discussion facilitation ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ), group processing ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ), and collaborative teamwork ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) skills. One instructor highlighted situations where group work is critical for creating an effective learning environment in distance social work education:

*It's good in social work if you have any background in group work or have learned how to do group work; how to manage situations that sometimes get quite heated, or that [sic] nobody's talking. You have to have those skills to get going, to keep the momentum up.*

Many instructors emphasized that social work distance education courses include many group assignments and instructors are often required to facilitate group discussions online. Discussion facilitation skills help to strengthen collaboration among students. One educator defined discussion facilitation as: *"Helping students to collaborate online, enacted by building a warm, friendly atmosphere set by the instructor. Discussion facilitation is learned and taught to students by giving expression to discussion through online assignments, discussion posts, and web conferences."* Some instructors suggested that knowing how to facilitate online discussions helps to enhance group work; however, it is not always easy to model collaborative teamwork in the online environment due to the lack of physical presence.

The next group of skills which received a mean score of importance of at least 3.0 is connected to social work practice and includes the following: planning ( $M=3.48$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ), assessment ( $M=3.35$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ), implementation ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ), and evaluation ( $M=3.53$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ) skills. One instructor suggested that distance educators who have strong social work practice skills could model them as well as assess a student's clinical skills, particularly in social work practice courses. For example, it was proposed that assessment skills can be used on two

levels: one where the instructor applies assessment skills to grade students' work and second where the instructor is teaching students how to develop these skills. Implementation skills was the only item that received a mean score of importance of 3.0 but was rated as critical only by three instructors. One instructor pointed out that implementation skills are important for both modeling and assessing social work students' professional performance.

The skills of negotiation ( $M=2.82$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ), being a change agent ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=0.79$ ), termination and follow-up ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ), and project management ( $M=2.90$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ) received critical ratings of less than four and mean scores below 3.0. It suggests that they are not perceived as critical as other identified skills and are less important for creating an effective learning environment. No one ranked public relations skills ( $M=2.55$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) as critical, and it had the lowest mean score assigned to any skill. Instructors commented that they did not use these skills while teaching social work courses online. Participants who had taught just a single online course assigned a not critical rating for teamwork and collaboration skills as they did not work in a team while preparing the course content. One instructor stated that: *"I guess in my position, where I was just an instructor, I didn't see the need [for] these particular skills. Maybe if I had been in management or if I had to attend meetings in a group setting, I might have needed those skills."* Another instructor added: *"Negotiation skills, project management skills, public relations skills, change agent skills...I just didn't see that they seem to be as prominent in the skill set that, in terms of creating that virtual classroom, especially in social work."*

Some additions were made to the initial list of skills. They included general teaching, time management, and conflict resolutions skills. Teaching skills were added to emphasize that social work distance educators should know how to design and grade a course, and manage the online classroom. Many instructors spoke about the extra preparation time that is required to

organize an online course. They added that, while being responsive in a timely fashion is important, setting clear boundaries is also critical in managing time spent teaching online. One instructor commented on this issue in the following way:

*What expectations have we created when we respond instantly? And there is this new mentality because of electronics, and because of cell phones, that everything will be instantaneous. I think we have to make clear our parameters of when are our office hours, when are we available, when will we be online... when we have our collaborative sessions. And just being aware that giving instructors permission to set those parameters is really important.*

The debate on response time was evident with some social work educators emphasizing the importance of responding immediately to student questions around course content, and others highlighting the importance of setting limits with respect to availability.

Instructors also deemed conflict resolution skills to be critical in online teaching, as social work covers many areas that may make students uncomfortable sharing their perspectives or making ethical or moral judgments. Skills for dealing with inappropriate discussion posts in the online classroom were added as critical for distance social work education due to the potentially sensitive nature of the course content.

The requirement to demonstrate online presence was mentioned by some social work distance educators. One instructor noted that providing timely feedback is critical in showing students that the instructor is present online and noted the extra work this involved:

*I think the feedback [online] ends up being more work than perhaps the feedback I would provide on-campus because there's this sense of wanting to ensure that the students feel*

*like they're being attended to, whereas on-campus you attend to them for three hours, and you have office hours, and they go off on their day.*

The importance of being present online requires instructors to demonstrate multiple skills simultaneously. Therefore, multi-tasking becomes a critical skill to maintain a balance between teaching and other professional responsibilities, such as service and research.

### **Summary and Discussion of Findings Pertaining to Research Question 1: Instructor Characteristics**

Social work distance educators identified a number of instructor characteristics (qualities and skills) that are critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. This summary synthesizes the answers to two survey questions about critical qualities and skills of distance social work instructors and compares results with selected findings from literature in the field.

The identified critical qualities for social work distance educators can be connected to qualities discussed in the literature on effective teaching online. Johnson (2009) in his dissertation found that online students used 53 descriptors to identify effective teaching on distance. Those descriptors included instructor qualities such as

accessible, accommodating, approachable, attentive, available, caring, clear, collaborative, communicative, compassionate, competent, concerned, confident, consistent, constructive, creative, current, dedicated, dependable, diplomatic, eclectic, efficient, empathetic, engaging, enthusiastic, fair, flexible, focused, friendly, helpful, humorous, interactive, interesting, kind, knowledgeable, motivating, open minded, organized, patient, passionate, personable, practical, prepared, professional, punctual,

realistic, reasonable, respectful, responsive, thorough, trustworthy, understandable, and understanding. (p.35)

Johnson reduced his list to nine most important qualities: being respectful, responsive, knowledgeable, approachable, communicative, organized, engaging, professional, and humorous. Those qualities were listed in the order they were mentioned in Johnson's survey results, from most noted to least noted qualities. Social work distance educators in the current study assigned a different rating of importance to the selected set of qualities, with the most critical quality being responsive instead of respectful that was the top rated quality in Johnson's study. Social work distance educators also added some qualities that were not included on Johnson's original list of nine qualities or the longer list of 54 descriptors. Those descriptors were connected to 'social work professional qualities', such as being ethical which received 11 critical ratings, being genuine with six critical ratings and being empathic and warm with four critical rating for each quality. Some additional critical qualities that were not used in the Johnson study but were mentioned by social work distance educators in this study included being computer / technologically savvy, prompt, democratic, reflexive, tolerant, participatory, persistent, firm and facilitative.

Four distinct groups of qualities can be synthesized from those deemed critical based on the criterion of receiving at least four critical ratings by participating distance social work educators. The first group focuses on the pedagogy of online learning; instructors should be knowledgeable about course content and distance social work education, specifically how to respond to students in creative ways to promote the learning of course content. The second group is connected to the instructor's ability to manage students in the online environment; instructors should be organized, and flexible when delivering course content. The third group is connected



to the importance of human interaction and relationship building in social work education; critical qualities, such as being communicative, engaging, approachable, and humorous suggest that the instructor should create a strong social presence online. The fourth group involves professional social work qualities; instructors should exhibit professional qualities, such as being respectful, ethical, genuine, empathic, and warm to facilitate learning in the online environment. In addition to the four groups of qualities, one instructor quality, being computer and technologically savvy, suggests that instructors should have at least basic knowledge of technology to teach online. Several interviewees highlighted that educators should know how to use different technological tools to achieve learning objectives in the online environment.

The qualities added by survey participants to the list generated through the literature review amplify the aforementioned sets of critical qualities. For example, being collaborative, available, and participatory enhances the group of qualities that focuses on human interaction and relationship building; being efficient, persistent, and firm helps instructors to improve on managerial qualities; being democratic and reflexive strengthens the professional set of qualities; and being constructive and interested helps instructors to build on pedagogical qualities.

The four distinct sets of qualities and the single quality of being technologically-savvy can be connected to the Berge (2008) role model for online instructors. In the Berge (2008) model the pedagogical role can incorporate pedagogical qualities that help to create a cognitive presence in an online learning environment. The social role can include human relationship qualities to build a social presence. The managerial role can incorporate the managerial set of qualities to develop teaching presence, and the technical role can include the quality of being computer/technologically savvy. The original Berge (2008) model should be expanded for social

work, where the fifth role, labeled here as a professional role focuses on professional qualities critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education.

There are a number of studies that identify critical instructor skills needed to create an effective online learning environment. However, their focus has overwhelmingly been limited to perceptions of instructors that are not social work educators and are not teaching in Canadian universities. When comparing the results of this study to the results of four previous studies, such as Abdulla (2004), Thach (1994), Williams (2000), Egan and Akdere (2005), there is some similarity among these studies. Individually, distance educators held organizational skills in the highest regard, followed by feedback skills and interpersonal skills. Content knowledge, presentation skills and collaborative skills rounded out the top six skills identified in the original list of 20 skills.

The current study confirms some of the findings from prior research but also provides a unique perspective of social work educators who rated engagement skills as a third top-rated skill whereas Williams (2000) and Thach (1994) found that collaboration/teamwork was one of the top three skills. In the Egan and Akdere (2005) study, collaboration/teamwork were number eight in the critical list of skills. The current study also highlights some social work professional skills, such as assessment and evaluation skills that are rated much higher when compared to the other three studies.

Based on the responses from the Canadian social work educators who took part in this study, instructor skills, like the aforementioned qualities, can be divided into five distinct sets: pedagogical, managerial, professional, social and technological. The first skill set focuses on the pedagogy of online learning; an instructor should be able to communicate the course expectations to students, both verbally and in writing. The top three skills in this set include

interpersonal communication, feedback, and writing skills. The second skill set is connected to the instructor's ability to manage students online and includes three critical skills: organization, discussion facilitation, and presentation. The third skill set is related to the professional social work skills that an instructor should demonstrate online; it includes engagement, planning, implementation, and evaluation skills that are a core part of the social work problem-solving model. The fourth skill set is linked to the importance of relationship building and creating an online community of learners; critical skills, such as group processing and collaborative teamwork skills, suggest that an instructor should establish a strong social presence for effective online teaching. The fifth skill set is connected to technological competency; i.e., instructors should have basic technology and multimedia skills to teach effectively online.

The skills that were added by social work distance educators to the original lists of critical skills can amplify those five sets of skills. For example, course design, editing, grading, and teaching skills enhance the pedagogical skill set. Time management, multi-tasking, and class management skills help to improve the managerial skill set. Skills in conflict resolution such as dealing with inappropriate discussion posts and discrimination by students strengthen the professional skill set.

The list of skills rated critical in this study and its corresponding roles can also be connected to the Berge (2008) model for instructors' roles. In addition to the list of qualities that fit four roles identified in the Berge study (i.e., pedagogical, managerial, social and technical) one more role should be added to highlight the uniqueness of social work distance education. This is the professional role and it includes a number of corresponding skills that were identified as critical in this study.

The first research question focused on identification of instructor characteristics that are critical to creating an effective learning environment. Instructor characteristics identified in this study include the qualities and skills that are important for an instructor to possess to teach social work distance education courses effectively. Table 8 provides a summary of instructor roles and instructor characteristics that social work distance educators in this study perceive as critical for creating an effective learning environment.

**Table 8: Critical Instructor Roles**

<b>Instructor Role</b>	<b>Critical Instructor Qualities</b>	<b>Critical Instructor Skills</b>
<b>Pedagogical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Responsive</b></li> <li>• <b>Knowledgeable</b></li> <li>• <i>Creative</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Interpersonal communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Feedback</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing</b></li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communicative</b></li> <li>• <b>Engaging</b></li> <li>• <b>Approachable</b></li> <li>• Humorous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group processing</b></li> <li>• Collaborative teamwork</li> </ul>
<b>Managerial</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organized</b></li> <li>• <i>Flexible</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organizational</b></li> <li>• <b>Discussion facilitation</b></li> <li>• <b>Presentation</b></li> </ul>
<b>Technical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Computer (tech) savvy</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Basic technology</b></li> <li>• <b>Multimedia usage</b></li> </ul>
<b>Professional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Respectful</b></li> <li>• <b>Ethical</b></li> <li>• <b>Professional</b></li> <li>• <b>Genuine</b></li> <li>• <b>Empathic</b></li> <li>• Warm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Engagement</b></li> <li>• <b>Planning</b></li> <li>• <b>Assessment</b></li> <li>• <b>Evaluation</b></li> </ul>

*Note:* The bolded font for qualities and skills represents those that receive four or more critical ratings and the mean scores of importance of 3.0 or higher. The non-bolded font identifies qualities and skills that receive four or more critical ratings but had an average rating of importance that was less than 3.0. The italic font identifies qualities that receive four or more critical ratings but were not included as part of the original list of qualities on the survey questionnaire.

The summary table is limited to skills and qualities that receive at least four critical ratings.

Many of those selected skills and qualities also receive the mean score of at least 3.0 which

confirm their perceived importance for creating an effective learning environment. The use of a bolded font in Table 8 highlights all instructor qualities and skills that receive four or more critical ratings and the mean scores of importance 3.0 and higher. The non-bolded font points out qualities and skills that receive four or more critical ratings but has the average rating of importance less than 3.0. The italic font in the table highlights those qualities that receive four or more critical ratings but were not included as part of the original list of qualities on the survey questionnaire generated from the literature review conducted for this study.

The research findings provide an opportunity to organize critical instructors' skills and qualities into five roles. Each identified role includes a number of skills and qualities that are critical to creating an effective learning environment from the social work distance educators' perspective. The pedagogical role requires the instructor to be responsive, knowledgeable and creative and to possess strong interpersonal communication, feedback and writing skills. The social role highlights the importance of group processing and collaborative teamwork skills so that the instructor can exhibit communicative, engaging, approachable and humorous qualities. The managerial role focuses on organizational, discussion facilitation and presentation skills to be organized and flexible in an online learning environment. The technical role emphasizes the importance of basic technology and multimedia usage skills, and highlights the criticality of being computer (tech) savvy in teaching social work courses via distance delivery methods. The professional role focuses on the importance of being respectful, ethical, professional, genuine, empathic and warm in demonstrating engagement, planning, assessment, and evaluation skills to create an effective learning environment.

In summary, to create an effective learning environment, instructors should adapt to the changing nature of how people interact online and develop qualities and skills that help to

embrace these changes in human communication, pedagogy, management, and the use of technology while maintaining the professional focus of social work. One instructor reflected on what this might look like in the future:

*I think in 20 years there's going to be way more communication by technology, and if we want to maintain close relationships with human beings, we're going to have to get way better at it: way better typing, way better at thinking before we write something down. Way better at imparting a tone online that we want to give. We're going to have to get better at it.*

Those five roles enhance the current literature and existing model for online instructor roles (Berge, 2008) by providing a unique social work distance education perspective that highlights critical skills and qualities needed to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs in Canada. The next section focuses on study findings related to critical student characteristics.

### **Findings Pertaining to Research Question 2: Student Characteristics**

The second research question focused on the student characteristics that are critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. Critical student characteristics include qualities and skills that research participants perceived to be essential for the creation of an effective learning environment. Lists of student qualities and skills were rated on the degree of criticality as well as the level of importance (not important, somewhat important, important and very important) via a survey questionnaire. The next two sections present the study findings related to student characteristics.

## Critical Student Qualities

The identification of student qualities are organized based on the number of times they were identified as critical for distance social work education by research participants. Being self-motivated was named as critical 22 times out of a possible 34. The next top 10 qualities (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) in descending order are: ethical (14), collaborative (13), independent (10), interactive (9), open-minded (8), genuine (7), goal-motivated (6), technologically savvy (5), empathic (3), and knowledgeable (2). All above-listed qualities except being knowledgeable received a mean score of 3.0 and higher, which suggests that they also perceived as quite important for online learning. Being warm was not rated as a critical student skill. Table 9 provides a summary of critical student qualities, responses on a four-point Likert scale to assess the perceived level of importance, mean scores, and standard deviations for each quality.

Instructors identified some new student qualities, not included on the original list, which they perceived to be critical for creating an effective learning environment. These were: respectful (4), organized (4), critically reflective (4) and self-directed (2). Some student qualities perceived as critical were mentioned once: curious, flexible, systematic, democratic, culturally aware, and mindful. Instructors also provided comments in the survey that suggested that critical qualities depend on the nature of the course. They also mentioned that students should be able to locate resources as needed, have the ability to understand written instructions, and be willing to ask for help to be successful in the online learning environment.

**Table 9: Critical Student Qualities**

Student Qualities	Critical Counts	NI	SI	I	VI	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Self-motivated	22	0	0	2	19	3.90	.301
Ethical	14	0	1	11	13	3.48	.586
Collaborative	13	1	4	10	12	3.22	.847
Independent	10	0	1	6	20	3.70	.542
Interactive	9	0	1	11	17	3.55	.572
Open-minded	8	0	5	12	13	3.27	.740
Genuine	7	0	5	14	11	3.20	.714
Goal-motivated	6	0	3	15	13	3.32	.653
Technologically savvy	5	0	6	12	15	3.27	.761
Empathic	3	2	6	14	11	3.03	.883
Knowledgeable	2	0	11	16	6	2.85	.712
Warm	0	5	13	9	5	2.44	.948

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

The student quality that received the highest number of critical ratings, the highest mean score, and the lowest standard deviation is related to their ability to be self-motivated ( $M=3.90$ ,  $SD=0.30$ ). A number of other qualities that were ranked as critical can be linked to being self-motivated. They include being independent ( $M=3.70$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ) and goal-motivated ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ). One instructor stated that:

*Motivation is a quality that guides a student to their goal. Having a goal-motivated attitude is a very important quality for Distance Education (DE) students, as the purpose of lessons and learning is related to specific goals, and motivation to meet these goals is the means to the end point of understanding, leading to knowledge acquisition.*



Another instructor concluded that when students are not motivated *“they will most likely not do very well in a class.”* The same instructor stated that it is challenging to motivate every student: *“I mean, I can do as much as I can but at the end of the day, the motivation has to come from [them]. That’s really important.”*

Many participating instructors view online learning as a solitary activity and feel that students have to be willing to do it alone to a certain extent to be successful. One instructor argued that being independent and self-motivated is critical for an online student:

*Because of the way the systems are set up right now, students have to be independent. They work independently, so they have to be able to do that. There’s nobody pushing them or reminding them or whatever. And they have to be self-motivated. It’s hard at ten o’clock to sit down and start writing a paper.*

Another instructor echoed the importance of being an independent learner as a critical quality for an online learning environment:

*When you have 60 students in your online course, you don’t see their faces. I have no idea what these people look like, there is no visual cues that tell you who they are, you can’t probe them along. So, if you’re not an independent person, and if you’re not independently motivated to do the course, and to participate, then you’re not going to be successful in an online program.*

Some instructors noted that large class sizes do not allow instructors to establish individual contact with every student, so the need to be self-motivated and an independent learner increases with the size of student enrollment in an online course.

One instructor added the importance of being a self-directed learner as an overarching quality of being self-motivated, independent, and goal motivated. The instructor defined being

self-directed as *“knowing how you learn best and what you need to have happen. Because if you don’t demand it or make sure that you do things in a way that works for you, you’re lost.”*

Another instructor suggested that online social work students are: *“Self-directed, and because of that, you need students who are really on task and who are able to do the work that they are expected to do.”* Some instructors emphasized that online learning is not for every student, and those who decide to pursue a degree via distance delivery should be well prepared to engage in self-directed learning to complete the program requirements. One instructor stressed that: *“Many students don’t like distance for this very reason. They want to be on-campus because they just can’t be that self-motivated.”* One instructor noted that some students excel when they take classes on-campus but are not successful when they switch to online education. Another interview participant suggested that, in addition to being independent, self-directed, and goal motivated, social work students in an online program should be able to ask for help when needed:

*If you somehow have not understood the assignment, and you got out of pattern for a few weeks or whatever, you have to be able to call and say, ‘Look, I’m not getting this. I don’t understand this. I’m totally lost. The textbook is making no sense to me.’ And I think you have to have that ability to reach out. And that takes a certain amount of maturity but if not, you’re just going to be totally lost. You’re going to end up dropping the course or retaking it.*

Overall, the belief that being a self-directed learner (i.e., independent, goal motivated, etc.) who knows when to ask for help promotes success in the online learning environment was a common theme voiced by many instructors who took part in this study.

Being ethical ( $M=3.48$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ) received the second highest number of critical ratings and was identified as an essential quality by many instructors. As one educator noted: *“You have to make sure that you’re ethical in the way that you’re approaching your work. Because anyone can go online, snag parts of other people’s papers and pass it [sic] off as your own.”* Other instructors echoed the importance of being ethical:

*Sometimes what happens is that students have to do online testing or you don’t get to see them take the test and so, it is important that they have been honest that they are the ones who are taking the test and they are not plagiarizing or cheating, as that happened in the past.*

Being collaborative ( $M=3.22$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ) was the third highest rated quality based on the number of critical ratings. Being collaborative was identified as critical because many instructors used group work in their classes and collaborating online was essential for achieving course objectives. One educator shared that:

*The biggest challenge I’ve had as an instructor in asking students to do that assignment is being collaborative online and learning how to work together in an online environment. And I’ve seen a range of willingness to engage in that, and students who were less willing, I think, have a harder time in a course.*

During interviews, instructors shared similar reasons for rating being collaborative as a critical quality to another quality of being interactive ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ). One educator stated: *“You need everyone to collaborate so that it doesn’t become you and then them, and then they and then you. It has to be a joint discussion because that’s how we learn best.”* Another instructor implied that there is a reason the word *social* is in front of the word *work*:

*I have had a number of occasions—actually, probably half a dozen—where students said to me, ‘I signed up for distance ed. because I didn’t want to be a part of small group discussions.’ Very politely, you say back, ‘Well, you’re in a social work program.’*

Many interviewees emphasized the importance of group collaboration and reflected that if students had challenges with group work, they should find ways to embrace it as being an effective social work practitioner involves collaboration.

Another quality that interviewees added to the list of qualities that was connected to being collaborative, ethical and interactive was being respectful. One instructor stated that:

*You have to respect one another. You have to be careful in how you frame things because you don’t know everyone’s experiences, backgrounds, who they are, what’s important to them. So, you have to assume you don’t know rather than assume that you know.*

A number of research participants emphasized that being respectful allows students to maintain professional conduct in online discussions. One instructor, having seen particular email communications, shared that: *“Some students can be just plain hurtful. The hurtful things, and the rude things, and the obnoxious things, and the flippant things, they have no place in education.”* The instructor added that: *“When you’re communicating with your instructor, you have to be respectful. When you’re communicating with other students you have to be respectful. And if you can’t be respectful, then you probably shouldn’t be in an online course.”* A different instructor added that, in addition to being respectful, students should be culturally aware:

*Awareness of culture is more than that. It’s cultural safety as well, which aboriginal people have talked about quite a lot. And that is that people feel free to speak. When the only persons that are silent in the group online are the ones that I know have an accent, or the ones that I know have names that are obviously from some other place, or that*

*maybe some ideas come from different places, I want to know what's going on. I want to encourage them, to bring them in, to give them examples that resonate with their experience.*

Social work practice requires students to work in diverse contexts, so being respectful and being able to create a culturally safe environment are qualities that are critical for creating an effective learning environment.

Instructors identified two qualities that are critical for creating a respectful and professional relationship online. Those key qualities include: being empathic ( $M=3.03$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ), and being genuine ( $M=3.20$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ). One instructor stated that, by being genuine, students: “*Can't be there putting on a fake front, because it's an online. So what it is, it's that you trust that the face the student puts forward and this goes for all of the participation in the classes.*” Being empathic was deemed critical by one instructor who noted:

*The empathy piece is so fundamental for our field. It is just central to what we do and the democratic piece fits in there too. It is about [the] student role in the classroom but it is also about how, because I think it transfers into the way students relate to others, which is fundamental to the work that we are doing.*

The importance of the relationship-building qualities that are critical for distance social work education students was widely discussed in the interviews. One instructor mentioned that: “*It's fostering connection and, really, a sense of this connectedness, but a sense of, 'I hear, I see you, and you see me, and we're engaged in this' and in that there is a real sense of empathy.*”

The quality of being open-minded ( $M=3.27$ ,  $SD=0.74$ ) also received a number of critical rankings. As one instructor stated, the reason for choosing this quality is that:

*We're all different. And you have to be open to people's backgrounds and orientations being completely different from yours. And be open to things that, maybe you have a censorship idea [about] at first but, if you listen to all of the story, maybe you are a little in doubt. So, being open-minded not to shut anybody down; to hear them and then think about it and say 'well, there may be a point here.'*

A different instructor considered being open-minded to be an imperative student characteristic:

*Characterized by being open to new ideas. It means the student is willing to listen before judging. To me, it is a quality of matureness. Higher education requires open-minded thinking that pursues alternative explanations, reasoning and, as philosophy suggests, to stand back and think about the right way to think about things. So, being open-minded is a key quality in my mind.*

A number of instructors highlighted the importance of being open to new ideas and new ways of learning as a critical component of a social work professional identity.

Some instructors suggested that the qualities for online success are the same as for on-campus success, with a greater emphasis on individual qualities, such as being technologically-savvy ( $M=3.27$ ,  $SD=0.76$ ). One instructor stated that:

*If you do not have basic computer knowledge on how to run these sites, then you have no business being in the course. This is taking away from your learning. This is taking away from learning of other students because you can't actually use the software and the course site and the computer to be able to learn. So, if students don't have a certain level of computer knowledge, they really shouldn't be taking the courses.*

Many social work educators emphasized the importance of technological knowledge and the ability to perform basic operations. If a student chooses to take classes online, it is essential to embrace the technology in order to acquire knowledge in the field of social work.

Two qualities received a mean score of less than 3.0. Being warm ( $M=2.44$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) received no critical ratings. When interviewed, instructors suggested that being warm is an essential quality in social work practice but does not affect the learning environment. Two instructors identified being knowledgeable ( $M=2.85$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ) as a critical quality. Being knowledgeable, as one instructor noted, relates to: *“Being well-informed, insightful, intelligent, as well as having awareness of world issues and concerns, political and structural inequalities, [the] self, and the impact of cultural issues related to values and beliefs.”* Some interviewees expressed the hope that students will obtain necessary knowledge by participating in course activities but that being able to use prior knowledge to expand on their understanding of the world is an essential component of social work education.

### **Critical Student Skills**

Distance social work educators were asked to identify student skills that they consider critical to creating an effective learning environment. Table 10 provides a summary of critical student skills. These critical skills have been organized based on the number of times study participants identified them. The table includes a four-point Likert scale to assess the perceived level of importance of each identified skill, mean scores, and standard deviations.

Self-motivation skills were rated the highest among these skills and received 15 critical ratings out of a possible 34. The other skills that received at least four critical ratings (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) in descending order include: critical thinking (14), time-management (13), interpersonal communication (12), organization (12), basic

technology usage (11), group collaboration (11), self-reflection (10), writing (8), engagement (7), study (7), knowledge application (6) and online discussion (6) skills.

**Table 10: Critical Student Skills**

Student Skills	Critical Counts	NI	SI	I	VI	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Self-motivation skills	15	0	0	2	23	3.92	.277
Critical thinking skills	14	0	0	6	19	3.76	.436
Time-management skills	13	0	0	4	21	3.84	.374
Interpersonal communication skills	12	1	2	8	16	3.44	.801
Organizational skills	12	0	0	10	13	3.57	.507
Basic technology usage skills	11	0	4	10	14	3.36	.731
Group collaboration skills	11	1	1	13	12	3.33	.734
Self-reflective skills	10	0	1	10	16	3.56	.577
Writing skills	8	0	1	8	17	3.62	.571
Engagement skills	7	2	2	8	15	3.33	.920
Study skills	7	0	0	11	17	3.61	.497
Knowledge application skills	6	0	1	12	16	3.52	.574
Online discussion skills	6	0	2	7	19	3.61	.629
Goal-setting skills	3	0	2	17	12	3.32	.599
Planning skills	3	0	0	15	15	3.50	.509
Problem-solving skills	3	0	0	15	16	3.52	.508
Teamwork skills	3	1	1	13	15	3.40	.724
Feedback skills	2	2	5	13	11	3.06	.892
Implementation skills	2	2	6	16	5	2.83	.805
Assessment skills	1	3	8	12	9	2.84	.954
Evaluation skills	1	5	5	16	6	2.72	.958
Knowledge acquisition skills	1	0	1	15	16	3.47	.567
Support skills	1	1	5	19	7	3.00	.718
Termination and follow-up skills	1	5	8	14	5	2.59	.946
Negotiation skills	0	3	6	15	8	2.88	.907
Research skills	0	0	8	16	9	3.03	.728

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.



Similar to the data in the previous table, the average scores are closely connected to the criticality ratings. Higher mean scores usually resulted in a greater number of critical ratings; however, some skills that received an average score above 3.0 did not receive four critical ratings (i.e., goal-setting, planning, problem-solving, teamwork, feedback, knowledge acquisition, support and research skills). The following skills received less than four critical ratings and the mean score of importance less than 3.0: implementation, assessment, evaluation, termination, and follow-up and negotiation skills. Some skills were added by social work instructors. They include listening/hearing skills, skills in cross-cultural communication, application of cultural understanding, and skills in advocacy.

Many instructors cited similar reasons for ranking self-motivation as the top skill ( $M=3.92$ ,  $SD=0.28$ ) for students. Having self-motivation skills allows students to become self-directed learners and that is critical for an online environment. Time management ( $M=3.84$ ,  $SD=0.37$ ), organization ( $M=3.57$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ), writing ( $M=3.62$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ), study ( $M=3.61$ ,  $SD=0.50$ ) and support ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ) skills were also deemed critical to ensuring that online students know how to become successful self-directed learners.

The next set of skills, including interpersonal communication ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ), group collaboration ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ), engagement ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=0.92$ ), online discussion ( $M=3.61$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ), and teamwork ( $M=3.40$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ), received a number of critical ratings as they are related to the similar qualities that help students to build relationships in the online learning environment. One instructor noted that students cannot complete a program if they do not have those skills: *“They have to have all of those skills....Those skills will help them to not only get to a program but to experience success in the program.”* Another social work instructor highlighted

that online programs tended to attract people who are working, because they offer flexibility in choosing a time to learn course content.

Self-reflective skills ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ) and critical thinking skills ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.44$ ) were deemed critical for distance social work education. One instructor noted that self-reflection is of particular importance for social work education:

*Because what we're doing is we're learning. And while we're learning, we're synthesizing the material and then we go out and maybe we do things a little differently. So, that what you learn has a translation process and maybe a transformation process. So, the reflectivity/reflection/reflexivity is critical because you shape what you learn, you shape what you practise based on that.*

Another instructor added that: *"All of my grading rubrics contain something about critical thinking and self-reflection. I just think that should be in all our teaching, because we're trying to train self-reflective and critically thinking practitioners."* The vast majority of interviewees emphasized the importance of self-reflection and critical thinking as well as feedback ( $M=3.06$ ,  $SD=0.89$ ) and research ( $M=3.03$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ) skills in professional social work practice. Social work is an ethical profession. The ability to make judgment calls that are grounded in values from the professional code of ethics is essential for providing services needed in all areas of social work practice.

Social work practice skills such as problem-solving ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ), goal setting ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ), and planning ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ) received a number of critical ratings. One instructor noted that the problem-solving process is initiated as soon as a student receives a course outline: *"You're looking at the course outline; it's not making sense to you. You have to be able to problem-solve, knowing what you need, knowing who you need to talk to."* Another

instructor pointed out that online education requires independent learning: *“Here’s the readings, and here’s the questions from the reading; it’s not a lot of back and forth with the instructor.”*

Many educators noted that by becoming an independent learner, students develop their problem-solving skills in an online environment.

Basic technology usage skills ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ) were also rated as critical. One instructor suggested that fewer and fewer people are intimidated by technology and that those skills should be very basic. A different instructor stated that: *“Basic technology skills are very important for DE[Distance Education] students as technology is inherent in the development and access to course content. In other words, various aspects of technology are used in their delivery systems.”* Since all online learning activities are mediated through the use of technology, it is expected that students have acquired basic technology skills to be successful in that environment.

Knowledge application ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ) and knowledge acquisition ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ) skills were also rated as critical. One instructor stated that knowledge application skills include the: *“Application of a theory-based assessment of a problem or situation or policy, integration, synthesis, analysis of knowledge, professional integrity, and competence.”* while knowledge acquisition skills: *“Are cumulative and very important to make sense of the course information provided. Learning strategies are detailed in through the study of assignment goals and outcomes as well as grading rubrics, independent research, instructor feedback, student group assignments, and discussion posts.”* Research participants noted that both knowledge acquisition and knowledge application skills are critical because they are essential in preparing students for professional social work practice.

Certain practice skills, such as assessment ( $M=2.84$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ), implementation ( $M=2.83$ ,  $SD=0.81$ ), and evaluation ( $M=2.72$ ,  $SD=0.96$ ), were rated as not important and received a mean

score below 3.0. An instructor suggested that: *“They’re important social work skills but I don’t think, in terms of their actual online ability to take the course and learn they particularly apply.”*

Other skills that receive low mean scores and number of critical ratings include negotiation skills ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ), and follow-up and termination skills ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ). One instructor noted: *“Obviously, from a social work perspective, it’s[negotiation and follow-up, termination skills] essential but in an online course, as it pertains to the learning, I don’t really think that it matters.”*

Two instructors added listening/hearing skills to the list of critical skills for online learning. One educator noted that for an online course:

*You have to be able to listen but you have to be able to hear it. So, sometimes students listen but they’re not translating it into what it really means. They’re just writing notes or they’re off in space. You have to be able to listen to what’s said and understand what is being said to you, is what I’m trying to say. And I think that’s an essential skill.*

Listening skills are a necessary skill in classroom learning but are also critical in online education, particularly during web conferences, to ensure that students are active participants.

Another skill that was added to the original list of critical skills is that of advocacy. Two instructors highlighted the importance of advocacy in professional social work practice. One instructor stated that:

*I think that all people in social work need to learn advocacy skills because when you work with clients, the system isn’t fair, quite often. And so, you need to advocate and fight sometimes for your client. And you can do that because of your position. And also in the broader society, you might be able to advocate for a certain change in policy within the*

*government that's negative, that's hurting people, or one that's missing; housing policy, for example. So, all those are important in our field.*

Some instructors stated that students should already have this skill before entering a social work program (online or face-to-face) while others reported that certain professional social work skills, such as advocacy can be learned through the course of study.

## **Summary and Discussion of Findings Pertaining to Research Question 2: Students**

### **Characteristics**

Social work distance educators identified a number of critical student characteristics (qualities and skills) for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. This summary synthesizes the answers to two survey questions about critical qualities and skills of distance social work students and compares these results with selected findings from literature in the field.

In reviewing the list of critical qualities for social work students that have a mean score of importance more than 3.0 and at least four critical ratings, five distinct groups of qualities can be identified as helpful for creating an effective learning environment. The first group of qualities focuses on the self-directed nature of distance social work education and includes the highest-ranked quality of being self-motivated, as well as being independent, organized, and goal-motivated. The second group of qualities focuses on the professional orientation of social work education and includes qualities such as being ethical, genuine, respectful, and empathic. The third group of qualities focuses on group work and emphasizes the importance of human communication in social work practice. The critical qualities that are part of this group include being collaborative and being interactive. The fourth group of qualities focuses on the cognitive ability of social work students and includes the qualities of being open-minded and critically

reflective. In addition to the four groups of qualities, the quality of being technologically-savvy suggests that students should have at least basic knowledge of technology to learn online while an advanced understanding of technology was voiced as desirable for success in an online learning environment.

Instructors added some qualities to the original list generated through the literature review. Those qualities help to amplify the proposed five sets of critical qualities. For example, being systematic, curious, and mindful contributes to improving cognitive qualities. Being democratic and culturally aware strengthens the professional set of qualities. Being both flexible and persevering help to enhance the self-directed qualities critical to effective online social work education.

Four out of five groups of qualities (cognitive, social, technical and self-directed) for student success emerging from this study can be found in other research on distance education. Schrum and Hong (2002) highlighted seven dimensions as significant for online student success from fourteen distance educators; these included access to tools, technology experience, learning preferences, study habits and skills, goals or purposes, lifestyle factors, and personal traits and characteristics. Those dimensions can be connected to four of the five sets of qualities identified in the study: access to tools and technology experience is connected to technical qualities; learning preferences are connected to social qualities; study habits and skills are connected to cognitive qualities; and goals or purposes, lifestyle factors, and personal traits and characteristics are connected to self-directed qualities.

Yukselturk and Bulut (2007) asked 80 students who attended an online computer programming course to identify critical qualities for student success. The results of the study suggested that intrinsic goal orientation, task value, self-efficacy, cognitive strategy use, and self-

regulation were significantly positively correlated with online student success. Those results focus on two critical group of qualities identified in the current study: cognitive qualities (cognitive strategy use) and self-directed qualities (intrinsic goal orientation, task value, self-efficacy, and self-regulation).

Cognitive, technical and self-directed qualities were critical in some other research studies. Kerr, Ryneearson, and Kerr (2006), in their study of 180 students, highlighted four characteristics of success: reading and writing skills, independent learning, motivation, and computer literacy. Those four aspects of success also can be connected to the three sets of qualities identified in this study: reading and writing skills are related to cognitive qualities, motivation is connected to self-directed qualities, and computer literacy is related to technical qualities. Another study by Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) asked 76 students to answer the question of what makes a learner successful in an online environment. The authors found that the majority of the participants identified the following components as helpful in their online learning: design of the course (cognitive qualities), comfort with online technologies (technical qualities), and time management (self-directed qualities).

Overall findings from this study are consistent with the literature in the area and suggest that the increased self-directedness of distance education requires students to be active and engaged in the learning process. Self-directed qualities have also been found to facilitate successful online learning (Miller & King, 2003). Some studies (e.g., Bullen, 1998; Horwath & Shardlow, 2000) have also found that students who might not develop the self-directed qualities may be more likely to participate less in and report having more difficulties with online courses than face-to-face courses.

An important contribution of this study to social work distance education is the recognition of unique qualities students should bring to online learning that are consistent with social work professional qualities. The emerging professional qualities, such as being ethical, genuine, respectful, and empathic, included in the original list of qualities as well as suggestions voiced by social work educators for being democratic and culturally aware provides more insight about the professional qualities in social work distance education.

The list of skills for social work students compiled from the literature review has a large number of items, so very few additional skills were suggested. Participating instructors rated a number of the listed skills as critical. Those skills with a mean score of importance more than 3.0 have been grouped into five sets that include skills critical for distance social work education. The first set is connected to self-directed qualities and includes self-motivation, time management, goal setting, planning, and study skills. The second set is connected to cognitive qualities and includes critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and writing skills, as well as knowledge application and feedback skills. The third set is focused on basic technology skills for the online environment. The fourth set is focused on the importance of relationships and includes group collaboration, engagement, teamwork, and online discussion skills. The fifth set emphasizes emerging professional social work skills such as self-reflective skills, problem-solving skills, and skills that were added by research participants: listening/hearing skills, skills in cross-cultural communication, application of cultural understanding, and advocacy.

The identified skills and qualities (technical, cognitive, social, self-directed and emerging professional) for students' success from this study can be connected to the Borges Sáiz (2008) description of five key sets of competencies (operational, cognitive, collaborative, self-directing, and course-specific) for online student success. Operational competencies represent



technological skills and qualities that every online student needs to have to be successful in an online learning environment. Cognitive competencies focus on how one can learn course content and are connected to the list of cognitive skills and qualities for social work distance education students. Collaborative competencies require qualities and skills to enhance communication and co-operation. Self-directing competencies focus on skills and qualities that are put into practice internally by the learner. And course-specific competencies are the skills and qualities that are required for professional social work practice.

The five sets of skills and qualities identified in this study suggest five roles for online social work students. Those roles are consistent with Borges Sáiz's (2008) description of the online student role and include technical, cognitive, social, self-directed and emerging professional roles. The roles identified in this study can also be compared with findings from other studies. As Fresen (2005) suggests students will be successful if they communicate with other students (the social role), apply critical thinking skills (the cognitive role), and practice time management, personal motivation, commitment, effectiveness and efficiency (the self-directed role). Roper (2007) asked 59 graduate students who completed a degree online and achieved high academic rating to suggest practical steps that helped them succeed in their online courses. Students' suggestions can also be connected to the five roles identified in this study for student success. For example, the number one suggestion identified by students in Roper's study was to develop a time-management strategy. The strategy is related to the self-directed skills and qualities for student success established in the current study. Other strategies that were used to promote student success in Roper's work required students to make the most of online discussions (cognitive, social and self-directed roles), apply the knowledge learned from the course (social and professional roles), make questions useful to their learning (cognitive role),

stay motivated (self-directed role), communicate the instruction techniques that work (cognitive role), and make connections with fellow students (social role). By grouping students' skills and qualities into five distinct roles the current study helps in identifying critical areas for student success in social work distance education.

In summary, the second research question focused on the identification of student characteristics critical for creating an effective learning environment. Student characteristics identified in this study include qualities and skills that are important for a social work distance education student to possess in taking BSW courses via distance education. Table 11 provides a summary of critical student roles and its corresponding skills and qualities social work distance educators perceive as critical for creating an effective learning environment.

**Table 11: Critical Student Roles**

<b>Student Role</b>	<b>Critical Student Qualities</b>	<b>Critical Student Skills</b>
<b>Cognitive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Open-minded</b></li> <li>• <i>Critically Reflective</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Critical thinking</b></li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing</b></li> <li>• <b>Knowledge application</b></li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collaborative</b></li> <li>• <b>Interactive</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group collaboration</b></li> <li>• <b>Engagement</b></li> <li>• <b>Online discussion</b></li> </ul>
<b>Self Directed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-motivated</b></li> <li>• <b>Independent</b></li> <li>• <b>Goal-motivated</b></li> <li>• <i>Organized</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-motivation</b></li> <li>• <b>Time-management</b></li> <li>• <b>Organization</b></li> <li>• <b>Study</b></li> </ul>
<b>Technical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technologically savvy</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Basic technology</b></li> </ul>
<b>Emerging Professional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ethical</b></li> <li>• <b>Genuine</b></li> <li>• <i>Respectful</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-reflective</b></li> </ul>

*Note:* The bolded font for qualities and skills represents those that receive four or more critical ratings and mean scores of importance of 3.0 and higher. The non-bolded font is used for qualities and skills that receive four or more critical ratings but had average ratings of importance that were less than 3.0. The italic font is used for qualities that receive four or more critical ratings but were not included as part of the original list of qualities on the survey questionnaire.

The summary table is limited to skills and qualities that receive at least four critical ratings and average scores of importance 3.0 and higher. Font changes are used to highlight key differences in each of the identified lists. The bolded font highlights all student qualities and skills that received four or more critical ratings and mean scores of importance 3.0 and higher. The non-bolded font points out qualities and skills that received four or more critical ratings but had the average score of importance less than 3.0. The italic font in the table highlights those qualities that received four or more critical ratings but were not included as part of the original list of qualities on the survey questionnaire generated from the literature review conducted for this study.

The research findings provide an opportunity to organize critical student skills and qualities into five roles that are consistent with current research (e.g., Borges Sáiz, 2008). Each identified role includes a number of skills and qualities that are critical to creating an effective learning environment from social work distance educators' perspectives. The cognitive role requires students to be open-minded and critically reflective to develop critical thinking, interpersonal communication, as well as writing and knowledge application skills. The social role highlights the importance of group collaboration, engagement, and online discussion skills. The self-directed role focuses on self-motivation, time management, organization and study skills which help students to become a self-motivated, independent, goal-motivated and organized learner. The technical role emphasizes the importance of basic technology skills and highlights the criticality of being computer (tech) savvy in learning social work curriculum via distance education. The emerging professional role focuses on the importance of being ethical, genuine, and respectful which help to demonstrate self-reflective skills.

The five identified roles provide a comprehensive overview of critical students' characteristics needed to create an effective learning environment. The study findings enhance the current research by sharing social work distance educators' perspective on what qualities and skills are critical for social work distance education in Canada. The following section presents findings on the research question related to university supports.

### **Findings Pertaining to Research Question 3: University Supports**

The third research question is focused on identifying university supports needed to create an effective learning environment. Two parts of the quantitative survey focused on university supports: those for instructors and those for students. Findings relating to such supports will be highlighted in the sections that follow.

#### **University Supports for Students**

Two of the survey questions pertained to those university supports for students that are critical for the creation of an effective online learning environment. The first question asked instructors to rank student support services, and to suggest others that were not included on the original list; and the second focused on the methods of providing the support services identified.

**Critical list of university supports for students.** University supports for students that are essential for learning online have been organized based on the number of times research participants identified them. Table 12 provides a summary of those university supports deemed critical from the perspective of participating distance social work educators, responses to a four-point Likert scale for assessing the perceived level of importance, as well as mean scores, and standard deviations for each university support based on Likert scale responses.

**Table 12: University Supports for Students**

University Supports for Students	Critical Counts	NI	SI	I	VI	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
University technical support	25	0	0	3	15	3.83	.383
Library services	15	0	1	8	15	3.58	.584
Disability/accessibility services	12	1	0	6	17	3.63	.711
Aboriginal student centre	9	2	3	7	16	3.32	.945
Academic learning and tutoring services	9	1	2	10	15	3.39	.786
Mental health, and personal counselling services	9	1	6	6	13	3.19	.939
Academic counselling services	7	0	4	8	16	3.43	.742
Financial aid services	6	2	3	10	16	3.29	.902
Registrar's office (transcripts, graduation, etc.)	5	1	3	15	11	3.20	.761
Bookstore	2	2	8	15	7	2.84	.847
Career and employment centre	1	5	13	8	6	2.47	.983
International student centre	1	5	5	13	8	2.77	1.023
Student life and development centre	1	5	13	8	6	2.47	.983
Testing centre	0	6	10	9	8	2.58	1.062
University health services	0	6	9	10	7	2.56	1.045

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

University technical support was rated the highest, receiving 25 critical ratings out of a possible 34. The list of professional university supports in descending order (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) include: library services (15), disability/accessibility services (12), Aboriginal student centre (9), academic learning and tutoring services (9), mental health, wellness, and personal counselling services (9), academic counselling services (7), financial aid services (6) and registrar's office services (5). The following university support services received fewer than two critical ratings each: bookstore, career and employment centre, international student centre, and the student life and development centre. The testing centre and university health services were not rated as critical by social work distance delivery instructors. Instructors did not suggest any additional professional supports to the list generated through the

literature review. Nine university supports for students received a mean score above 3.0 and critical counts above four to be considered both important and critical for creating an effective learning environment.

University technical support ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ) received the highest number of critical ratings (i.e., 25) and had the highest mean score on the importance scale at 3.83. One instructor noted that: *“Some people have difficulties when we had, for example, D2L [course management system] or software that was down, and they had to do something they could not do it. They needed the technical support to know how to access it.”* Another instructor added that Information Technology (IT) support that is included in the university technical support services is critical as technology does not always work, and students need professional help to ensure they can navigate to complete their course work. Respondents provided many examples of problems with technology, including issues with the course management system, internet access, and software setup, thereby demonstrating the need for technical support to create an effective learning environment.

The availability of technical support was raised as a concern by many instructors, as some universities do not have their IT support desk open during hours when students are doing their homework; i.e., late evenings and weekends. Some instructors also conduct web conferences in the evening to accommodate student schedules and time zone differences, and they require technical support if something does not go as planned. One instructor stated: *“I don’t know enough to be able to help them troubleshoot, plus I’m already online in the classroom, so I can’t be doing those. So I think they need that; the same sort of timely support that instructors need.”*

The immediacy, timeliness, and responsiveness of IT support were raised by a number of educators as essential elements for promoting effective teaching and learning. One instructor suggested that technical support should be available on-site:

*If somebody is in a session and having trouble with their microphone or a camera, the instructor or maybe a technical support person needs to be there to assist them so that they can get it working, or otherwise they can't participate. That's why it's critical. Also, if the student has trouble accessing certain materials, maybe because of their browser or pop-up being blocked, or other kinds of technical issues, they need to be able to either trust that the instructor can help them, or that there is some kind of IT support desk assistance that they can easily access to help them with that.*

The need for IT support for dealing with any technical-related concerns was mentioned by the majority of research participants as critical for both students and instructors.

In addition to technical support, two other university services received no 'not important' ratings: library ( $M=3.58$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ) and academic counselling services ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=0.74$ ). Many instructors noted these as essential services for students. For example, library services were rated as critical as the library provides access to course material, a link noted by one instructor:

*"There's links back and forth between the library and your course."* Academic counselling services were rated critical as they provide advice to students on what courses to take, how to manage academic requirements, and how to stay focused on learning.

The ability to prepare students for success in the online learning environment by ensuring that everyone has the tools necessary was raised by a number of social work educators. One instructor stated that, if the use of the software is expected, the institution should provide access to it, and help in: *"Obtaining the necessary texts and the necessary materials because some*

*students had difficulty accessing the materials which meant that they were late handing in assignments but it wasn't their fault."* Another instructor suggested a way to ensure that students have all the necessary reading material to engage in online learning:

*I think we need to look at the costs and also be aware of when we're setting a textbook, how expensive it is. Can people get this? I think the other thing the university could do is...for online learning, we should just send out a package. I know it's more expensive but let's put everything in the package. So, here's your text, here's your manual, here's whatever. You don't have to do anything.*

Some instructors noted that access to required software and support with purchasing textbooks can improve students' academic performance.

A high number of instructors identified accessibility/disability services ( $M=3.63$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ) as critical for students with disabilities. One educator noted that

*I actually had a student this last semester that I was teaching, who had quite a severe disability. And I had the chance to work closely with the disability services to come up with a plan that worked for her, that made the course accessible to her, and she completed the course with a lot of success, so I had a good recent experience with that, that's why I probably put it as critical.*

Another instructor noted some challenges with the current model of support from disability/accessibility services as it should be based on the principle of self-identification whereas, at present, students need to prove that they have a disability. One educator shared that students with learning disabilities currently must pay more than \$500 CAD for a psychological learning assessment to demonstrate that they are eligible for accommodation. Another structural barrier identified by an interviewee is that students must register with disability/accessibility



services before the course start date to qualify for the service, which does not take into account the possibility that a disability may develop while taking the course.

Instructors mentioned some university supports that promote cultural diversity among the student population. University services for selected student groups were rated critical by social work distance educators. For example, the Aboriginal student centre ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) is an essential support for building relationships among indigenous students. One instructor emphasized that the” *“Aboriginal student centre is very important as it provides culturally appropriate personal and moral support to students. The centre would provide access to information for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.”* Another instructor stated that other student groups, such as those which include immigrants, refugees, or anyone who has unique cultural needs, may require some kind of university support services that provide: *“Anything that would be able to help a student maybe communicate from a cultural perspective to me, what’s going on in their life, in their course.”*

Culturally-appropriate support services should be available as there are a number of groups that may need support. One instructor emphasized that: *“We try to increase our diversity in our classes, and sometimes that means people have English as an additional language and need even more support to clearly communicate in the written discussions or in the assignments.”* Although some instructors stressed the importance of the international student centre ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ), as it helps: *“International students adapt to the Canadian experience and succeed academically, to make new friends, to know how to access resources, and to feel welcome,”* it received a low mean score of importance as a number of instructors noted that they have a very limited population of international students in their courses.

Many educators proposed the need for support services for all vulnerable groups. Examples of such services include Dalhousie University's Black Student Advising Centre, which focuses on the large African Nova Scotian student population, or ally groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. One instructor noted that although a university may include students from vulnerable groups, the institution does not always provide adequate support services for those students:

*Particularly in social work where they're dealing with these tough issues and asking to think about their worldview in a totally different way. How are we supporting them in doing that? Right, we say all the time in social work that we have a very strong affirmative action policy for admission, that we invite students into the school, but we need to find better ways of supporting students once they are in here.*

Some schools have such affirmative action policies in place but, as one instructor noted: "We're trying to work on ways to better support students, but it's always an ongoing issue." Although having an affirmative action policy was suggested by some instructors as a step in the right direction, without proper university supports those policies have limited application.

A number of general university supports were rated critical for online social work education, and several noted that universities need to invest more in general support services to fulfill their mandate as public institutions that provide education for everyone. Support with registration ( $M=3.20$ ,  $SD=0.76$ ), and academic counselling and tutoring services ( $M=3.39$ ,  $SD=0.79$ ), are critical as they help students who are unfamiliar with university become oriented and make the transition to university life. Registration services were named key because:

*The university needs to make that a user-friendly process and attend to that for the student, because most of our online [students] may not be registered in a program in that*

*institution, or they may need some extra admission and registration support that needs to be provided by the institution.*

Academic counseling and tutoring services were identified as critical because online students need support to balance their family, work and academic commitments.

Some instructors noted that students are struggling to pay for their education and that this impacts their academic success. Financial aid services ( $M=3.29$ ,  $SD=0.90$ ) were, therefore, rated critical by a number of study participants. One instructor shared their perspective on why this is an essential support for creating an effective learning environment: *“Not that it relates to online learning more than any other type of learning, but you have to be able to not be totally stressed out about money all the time in order to learn.”* Universities have a role in providing financial support to ensure that students are successful. Some instructors noted that, although the majority of scholarships are designed for on-campus students, some schools are working very hard to balance the number of financial supports by providing more opportunities for online students to apply for scholarships and other sources of funding.

Mental health, wellness, and personal counselling ( $M=3.19$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ) were identified as other critical university supports. One instructor pointed out that: *“Just like the finances, if you’re not in the mental and emotional space to engage in the learning, then you is not gonna be successful.”* Another instructor added another example that demonstrates why mental health, wellness, and personal counseling services are critical for social work education:

*Talking about incest and a student discloses something to me, I’m not going to be social working that student, but I need to be able to have someone ready online to be able to talk to that student, just like they would here at the university.*

Some instructors noted that social workers deal with a number of emotional topics and so access to mental health, wellness, and personal counselling is critical for professional social workers as well as social workers in training. Universities should provide mental health support to model the outstanding quality of support services students would utilize in a successful professional practice.

The rationale for designating individual supports as critical was not always easy to make, as many instructors were not aware of all of the issues students face in the online learning environment. For example, whether students used the bookstore or not depended on whether they had to use a required text or could rely on academic articles that are accessible through library services. Some instructors rated the bookstore not important while others rated it as critical. This support services also received a mean score below 3.0. Some instructors felt that online students should be able to purchase required textbooks online, while others saw the bookstore as a central point for obtaining required course material.

In addition to being unaware of some student challenges in the online environment, the question of access influenced decisions around criticality. This concern was primarily voiced in discussing cultural group support services, and mental health, wellness, and counseling support services, which some instructors thought could be accessed through local community agencies.

One educator noted that:

*It's interesting to think of how those function over distance because I think they're critical for students on-campus. And especially something like for international students and for indigenous students. It gives students on-campus an actual physical space to go to where there are other people like them with the same issues and the same struggles and whatever. They can talk.*

The primary reason why a number of supports, such as career and employment centre ( $M=2.47$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ), student life and development ( $M=2.47$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ), and university health services ( $M=2.56$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) were rated as not important, was that instructors do not know how valuable those supports are for students and whether social work distance education students could access those supports. The testing centre ( $M=2.58$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) received no critical ratings and one of the lowest mean scores as many instructors during interviews shared that they do not use off-campus testing and when quizzes are given, they are usually scheduled online.

Some educators rated many university supports as important but did not deem them critical. One instructor stated that: *“I think those things are important but how do you translate it online.”* For example, *“an indigenous student in northern Manitoba, there is an Aboriginal student centre, but how does that person know about access? What do they get out of it?”*

Another educator echoed:

*I ticked the Aboriginal centre. I think it's essential for students but, in an online program, how do you do that? And probably there is a way if we thought about it, if we really thought about a virtual world. There probably is a way to do it. We just haven't come up with it yet. But I do think that those kinds of things are really important.*

Another respondent commented: *“There's an international student taking a distance course and living somewhere else, how does the international student centre know about them, to know that they're an international student.”* One instructor summarized the challenge by stating that: *“The supports the university offers are geared for face-to-face students. They may not be sophisticated enough to provide those kinds of supports for students in the online learning environment.”* One educator suggested that all services should be critical because:

*Often times students are faced with barriers that get in the way so you can have the best program possible and you can have all the technical supports available but, let's say the student is struggling financially or with disability. Having those kinds of support will reduce structural barriers that may get in the way.*

Instructors suggested some reasons why some universities do not provide identified critical supports for online students. One instructor stated that: *"Our university is not assuming that the students are not living here."* Some educators mentioned that their universities do not have the vision to support distance education students and only focus on how to provide on-campus support services. Some instructors noted that when universities start thinking from the perspective of distance students, supports will become more in line with their needs. Instructors noted that students should be asked about how university supports are provided to them as instructor knowledge on this topic is limited to their personal experiences and the experiences of students who have shared their challenges and successes in receiving university supports.

The current study, in addition to addressing questions on critical university support services, looked at critical ways to provide such supports. The next section presents key findings that describe the methods of service provision needed to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education.

**Critical ways of providing university supports for students.** The survey questionnaire asked instructors to identify ways of providing university support for students that could be defined as critical to success in delivering distance education in social work. The following is a list of these methods and is organized in descending order based on the number of times each was identified as critical by research participants. Information posted online (faculty website; course management system; blog; wiki), and orientation sessions and workshops (web

conference/face-to-face) were rated the highest, receiving 14 out of a possible 34 critical ratings. Other methods identified, with the number of critical responses shown in parentheses, include readiness surveys (8), ongoing one-on-one student advising (8), peer-to-peer/student mentorship (8), and student support manuals, books, or other print resources (5).

Table 13 provides a summary of methods for providing student supports listed on the original survey questionnaire identified as critical by participating distance social work educators, responses to a four-point Likert scale to assess the perceived level of importance, mean scores, and standard deviations for each method of providing university support. It is significant to note that while all methods for providing critical students support received more than four critical ratings, only the two highest rated methods received a mean score of importance 3.0 or higher.

**Table 13: Methods for Providing Critical Support**

Methods for Providing Support	Critical Counts	NI	SI	I	VI	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Information posted online (faculty website; course management system; blog; wiki)	14	1	0	7	18	3.62	.697
Orientation sessions and workshops (web conference/face-to-face)	14	0	5	4	16	3.44	.821
Readiness surveys (prior to taking online courses)	8	4	6	9	12	2.94	1.063
Ongoing one-on-one student advising	8	2	9	8	11	2.93	.980
Peer-to-peer/student mentorship	8	2	7	14	6	2.83	.848
Student support manuals, books, or other print resources	5	6	6	8	12	2.81	1.148

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

The following ways of providing support were added to the original list by participating social work instructors. They include a peer-run help desk, IT support throughout the course, a 24/7 technical support line, instructor support throughout the course, mandatory technology training,

training on understanding course syllabi, the use of creative videos, humorous Power Point slides, chats, Facebook, and activity checklists for all courses.

Research participants rated orientation services ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ) as critical for success as they introduce students who have never taken an online course to the online environment. A number of interviewees suggested that student orientation should be conducted at the beginning of the program. One instructor emphasized that:

*Thorough orientation at the beginning of the school year, but even throughout the school year, another orientation, a reminder of sorts will be helpful. Because I think the students, again, sometimes sign up thinking that this is the personal one-on-one correspondence course or something, they didn't entirely do it in their own privacy. It's not a private course. It's not a correspondence course.*

Another instructor noted that it requires a lot of resources to bring students from coast to coast for on-campus orientation: *"It'd always be nice if students could actually meet each other in person but everybody's in different parts of the country so that sometimes is prohibitive to have that happen."* Many instructors agreed that orientation is necessary to build the online community and to familiarize students with the principal components of distance social work education.

One educator suggested that university should provide ongoing orientation services for students because, if students get too much information in a short period, they cannot remember it all. A more balanced approach to orientation, which would include the opportunity to have one-on-one advising and online resources, was suggested so that students could access supports as they need them.



Another suggestion made by a number of interview participants was the requirement for students to attend mandatory technology training during orientation while one instructor also suggested that, in addition to technology training, students should be oriented on how to read the syllabus:

*I'm now finding out that reading a syllabus, evidently, is a skill that I never appreciated.*

*I have students that a) don't get it (they have to reread it), b) don't go back to it. You have to keep saying, probably the assignment that's cited in your syllabus with the marking grid is what you should be following. So, I think that orientation to how to read a syllabus, what you have to do to survive in an online course.*

Mandatory orientation was suggested by some instructors to ensure students are aware of the types of supports provided by the university to meet their individual needs.

Orientation is also a different way of building relationships in an online community, which is critical for social work education. Instructors suggested a number of ways that students can stay connected after the initial orientation (e.g., social media). One educator shared the experience of teaching in a college setting where each student cohort developed its own Facebook page and noted how students could conduct some community-building activities that way: *"They communicate with each other. They help each other. They point out resources."*

Another instructor suggested that Facebook permits students to connect in person, as students can see that there might be a fellow student living near enough that they might have the opportunity to get together to work collaboratively on group projects, share ideas, and support each other. One instructor stated that Facebook is: *"Like the coffee room or the student lounge. It's like a place where you can just go on and chat with other people."* Another instructor added that Facebook can be used to create relationships, as social work students need to communicate

with each other and *“unless there is the residency requirement, or it’s blended learning, they rarely ever see each other. So, they’re creating relationships like one we create on Facebook.”*

Those instructors familiar/aware of the benefits of social media use commented on its educational value for social work distance education.

Making information available through course websites ( $M=3.62$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ) received the same number of critical ratings as orientation services, but was rated by research participants as the most important method for providing student support. One instructor stated: *“If I’m not available if someone else is not available, they have another way in which they can get that information.”* Another instructor added: *“There’s a number of particular pieces on every course site that guides students, and in terms of giving them information on how to navigate their course space.”* A number of instructors mentioned the importance of design as critical in making information available online. About the design of the frequently asked question (FAQ) section of the course website, one participant noted: *“I think there needs to be a sense of flow so when they go online...they know what they need to do.”* Another educator suggested that to strengthen the course design, reminders of course activities, such as activities checklists, should be placed every week to remind students of critical due dates and related course requirements.

Making information available through the use of student support manuals, books, or other print resources ( $M=2.81$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) was rated as critical by five instructors but overall received the lowest mean score. Some instructors emphasized the importance of online resources, in addition to print manuals, to ensure that the needs of online students are met and to familiarize them with the supports available to those with limited physical access to the campus. Instructors were unsure how students access information, and some suggested that a study be designed to obtain data on the preferred methods of receiving information from a student’s perspective.

Some instructors rated a readiness survey ( $M=2.94$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) as a critical way of providing support for students. One perspective on this was shared during the interview phase:

*I have some students up North who enroll in distance ed. courses constantly and always drop out. They're just not ready for the independent learning, or the amount of reading they have to do on their own and...the truth is, we need to check and make sure that they, first of all, have the reading competence, quite frankly. But secondly, have the ability to schedule their own, understand that they're responsible for getting through the course material, even more on an online course than in a classroom. So, I think we need to find out if they're ready.*

Another instructor noted that well-designed readiness surveys provide information to students about their strengths and challenges related to distance learning: “*Students need to know how to work independently. Students need to know how to advocate for themselves when they need help. Students need to know how to manage and schedule time and how to prioritize situations.*” Some instructors emphasized the importance of having students complete a readiness survey before submitting their application to ensure they are aware of the expectations involved in an online social work program.

One-on-one student advising ( $M=2.93$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ) was deemed a critical way for providing support by some instructors. This critical rating was based on experiences with working with online students who stated that they benefitted from having someone available who was able to provide both academic and non-academic support. Being able to connect to the person who can provide one-on-one advising services and who knows the overall system of university supports can help assess students needs. Then the advisor can connect students to other resources, such as library, financial aid, registration. Some instructors noted that students

can connect with instructors for additional support, while others emphasized the need for an external person (not an instructor) who can help students with academic and non-academic challenges.

Some instructors identified peer-to-peer support ( $M=2.83$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ) as a critical way of providing support. One educator noted that: *“We actually create spaces on course sites for a social work cafe, where the students are able to work with, connect with one another.”* Another instructor described a community of practice that can be created as a private space for students; i.e., a non-moderated space on a discussion board where students can ask questions and receive answers from their classmates. In addition to this, some instructors stated that support that ensures respectful and safe exchanges can also be provided for students on discussion boards. One educator suggested an online tutorial to inform students on how to post respectfully:

*I'd rather prevent those kind of incidents[disrespectful, insensitive posts], than intervene after the fact. I don't want to set them up for failure because of that. I think it would be more fair to have some kind of an orientation that addresses, like sarcasm, we can't hear your tone, those kind of things about voice and written word.*

Another way to provide support for students is to make funding available for accessing the online learning environment, particularly as it relates to the quality of internet service and required software and hardware. One instructor suggested that:

*Either you make sure there's some technical help available and we provide for that and there's funding for it, and there's also some kind of way to upgrade their equipment so that they can learn. Otherwise, it's partial learning only and you can be sure that something's going to be missed. So, I think [it's] important that we are properly funded*

*for student support, equipment-wise, technology-wise, and even having a backup that's live, and it's online when they need it.*

### **Summary and Discussion of Findings Pertaining to University Supports for Students**

University supports that social work distance educators identified as critical are related to the five student roles defined in this study: technical, cognitive, self-directed, social, and emerging professional. Participants in the study noted that each critical support helps students to develop skills and qualities important in creating an effective learning environment. As each student has unique needs and faces different barriers to acquiring the skills and qualities needed to be successful, university supports should be available at the time when the student most needs them. For example, to develop technical skills, and qualities, and to strengthen the student's technical role many study participants suggested that university technical support should be provided both at the beginning of the course/program and at the request of the student. Students should be able to learn those critical technical skills and apply them in their interaction with course content, other students, and instructors.

Library, academic learning and tutoring, and bookstore services are essential to building cognitive skills and qualities and strengthen a student's cognitive role. Both the library and the bookstore provide students with needed resources to connect with course content. Academic learning and tutoring services help students demonstrate their cognitive abilities in presenting the knowledge gained from course activities.

Some university supports are designed to help students build self-directed skills and qualities to strengthen their self-directed learner role. For students to stay self-motivated, independent, and organized, university supports such as accessibility/disability, academic counselling, financial aid, and registration services are needed. In addition to requiring them to

stay self-motivated, these services are critical for students who have barriers to accessing post-secondary education.

Mental health, wellness, and personal counseling and culturally relevant support services are essential for social work due to the discipline's practical focus on emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. These services can be used to enhance students' emerging professional and social roles. The availability of a variety support services to students also demonstrates the university's commitment to social inclusion. Because social work education focuses on students with different needs, universities should provide supports to address those needs; in so doing, they become more accessible to such students.

Each identified critical university support can strengthen more than one critical student role in creating an effective learning environment. It is not easy to assign specific support to only one role. For example, when students receive technical support, it is likely to affect their technical skills, cognitive skills, and self-directed skills. Students who receive mental health counselling support can improve all their skills as their mental health improves.

Findings from the study suggest that for students to be successful and build needed skills and qualities to perform critical roles, they must have easy access to university support services. Those findings are consistent with other academic literature. For example, Levy (2003) and LaPadula (2003) suggest that universities should provide distance education students with an experience equivalent to the on-campus students, including the same types of student support services. Levy (2003) also found that online students need counseling support, library services, and financial aid to be successful in learning online. Study findings are also consistent with the Brindley, Walti, and Zawacki-Richter's (2004) assertion that "there is widespread recognition that learner support in the form of effective teaching, advising and counseling, library,

information and technical assistance, and efficient administrative services can make an important positive difference to the distance learning experience.”(p.5)

Social work distance students should have access to all identified critical university support services. Fink (2002) pointed out that students who are not prepared for taking online classes might have an adverse impact on creating an effective learning environment for other online students and the instructor. And as indicated in the literature, students who have access to university support to satisfy their individual study needs are more likely to succeed in their distance education classes (Levy, 2003; Mason & Weller, 2000; Savrock, 2001).

The findings from this study suggest that social work distance education students might require support before, during and after their learning process, and this is consistent with Thorpe’s (2002) findings. The university supports services that received four or more critical ratings reflect the perceived importance of addressing unique student needs (e.g., proper technical support and access to library services, on-going disability/accessibility services, and access to specific cultural supports (e.g., Aboriginal student centre); as well as academic learning and tutoring services, mental health, wellness, personal and academic counselling services, financial aid services and registration support. A range of university supports offer social work distance educators an additional and powerful means of achieving curriculum learning objectives. The university supports critical for students’ success provide the consistency and individualized attention for social work distance students’ needs. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) have noted university support services provided to students throughout their educational experience with the institution facilitate students’ success in an online learning environment.

Potter (2013) also suggested that student support should be continuous and include university supports before students are enrolled in the distance education program, when they

start the program, when they move through the program, and when they complete the program. These supports should be available for students to deal with both personal and institutional issues. Distance education students in Potter's study placed the highest importance on those support services that relate to general information about how to enroll in distance learning programs, communicate with instructor and students, promote academic success and access personal assistance when needed. The current study findings are similar to Potter's findings, as social work distance education instructors perceive that a university should provide supports for students based on their individual needs, and that those identified critical university supports should be available throughout their studies.

There are many methods of providing university supports for online students. The two highest ranked methods (through information posted online, and orientation sessions and workshops) suggest that it is essential that universities use a variety of media to inform students of available supports and how to access services. Three other ways of providing supports (readiness surveys, ongoing one-on-one student advising, and peer-to-peer/student mentorship) received eight critical ratings each, which suggests that these are essential elements of a student support system; therefore, as study participants suggested, universities should offer such services to help create an effective online learning environment.

The methods rated as critical by social work distance educators for providing student support services suggests the multiplicity of ways how a university can connect with social work online students to meet their learning needs. Findings from the current study support previous findings that require universities to provide an excellent orientation to online courses and support students with the socialization process throughout their program of study (Lynch, 2001). Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) pointed out that the diversity of methods for providing



university supports can improve academic experiences for students, connect them to other learners, and help them develop needed learning skills and qualities that are necessary to succeed in an online learning environment. LaPadula (2003) added that by using multiple methods of providing support services the university can “enhance enrollment, decrease attrition, and provide for a well-rounded program” (p.119). The commitment of the university to invest resources in building a distance education student support network allows online students to experience the same opportunities and services as students in traditional classes to meet their learning needs. LaPadula (2003) also suggested that a university should continually evaluate and improve their support services for online students and find the most critical ways to deliver university supports to all online students.

Brindley et al. (2004) published a book on learner support in open, distance and online learning environments that included 21 chapters on best practices for providing university supports for online students. This study adds a social work educator’s perspective on what university supports are critical and how university should provide support services for students to create an effective learning environment. Brindley et al. (2004) noted that the nature of student support in distance education is always affected by research findings. The current study results provide an opportunity to inform administrators in universities about the critical social work distance learning student support services needed to create an effective learning environment, and suggest methods how to deliver those services for students while remaining committed to the values and traditions of social work education.

In summary, the study findings provide an opportunity to answer the third research question in regards to the university supports needed for students in creating an effective learning environment for online learning. The social work distance educators considered a number of

supports and identified those that they regarded as most critical for students' success. University supports that received at least four critical ratings were university technical support, library services, disability/accessibility services, an Aboriginal student centre, academic learning and tutoring services, mental health, wellness, and personal counselling services, academic counselling services, financial aid services and registrar support (transcripts, graduation, etc.). Instructors also rated methods regarded as critical for providing support to students. Six methods received four or more critical ratings: information posted online (faculty website; course management system; blog; wiki), orientation sessions and workshops (web conference/face-to-face), readiness surveys (prior to taking online courses), ongoing one-on-one student advising, peer-to-peer/student mentorship and student support manuals, books, or other print resources.

The current study findings can enhance the academic literature by adding a social work perspective on how to provide support for social work students in creating an effective learning environment. These can be compared to Potter's (2013) model of support, which was developed by asking distance education students from different disciplines to highlight the personal and institutional issues that require support while taking an online program. Table 14 provides a visual representation of Potter's original model of support for online students. In Potter's model student issues with which they need help are divided into two areas: personal and institutional. Institutional issues are also divided into communication/ information issues and learning issues. As students move through different stages of an online program, they experience a number of concerns with which they need support.

**Table 14: Potter's Model of Student Support**

<b>Potter's Model of Student Support</b>			
<b>Stage</b>	<b>Personal Issues</b>	<b>Institutional Issues</b>	
		Communication/ information issues	Learning issues
<b>Pre-enrolment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How distance study might affect self, family</li> <li>• Finances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Info about distance opportunities</li> <li>• Info about courses/programs</li> <li>• Help with application process</li> <li>• Advice re course selection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior learning assessment</li> <li>• Appropriateness of distance formats</li> <li>• Orientation to media/delivery format</li> </ul>
<b>Starting courses / program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling when required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication with instructor</li> <li>• Communication with other learners</li> <li>• Info about getting textbooks</li> <li>• Academic advising</li> <li>• Help with logistics/problem-solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation to learning resources</li> <li>• Learning skills assistance</li> <li>• Local learning centre</li> <li>• Tutoring assistance</li> <li>• Well-designed courses</li> <li>• Effective and timely feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Moving through program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling when required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication with instructor</li> <li>• Communication with other learners</li> <li>• Academic advising</li> <li>• Help with logistics/problem-solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tutoring assistance</li> <li>• Writing skills assistance</li> <li>• Well-designed courses</li> <li>• Effective and timely feedback</li> <li>• Accessing learning resources</li> </ul>
<b>Moving on</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further educational opportunities</li> </ul>	

*Note:* Adapted from Beyond access: Student perspectives on support service needs in distance learning by J. Potter, 2013, *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 24(1), p. 78.

The current study enhances Potter's model by connecting students issues that they experience in different stages of their journey with critical university supports that are designed to help social work students to be successful in an online learning environment. For example, during the pre-enrolment stage of entering into social work distance education program students could receive support through taking a readiness survey to help them with personal, communication and learning issues they might experience in the program. Properly designed

readiness surveys can provide students with information on what is expected from online students, what skills they should have to be successful online and how they can access needed supports to build those skills. The ability of students to obtain proper supports to address their needs can enhance their success in an online learning environment.

All methods that were identified as critical in this study can be used in all four stages of Potter's (2013) model to orient students to the online environment, build their skills and qualities, and promote their success in achieving learning objectives in all social work distance education courses. As students move through their program of study, they need to be aware of critical supports that can address their learning, communication, and personal needs. The list of university supports that are identified in the current study and the ways how to provide supports should help social work distance education students to meet their needs at every stage of their learning journey in becoming a professional social worker.

The following section focuses on the university supports needed by instructors to create an effective learning environment.

### **University Supports for Instructors**

The survey included three questions related to university supports for instructors: the first asked instructors to identify and rate critical professional supports; the second asked instructors to highlight key training topics; and the third focused on methods of providing instructor supports. The following three sections provide an overview of the research findings for these three survey questions.

**Critical list of professional supports for instructors.** Social work distance educators identified several university professional supports for instructors as critical in creating an effective learning environment. These have been organized in descending order based on the

number of times each was identified as critical. Information technology (IT) support received 30 out of 34 possible critical designations, the highest number for any study category. Other professional supports (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) include: instructional design (15), course editing (8), library (7), video/audio producer (6), graphic design (4), and teaching assistant support (4). Table 15 provides information on the importance of each professional university support for instructors, and results from a four-point Likert scale to assess the perceived level of importance, along with mean scores and standard deviations for each university support.

**Table 15: University Professional Supports for Instructors**

<b>University Professional Supports for Instructors</b>	<b>Critical Counts</b>	<b>NI</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>VI</b>	<b>Mean (M)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (SD)</b>
Information technology (IT) support	30	0	1	0	15	3.88	.500
Instructional design support	15	1	2	11	10	3.25	.794
Course editing support	8	3	5	7	13	3.07	1.052
Library support	7	0	5	18	6	3.03	.626
Video/audio producer support	6	3	9	11	8	2.77	.956
Graphic design support	4	4	8	11	9	2.78	1.008
Teaching assistant support	4	4	12	14	1	2.39	.761

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

Similar to the data in the previous tables, the mean scores are closely connected to the criticality ratings. Higher mean scores usually resulted in a greater number of critical ratings. Information technology, instructional design, course editing, and library supports received an

average score of 3.0 and above, which suggests that it is important that these supports be provided for online social work educators.

IT support ( $M=3.88$ ,  $SD=0.50$ ) was mentioned as critical in all aspects of online education from dealing with issues related to the operation of the course management system to installing required software. Some instructors stated that they do not have enough time to familiarize themselves with the technology and because all aspects of distance education involve technology, IT support is needed. One instructor stated: *“When you’re web-conferencing especially, you’ve already got three layers. You’ve got the students, you’ve got the curriculum, and then you’ve got the technology. And so to be the support for it, it’s too much. You can’t handle it all.”* Another instructor pointed out the immediacy factor of IT support for live meetings using the analogy from face-to-face classroom teaching:

*If you are going to teach a class and you have a majority students in class but three students are locked outside the hallway you can’t teach the class and get them in the door when the door is not unlocking, so having some IT support could help those students who are in the hallway to come to the classroom is fundamental.*

Some instructors emphasized the importance of building relationships with the people who provide IT support in creating an effective learning environment. One educator noted: *“You have to create relationships with those people [support providers] face-to-face. Or online, in your own way, you have to be appreciative and genuine with them, and give them thank yous...and developing [sic] a relationship with those people.”* Another instructor added that more appreciation should be given to people who provide IT support: *“I feel like they’re taken advantage of. People just need them immediately when they need them, and then, ok, they go back to what they did and they forget it was a big deal. They need to give them appreciation.”*

Instructors who taught in schools with dedicated technical support available within their home departments during interviews praised people who provide it for their dedication to distance social work education. One instructor noted: *“It’s critical to have it [dedicated support services] within the school. I think that’s one reason why we are successful with our online program, this is because we’ve had that from the very beginning, and we’ve had the infrastructure of staff support.”* Instructors emphasized that when they teach online, IT people become essential in creating a positive experience, so establishing a good working relationship is essential to receiving this much-needed support.

Some instructors expressed concern about technical support for sessional academics as they were unsure whether they have the same access to supports as full-time faculty members. As well, because sessional instructors might teach only one course, it is crucial to ensuring they are well-oriented and have supports when needed for teaching online. A sessional instructor shared the story of how university support was critical in creating an effective learning environment:

*Oh my goodness, so I’m going to teach online at this university for the first time, and you want me to redesign this course over the next three weeks?”... “The only two things I used was [sic] instructional design support and IT. Nothing else, actually, was immediately available to me. I found the support kind of difficult to access, out of those two, and those two that I did access were complete lifesavers for me. So that’s why I’ve put those as critical.*

Instructional designer support ( $M=3.25$ ,  $SD=0.79$ ) was the second highest ranking professional support. One of the main reasons this support was rated critical is that an instructional designer has current knowledge of what works online. As one instructor noted, they are:

*Keeping up with all the stuff that you could do online. I don't have time to do all that. I have enough research and things to read, and the different other courses I teach, without worrying about what blogs are good, or wikis, or what's the shared chatrooms. So, having people that know that and can offer that is helpful.*

Another instructor noted that instructional design support is necessary: *"For consistency and coherence and professional integrity of course content."*

Many social work educators noted the role of the instructional designer as critical for providing support for all aspects of course construction and organization. An instructor stated: *"You have to have a really good curriculum that really strategically sets out how you're going to teach online."* Another educator added:

*I find it really useful to be able to sit around with people who know the technology, but also other instructors who have used it, to say, 'Okay, this is what I want students to learn from this week. How can I play with that? How can I do that? How could I get that?'*

Having a person who can help distance educators to design course carefully to achieve course objectives was also instrumental in creating an effective learning environment.

There was some disagreement on what the background of an instructional designer should entail; some instructors suggested that it is enough that they have strong online pedagogy skills, while others emphasized the need for a background in social work education. One educator explained:

*If you don't really understand what a social worker looks like, that person that's doing the design wouldn't design it in the same kind of way as someone who understood exactly what that student needs to do in interpersonal communication skills or practices course. I*



*think they should be a social worker. And in many universities, people that are involved in the field, even the admin. assistants are all social workers.*

This sentiment was echoed by another respondent who noted that: *“Somebody doesn’t need to know anything about social work in order to teach me how to use this video feature...but do they understand more of the transformative critical pedagogy that we want to use?”* This instructor emphasized both the importance of general distance education support (how to use video online) and social work specific instructional designer support (how to use transformative pedagogy online). While there was no consensus on what the background of an instructional designer should include, the critical nature of this type of support was recognized by many social work educators.

A course editor reviews online material to enhance the quality of online course content. Course editor ( $M=3.07$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) support was the third highest ranked professional support. One instructor described the benefit of a school of social work having a technical person available: *“Who you could go to at any point, even midway through the course, and say, ‘can you take the letter “s” out of that word, out of the verb, and that sentence on the third page, paragraph two’ and the person would do it.”* Some instructors suggested that it is always helpful when another person can review material and suggest improvements before content is uploaded to the course management site.

Library support ( $M=3.03$ ,  $SD=6.16$ ), designated as critical, can include the following: the investment in and access to online journals, the availability of dedicated social work librarians, and collaboration with librarians to plan course assignments (e.g., annotated bibliography). One instructor highlighted that a librarian can design a video on how to use library services to write an academic essay that the instructor can share with their online students: *“What are the*

*essential elements of a good academic essay? All of that is available to the students. Click, click, click, and they've got the YouTube videos."* Another instructor noted that librarians are helpful in dealing with copyright concerns: *"We don't get in trouble with the copyright police and none of that would happen without the support of librarians. So, we have a dedicated distance education support librarian for social work."*

Video/audio production ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=0.96$ ) and graphic design ( $M=2.78$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ) supports are not available in all schools, so many instructors felt unable to assess whether these supports were critical or not, having never used these types of support. Those instructors who have had the opportunity to access these supports, however, noted that they were critical in the design of courses that include video and audio components. As one instructor noted, these supports: *"Provide opportunities for instructors to be consistent, creative, and innovative in presenting course content."*

Teaching assistant (TA) support ( $M=2.39$ ,  $SD=0.76$ ), although reported to be typically unavailable for online courses, was rated as critical by four research participants for creating an effective learning environment. Some instructors designated teaching assistance as critical due to the extra time demands to prepare courses, engage with students, and grade work. As noted by one study participant:

*I think the expectations for distance education that I find really overwhelming is the student size...and so a), you're doing a lot more grading, and b) you're really trying to engage with them...and so the TAs can play a role in supporting that.*

Some instructors rated various types of supports as not important based on the level of availability of those particular supports or the degree to which they had accessed them. For example, one instructor shared that the designation of not important for teaching assistant as well

as audio producer support was because: *“I never had both of those supports.”* Another instructor, in reference to editing support, stated: *“To me it hasn’t been important, because I haven’t accessed it.”*

Instructors suggested a number of additional ways the university can provide support that were linked to the university’s vision to offer courses via distance education. Some educators added teaching and learning centres, available at some universities, as critical for distance social work education, while others commented that those supports are usually focused on classroom education: *“And they don’t think about education in any other way.”* One educator also suggested having a person available to provide professional support: *“Who’s interested in exploring because, as an instructor, you don’t have time. When you go to a conference or something like that, and you hear, ‘oh, there’s this technology ‘but to have those people here.’”* Some instructors suggested the need for university support with every aspect of online education including technical, instructional design, library, and course editing support. One educator noted:

*We need support for everything because the more we’re supported with regards to what our course looks like, how much we can change it, how quickly we can access library and that kinda stuff...if we don’t have that support...we don’t get paid money to go out for extra training and we don’t get paid to do any of that extra stuff.*

Concerns about the criticality of professional university supports were voiced by many social work educators and was summarized by one instructor’s statement: *“I do not think faculty who are teaching want to be bogged down learning these other things.”* Many educators shared that the university expectations for online instructors are much higher in comparison to face-to-face instructors and they are expected to provide additional technical and other forms of support needed for online students that take away time from their other teaching duties.

**Critical topic areas for distance education instructors' support.** Knowing what training topics are essential for distance social work educators is an important component of a university's support system. The following list of training topics has been organized based on the number of times each was deemed to be critical as perceived by social work instructors. Building community in the online classroom was rated the highest and received 18 out of a possible 34 critical ratings. Other training topics, organized in descending order, followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses, include: assessment, grading, and feedback (16), adult learning theory and online pedagogy (14), course organization and facilitation (13), discussion facilitation and instruction (13), and course climate and the online classroom environment (8). All training topics in addition to receiving more than four critical ratings, also received the mean score of importance higher than 3.0.

The following were not part of the original list of critical training topics but were added by study participants. Each topic was added once by a different instructor. The topics highlight individual training needs and include technology skills and operating system training, use of multimedia/social media, understanding the disembodied nature of distance education, dealing with difficult students and promoting safety on discussion boards, diversity/cultural integration in courses, improvising when plans fall apart, and student-led evaluation of participation.

Table 16 presents a four-point Likert importance scale, mean scores, and standard deviations for training topics for instructors considered critical for creating an effective online learning environment.

**Table 16: Training Topics for Instructors**

Training Topics	Critical Counts	NI	SI	I	VI	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Building community in the online classroom	18	1	3	4	14	3.41	.908
Assessment, grading, and feedback	16	0	1	6	19	3.69	.549
Adult learning theory and online pedagogy	14	0	2	11	13	3.42	.643
Course organization and facilitation	13	0	0	8	20	3.71	.460
Discussion facilitation and instruction	13	0	0	12	15	3.56	.506
Course climate and the online classroom environment	8	1	3	11	13	3.29	.810

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

Building community in the online classroom ( $M=3.41$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ) received the highest number of critical ratings for a number of reasons. One instructor noted that, when instructors know how to encourage students to build community, they learn more effectively:

*I think students learn from each other. I think of them sitting home alone and I just think, how's that not just a correspondence course? And it's possible to learn that way, and I think some people do. You know, people who are book readers, and they learn in that fashion and they can learn on their own and pick out things that are important but not everybody can do that; read a 20-, 25-page article or chapter and know automatically what's important, pick up on the cues and stuff in it.*

Another instructor noted that there are a lot of benefits of being able to connect with one another online and to build community in the online classroom:

*[Researchers] say it affects retention and they also say it affects grades but, particularly for some of our ethnically diverse students who are used to working in groups and need that type of support, it's essential that they feel they can put something online, nobody's*

*going to put them down, and everybody's going to respect their opinion. And they sort of get to know each other. And, getting to know each other, even though it sounds like a strange thing, I think it's really important.*

Assessment, grading, and feedback ( $M=3.69$ ,  $SD=0.55$ ) was the second top-ranked training topic. A number of instructors noted that, although these features are currently incorporated in the course learning system, as they are continually being upgraded, how to use those features should be taught to instructors. One instructor stated that it is important to be creative in designing assignments for online courses: *"I think in any teaching it's critical but in online you need to be a bit more creative about how you get the students to show that they really meet the learning goals of the course."*

Adult learning theory and online pedagogy ( $M=3.42$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ) was the third top-ranked topic. One instructor noted that: *"I just think it's really critical to adapt our teaching to the online environment, and to take that responsibility seriously in order to maximize student participation and learning in the course. Teaching online and teaching in the classroom are not the same thing."* A number of instructors were not able to separate the three top-rated topics and stated that adult learning theory, assessment, and building community are particularly critical for distance social work education. One instructor noted that those three topics: *"Are most critical to teaching in general. And in an online context, it requires a bit more thought and process to execute."*

Course organization and facilitation ( $M=3.71$ ,  $SD=0.46$ ), and discussion facilitation and instruction ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ) were rated equally critical to effectiveness in the online learning environment to be effective. One instructor shared a common theme on what makes those topics critical for distance social work education:

*To me, course organization and facilitation has become more important as DE instructors are more often in charge of organizing courses that focus on problem solving and critical thinking, and facilitating the design of these courses requires instruction on preparing coherent, effective, efficient, evaluative content.*

Another instructor said: *“I think as an instructor, you have to be able to engage the class in ongoing discussions, and not just lay down the “this is I’m right” thing. I think you have to do this to develop critical thinking.”* One educator noted the importance of professional communication in online discussions and stated: *“You can apply some of your skills from facilitating face-to-face discussion, but some things are different though. Like language, when they’re writing, you can’t tell their tone. So they’ll put something that’s sarcastic, and someone else will take it seriously.”* Some instructors stated that the disembodied nature of online learning requires instructors to learn how to facilitate discussion differently than in a face-to-face setting.

The need for training depends on instructors’ professional background. One educator noted:

*Some instructors may not need certain training, and some might. So, it depends on their previous experiences and the skills that they’re bringing in. So, [if] somebody’s been working, doing community development in their practice, they would understand the importance of building the community and how to do that intuitively in their online course. But others who may not have an understanding of how to practice building community may have difficulty figuring out how to do that online.*

The idea of having different training options to address the instructor’s individual needs was a prominent theme raised in the interviews.

**Critical methods of providing university supports for instructors.** The method of providing university supports for distance social work educators is an important component of university services. The following methods are organized based on the number of times each was identified as critical as perceived by participating social work instructors. One-on-one personalized training sessions with a professional distance educator/instructional designer was rated the highest, receiving 10 out of 34 critical ratings. Other methods of provision (followed by the number of critical ratings in parentheses) have been arranged in descending order based on the number of critical ratings each received. These include: an ongoing mentorship program (9), peer-to-peer support from another social work distance educator (9), an online course for instructors (7), training manuals, books, or other print resources (7), and small group workshops (6). A wiki, or interactive blog, was rated critical once. The top three ways of providing support (one-on-one personalized training, a mentorship program and peer-to-peer support) were also recognized as important with the mean score of 3.0.

The other ways of providing supports added via the suggestion box on the survey questionnaire were examples of good course architecture and sample course outlines. Participants also suggested that instructors should be paid for the time they put into training and the use of support, as well as receive financial support to attend conferences. Instructors also highlighted the importance of live assistance that provides a speedy response when problems arise; technological support for developing course material and brainstorming ideas; control over course content; and a dedicated online workload.

Table 17 summarizes critical counts and responses on a four-point importance scale, including means and standard deviations for methods of providing instructor supports in creating an effective online learning environment.



**Table 17: Methods for Providing Support for Instructors**

Methods for Providing Support	Critical Counts	NI	SI	I	VI	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
One-on-one personalized training sessions with professional distance educator / instructional designer	10	4	2	8	17	3.23	1.055
Ongoing mentorship program	9	0	7	9	14	3.23	.817
Peer-to-peer support from another distance social work educator	9	0	7	14	10	3.10	.746
Instructor's online course	7	3	6	10	11	2.97	.999
Training manuals, books, or other print resources	7	6	8	10	10	2.71	1.088
Small group workshops	6	2	6	15	9	2.97	.861
Wiki or interactive blog	1	8	12	12	1	2.18	.846

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived importance: NI-not important; SI-somewhat important; I-important; VI-very important; Mean scores are calculated from 1=NI to 4=VI.

The method for providing one-on-one personalized training sessions with a professional distance educator/instructional designer ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) received the highest number of critical ratings. One instructor emphasized that having someone you can discuss challenges with face-to-face is very helpful in learning online technology. Another educator noted, *"To me, that's the best one; the one-on-one."* A different instructor added: *"I find it helpful if somebody comes into my office or I can meet them somewhere, and we sit face-to-face, and they talk me through the system."* Some educators also emphasized the efficiency of one-on-one support in comparison to learning on your own, as one research participant described: *"[Instructors] can probably figure things out on their own. It might take them three days and, if someone could provide them support one-on-one, it might only take them an hour."*

Some instructors emphasized the importance of ongoing mentorship ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ). One educator explained that mentors can provide answers to critical questions when needed, based on their experience teaching in an online learning environment. The questions that mentors should be able to help with include: *“What is it that you want the students to learn? What do you want them to know after this module that they didn’t know before?”* Another instructor added these questions: *“Does this assignment make sense or I’ve got a new idea for the assignment that I want to try, what you think about it?”* The importance of having a mentor was usually voiced by instructors who were relatively new to teaching online. For example, one educator stated: *“It would be nice if I had somebody who said, ‘Well, you started teaching here two years ago, and we are going to hook you up with one of the faculty members.’”*

Similar to mentorship is peer-to-peer support ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=0.75$ ), and the importance of this was emphasized by a number of instructors. Distance social work educators who had direct experience with peer-to-peer support stated that it was essential for their learning. One educator shared the following:

*I think the participants really appreciate it. It gives them a chance to share their tips and experiences and their frustrations. And we teach each other and learn. And we think about more longer term strategies for our faculty in terms of online teaching development. It’s been quite useful.*

One research participant described the challenge of including instructors from other universities in the peer support group: *“We have in the past invited other practitioners that were interested in it. And we try to invite and include people from other institutions, but it just seems to come back to us again.”*

The related topic of the community of practice came up when peer-to-peer support was discussed. One instructor explained the criticality of this support in building a community of practice: *“Because part of the downside of teaching online is that it’s really isolating. So, it’s just you and a hundred students who you’ve never seen. So, that feeling of peer education really helped me.”* One instructor suggested a way to provide peer-to-peer support using a community of practice approach: *“So I was envisioning a place where I could have a discussion board and say, ‘Oh, I’m trying to address this racist discussion post, do you have any advice?’”*

An online course for instructors ( $M=2.97$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ) was considered critical but not as important as other items for providing current information on best practices in online teaching. One instructor explained that it is important: *“As situations arise or changes need to be made to update course content. This is an easy-to-access method of support.”* Another instructor suggested that a course on how to teach via distance could:

*Look at the kinds of problems you can encounter. I mean, how do you make it interesting in Adobe? Not just the technical tricks, but also, what kind of group activities work in some of these courses with online students in social work.*

In addition to an online course, seven instructors rated training manuals, books, or other print resources ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ) as critical for the online environment, with one instructor emphasizing that such resources should also be available online. Another educator added:

*It’s very helpful to have something in print or online in front of you to say, okay, this is how you make discussion groups. This is what the dropbox does for you. This is how you use it. This is what happens if it goes wrong. I like something to read. It would’ve been really helpful to me if, when I picked up this course to begin with, somebody said to me, ‘Oh, by the way, you have discussion group but you can also make individual groups.’*

A different instructor mentioned having: *“A few little guides, like a quick reference...how to make your course active, how do you enter your grade, things like that. And so, I have found those useful over times.”*

Small group workshops ( $M=2.97$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ) were also rated critical by six research participants. One interviewee shared that: *“These types of workshops are my favourite. I seem to learn a tremendous number of supportive ideas from other instructors. As well, the university team of online staff can suggest different ideas for innovative methods of teaching.”* While some instructors praised the benefits of small group workshops for the online environment, others had different experiences due to the type of workshops offered by some institutions. One educator described them as focusing on: *“What you would use to support what you do in the classroom. That’s as far as it goes in all of their workshops.”*

Wikis, or interactive blogs ( $M=2.18$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ), received the lowest number of critical ratings and the lowest mean score. Some instructors were unsure how these two methods of receiving support could benefit them personally and also stated that maintenance of these would be time-consuming. The explanation given for the non-critical rating was that information on both wikis and blogs is not readily available, and instructors had very limited time to review online resources when they needed to find answers to very specific questions.

Instructors listed some other ways for receiving support. Two educators shared that using videos can be very helpful in learning about teaching online. Another instructor attended educational conferences and stated: *“I’ve done presentations at the teaching and learning conferences and I think those are always important...and to share and compare what’s happening in one school to what’s happening in another school.”*

Some instructors shared that they did not use university supports and focused on self-support. One educator shared: *“I just learned on my own. And I’ve had to look and find the resources that were helpful to me.”* Another instructor explained: *“To try and prepare myself...I did some reading of the academic, the scholarly literature on online teaching and learning. And I’ve continued to review some of that literature as I’ve been teaching, because I think there is some really good stuff coming out”.*

A number of instructors mentioned that they benefited from examples of effective teaching to obtain fresh ideas and implement them in their online courses. One instructor stated: *“I’ve been teaching for a while. I want you to give me something new. I want you to give me some teaching skills that are current, or that you got from a teaching conference, that somebody did on their Adobe and it worked really well, and it can be generalized to a lot of courses.”*

Having access to examples, such as course outlines, was also suggested as a way of providing support. One instructor said: *“I think for people, especially people who are teaching for the first time, it can be intimidating. And so, I think that one of the ways to break some of that down is to have people see samples of courses.”* One educator suggested creating a global repository to support online social work educators: *“I can see some real opportunities for creating a global, or even national, repository for social work learning objects—digital or electronic learning objects that are quite high quality. And have that shared as a social work profession, across the provinces’ social work educators.”*

### **Summary and Discussion of Findings Pertaining to the University Supports for Instructors**

University supports for instructors are essential for creating an effective learning environment. By identifying key professional supports for instructors to teach online, the current study highlights the types of support infrastructure that are necessary to create an effective

learning environment in social work distance education programs. Brooks (2010) suggests that as instructors' needs vary, university supports are critical, particularly in an age of technological advancement that requires instructors to learn and use new tools to teach online. Fish and Wickersham (2009) provide some reminders on how to ensure that best practices of university supports are implemented in online learning. The authors suggest that the university should be willing to invest in technical support and equipment that is critical to implement successful online program. The university should also invest resources in those support services that are critical to creating an effective distance education support infrastructure.

The majority of instructors agreed that IT support is the number one professional support required for creating an effective learning environment. Three other types of support were also rated as important. These included: instructional design support, course editing support, and library support. Instructors received these types of support through their universities and found them valuable for successful online teaching. Three other forms of support that were rated less important for online learning than those above were video/audio production support, graphic design support, and teaching assistant support. Some interviewees shared that they did not usually receive these supports at their universities. Overall, instructors shared that they were able to obtain some of the listed university supports, with the most positive experiences reported by instructors who had supports embedded within their respective school; e.g., having a dedicated instructional designer, course editor, and librarian.

Wilson, Ludwid-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap (2004) assert that instructors are an essential component of online courses, because they provide the infrastructure for learning, model effective learning strategies; monitor, assess and provide feedback on student's learning; troubleshoot and resolve learning problems; and create a respectful learning community. The

current study confirms that these areas are also critical for social work distance educators' training. For instructors to be successful online, they need to receive training in all critical areas identified in this study with the highest emphasis on building community in an online classroom. The current study is also consistent with Bailey and Card's (2009) conclusion that university administrators need to consider providing more pedagogical training and support to instructors who teach online.

All training topics listed in the survey questionnaire were deemed critical by research participants, and each received a mean score above 3.0, suggesting that they are all important in creating an effective learning environment. Interviewees shared that training is critical for learning about best practices in online education. Some additional training topics were suggested as important for distance social work educators specifically. Instructors emphasized the importance of learning about ways to promote diversity and cultural integration within the disembodied learning environment. Universities should develop training to incorporate these other issues while remaining current with training in the key areas noted in the survey questionnaire.

Research suggests that universities should use multiple methods for providing instructors with critical support services. Covington, Petherbridge, and Warren (2005) suggest that to create an effective learning environment in online learning instructors need administrative support, peer reassurance, and professional development opportunities. Administrative support can be provided through the creation of an instructor's online course, and the development of training manuals, books, or other print resources. Professional development opportunities can be created through one-on-one personalized training sessions with a professional distance educator / instructional designer or small group workshops. Peer reassurance can be achieved through an

ongoing mentorship program and peer-to-peer support from another distance social work educator. Gabriel and Kaufield (2008) also suggested forming peer support groups through the use of communities of practice where instructors can discuss ideas with others and help each other in online teaching.

Instructors also shared that their individual needs to access certain professional university supports were based on their personal level of preparedness. Instructors who had more experience teaching in the online learning environment had more required skills and required different level of supports than those with less experience. Wilson and Stacey (2004) provided a guide on how to match professional support with different instructors' needs based on the level of experience in teaching online. In their model, the more experienced instructors can become support providers to other instructors who are learning how to teach in an online environment. Instructors in the current study had varied levels of experience in teaching social work distance delivery courses, and that diversity helped to identify supports needed for instructors with different backgrounds and experiences.

All the ways listed for providing supports were rated critical for the online learning environment. Some methods received more critical ratings than others but overall, instructors agreed that universities should use different methods to provide support based on the specific needs of each instructor. It is essential that universities make supports available and accessible to social work educators promptly to create an effective learning environment.

In summary, social work distance educators identified a wide range of critical university supports that can help to create an effective learning environment. The findings suggest the following types university supports are essential: information technology (IT) support, instructional design support, course editing support, library support, video/audio producer



support, graphic design support, and teaching assistant support. As well, all training topics that were mentioned in the literature received four or more critical ratings from those instructors who participated in the study. They felt that social work distance educators should receive training on building community in the online classroom, assessment, grading, and feedback, adult learning theory and online pedagogy, course organization and facilitation, discussion facilitation and instruction, and facilitating both the course climate and the online classroom environment in order to create an effective learning environment. All but one method of providing support (wiki/interactive blog) received four or more critical ratings. Social work distance educators suggested that they should receive university support through one-on-one personalized training sessions with a professional distance educator / instructional designer, ongoing mentorship program, peer-to-peer support from another distance social work educator, instructor's online course, training manuals, books or other print resources and small group workshops.

Findings from this study can be compared with the Wilson and Stacey (2004) model of matching levels of needs of instructors to ways of supporting their efforts to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education. Table 18 provides a visual representation of the Wilson and Stacey (2004) model for providing university supports for online instructors. The model can be adapted for social work distance educators and includes critical professional supports, ways of providing university support, and training topics identified in this study that are essential to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. Each support can be connected to the specific needs instructors have on different levels of their professional development identified in the Wilson and Stacey (2004) study.

**Table 18: Wilson and Stacey's Online Instructor Support Model**

<b>Wilson and Stacey's Online Instructor Support Model.</b>	
<b>Description of the Educators at each Stage</b>	<b>Educators Development Content and Approach</b>
<b>Level 1:</b> beginners, novice, lack of familiarity with online teaching, lack of experience with technology in teaching. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Aware of innovation using technology in teaching,</li> <li>•Varying levels of interest in technology amongst instructors at this level, some are reluctant.</li> <li>•Primary need is the identification of opportunities to use technology effectively</li> </ul>	'Show and Tell' activities, operational training, short seminars on current activities within the institution, guest speakers, and exemplars. Initial training in the most critical areas (training topics) using one of the most critical methods for providing support with one or more critical professional instructor supports to build critical skills and qualities for creating an effective learning environment.
<b>Level 2:</b> Advanced beginner, limited exposure, required to use technology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Some experience in teaching in flexible learning environments</li> <li>•'Learning the process'</li> </ul>	Level 1 activity plus instructional design skills, skills in online pedagogy, learning management system skills, skills in use of email, discussion boards, role play and debates to increase interactivity online. More reflection encouraged at this stage to consolidate theoretical knowledge and project-based learning. Use diverse methods in providing support on critical training topics with the use of professional university supports.
<b>Level 3:</b> Want to try things out; want to use online learning environments, still may have limited skills and exposure to technology in teaching. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Implementing the innovation in their work</li> <li>•Exploring and experimenting</li> <li>•Applying the process</li> </ul>	Level 1 and 2 skills plus focus on more complex technical knowledge, more complex forms of interactivity online (e.g., collaborative group learning), preparing instructors to handle problems of more intensive online discussions (e.g., lack of responses); case studies are useful approach with this stage of development.
<b>Level 4:</b> Competent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced</li> <li>• Proficient</li> <li>• Expert</li> <li>• Improving the innovation</li> <li>• Consolidation of skills and learning</li> </ul>	Instructors at this level become role models for others, act as resource for other instructors, providing advice, engaged in research and development focused activities, can be used as formal and informal participants in a staff development program. Instructors possess critical skills and qualities to create an effective learning environment and willing to share their knowledge with others.

*Note:* Adapted from 'Online interaction impacts on learning: Teaching the teachers to teach online' by G. Wilson, and E. Stacey, 2004, *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 20(1), p. 42.

This model can assist university administrators in assessing the different levels of preparedness of each individual social work distance educator based on their motivation for and

experience with teaching online and provide critical support services based on the unique needs of the individual instructor. For example, based on the Wilson and Stacey (2004) model, if a new instructor is hired to teach in a social work program and has limited experience in teaching online, it may be important to use ‘show and tell’ activities for level one preparation to motivate and prepare the instructor to teach in an online learning environment.

The instructor should be informed about critical university supports that can be accessed to build needed skills for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. As an instructor moves through the levels identified in the Wilson and Stacey model, their reliance on critical university supports changes based on their needs and level of preparedness and motivation to teach in an online learning environment. A university should provide the identified critical supports to all instructors as they need to access them based on the levels of professional preparation and development.

The next section focuses on what motivates social work distance educators to teach online and how prepared they perceive themselves to be in teaching social work curriculum in an online learning environment. It also provides findings on significant challenges that influence the level of instructor motivation and preparedness to teach online.

### **Motivation and Preparedness for Teaching Social Work Curriculum Online**

University supports can affect instructor motivation and preparedness for teaching online. The findings from two ten-point survey scales on motivating factors and faculty preparedness for teaching online provide data on social work distance educators’ motivation and readiness to teach online. This section also highlights findings from the qualitative interviews on issues raised by instructors about current challenges and opportunities regarding university supports deemed critical to effective distance social work education. The mean and standard deviation are used to

report the respondents' perceived agreement for each survey item. Higher mean scores demonstrated greater perceived agreement to each statement related to motivating factors and instructor's preparedness to teach online.

The quantitative survey responses provided some explanation of the factors that motivate social work instructors to teach online. The factors that were included in the survey were based on Wright's (2012) study that focused on four dimensions for exploring the motivating factors for online teaching: (1) flexibility for the student and instructor, (2) extra financial compensation, (3) external pressure to teach online, and (4) the personal decision to teach online and overall satisfaction from online teaching.

The descriptive statistics showed that flexibility and convenience for the student ( $M=4.56$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ) and the instructor ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ), as well as satisfaction from online teaching ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ), and the personal decision to teach online ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=1.23$ ) were the strongest motivating factors for teaching online.

Two dimensions from the Wright's (2012) scale received mean scores of less than 3.0 on agreement scale and did not prove to be strong motivators for social work distance educators. According to the quantitative responses to this survey, extra pay ( $M=2.65$ ,  $SD=1.49$ ) is not an important motivating factor for teaching online. The aggregate mean score that combines the scores for four variables that addressed four types of pressure to teach online was also low ( $M=2.22$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ). For example, peer pressure from colleagues ( $M=2.26$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ), pressure from campus administration ( $M=2.24$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ), pressure from students ( $M=2.24$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), and outside pressure from competitors, such as other Schools of Social Work ( $M=2.12$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) to teach online also did not prove to be strong motivating factors.

Table 19 provides ratings for the ten statements on motivating factors adopted from the Wright's study along with mean scores and standard deviations for each statement. One item on Wright's motivation factors scale measured instructors' access to technical support. In the current study, instructors confirmed that when they need technical support, they can obtain the appropriate help ( $M=3.97$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ).

**Table 19: Motivating Factors to Teach Online**

<b>Instructor Motivating Factors</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Mean (<i>M</i>)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (<i>SD</i>)</b>
Teaching online courses provides my students with more flexible learning opportunities	0	0	1	13	20	4.56	.561
Teaching online courses provides me with more flexible working conditions	1	3	1	7	21	4.33	1.109
I derive personal satisfaction from teaching online courses	1	2	1	15	15	4.21	.978
Teaching online is my own personal decision (as opposed to being required by my department)	3	2	1	14	14	4.00	1.231
When I need technical support, I am able to obtain the appropriate help	1	3	2	18	10	3.97	1.000
Teaching online courses provides opportunities for extra financial compensation	12	5	4	9	4	2.65	1.495
I feel pressured by my colleagues to teach online courses	11	10	7	5	1	2.26	1.163
I feel pressured by my department chair, dean, or other administrators to teach online courses	12	11	4	5	2	2.24	1.257
I feel pressured by my students to teach online courses	12	10	5	6	1	2.24	1.208
I feel pressured by competitors (e.g., other universities, programs) to teach online courses	11	13	6	3	1	2.12	1.066

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived agreement: SD-strongly disagree, D-disagree, N-neutral, A-agree, SA-strongly agree; Mean scores are calculated from 1=SD to 5=SA.

The study also adopted another scale from Wright's study that measures instructor's level of preparedness to teach online. Table 20 provides ratings to the ten statements taken from the

Wright's study that are related to instructor preparation with mean scores and standard deviations for each statement.

**Table 20: Instructor Preparedness to Teach Online**

<b>Instructor Preparedness</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Mean (<i>M</i>)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (<i>SD</i>)</b>
I have the necessary pedagogical skills needed to teach online courses	0	1	2	19	12	4.24	.699
I have the necessary knowledge to develop instructional materials for online courses	0	1	3	18	12	4.21	.729
I have the necessary technical (computer) skills to teach online courses	0	1	6	17	10	4.06	.776
I have had opportunities to learn how to develop the technical (computer) skills for teaching online courses	1	4	0	19	10	3.97	1.029
I have taken advantage of professional development opportunities to learn how to teach online courses	0	4	2	23	5	3.85	.821
I have had opportunities to learn how to develop instructional materials for online courses	2	6	2	15	9	3.68	1.224
I prefer to receive one-on-one training to develop my online skills (versus attending workshops)	1	5	10	7	11	3.65	1.178
I have had opportunities to learn how to develop the pedagogical skills for teaching online courses	2	8	5	11	8	3.44	1.260
I have had opportunities to observe other faculty members who teach online courses	5	12	2	9	5	2.91	1.378
Professional development funding is available to support my development as an online instructor	8	9	7	6	4	2.68	1.342

*Note:* Likert scale of perceived agreement: SD-strongly disagree, D-disagree, N-neutral, A-agree, SA-strongly agree; Mean scores are calculated from 1=SD to 5=SA.

The majority of instructors felt that they had the needed skills to teach online. For example, most survey participants felt they had the necessary pedagogical skills required to teach online courses ( $M=4.24$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ). Participants were also confident in their ability to develop

structural materials ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ) for teaching online. The third highest mean score ( $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=0.78$ ) suggests that instructors also have the necessary technical (computer) skills to teach online courses.

The majority of instructors also felt that they have opportunities to develop their skills, for example, most agreed that they had opportunities to learn how to develop their technical skills to teach online ( $M=3.97$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ). In addition, a smaller majority felt they had adequate opportunities to develop their pedagogical skills ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ) to teach online. They also indicated that they had taken advantage of professional development opportunities to learn how to teach online ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) and acknowledged that they had opportunities to learn how to develop instructional material for teaching online ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ). The survey responses suggested a somewhat stronger preference for one-on-one training versus a workshop format ( $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ).

Only two items received a mean score lower than 3.0: whether instructors had opportunities to observe other social work educators teaching online ( $M=2.91$ ,  $SD=1.38$ ), and whether there were adequate financial resources to support their professional development ( $M=2.68$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ).

During the interviews, participants were asked to provide comments on areas that were not covered by the survey but can influence their motivation, preparedness and overall ability to create of an effective learning environment in distance social work education. One instructor highlighted that social work education requires students to reflect critically and engage with others:

*Social work is about working with people, individuals, families, groups, communities. I do not know any [area] of social work that you do without engaging with humans. Social*

*work is about engagement and, part of the use of self for social worker is really important in our work.*

Many instructors indicated that they were constantly looking for creative solutions about how to promote self-reflection in a virtual space. One educator shared that online it is hard to ask students:

*To read materials that indicate that you're complicit in the very ways in which inequality is produced, and then you're asked to reflect on how you're complicit, and then write about that, and post it for the others in your group and your instructor to read and engage with.*

Another instructor highlighted that on-campus communication that promotes self-reflection happens at the moment and is not recorded, while online, everything that is posted can be seen over time and that creates an additional challenge unique to distance social work education. How does one engage when the main medium of communication is text and not the usual face-to-face communication? Another instructor noted that the challenge for teaching critical reflection is unique to social work education in general: *"We're always getting them to critically look at not only the material that they read but also critically process that into their own personal self and that's very different than any other professional faculty."*

The challenge of the absence of visual cues that impact the creation of an effective learning environment was voiced by a number of social work educators. One instructor noted that:

*Doing it online is often quite a lot more difficult because we don't have the visual. I mean we could, but it's not there yet. And even still, I think that there is much more understated communication that happens physically in personal settings, when you see face-to-face.*



Another instructor noted that it would be easier to engage if it was possible to see all students. One instructor shared that, in class: *“We can do all kinds of exercises and you can watch their body language [but] if they roll their eyes when they say something online, you can’t see any of that.”* Another instructor added, *“I think there’s something about human beings needing a physical space. So, what you’re trying to do in distance is create that same sense of space and that’s really hard to do.”* A number of instructors highlighted the importance of further research into the disembodied nature of distance education and how to recreate a sense of space in the online learning environment for social work.

Some instructors offered a suggestion to improve online engagement and allow students to experience classroom learning by having a seven- to ten-day face-to-face residency and a residency component is part of the required curriculum in distance education in some Schools of Social Work. One instructor, who observed students with experience in online engagement before completing their residency component, reported that they demonstrated a stronger sense of connection and worked better together than students who fulfilled the residency component without prior online engagement experience. The former students:

*Initially saw each other, hugged each other, discussed their personal lives with each other. It was not a quiet moment between students. They were very engaged with each other, had built a community. They were very keen on sharing their breaks together, going out for meals, in contrast to the groups that had not had that online community-building semester.*

Some instructors suggested that the view of distance delivery as a form of correspondence education was considered to be an old strategy of course delivery. One instructor stated that when: *“You mailed out the package of material, people would work on it and send it*

*back, and they did not see the need for engagement or involvement or kind of connection, relationship building.”* Another instructor noted:

*When we first started doing distance education at the School of Social Work, there was a lot of negativity about distance education at that time, and there was a sense that you could not do social work by distance. We were pretty adamant that you could and so, part of the reason why we have developed distance [delivery] in the way that we did, was so that we could prove that you can have that kind of engagement in an online environment.*

Some instructors commented that, over time, they have noticed a change in attitudes toward distance education in social work and that the correspondence way of delivering courses is changing to incorporate new ways of interaction among students, content and instructors. Social work distance education was noted by many instructors as becoming more acceptable as practising social workers who have completed their degrees online are seen to be effective. Some instructors emphasized the importance of conducting further research to find out how satisfied clients are with services they receive from social workers who have graduated from online programs, in addition to studying employer and student perspectives on the quality of social work degrees delivered via distance.

Some participants noted that inequity in remuneration created challenges in online teaching. For example, in one of the participating universities some part-time instructors shared that administration adopted a model where part-time distance educators are paid based on the number of students registered in the class ( i.e., salary = \$100 per student), with no consideration given to the nature of courses and types of assignments used to grade students’ performance.

In addition to inequity in remuneration some participants who were sessional instructors also noted that they have no control over course content. The lack of ability to change the course

content meant that they were unable to change course readings, the number of assignments or the grading criteria for the courses they were hired to teach as all courses were designed by faculty members who did not teach them. Some interviewees complained that their role in those particular distance education courses was limited to grading course assignments and answering student emails. A part-time instructor who taught at the university where instructors are not allowed to change course content and assignments in their courses said that university administration needed to:

*Give us some autonomy. Please. If we need help, then give us the openness to ask. But also accept the fact that we have some expertise to offer too...we sometimes have all kinds of history in developing the course, teaching in the classroom, working on the content in a very, very deep way.*

Many instructors commented that online education requires more time to prepare and teach courses than face-to-face instruction, while universities provided less compensation for online teaching. One educator shared concerns voiced by a number of part-time social work distance educators in the study regarding the low pay for the amount of work that needs to be done to teach online:

*When you're paid as a marker, how can you do anything else? Because when you're teaching online, it's actually more work. It's more work than in the classroom. And we're already doing it out of the goodness of our hearts. We're not earning anything. We're in the hole.*

Many educators raised the comment around more preparation time that is required to design and teach courses online in comparison to face-to-face instruction. One instructor stated that for

every hour to prepare for an on-campus class it took three hours of preparation time for an online class.

The impact of a consumer culture and the changing nature of post-secondary education in Canada from a service to business model of delivery were cited by a number of social work educators as two of the reasons why universities are trying to save money on instructors' pay and training while increasing the number of students for online course delivery. One educator questioned the word "delivery" when discussing the challenges that arise with viewing education as a money-making industry:

*The whole verb of "deliver" is one that I think should be taken out of our vocabulary when it comes to education. The idea of delivery education is like, all right, we will deliver room service too, here's your meal. I think that that's a problem.*

Universities that "deliver" their services to students without taking into account the needs of educators create an imbalance of supports that can result in lowering the quality and standards of educational services. Some instructors commented that, because social work education is rooted in service to humanity and social justice values, access to education should not be used as an opportunity to deliver services to more people for the purpose of economic/financial gain.

Some instructors suggested that if universities are making more profit from distance delivery then some of that money should go back to the instructors who teach these courses. One instructor stated that universities: *"Make a lot more money teaching online because of the higher number of students, because of no-room class, no technology and I think that should be recognized and passed along to instructors."* Another educator suggested that there should be a better balance between workload and monetary compensation:

*It's very stressful to learn about the online environment, the ever-changing tools. A lot of anxiety, a lot of stress, around teaching online comes when it's more work than other courses, I'm not compensated for it. It's like an imbalance in the workload, because we were talking about all the invisible work. So, if you can address all of those things, [then] there's a balance of workload, you are being fairly compensated, then you can focus, you can invest in those online courses and feel good about it.*

A different instructor shared that if:

*The university is seriously pursuing online educational program, then they need to invest also on the instructor side. So not just in their recruiting students, putting books out there, putting classes online, marketing them, they need to say, 'Instructors have to do this effectively to make this work popular.' So invest in the instructors, but that means pay them for it, don't add it on top of their workload that's expected to be done.*

The issue of class size and lack of equity among sessional and full-time instructors was raised in a number of interviews. One educator shared that the university recently combined two sections of the same online course taught by two different instructors into one large online class with one instructor. Those large size online social work courses are usually left for sessional instructors to teach as full-time tenured faculty often choose to teach small size graduate classes. Another educator shared that in large classes instructors often rely more on multiple choice and true and false tests and do not have time for assessing individual self-reflection skills that are critical for professional practice. One educator expressed a preference for the ideal class size: *"I would not like to see more than 40, and I know we do have more than 40 at times, in certain courses."* An instructor shared that the benefit to having maximum forty students per class is to maintain diversity among students and make it possible to keep track of student progress

effectively online. Although many instructors expressed a preference for teaching classes with fewer than 20 students, they noted that this is not the reality within the current university structure.

A number of instructors suggested a strategy for providing resources and supports for online instructors as a way to deal with increasing demands (preparation time and large class sizes) for online teaching. One educator noted:

*The university needs to have a strategy for supporting their online instructors and dedicate resources to that, and have it clearly communicated to instructors that teach online what the resources are, and what supports they have. For the organization to think clearly about how they're going to support online teachers, whether that's paying them a little more for the development of the course, or whether it's providing that repository of previous courses where the learning objects are [there] that they can use.*

Another instructor suggested that university resources should be invested in paid supports:

*If you want people to stick with you for a long period of time, then you need to invest some money into training us to do as much as we can on our own, and then to have those resources available to us, [because] technology is changing too quickly.*

Many instructors, who had experience teaching social work online shared that there have been many changes to the delivery of distance social work education. This final quote in this section demonstrates how one distance social work educator has experienced this evolution:

*Distance education has come a long way since I first began teaching online some 15 years ago. The face-to-face collaborative sessions have brought the passion for distance teaching back for me. Connecting with the students in multiple ways is so important for distance education.*

## **Summary and Discussion of Findings Pertaining to Instructors' Levels of Motivation and Preparedness**

Instructors' motivation and the availability of university supports can influence their readiness to teach online. Results from this study support Wright's (2012) findings that flexibility, convenience and the ability to reach and teach a wider range of students were the key motivators for online teaching. Similar to those in Wright's study, most respondents in the current study felt that there were adequate professional development opportunities that increased their motivation and level of preparedness to teach online. Social work distance educators also possess a high degree of self-efficacy and confidence in their pedagogical and technical skills for teaching online. This study also supports findings that instructors' satisfaction is high when the university values online teaching and has policies in place that help both faculty and students. Instructors are also more satisfied when the university provides release time for course development and recognizes that design and delivery of online classes are time-consuming and require more planning and organization (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

Despite having a high level of preparedness and strong motivation to teach online a number of instructors raised concerns about teaching social work curriculum in an online learning environment. One of those concerns was the lack of university support for sessional instructors; for example, unequal pay in comparison to full-time faculty and the overall devaluation of part-time academic work. Social work distance educators raised in this study challenges similar to those identified by Bower (2001) and Knowles (2007) that are related to fair pay, opportunities for promotion and tenure, dedicated online workload, and the availability of different training options. Findings suggest that if the university wants to create an effective learning environment it needs to provide adequate support for social work distance educators.

The support should take a variety of forms to recognize the range of motivations and needs of individual instructors.

In addition to the lack of university support for sessional instructors, social work distance educators raised a number of pedagogical challenges to teaching social work distance education curriculum online. Some of those challenges are similar to findings from Knowles' (2007) study and focus on the importance of relationship in professional instruction (loss of face-to-face interaction in an online learning environment), need for rethinking curriculum (adequate class size), and the need for pedagogical dialogue among social work distance educators. One of the major pedagogical challenges raised by a number of instructors was related to the disembodied nature of online education. It makes teaching social work courses via distance more challenging than on-campus education as it requires a lot of human interaction that is not easy to model in the online learning environment. Although all instructors who participated in the research believe it is possible to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education, they feel universities must fulfill their role in supporting both students and instructors to adapt to the disembodied nature of online education. The perceived lack of university supports makes teaching online more challenging.

The perceived challenges of the disembodied nature of online education have been discussed in the literature. While Cunningham (2014) acknowledges that the "fundamental differences between campus and online students is that campus students occupy a physical space in the classroom"(p.44), Becket (1998) see the lack of physical space as one of the major challenges for online education. He provides a pessimistic prediction about the future of distance education, noting that:



*Pedagogically we are more than ever 'writing on the body'; technologically, however, we are writing off the body. Disembodied learning, in my view, will be a poor substitute for classroom teaching. It will, however, be very widely available. It will provide access to more learning opportunities. But in doing so successful learning may be elusive. If there is a foot to be shot in (all that's left of embodiment?), flexible delivery may well do the maiming (para.20).*

Lupton (2015) also suggested that there are a lot of challenges in teaching within the disembodied online environment. She states:

*As compensation for my feeling of being a '(no)body' I have thrown myself into creating vibrant connected learning communities. But despite this I still feel that my expression is limited. I have less information and knowledge to draw on. I feel one-dimensional and less artistic. I still yearn to be a 'some body'.*(para 13).

However, Miller, Cohen, and Smith (2014) provide a different view of how online teaching can promote disembodied learning experience by sharing that the use of collaborative features can facilitate “survival of the solitary lifestyle of the distance learner” (p.46). The authors also observed that in a disembodied learning environment students are more enthusiastic commenting on discussion forums and blogs, and that the online culture helps students to build a respectful and engaging community of learners.

Many respondents mentioned that despite numerous faculty and pedagogical challenges they are always looking for ways to engage students and facilitate the creation of an effective learning environment. However, results from this study suggest that university can enhance its process by providing critical supports, as having to deal with additional stress creates a possibility for professional burnout. Hogan and McKnight (2007) explored the issue of burnout

among online instructors and their findings can help university administrators to design appropriate response to the challenges identified in the current study. In order to prevent burnout among online educators Hogan and McKnight (2007) recommended that university administrators follow specific steps, such as 1) consult with distance educators on matters directly impacting their learning environment (i.e., deal with control over course content concern and proper support for sessional instructors raised in the current study); 2) provide adequate resources to support online distance educators (i.e., provide critical university supports identified in this study); 3) provide detailed job descriptions and social work distance educators expectations to reduce role ambiguity (i.e., could help with the workload concern raised in the current study); 4) create and maintain clear lines of communication between social work distance educators and administrators by providing performance feedback (i.e., can help to ensure consistency of support for part-time and full-time academic staff); 5) facilitate professional development activities (i.e., the use of critical ways for providing university support and training on critical areas raised in the study); and 6) reduce teaching load and number of students per online course (i.e., will address class size concern).

All of the Hogan and McKnight's suggestions can be applied to concerns that were voiced in the current study, particularly about support of part-time academic staff and overall university support infrastructure needed to create an effective learning environment. By providing critical support services for instructors, universities can increase their level of preparedness and motivation and help to address those challenges raised in the current study.

### **Chapter Review**

This chapter has presented findings based on data collected through a quantitative survey, which had 34 respondents, and 24 responses from those who participated in the follow-up

qualitative interviews. Quotations were used to strengthen the findings and to explore some of the complexities involved in teaching social work through distance delivery. The purpose of using multiple quotes was to ensure that the diversity and multiplicity of teaching experiences were represented. The findings from the study were used to answer three research questions that identified the instructor and student characteristics, and university supports needed to create an effective learning environment. The following chapter synthesizes key study findings, with the goals of: creating an effectiveness model for distance social work education; making further connections to the academic literature; exploring implications for social work education; making recommendations; and outlining areas for future research.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCEPTUAL MODEL, SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the last 20 years, the growth of Canadian online social work programs has provided opportunities for students who might otherwise be excluded from post-secondary education due to personal or structural barriers. Despite the skepticism about the appropriateness of delivering a social work curriculum via distance (see Coleman & Collins, 2008; Kreuger & Stretch, 1999), the findings from this study suggest that it is possible to create an effective learning environment in online social work education.

The purpose of this study was to identify critical characteristics of instructors and students and the related university supports that are necessary for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs. This exploratory-descriptive study utilized a mixed-methods design to examine the perceptions of social work distance educators from four Canadian universities. The study used two data collection methods to examine in-depth participants' perspectives on characteristics and supports they viewed as necessary to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs. The research questions were:

- What are the critical instructor characteristics for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?
- What are the critical student characteristics for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?
- What are the critical university supports for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?

- Can a model be identified which integrates answers to the first three research questions for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education?

Based on the perspectives of 34 distance social work educators who have taught at one of the four Canadian universities that offer complete BSW degrees online, there is an increasing recognition that undergraduate education in social work is evolving to allow for the incorporation of different delivery methods in order to satisfy the needs of diverse groups of learners. As one study participant noted, distance education is consistent with social work values as it improves access to marginalized groups:

*Even someone who's parenting or someone who's working full-time, they go to school...can't fit face-to-face in their day, and they can fit in online. It does [make] for a much more diverse discussion. Because people live in different places, they have different examples and different experiences. So, I think it's good in terms of social work diversity, I think it's a good fit.*

The synthesis of the major findings in this chapter endeavours to answer the fourth research question: whether a model can be designed to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education. In addition to addressing this question, implications from this study are discussed, and recommendations from the study's findings as well as for future studies will be made. This chapter also provides a detailed discussion of the possible meanings, conclusions, and limitations of the current study.

### **Key Findings**

The current study represents the first comprehensive attempt to identify critical instructor and student characteristics, and university supports as they pertain to the creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs in Canada. As a result of the

information gathered through this study, it is evident that the professional role for social work educators and the emerging professional role for social work students are critical additions to the four roles that have been commonly identified for each in the distance education literature: technical, pedagogical, social, and managerial roles for instructors, based on the Berge's (2008) model; and technical, cognitive, social, and self-directed roles for students, based on the Borges Sáiz (2008) model. In addition to identifying five critical roles for both social work educators and students, the study identifies a set of required skills, qualities and university supports for instructors and students that promote the creation and maintenance of an effective learning environment in online social work programs. The study also established a strong link between distance education research and social work education research for the purpose of understanding the components that create an effective learning environment. Overall, the study helps to build credibility for online social work degree programs with respect to the factors that are needed to create an effective online learning environment.

Key study findings are summarized in Table 21. The table is organized using five distinct roles identified in the study with selected skills and qualities that received the most critical ratings for each role. University supports listed in the table are not associated with specific roles as each support identified was deemed critical in improving multiple qualities and skills from all five roles. Each column of the table is limited to the qualities, skills, and university supports, for both instructors and students, which received four or more critical ratings. The rationale for selecting a cut-off of four critical ratings is based on the limited number of critical ratings respondents' could identify, and the fact that four or more such ratings represent a significant level of agreement.

Qualities and skills that received four or more critical ratings also usually received an average score on an importance scale of 3.0 and higher that suggests they are both critical and between important and very important for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. The qualities, skills, and university supports that received fewer than four critical ratings have been discussed in the previous chapter but are not included in the composite table.

There were some qualities, skills, and university supports that received four or more critical ratings but did not meet the 3.0 and higher mean score requirement on the importance scale. In order to differentiate the lists, different fonts have been used in the table. The bolded font highlights all of the characteristics (qualities and skills) and university supports that received four or more critical ratings as well as mean scores of importance of 3.0 or higher. The non-bolded font denotes qualities, skills and supports that received four or more critical ratings but had an average score of importance of less than 3.0. Those non-bolded qualities, skills and supports were considered critical by study participants but less important than those that received a mean score of importance of 3.0 or higher for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education. The italic font highlights those qualities that received four or more critical ratings that were generated by the study participants but were not included as part of the original list of qualities on the survey questionnaire (those generated through the literature review). Skills, qualities and university supports that are included in the table with the use of non-bolded and italic fonts met the minimum number of critical ratings established for this study but were considered less important by study participants than other skills, qualities and university supports for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education.

Table 21: Critical Student and Instructor Roles

Critical University Student Supports	Critical Student Qualities	Critical Student Skills	Student Role	Effective Learning Environment	Instructor Role	Critical Instructor Skills	Critical Instructor Qualities	Critical University Instructor Supports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University technical support</li> <li>• Library</li> <li>• Disability / accessibility</li> <li>• Aboriginal student centre</li> <li>• Academic learning and tutoring</li> <li>• Mental health, wellness, and personal counselling</li> <li>• Academic counselling</li> <li>• Financial aid services</li> <li>• Registrar's office</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Open-minded</b></li> <li>• <i>Critically reflective</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Critical thinking</b></li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing</b></li> <li>• <b>Knowledge application</b></li> </ul>	• <b>Cognitive</b>		Pedagogical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Interpersonal communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Feedback</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Responsive</b></li> <li>• <b>Knowledgeable</b></li> <li>• <i>Creative</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Information technology (IT)</b></li> <li>• <b>Instructional design</b></li> <li>• <b>Course editing</b></li> <li>• <b>Library</b></li> <li>• Video/audio producer</li> <li>• Graphic design</li> <li>• Teaching assistant</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collaborative</b></li> <li>• <b>Interactive</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group collaboration</b></li> <li>• <b>Engagement</b></li> <li>• <b>Online discussion</b></li> </ul>	• <b>Social</b>		Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group processing</b></li> <li>• Collaborative teamwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communicative</b></li> <li>• <b>Engaging</b></li> <li>• <b>Approachable</b></li> <li>• Humorous</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-motivated</b></li> <li>• <b>Independent</b></li> <li>• <b>Goal-motivated</b></li> <li>• <i>Organized</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-motivation</b></li> <li>• <b>Time management</b></li> <li>• <b>Organization</b></li> <li>• <b>Study</b></li> </ul>	• <b>Self-directed</b>		Managerial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organizational</b></li> <li>• <b>Discussion facilitation</b></li> <li>• <b>Presentation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organized</b></li> <li>• <i>Flexible</i></li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technological savvy</b></li> </ul>	• <b>Basic technology</b>	• <b>Technical</b>		Technical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Basic technology</b></li> <li>• <b>Multimedia usage</b></li> </ul>	• <i>Computer (tech) savvy</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ethical</b></li> <li>• <b>Genuine</b></li> <li>• <i>Respectful</i></li> </ul>	• <b>Self-reflective</b>	<b>Emerging Professional</b>		Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Engagement</b></li> <li>• <b>Planning</b></li> <li>• <b>Assessment</b></li> <li>• <b>Evaluation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Respectful</b></li> <li>• <b>Ethical</b></li> <li>• <b>Professional</b></li> <li>• <b>Genuine</b></li> <li>• <b>Empathic</b></li> <li>• Warm</li> </ul>	

*Note:* The bolded font used for qualities, skills and university supports represents those that received four or more critical ratings and the mean scores of importance of 3.0 and higher. The non-bolded font is used for qualities, skills and university supports that receive four or more critical ratings but where average rating of importance was less than 3.0. The italic font is used for qualities that receive four or more critical ratings but were not included as part of the original list of qualities on the survey questionnaire generated from the literature review conducted for this study.



The study advances research in the area of distance social work education. When Knowles (2004), in his study on pedagogical and policy challenges in implementing e-learning for social work education, cited Duderstadt (2000), (reproduced below), when undergraduate social work education via distance delivery was in its early stages of development in Canada:

It is often scary and difficult to let go of old and comfortable roles, to be open to new possibilities and ways of being. Yet change brings with it the possibilities of deeper connections to our students and the potential for serving a much broader range of our society. Growth, both for an institution and for the individuals that comprise it, can come only with a step into the unknown. We move forward together, not recklessly, but thoughtfully—with care and a deep sense of commitment to the lives and dreams of our students (p.289).

Knowles (2004) noted in his study that to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs it is important for educators to address professional, pedagogical, faculty and administrative challenges.

Ayala (2007) further advanced the knowledge in the design of online social work education in Canada by conducting a case study analysis of the University of Calgary's MSW program. One of the social work educators in her study stated-

the way we've delivered [education] for the last 100 years no longer necessarily reflects the type of student we have, the realities of today. And think of systems theory - if you're a closed system, you're going to die. If you're not open and not flexible and can't adapt and interact with your environment, you're going to die. And I think that's just the reality of the university - we have to [adapt]. But making sure that we do it in a conscientious critical way, so it's not just embracing it and running forward with it without clearly

stopping along the way to evaluate and assess. Where are we at [sic]? Is this working? Is this the best way we can do this? So, we have to be critical thinkers too, and competent practitioners. We can't just embrace things because this is the latest and greatest. (p.238)

Ayala (2007), based on her analyses of the perspectives of graduate students and social work educators in the MSW online program at the University of Calgary suggested that social work educators should keep exploring the pedagogical potential and student interest in an online education to create an effective learning environment.

The evolution of ideas since the Knowles (2004), and Ayala's (2007) dissertation research and findings from this study paves the way for the creation of new research to continue critical inquiries about required resources and other factors that impact further development in the field of social work distance education. As well, social work distance educators should work together to develop best practices and share common resources that help to create an effective learning environment. One study participant noted, "*We could really support each other in increasing the quality of our teaching resources globally, and so that requires an open policy and that open creative commons mindset.*" Continued exploration and collaboration in this area will ensure that social work students and instructors, together with appropriate university supports, can organize efforts to create an effective learning environment and further the vision of social work education.

Overall, the study findings addressed three research questions, which identified the instructor and student characteristics and university supports deemed critical to the creation of an effective learning environment. An attempt to create a model that focuses on an effective online learning environment in social work distance learning can be made using the current findings. The following discussion focuses on the development of such a model.

### **A Proposed Glider Effectiveness Model**

Answers to the three research questions provide new data that can help to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education. The characteristics and supports that were identified in the study may also assist in creating a model that focuses on how to enhance the effectiveness of distance social work education. Figure 2 represents a visualization of such a model using the analogy of a glider to connect characteristics of an effective learning environment with study findings.

A typical glider, as described by Marshall and Adkins (2001), has three key parts: wings, fuselage, and control surfaces. These parts can be used to represent the critical characteristics and supports identified in the study, a positive learning experience, and service effectiveness, respectively.

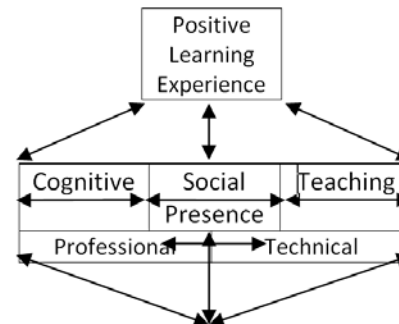
The wings of a glider allow it to maintain balance. In order to create an effective learning environment for distance social work education, it is critical that universities provide balanced supports to both instructors and students to allow for the development of critical skills and qualities. The wings in this analogy correspond to the study findings, with one wing representing instructor characteristics and the associated university supports, and the other wing representing student characteristics and the associated university supports.

The fuselage, which is positioned at the front of a glider, allows for smooth navigation through the air. In distance social work education, the fuselage could be viewed as the need to create a positive learning experience for each course. In the Glider model, the fuselage is represented using Garrison's et al. (2000) community of inquiry model. This model has three categories of presence (cognitive, teaching, and social) that can be linked to three critical roles for instructors/students (pedagogical/cognitive, managerial/self-directed, social/social). This

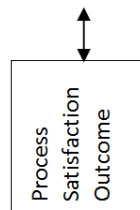
study has identified two additional instructor/student roles (professional/emerging professional and technical/technical) as critical for the creation of an effective learning environment. Based on the findings, all five roles are needed for students to master learning objectives in distance social work undergraduate courses.

The final part of a glider is made up of control surfaces, which are used to guide the direction of flight. In the Glider model, control surfaces represent service effectiveness, as discussed in Patti's (1987) research. Measures of process, outcome and satisfaction should be used to guide the creation and maintenance of an effective learning environment in distance social work education.

The Glider model is a tool that can be used by social work distance educators, students, and administrators to measure how well the various components of the glider are being utilized to create an effective learning environment. For example, instructors can use the Glider model to monitor what skills, they need to develop to create an effective learning environment in their courses, to improve their level of motivation, preparedness and overall satisfaction with teaching in an online learning environment. Social work distance education students can assess their skills and qualities needed for success online and access appropriate university supports to develop needed skills in realizing an effective learning experience. Schools of Social Work can use the Glider model to ensure that the critical university supports are available for students and instructors to meet their individual needs in an online learning environment.

**Figure 2: Social Work Distance Education: “Glider” Effectiveness Model**

Critical University Student Supports	Critical Student Qualities	Critical Student Skills	Student Role	Effective Learning Environment	Instructor Role	Critical Instructor Skills	Critical Instructor Qualities	Critical University Instructor Supports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University technical support</li> <li>• Library</li> <li>• Disability / accessibility</li> <li>• Aboriginal student centre</li> <li>• Academic learning and tutoring</li> <li>• Mental health, wellness, and personal counselling</li> <li>• Academic counselling</li> <li>• Financial aid services</li> <li>• Registrar's office</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Open-minded</b></li> <li>• <i>Critically Reflective</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Critical thinking</b></li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing</b></li> <li>• <b>Knowledge application</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cognitive</b></li> </ul>		<b>Pedagogical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Interpersonal communication</b></li> <li>• <b>Feedback</b></li> <li>• <b>Writing</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Responsive</b></li> <li>• <b>Knowledgeable</b></li> <li>• <i>Creative</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Information technology (IT)</b></li> <li>• <b>Instructional design</b></li> <li>• <b>Course editing</b></li> <li>• <b>Library</b></li> <li>• Video/audio producer</li> <li>• Graphic design</li> <li>• Teaching assistant</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collaborative</b></li> <li>• <b>Interactive</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group collaboration</b></li> <li>• <b>Engagement</b></li> <li>• <b>Online discussion</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Social</b></li> </ul>		<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group processing</b></li> <li>• <b>Collaborative teamwork</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communicative</b></li> <li>• <b>Engaging</b></li> <li>• <b>Approachable</b></li> <li>• <b>Humorous</b></li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-motivated</b></li> <li>• <b>Independent</b></li> <li>• <b>Goal-motivated</b></li> <li>• <i>Organized</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-motivation</b></li> <li>• <b>Time-management</b></li> <li>• <b>Organization</b></li> <li>• <b>Study</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self Directed</b></li> </ul>		<b>Managerial</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organizational</b></li> <li>• <b>Discussion facilitation</b></li> <li>• <b>Presentation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organized</b></li> <li>• <i>Flexible</i></li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technologically savvy</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Basic technology</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Technical</b></li> </ul>		<b>Technical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Basic technology</b></li> <li>• <b>Multimedia usage</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Computer (tech) Savvy</i></li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ethical</b></li> <li>• <b>Genuine</b></li> <li>• <i>Respectful</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-reflective</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emerging Professional</b></li> </ul>		<b>Professional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Engagement</b></li> <li>• <b>Planning</b></li> <li>• <b>Assessment</b></li> <li>• <b>Evaluation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Respectful</b></li> <li>• <b>Ethical</b></li> <li>• <b>Professional</b></li> <li>• <b>Genuine</b></li> <li>• <b>Empathic</b></li> <li>• <b>Warm</b></li> </ul>	



It is important that each part of a glider (such as the landing gear) be continuously serviced and that the route is monitored while in flight. For distance social work education, this means that research should be consistently conducted to ensure that an effective learning environment is maintained. For example, further research is needed on how universities are doing in providing the critical support services identified in this study, and how these support services can be enhanced to help instructors create a positive learning experience for students. Social work administrators should be regularly updated on best practices to optimize the critical skills and qualities among both instructors and students needed to realize an effective learning environment. Continuous research in distance social work education will provide new information to stakeholders on measures of process, outcome, and satisfaction, all of which can help to create an effective learning environment.

The analogy of the glider has been used to present the findings from this study. The Glider model requires all distance social work stakeholders to work together. Such collaboration ensures the social work profession is moving in the direction set by the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and the CASWE-ACFTS Standards for Accreditation (2014), so that future social workers are engaged in competent practice that is focused on principles of social justice, service to humanity, and the right to self-determination.

### **Contributions of the Study**

The current study advances the knowledge of Canada's distance education in undergraduate social work in at least eleven identifiable ways that collectively contribute to the creation of an effective learning environment. Each identified contribution is connected to the research questions related to instructor and student characteristics and university supports that were answered in the study. This list is organized based on the order each contribution was

identified in the study, and references the related findings from the literature review in response to the research questions:

1. This research has provided an opportunity to define an effective learning environment for distance social work education that can be created by focusing on three corresponding components—outcome, process, and satisfaction. The working definition of what constitutes an effective learning environment in distance social work education is based on constructivist learning theory, Garrison's et al. (2000) community of inquiry model, and Patti's (1987) analysis of service effectiveness and was developed during the literature review stage of this study. An effective learning environment occurs when students successfully master learning objectives within a quality-designed curriculum where students are satisfied with the process and outcomes of learning.
2. Findings from the current study identify a specific list of critical instructor characteristics (qualities and skills) for teaching social work in an online environment, thereby adding to the lists of instructor skills required for effective distance teaching that have been previously identified in the literature (Egan & Akdere, 2005; Thach, 1994; Williams, 2003). Although the characteristics identified as critical in the current study share similarities with those that have been identified through prior research, collaborative and professional qualities and skills received much higher ratings in the current study in comparison to other research (e.g., Egan & Akdere, 2005; Thach, 1994; Williams, 2003). This is likely due to the enhanced focus on human interaction and professional preparation in social work education.
3. The study enhances the Berge (2008) model for the roles of the online instructor by proposing a fifth role that highlights the importance of professional qualities and skills important to social work education. The proposed model includes five overlapping roles:

pedagogical, social, managerial, technical, and professional, and selected critical qualities and skills identified in this study should be incorporated, as indicated, into each respective role.

4. Findings from the current study identify a specific list of student characteristics deemed critical for learning in an online environment, thereby contributing to the list of characteristics that have been identified in the literature (DeVine, 2013; Fresen, 2005; Meyer, 2002). Similar to the list of skills and qualities for instructors, the list of student characteristics critical to success in the online environment share some commonalities with those identified through prior research, particularly in the areas related to self-directed and technical skills and qualities. However, based on the focus on relationship-building and engagement in professional practice inherent in social work education, student social and professional skills and qualities were rated higher in the current study than in other distance education research (e.g., DeVine, 2013; Fresen, 2005; Meyer, 2002).
5. The study enhances the Borges Sáiz (2008) model for the roles of the online student in social work by proposing a fifth role; namely, that of the emerging professional. The proposed model would have five overlapping roles: cognitive, social, self-directed, technical, and emerging professional.
6. The study's findings propose a specific list of university supports that are critical for effective teaching in the online environment, thereby adding to those that have been identified through other studies that have focused on the significance of faculty guidance, training, and support to ensure success with distance education endeavours (Beaudoin, 1990; Dillon & Walsh, 1992; Gautreau, 2011; Padgett & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000; Siegel et al, 1998). Although similarities exist between the critical professional support services identified in the current



study and in prior research, the major differences that have emerged from this study relate to the administrative and pedagogical challenges that interfere with accessing supports and enabling the development of critical skills.

7. The study findings enhance Wilson and Stacey's (2004) model for identifying levels of need for online instructors. These levels of need are connected to the study results in that they relate to how critical support services, training topics, and methods of providing support help to ensure that the individual needs of the instructor can be met within the university's support infrastructure for distance education.
8. Study findings lead to a specific list of university supports critical for students to learn effectively in an online environment, thereby contributing to the results from other studies with a similar focus (Ozoglu, 2009; 2010; LaPadula, 2003; Mills, 2003). The study findings reinforce those from prior research that suggest that universities need to invest resources in building a supportive infrastructure for students in order to develop an effective online learning environment.
9. The study findings enhance Potter's (2013) model of support, which highlights the personal and institutional issues students require support with while learning online. Results from these two studies provide evidence of how the unique needs of distance learners can be met by having critical university support services in place.
10. The study identified factors that affect the preparedness and motivation felt by participants and some of the challenges they face online that have an impact on their motivation to teach online. Addressing the administrative and pedagogical challenges identified in this study can provide a focus for future research in the area of distance social work education.

11. The study findings provided an opportunity for the researcher to propose the Glider model that focuses on how to enhance the effectiveness of distance social work education. The model integrates critical characteristics and supports identified in the study, components from the Garrison's et al. (2000) community of inquiry model for the positive learning experience, and Patti's (1987) research on service effectiveness. It is a tool that can be used by social work distance educators, students, and administrators to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education programs.

Overall, the study addressed four research questions. The critical instructor and student characteristics and university supports were identified, and based on the study findings a Glider model is proposed as a guide for the development an effective learning environment in social work distance education. The following discussion focuses on the development of implications and recommendations for social work education and future research.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Study findings have specific implications and recommendations for social work education and future research, and these are summarized in Table 22.

**Table 22: Study Findings, Implications, and Suggestions for Future Research**

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Contributions of the Study</b>	<b>Implications/Recommendations for Social Work Education</b>	<b>Recommendation for Future Research</b>
1. Essential components needed to create an effective learning environment in social work distance learning	Construction of a new definition for an effective learning environment in distance social work education	Study findings support the need to use the new definition for an effective learning environment, and apply Patti's (1987) components for service effectiveness and Garrison's et al. (2000) community of inquiry model in future research in social work distance education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the three elements of Patti's model of process, outcome, and satisfaction be measured to enhance the learning environment in distance social work learning?</li> <li>• How can the community of inquiry model improve interaction among instructors, students, and content to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education?</li> </ul>
2. The importance and criticality of instructor qualities and skills were identified for creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance education	Creation of a list of critical qualities and skills for distance social work educators	Schools of Social Work can use these lists to build a supportive infrastructure to help instructors develop critical skills and qualities; as well, findings suggest guidelines for hiring new instructors to teach social work courses via distance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the identified qualities and skills be demonstrated by instructors in an online environment to promote effective learning?</li> </ul>
3. Identification of a fifth instructor role (professional role ) that is critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education	Categorization of identified skills and qualities into five interconnected instructor roles	Identified roles provide a rationale for Schools of Social Work to lobby universities and government for resources to help online instructors develop the skills and qualities needed to prepare effectively social work students for professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the provision of critical university supports be enhanced to assist instructors in developing the skills and qualities required to fulfill effectively the five critical roles in an online learning environment?</li> </ul>
4. The importance and criticality of student qualities and skills were identified for creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance education	Creation of a list of critical qualities and skills for distance social work students	Schools of Social Work can use the identified lists to build a supportive infrastructure for students that helps with the development of critical skills and qualities; these provide guidelines for supporting success among prospective students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the identified skills and qualities be demonstrated by students in an online environment to promote effective learning?</li> </ul>

5. Identification of a fifth student role (emerging professional role) that is critical to success in social work distance education	Categorization of identified skills and qualities into five interconnected student roles	The identified roles provide a rationale for Schools of Social Work to lobby universities for resources to help distance social work students develop the skills and qualities needed to perform each role.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can the provision of critical university supports be enhanced to assist students in developing the skills and qualities required to effectively meet requirements of the five critical roles in an online learning environment?</li> </ul>
6. The importance and criticality of professional supports for instructors were identified for the creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance education	Creation of a list of critical university supports for instructors	Schools of Social Work can use the list of critical university supports to lobby universities to help social work distance educators get access to those supports to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education. CASWE-ACFTS could use the list of critical supports when accrediting social work programs for online delivery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can each university support meet the individual needs of distance social work educators to teach successfully?</li> <li>What are the perspectives of support providers on how to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education?</li> </ul>
7. The findings suggested methods for providing support services for instructors as well as critical training areas that are needed to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education	Identification of critical methods for providing supports and training areas for instructors	Universities can use the identified methods for providing support and training to ensure that instructors receive needed support and training in the areas that are critical for the creation of an effective learning environment in distance social work education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can universities make supports available for instructors to fill their professional development needs?</li> <li>How can support be provided for key training programs to enhance co-operation between Canadian distance social work educators?</li> </ul>
8. The importance and criticality of university supports for students were identified for creation of an effective learning environment in social work distance education	Creation of a list of critical university supports for students	The university can use the list of critical university supports to build the a supportive infrastructure for students in promoting an effective learning environment in social work distance education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can each university support meet the individual needs of distance social work students to learn successfully?</li> <li>What student supports do students themselves deem necessary?</li> </ul>

9. The findings suggested methods for providing support services for students in order to create an effective learning environment in distance social work education	Identification of critical methods for providing supports for students	Universities can use the identified methods for providing support to ensure that student receive needed services that promote an effective learning environment in distance social work education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can universities make supports available for students to fill their learning needs?</li> <li>• How should university support services be provided based on the perspective of distance social work students?</li> </ul>
10. The study findings suggested some pedagogical and administrative challenges that affect the level of instructor's motivation and preparedness to teach in social work distance education.	Identification of pedagogical and administrative challenges that influence the instructor's level of preparedness and motivation to teach online	Universities can use the findings to improve the current level of instructor preparation and motivation by addressing the key pedagogical and administrative challenges identified in the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How should Schools of Social Work support instructors to resolve the identified administrative and pedagogical challenges to improving the level of preparedness and motivation for teaching in social work distance education?</li> </ul>
11. An effectiveness model was developed that incorporates critical instructor and student qualities and skills and university supports to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education	Creation of Glider Effectiveness Model	The model can inform CASWE-ACFTS on the critical roles and supports needed to create an effective learning environment and can be used as a guide for designing online curricula that take into account the needs of both instructors and students, and the university supports that can help meet those needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the model inform future developments in distance social work education?</li> <li>• Do critical characteristics and supports change over time in response to the changing needs of online students and instructors?</li> </ul>

Research implications and recommendations for social work education can be further grouped into three key areas, related to: an effective learning environment in distance social work education, distance social work educators and students, and universities that offer CASWE-ACFTS accredited social work programs. These are discussed below

### **Implications for Creating an Effective Learning Environment**

The current study provided an opportunity to define components that are necessary for creating an effective learning environment in distance social work education. Study findings

enabled the design of the glider model, which is based on the Garrison, et al. (2000) community of inquiry model and Patti's (1987) definition of service effectiveness. Findings from the study support expansion of the Garrison's et al. (2000) community of inquiry model and its original three types of presence (teaching, cognitive and social) that focus on how to create a positive learning experience by adding two types of presence (technical and professional) to correspond to the five critical roles identified for distance social work educators.

The five instructor roles identified in the study are related to the framework designed by Mishra and Koehler (2005; 2006), which highlights the interplay required between pedagogy (teaching, cognitive and social presence), technology (technical presence), and discipline-specific content (professional presence) to create an effective learning environment. Rienties, Brouwer, and Lygo-Baker (2013) stressed that such an environment can be created when students' learning needs are adequately addressed and instructors have "a sufficient combination of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technological knowledge" (p.5). Consideration of the interaction between pedagogy, technology and discipline-specific knowledge will help the instructor design courses with learning objectives that online students can master (Mishra & Koehler, 2005; 2006). Future studies can focus on how each identified role enhances the interaction between instructor, student, and content to build a community of inquiry in distance social work education.

### **Implications for Social Work Distance Educators and Students**

The study offers some implications for distance social work educators and students to ensure they possess the critical qualities and skills needed to both contribute to and make use of an effective learning environment. Due to the evolution of technology, and the constantly changing field of distance social work education, instructors and students should learn to take

control of their training needs while advocating for the university supports necessary for developing individual skills and qualities. Using the glider analogy as a guide, distance social work educators and students can self-assess and monitor the individual skills and qualities that were identified as critical in the study, to ensure they are filling their roles effectively and to determine whether appropriate supports are in place to enhance these if needed. For example, a distance social work instructor who requires better pedagogical skills to design a new online course should be able to access proper university supports to build those needed skills. As well, social work students who identify a difficulty with time management should be able to access student services that are designed to help them improve their time management skills.

Distance social work education instructors and students should have access to the critical supports provided by the university to create an effective learning environment. Ongoing support is also essential to the retention of distance social work educators and students and further research should focus on how to provide critical support services to meet the unique needs of both social work educators and students.

### **Implications for CASWE-ACFTS Accredited Distance Education Programs**

CASWE-ACFTS accredited distance social work programs, together with university administrators, are responsible for providing professional support for instructors to create an effective learning environment. The process of identifying specific skills within a particular profession has been recognized in the past as a necessary first step in creating effective professional development programs (McLagan, 1989). Schools of Social Work that offer online BSW programs should consider the study findings when developing or refining professional supports for instructors to meet their individual needs. They can also draw from training programs that are currently in place, such as Carleton University's CU Open online training

course, which is available for Canadian educators (Coan, 2015). The online course developed by Carleton University on how to be a successful online instructor can be modified to incorporate this study's findings on the training needs of distance social work educators. For example, the training modules from CU Open online training course that focus on challenges of online education and online teaching skills can be enhanced by incorporating findings from this study that are unique to social work distance learning. New training modules can also be added that are focused on the critical university supports needed in social work distance education. School of Social Work administrators could also use the results of this research for future staffing of online social work programs. The identified instructor roles coupled with the corresponding critical skills and qualities can be used as a guide in the selection of distance educators to meet the demands of each university.

Study findings show that a lack of balance may exist between workload, compensation and available supports for online social work instructors. CASWE-ACFTS accredited distance social work programs need to ensure that adequate workload expectations, compensation policies, and university supports are in place for distance social work educators. It is essential for universities to recognize the amount of time required to develop high-quality teaching materials in an online learning environment, to provide paid time for instructor development, and to address concerns around the disparity in compensation between part-time and full-time academic staff. Schools of Social Work that rely heavily on part-time instructors should review their compensation policies and professional support infrastructure to ensure that part-time instructors are fairly compensated for their work in developing and teaching online courses and have equal access to critical university support services.



Study participants suggested that a significant element that impacts workload is class size. An optimal class size should be established for each online social work course (Pelech et al., 2013). This consideration would help with the management of the intensive nature of online discussions, high levels of interactivity and group work, the incorporation of various types of presence (i.e., technical, professional, social, cognitive, and teaching), and the time demands placed on faculty members teaching in a disembodied learning environment. A number of instructors in the study emphasized that optimizing class size, would provide an opportunity to maintain diversity among students and to keep track of student progress more effectively.

As reported by some study participants, there are limited financial resources available to social work education programs, and there is minimal funding available to support educational opportunities for online instructors. As a result, online instructors might have difficulty attaining the skill levels required to teach effectively in the online environment. However, universities must adopt strategies to ensure that pedagogical and administrative challenges expressed by social work distance education are addressed. Possible strategies that might be considered to support of the continued development of online social work education programming include increased lobbying of university administration by CASWE-ACFTS and the development of new government partnerships.

There should also be increased lobbying from the Schools of Social Work of universities for additional resources that would support the creation of an effective learning environment for social work students. Given their limited ability to generate revenue and their public service mandate, Schools of Social Work must make a strong case for support. Knowles (2004) stated that “there is a limit to how much tuition fees can continue to rise and continue to attract students into social work and other human services oriented professions” (p.221). The Canadian

government should recognize that it is essential to provide more support for educational programs that offer training in the provision of necessary services for all Canadian citizens.

Another strategy to promote innovation in social work education, including the development of distance learning resources, would involve partnerships among Schools of Social Work that offer online programs. Participants in the study suggested a need for collaboration between all Schools of Social Work that offer social work education programs online in developing a national learning resource repository for distance social work educators in Canada. The identified educational resources could be easily shared among Canadian Schools of Social Work. The CASWE-ACFTS could provide leadership in creating a repository that would improve an ability of each School to meet the CASWE-ACFTS accreditation requirements for delivering their social work curriculum via distance.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study was exploratory in nature, and additional research efforts that could be undertaken to learn more about social work distance education. Some of the new research questions identified in Table 22 relate to how the identified qualities and skills can be demonstrated by instructors/students in an online environment to promote effective learning. Another future inquiry for research can focus on how the provision of critical university supports can be enhanced to assist instructors/students in developing the skills and qualities required to fulfill the five key roles for an effective learning in social work distance education.

The study should be expanded to include the perceptions of social work online students, university support providers, employers who hire social work distance education students and clients who are served by graduates from social work distance learning programs. In addition to contributing to the body of knowledge, comparisons between these various groups of

stakeholders can help to determine if there is a difference in perception on critical skills and qualities as well as university supports needed to create an effective learning environment. Future research efforts could include modifying the survey instrument used in this study by adding characteristics that were suggested by social work educators as critical and then surveying students who have graduated from social work distance education programs, employers who have hired students who graduated from those programs and clients who receive social work services from students who graduated from social work distance delivery programs. University support providers can also share their perspective on how university support services are utilized and what can be done to improve the existing support services for both students and instructors.

Another area for further research would be to explore differences between the effectiveness of graduate versus undergraduate social work distance education. Because of the pedagogical differences between undergraduate and graduate education (Callender, 1992; Artino & Stephens, 2009), a future study could explore the similarities and differences between the critical instructor and student qualities and skills and university supports needed to create an effective learning environment for these two educational levels.

It is important to note again that the study represented an initial exploration and description of what instructor and student characteristics and university supports are needed to create an effective learning environment. In addition, since the study sample was small the ability to generalize these findings to other programs is very limited. Instead, it is hoped that the findings provide insight and guidance for creating such an environment in social work distance education, and serve as a foundation for further research in the area. While Canada currently has no other accredited schools that offer full programs online, there are more social work distance

learning programs in the US accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008) that open up possibilities for comparative research. Expanding the study internationally using scientific sampling methods could allow generalization to a larger population of social work distance educators. However, international comparative research might also complicate the interpretation of findings because of national differences in accreditation standards and curriculum requirements.

### **Strengths of the Study**

The current study has a number of identifiable strengths. It supports social work educators in their continuing efforts to create an effective learning environment, thereby building a firm foundation for future social work practice by preparing BSW graduates using distance education. The strengths of the current study are highlighted below.

### **Scope of the Study and Development of Distance BSW Programs in Canada**

One of the strengths of this study, which focuses on the effectiveness of the online learning environment in social work education, is its scope. By including all accredited undergraduate social work programs across Canada, it offers a broader understanding of the effectiveness in teaching online social work courses using national standards agreed upon and sanctioned by the profession. Before this research, there had been no extensive published studies on CASWE-ACFTS accredited BSW distance education programs. In fact, the only comprehensive study that had been conducted was Ayala's (2007) dissertation research, which provided an extensive analysis of the MSW program at the University of Calgary, thereby offering a detailed review of one CASWE-ACFTS accredited distance social work program.

While not a direct goal of this study, it was beneficial to gather information on the extent to which distance education is being used to deliver the undergraduate social work curriculum.

Study participants provided much-needed information that can serve to enhance the effectiveness of the online learning environment and spark greater interest in this emerging field of study.

### **Glider Model**

A model was developed as a way to integrate key study findings using a heuristic approach to capturing the development of distance social work education. The Glider model is rooted in the constructivist community of inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000) and Patti's (1987) research on service effectiveness. It offers a unique way to demonstrate how instructor and student characteristics influence the creation of effective learning environment. By providing balanced support to both instructors and students, universities can create an environment that is effective for teaching and learning the social work curriculum through distance education.

### **Input from Experienced Faculty**

The strength of this study is that all collected research data came from social work instructors experienced in distance social work education. With a significant percentage of research participants having more than ten years of experience teaching distance social work courses, their perceptions and opinions are better informed than those of instructors who have never taught online. It was evident from the qualitative interviews that many participants have acquired extensive knowledge in this area, and this study provided an opportunity for them to share their expertise.

### **Response Rate**

This study has achieved an above average response rate as reported in other academic research (Baruch, 1999). The overall response rate to the initial invitation to participate in the study was 45.3% and 70% of those respondents agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews. Because of the length and detail of the survey, it was notable that 22 of the 34 respondents took

the time to write narrative comments on the original survey questionnaire and 24 out of 34 instructors participated in the follow-up interviews. This level of response indicates that distance social work educators who participated in the study are willing and interested in sharing their knowledge and experiences on teaching social work online.

In summary, given the exploratory-descriptive nature of the study, the results of this research provide significant findings that should be of interest to distance social work educators, students, university administrators and everyone who wants to ensure that social work education keeps developing and fulfilling its far-reaching mission and vision statements.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following section deals with the limitations of this study.

#### **Lack of Other Perspectives**

While there are benefits to surveying instructors experienced in teaching online social work courses, there were no other perspectives that also help to create an effective learning environment included, such as information collected from students or university support providers. In future studies, it would be important to modify the questionnaire and survey students who have graduated from social work distance delivery programs for their perceptions of effectiveness. Other perspectives that may be important to include are those of social work clients and employers of distance social work graduates as well as university support providers. These additional stakeholder perspectives could strengthen the list of critical characteristics and supports by identifying further needs.

#### **Program Sample Size**

Distance education may be delivered differently from one institution to another, so the characteristics and supports that have been identified may vary in degree of importance

depending on the individual institution's approach. Due to the relatively small sample size from each program, this study was not able to reliably highlight the differences in identified characteristics among the four participating universities. The size of the sample also limited the types of statistical tests that could be applied to the data. The mean and standard deviation scores provided an initial descriptive analysis in identifying critical characteristics and supports. With a larger sample size it might be possible to conduct other statistical tests, such as mean comparison among critical characteristics and supports between programs.

Once distance social work education expands beyond the four accredited Canadian universities, more studies should be conducted that include a larger sample size so that statistical validity can be established. Another way the sample size might be increased is to include MSW distance delivery instructors and compare means between identified undergraduate and graduate critical characteristics and supports. As well, a separate study should be designed for contract academic staff so that their unique needs and challenges can be highlighted to address a potential sampling bias due to the underrepresentation of part-time instructors in the current study.

### **Survey Questionnaire**

The length of the questionnaire may have contributed to participant fatigue, resulting in some survey questions being left unanswered. Follow-up interviews helped clarify questionnaire responses, however, some open-ended answers to the survey questions were not discussed in these interviews. Important critical insights may have been missed due to the lack of participation in the follow-up interviews.

The questionnaire was wordy, and respondents may not have given full consideration to the meaning of their responses to each question. When rating characteristics and supports, some participants did not use the importance scale, which resulted in a lower number of responses for

some items on the scale. The questionnaire design might be improved with an online survey that reminded respondents to rate the criticality and importance of each item.

### **Conclusion**

This study represented an initial exploration and description of instructor and student characteristics and university supports critical to creating an effective learning environment. Since the study sample was small, the ability to generalize these findings to other BSW online programs is limited. However, the results do provide important insight and guidance for creating an effective online learning environment in social work education and serve as a foundation for continued research in the area.

As distance social work education continues to evolve and new technologies are incorporated in response to societal shifts, further research examining how these changes influence critical characteristics and supports is strongly encouraged. It is important that follow-up studies be conducted, perhaps at 5- and 10-year intervals, to monitor whether the identified qualities and skills have changed as a result of advancements in pedagogy, new technologies, and other influences on distance social work education.

Some study participants commented on the importance of this study and recommended further research in the area of distance social work education. One instructor stated: *“I’m really glad you’re doing this. I think it’s long overdue.”* Another instructor made the comment: *“This has been a well written and fairly comprehensive survey I have appreciated receiving. Distance delivery is a critical delivery format and I am glad that research is being done in this area as it is crucial that we get it right.”* Another highlighted the need for increased knowledge sharing between educators, *“So what you’re doing is so important...because we want to know what other people think.”*



This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge amidst changing educational paradigms. Social work educators and administrators have professional and ethical obligations to fulfill, so effective ways to educate future social workers must be carefully considered. Further research will serve to strengthen the quality of distance social work education and ensure that the profession continues to develop as new knowledge is passed to future generations in the most appropriate, accountable, available, accessible, acceptable, applicable, and adequate ways.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTOR'S SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to complete the following questionnaire.

The purpose of this survey is to explore the perceptions of social work educators regarding instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports critical to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

Critical characteristics and supports are defined as those deemed essential to creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs from the viewpoint of the distance social work instructor.

For the purpose of this study, a distance-delivered course is considered to be any BSW degree course that is taught during the academic term but does not adhere to the traditional classroom format.

The Survey Questionnaire consists of six parts:

- *Part 1: focus on identifying Motivational Factors and Faculty Preparedness for Teaching Online.*
- *Part 2-5: focus on identifying Instructor Characteristics (Part 2), Instructor Support Services (Part 3), Student Characteristics (Part 4), and Student Support Services (Part 5) in social work distance education.*
- *Part 6 (Social Work Distance Education Teaching Experience and Demographic Profile): focuses on instructor experiences with teaching online social work courses and background information of participants.*

You can complete questionnaire in Microsoft Word and return by email in attachment or you can print the questionnaire and return by regular mail to the attention of Oleksandr (Sasha) Kondrashov at the University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work, 520 Tier Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

If you have any questions while completing the questionnaire, please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or the above email address.

It should take 20-30 minutes to answer the following questions:

### Part 1: Motivating Factors and Faculty Preparedness for Teaching in a Social Work Distance Delivery Program

1. The following table contains a list of statements about motivating factors for distance social work instructors.

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates the extent to which you agree with each statement.
- Please do not skip any rating.

Motivating Factors	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I derive personal satisfaction from teaching online courses					
I feel pressured by competitors (e.g., other universities, programs) to teach online courses					
I feel pressured by my colleagues to teach online courses					
I feel pressured by my department chair, dean, or other administrators to teach online courses					
I feel pressured by my students to teach online courses					
Teaching online courses provides me with more flexible working conditions					
Teaching online courses provides my students with more flexible learning opportunities					
Teaching online courses provides opportunities for extra financial compensation					
Teaching online is my own personal decision (as opposed to being required by my department)					
When I need technical support, I am able to obtain the appropriate help					

**2. The following table contains a list of statements about instructor preparedness for teaching in distance social work programs.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates the extent to which you agree with each statement.
- Please do not skip any rating.

<b>Faculty Preparedness</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Professional development funding is available to support my development as an online instructor					
I have had opportunities to learn how to develop instructional materials for online courses					
I have had opportunities to learn how to develop the pedagogical skills for teaching online courses					
I have had opportunities to learn how to develop the technical (computer) skills for teaching online courses					
I have had opportunities to observe other faculty members who teach online courses					
I have taken advantage of professional development opportunities to learn how to teach online courses					
I have the necessary knowledge to develop instructional materials for online courses					
I have the necessary pedagogical skills needed to teach online courses					
I have the necessary technical (computer) skills to teach online courses					
I prefer to receive one-on-one training to develop my online skills (versus attending workshops)					

## Part 2: Distance Social Work Instructor Characteristics

### 3. The following table contains a list of potential distance social work instructor qualities.

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each instructor quality is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 qualities from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional instructor qualities that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment.

Instructor Qualities	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Approachable					
Communicative					
Empathic					
Engaging					
Ethical					
Genuine					
Humorous					
Knowledgeable					
Organized					
Professional					
Respectful					
Responsive					
Warm					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**4. The following table contains a list of potential skills for distance social work instructors.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each instructor skill is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 skills from those that you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional instructor skills that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment.

Instructor Skills	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Assessment skills					
Basic technology skills					
Change agent skills					
Collaborative teamwork skills					
Discussion facilitation skills					
Engagement skills					
Evaluation skills					
Feedback skills					
Group processing skills					
Implementation skills					
Interpersonal communication skills					
Multimedia usage skills					
Negotiation skills					
Organizational skills					
Planning skills					
Presentation skills.					
Project management skills					
Public relations skills					
Termination and follow-up skills					
Writing skills					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					



### Part 3: University Supports for Distance Social Work Instructors

**5. The following table contains a list of potential university professional supports in place to serve distance social work instructors.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each university professional support for instructors is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but not more than 5 university professional supports from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional university professional supports for instructors that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment.

University Professional Supports for Instructors	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Course editing support					
Graphic design support					
Instructional design support					
Information technology (IT) support					
Library support					
Teaching assistant support					
Video/audio producer support					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**6. The following table contains a list of training topics for social work distance education. INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each training topic is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 training topics from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional topic areas that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment.

Training Topics	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Adult learning theory and online pedagogy					
Assessment, grading, and feedback					
Building community in the online classroom					
Course climate and the online classroom environment					
Course organization and facilitation					
Discussion facilitation and instruction					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**7. The following table contains a list of potential methods for providing distance social work instructors with support.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each method for providing support is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 methods from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional methods for providing support that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment.

Methods for Providing Support	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
One-on-one personalized training sessions with professional distance educator/instructional designer					
Ongoing mentorship program					
Instructor’s online course					
Wiki or interactive blog					
Peer-to-peer support from another social work distance educator					
Small group workshops					
Training manuals, books, or other print resources					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**Part 4: Distance Social Work Student Characteristics****8. The following table contains a list of potential qualities for distance social work students.****INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each student quality is for student success when starting the social work distance delivery program.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 student qualities from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional student qualities that you perceive are critical for student success when starting the social work distance delivery program.

Student Qualities	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Collaborative					
Empathic					
Ethical					
Genuine					
Goal-motivated					
Independent					
Interactive					
Knowledgeable					
Open-minded					
Self-motivated					
Technologically savvy					
Warm					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**9. The following table contains a list of potential skills for distance social work students.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each student skill is for student success when starting the social work distance delivery program.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 student skills from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional student skills that you perceive are critical for student success when starting the social work distance delivery program.

Student Skills	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Assessment skills					
Basic technology usage skills					
Critical thinking skills					
Engagement skills					
Evaluation skills					
Feedback skills					
Goal-setting skills					
Group collaboration skills					
Implementation skills					
Interpersonal communication skills					
Knowledge acquisition skills					
Knowledge application skills					
Negotiation skills					
Online discussion skills					
Organization skills					
Planning skills					
Problem-solving skills					
Research skills					
Self-motivation skills					
Self-reflective skills					
Study skills					
Support skills					
Teamwork skills					
Termination and follow-up skills					
Time-management skills					
Writing skills					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

## Part 5: University Supports for Distance Social Work Students

**10. The following table contains a list of potential methods for providing distance social work students with support.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each method is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 methods for providing support from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional methods for providing support that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

Methods for Providing Support	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Information posted online (faculty website; course management system; blog; wiki)					
Orientation sessions and workshops (web conference/face-to-face)					
Readiness surveys (prior to taking online courses)					
Ongoing one-on-one student advising					
Peer-to-peer/student mentorship					
Student support manuals, books, or other print resources					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**11. The following table contains a list of potential supports provided by the university for distance social work students.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Please consider each item separately and rate each item independently of all others.
- Please put an “X” mark near your rating that indicates how important (not important, somewhat important, important, very important) you believe each university support for students is for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.
- Please do not skip any rating.
- Please select at least 2 but no more than 5 university supports for students from those you have rated “important” or “very important” that you believe are critical. You can suggest up to three additional university supports for students that you perceive are critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery programs.

University Supports for Students	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Critical
Aboriginal student centre					
Academic counselling services					
Academic learning and tutoring services					
Bookstore					
Career and employment centre					
Disability/accessibility services					
Financial aid services					
International student centre					
Library services					
Mental health, wellness, and personal counselling services					
Registrar’s office (transcripts, graduation, etc.)					
Student life and development centre					
Testing centre (proctored exams, placement tests, etc.)					
University health services					
University technical support					
Your Suggestion 1:					
Your Suggestion 2:					
Your Suggestion 3:					

**Part 6: Social Work Distance Education Teaching Experience and Demographic Profile**  
**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Please complete the following questions by placing an “X” mark near all answers that apply to you. Your answers are important for creating a demographic and online teaching experience profile for this study.

**12. Please indicate the University(ies) you have taught in last 5 years:**

- ☐ Dalhousie University
- ☐ University of Calgary
- ☐ University of Manitoba
- ☐ University of Victoria

**13. Please indicate the type(s) of social work distance education courses you have taught in last 5 years:**

- ☐ Theory
- ☐ Practice
- ☐ Research
- ☐ Policy
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**14. Please indicate the delivery method(s) for social work distance education courses you have taught in last 5 years**

- ☐ Classroom learning (face-to-face, non-traditional format; e.g., cohort groups)
- ☐ Online learning, synchronous (live, real-time)
- ☐ Online learning, asynchronous (no set time)
- ☐ Hybrid, blended, mixed-mode (face-to-face, online, synchronous, and/or asynchronous)
- ☐ Other: Please describe

**15. How long have you been involved in social work distance delivery (beginning with this term)?**

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ More than 1 but less than 2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ 6-9 years
- ☐ 10+ years

**16. What is your professional rank**

- ☐ Emeritus
- ☐ Professor
- ☐ Associate Professor
- ☐ Assistant Professor
- ☐ Instructor
- ☐ Lecturer
- ☐ Other



**17. What is your employment status**

- ☐ Full time  
☐ Part time

**18. What level(s) of distance social work courses do you teach?**

- ☐ Undergraduate  
☐ Graduate  
☐ Certificate

**19. What is your age?**

- a) Under 30 years old  
b) 30-44 years old  
c) 45+ years old  
d) Prefer not to answer

**20. How do you identify?**

- a) Female  
b) Male  
c) Other

**21. Are there any other questions, comments, or concerns you would like to share about your experience teaching social work courses using distance delivery methods which you believe would be helpful for this research?**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please type/write your answer in the box below

**22. Please consider participating in the follow-up interview which is designed to gather further knowledge regarding the underlying rationale for your decision to identify certain characteristics and supports as either critical or not important. The interview will be conducted either by phone, by Skype, or in person and should take between 30-60 minutes. If you are interested, please provide a contact number in the box below that the researcher may reach you at to schedule an interview:**

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

Research Project Title: “Social work educators’ perceptions of critical instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports necessary for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education”.

Principal Researcher:  
***Oleksandr Kondrashov***  
Doctoral Candidate  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba

Primary Advisor:  
***Brad McKenzie***  
Professor Emeritus  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Social work distance education instructors are the key to the success of this research project. The purpose of this research is to understand your perceptions about teaching social work courses using distance education delivery methods, and to identify instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports that are critical for creating an effective learning environment in social work distance education based on these perceptions.

The eligibility requirements for this study are as follows: any person who has taught at least one distance social work course in the last two academic years (starting from spring/summer 2013) in one of four Canadian universities that offer fully CASWE-accredited BSW distance programs; i.e., University of Manitoba, University of Victoria, University of Calgary, and Dalhousie University. A distance course is considered to be any BSW degree course that is taught during the regular academic term and not using the traditional classroom format.

Your thoughts and opinions are highly valued! More importantly, they are essential to constructing a clear and accurate picture of the current condition of social work distance education in Canada. Your contribution benefits the development of the social work profession as a whole, and will influence the direction of social work distance education in the future. Ensuring that as many as possible eligible distance delivery social work instructors complete the attached questionnaire is important for the success of the study.

This consent form, a copy of which you may keep for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like further details about something mentioned here, or require information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to familiarize yourself with any accompanying information.

- The enclosed questionnaire should take about 20-30 minutes to complete.
- The questionnaire can be returned either by regular mail to the attention of: Oleksandr (Sasha) Kondrashov, University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work, 520 Tier Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba or via email to [oleksandr.kondrashov@umanitoba.ca](mailto:oleksandr.kondrashov@umanitoba.ca).
- When transmitting information via regular mail or email, there is always the risk of data transmission intrusion; that is, there is a possibility of being identified. Therefore, participant

anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed at that stage. However, all information will be treated as confidential once it has been received by the researcher.

- Only the researcher will have access to the names of those instructors who have completed the questionnaire and participated in the follow-up interview.
- No information identifying participants will be included in any publications or reports which result from this research project.
- Participation in this research study is completely voluntary.
- There are no known risks to participation in this study.
- This study complies with the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board requirements at the University of Manitoba.
- The second phase of research involves a follow-up qualitative interview, where survey participants have a chance to provide more detailed feedback and to discuss reasons for certain answers. If you are willing to participate in the interview phase of the study, please indicate this by answering yes to the final question of the enclosed questionnaire. If you choose to take part, I will contact you at the number you provide to set up a time for a follow-up interview. This interview will last from 30-60 minutes and you will be asked to elaborate on specific instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports that you perceive to be either critical or insignificant in creating an effective learning environment for social work distance programs. The interview can be conducted in person, via telephone, or using Skype. At any time during the interview process, you have the right to request that the digital recorder be turned off, to decline to answer any specific questions, or to terminate the interview altogether.
- If you choose to participate in the follow-up interview, it will be digitally recorded and later transcribed (using a laptop and Windows-related programs) for analysis purposes only. The transcribed interview will be forwarded to you, if you wish, so you have the opportunity to review and modify any of the information you have provided.
- During the project, all digital data will be stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's laptop which only the researcher will have access to. All print material will be securely stored in the researcher's office. This form and any other documents bearing your name will be stored separate from your survey responses, which will be coded with an arbitrary number. Following the completion of the doctoral dissertation, all raw data will be destroyed (by the end of 2016).

If you wish to receive a summary of the research findings, please indicate so in the space below as well as how you would like it forwarded to you (e.g., email, fax, surface mail).

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to receive the research summary. Please send the findings to:

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If you have checked yes, the research summary will be provided to you after the completion of the doctoral dissertation (by the end of 2016).

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and that you agree to participate as a subject. In no way does the act of signing this form waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or to refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may examine research records to ensure that the study is being conducted safely and properly.

This research has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 204-474-7122, or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been provided to you for your records.

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DATE

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DATE

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Participant

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Principal Researcher  
Oleksandr Kondrashov

## **APPENDIX C: COVER LETTER**

Dear Social Work Educator:

My name is Oleksandr (Sasha) Kondrashov and I am a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba. Your school has forwarded this cover letter to you at my request because you are one of approximately 50-60 people who meet the eligibility requirements for my doctoral dissertation research on identifying instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports which create an effective learning environment in social work distance education.

Those eligible for this study include: any person who has taught at least one distance social work course in the last two academic years (starting from spring/summer 2013) in one of four Canadian universities that offer fully CASWE-accredited BSW distance programs; i.e., University of Manitoba, University of Victoria, University of Calgary, and Dalhousie University. A distance course is considered to be any BSW degree course that is taught during the regular academic term not using the traditional classroom format.

The purpose of this research is to understand your perceptions about teaching social work courses using distance education delivery methods, and to identify, from the perspective of a social work distance educator, instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports which create an effective learning environment in social work distance education.

Please read the following information about the study:

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

If you agree to take part in this survey, you will be asked to complete the attached questionnaire, which should take about 20-30 minutes. As well, please read and sign the attached consent form which has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board requirements at the University of Manitoba.

You can either return signed consent form and completed questionnaire electronically via e-mail to [oleksandr.kondrashov@umanitoba.ca](mailto:oleksandr.kondrashov@umanitoba.ca) or you can send both documents by regular mail to the attention of Oleksandr (Sasha) Kondrashov at the University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work, 520 Tier Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

If you want to maintain anonymity please send your completed questionnaire with no identifiable information via regular mail.

Please note that all responses are confidential; no personal identifying information will be used in any publication/report associated with this research study. Monetary compensation will not be provided for your participation.

The second phase of research involves a follow-up qualitative interview, where survey participants have a chance to provide more detailed feedback and to discuss reasons for certain answers. If you are willing to participate in the qualitative phase of the study, please indicate this by answering yes to the final question of the enclosed questionnaire. If you choose to take part, I will contact you at the number you provide to set up a time for a follow-up interview. This interview will last from 30-60 minutes and you will be asked to elaborate on specific instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports that you perceive to be either critical or insignificant in creating an effective learning environment for social work distance programs.

### **Risks and Benefits of Participation in the Study**

Participation in this study does not pose any risks to your safety or well-being, or potential employment opportunities. The benefits derived from participation in this study include the potential to assist Canadian schools of social work in designing and delivering appropriate support services for distance social work students and instructors that serve to enable the creation of an effective distance learning environment.

### **Contact Info**

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at the following address:

[Oleksnadr.Kondrashov@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Oleksnadr.Kondrashov@umanitoba.ca)

### **Study Due Date**

Please complete and return the attached questionnaire and consent form via e-mail [Oleksnadr.Kondrashov@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Oleksnadr.Kondrashov@umanitoba.ca) or mail to the University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work, 520 Tier Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba before (the specified date)

Thank you so much for your time and co-operation.

With respect,

Oleksandr Kondrashov  
Doctoral Candidate  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba

**APPENDIX D: FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Each question (if applicable) will ask you to elaborate on specific instructor and student characteristic and university support that you perceived to be critical / not important in creating an effective learning environment for social work distance delivery programs

1. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following instructor quality (ies)
2. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following instructor quality (ies)
3. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following instructor skill(s)
4. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following instructor skill(s)
5. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following university distance delivery professional instructor support service(s)
6. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following university distance delivery professional instructor support service(s)
7. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following topic(s) for instructor to receive instructional support to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery program
8. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following topic(s) for instructor to receive instructional support to create an effective learning environment in social work distance delivery program
9. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following way(s) instructors should receive instructional support to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education course
10. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following way(s) instructors should receive instructional support to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education course
11. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following student quality (ies)
12. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following student quality (ies)
13. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following student skill(s)
14. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following student skill(s)
15. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following way(s) students should receive university support to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education course

16. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following way(s) students should receive university support to create an effective learning environment in social work distance education course
17. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following university distance delivery academic student support service(s)
18. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following university distance delivery academic student support service(s)
19. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a critical rating to the following university distance delivery non-academic student support service(s)
20. Please reflect on what made you decide to assign a non-important rating to the following university distance delivery non-academic student support service(s)



**APPENDIX E: FOLLOW UP LETTER**

Dear Social Work Educator:

Approximately two weeks ago, you should have received a letter with an attached survey for my Ph.D. dissertation study on instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports which create an effective learning environment in social work distance education. If you have already responded, thank you for your help and please disregard this letter. If you have not had time to respond or you did not receive my previous email, please consider taking some time to complete the survey now. It should take between 20-30 minutes.

You are among a few people who meet the research eligibility criteria: you have taught at least one distance social work course since the spring/summer of 2013 in one of the four CASWE-accredited universities (University of Calgary, University of Victoria, Dalhousie University, or University of Manitoba).

Your unique experiences as a distance social work instructor are essential in understanding the development of social work distance education in Canada. More importantly, they will provide me with an opportunity to identify key instructor characteristics, student characteristics, and university supports (for both students and instructors) which create an effective learning environment.

The study findings will provide an opportunity for social work programs engaged in distance education to learn of the perceptions of instructors about the characteristics that make for success in distance education. Your voice is important to this project. I hope you will participate by completing the survey.

Please complete the attached survey and consider participating in the follow-up interview. Please complete and return the survey via e-mail [Oleksnadr.Kondrashov@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Oleksnadr.Kondrashov@umanitoba.ca) or mail to the University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work, 520 Tier Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba before (the specified date)

Thank you in advance for your valuable contribution to the development of social work distance education in Canada.

Sincerely,

Oleksandr Kondrashov  
Doctoral Candidate  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba