

# **No one is talking to Practice Educators about Generative Artificial Intelligence.**

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## **Abstract**

This mixed methods research explored Practice Educator's experiences of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) in social work settings. Survey and interview data illustrated a general lack of awareness about what Gen AI platforms may be used and how to use them safely. Although a small number of Practice Educators are experimenting with different AI tools, they appear to be doing this in isolation and often covertly. None of the participants in the empirical research reported here, were aware of their employer having an AI policy, nor had they received guidance from universities about student use of AI on placement.

The article concludes that it is timely for social work employers to develop a strategic approach to Gen AI which will include practice guidance, training and ongoing support to enable social workers to ethically and competently use Gen AI. There is also a role for universities and social work professional bodies to lead the way in this emerging technology and harness its capabilities within social work education and practice.

## **Keywords**

Generative Artificial Intelligence, Practice Education, Field Educators, social work education, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

## Introduction

Artificial intelligence tools are widely used to do everyday, and more complex, tasks efficiently. On a personal level we encounter them continuously for example with predictive text, word processing tools, digital assistants (such as Siri on Apple devices and Amazon's Alexa), satellite navigation and chatbots which are increasingly built into websites to answer our questions. Many of these appear to provide an individualised response such as shopping list reminders, answering voice questions or rerouting our journey due to motorway closures. However, these types of narrow intelligence (Kumar, 2021) are rule-based systems, with algorithms that draw upon defined data and have a limited application whereby they can only solve specific problems. However, Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) has a wider range of abilities and the capability to create unique and 'original content which feels like it has been created by a human' (McCallum & Clarke, 2023: no page). Gen AI can generate entirely new content in many forms including text, video, code, sound and image (Banh & Strobel, 2023). Gen AI can compare, provide solutions, summarise, provide links to other useful documents, and link to existing videos and images that may be related to your specific request.

Because of its versatility, there are many potential ways that Gen AI can assist with our everyday lives, work tasks, social activities and within teaching and learning. For a more comprehensive overview of Gen AI see Banh and Stobel (2023).

Following an unexpected introduction to Gen AI in the summer of 2023, I began to reflect upon the potential use of it for learning and teaching within social work practice placements. I published a speculative article that proposed potential ways that Gen AI could be used by Practice Educators to facilitate student learning (Stone, 2023). Practice Educator is the term used in England for those who supervise, teach and assess social work students during their practice learning placements: often referred to as Practice Teachers or Field Educators elsewhere. My intention, in that article, was to encourage Practice Educators to experiment with Gen AI and to start a discussion about how it may be used as a tool to facilitate learning within social work practice settings.

After the publication of that first article, I hosted Gen AI introductory workshops for Practice Educators, and this led to the start of empirical research which is reported on in this

current article. At the time of commencing the research, there was no literature available about AI and social work practice education. Much of the published discussion about AI in social work education focused on academic integrity concerns (Rodriguez, et al., 2024), the intersection of ethical and relational practice (Hodgson, et al., 2022), using AI in research (Jaggers, & Mogro-Wilson, 2023), using ChatGPT for educational case studies (Netto, 2023) and developing the curriculum to include AI (Singer, Báez & Rios, 2023). In the USA, concerns have been expressed about the social work licencing exam and the performance of ChatGPT (Victor, et al., 2023). Within social care, AI has been deployed to assist with care tasks, within self-assessment tools, to predict burnout of staff, and chatbots for therapeutic interventions (Reamer, 2023). Goldkind (2021) outlines how AI constitutes virtual counsellors using motivational interviewing techniques and AI analysing data to help understand the criminal justice system. In Finnish child welfare services, AI has used historic data to predict future risks within the users of the service (Lehtiniemi, 2024).

The literature on AI within education and within social care services is swelling, but prior to this article, there has been no empirical research published in relation to how Practice Educators are experiencing AI in social work settings.

## **Methodology**

Before commencing empirical research, approval was obtained (20/10/23 Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the researcher's University reference FASSLUMS-2023-3991-RECR-4).

The research began by engaging social workers in a workshop which provided a very basic outline of Gen AI and included a demonstration of some ways that Practice Educators may use it in the workplace. Participants were invited to complete a short survey to ascertain what they knew about AI before the workshop and how motivated they felt to have a go at using Gen AI post-workshop. The survey was hosted online using Qualtrics, commenced with consent to participate, and included both quantitative and qualitative questions. To keep the survey as short and anonymous as possible, no demographic data was collected. At the end of the survey participants were invited to volunteer to partake in a

one-to-one interview. They were advised both in the survey and the follow-up email, that the purpose of the interview was to learn about the barriers and successes of using Gen AI.

All interviews were undertaken using Microsoft Teams which enabled the production of a transcript and video recording. The video was used to assist with ensuring accuracy within the transcription. A small number of minor edits were required, particularly when the participant did not speak clearly, or they had a strong accent. However, the automatically generated transcriptions were of good quality requiring little post-interview amendment. The transcripts were also anonymised to avoid the potential to identify participants, their place of work, and others including colleagues and students. Pseudonyms were given to all participants.

Consent to participate was obtained in writing prior to each interview. All of the interview followed a similar structure, commencing with a tour question asking them to outline their experience of Gen AI. The fluidity of these semi-structured interviews enabled participants to introduce topics and issues of their choosing, and for the probe questions to elicit further rich data (Lodico et al., 2010).

The quantitative data in the surveys was not complex and enabled simple frequency-type analysis. However, the qualitative data was more detailed, and the principles of thematic analysis were employed to help with the interpretation and identification of themes. Each interview transcript was read at least twice, and 'short phrases or words' ... [were] assigned to segments of data' in an attempt to interpret meaning (Naeem et al., 2023:4). This coding practice is a technique of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and using the tools in NVivo enabled re-coding, merging codes and looking across the data in an organised way. Through ongoing interpretation and immersion in data, themes were constructed and are presented in this article.

This research is best described as phenomenological and was designed to obtain perspectives and rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Generative Artificial Intelligence). Although I align closely with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), I emphasise inter-subjectivity and the multiple directions of interpretation at play, particularly

within the qualitative elements of the research. My interview style is aligned with my social work practitioner style where I co-construct data alongside the participant.

I do not subscribe to a clinical style of phenomenological bracketing where one can set aside pre-existing knowledge 'to understand the essence of the phenomenon' (Vicary & Ferguson, 2024: 5). I find it impossible and undesirable to bracket my understandings and knowledge because my 'fore-meaning' actively shapes the design of the project and the interview experience for both me and each research participant (Gadamer et al., 2004:295). Likewise, the participants have their own agency and subjective interpretative activities. Knowing the purpose and topic of the research prior to the interview, participants begin to formulate an interpreted narrative. During the interview, their articulation is influenced by recall, willingness to disclose, the questions I asked, and a whole range of non-verbal cues. I do not sit passively to collect data but as a reflective social worker, I perform reflection in action (Schön, 1991). It is evident in the transcriptions that I use my experiences and prior knowledge to interpret in the moment, actively shaping what happens next. The 'result of the interaction' (Melia, 1997: 34) where I probe and sense-check, actively co-constructs data. For example, the comment '*So you've got quite a role there*' encouraged the interview participant to reflect and respond with more detail: '*I think so. I think so. And I think sometimes we do ...*'.

Interpretation continued when thematically analysing, and in my interpretation whilst crafting words for this article, all of which combine to make for what Grix (2004) describes as 'messy' hermeneutic research. The inter-subjectivity and multi-direction of interpretation are accepted, in terms of what I can claim to begin to know (ontology) and how I come to know it (epistemology) within this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis style of research.

## Sample

The first workshop was hosted in November 2023 and attended by 12 Practice Educators from the Northwest of England, of which nine completed the survey. As part of Social Work England's World Social Work Week, a second workshop was hosted in March 2024. This event was attended by Practice Educators and other people interested in social work education or practice. 110 attended and 21 completed the survey. It is not possible to

identify the geographical location of participants nor their role in social work within this group.

The third and final workshop, in this series, was attended by Practice Educators in Northern Ireland in April 2024 (they use the title Practice Teachers). 12 attended and nine completed the survey.

In total 39 people completed surveys and at least two countries are represented in the data, but it is possible there may be more.

Emails were sent to all survey participants who expressed interest in taking part in a follow-up interview. 11 individuals responded and all 11 were interviewed between 27th February and 7th August 2024. All of those who volunteered to be interviewed identified as white. All participants worked either in local authorities or health trusts.

Interview participants either worked in England or Northern Ireland. The locations of participants' workplaces in England, spanned from the north of the country, throughout central regions, a London Borough, and through to the south coast. Four participants self-identified as working within adult services, three in children and family services, one in mental health and three worked across multiple service user groupings. Three identified as male and eight female. Two had been a Practice Educator for no more than two years and one had over twenty years' experience as a qualified Practice Educator. One interview participant was working towards becoming a qualified Practice Educator but all the other ten were qualified. The fewest number of students that the participants had supported was two. Six of the participants had worked with fewer than ten students and four had worked with between ten and twenty. One of the participants estimated they had worked with over fifty in their ten years as a Practice Educator and this brought the mean average number of students that interview participants had worked with to twelve. It is to be noted that in addition to students, some of the participants also supported other learners in the workplace which included newly qualified social workers and others undertaking a range of continuing professional development activities. In summary, the interview sample included a wealth of experience of working as social work Practice Educators across two countries.

## Findings from the survey

### Gen AI & Chatbot knowledge before the workshop

The survey data appears to illustrate minimal prior knowledge of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI). It is interesting to note that although the workshops were spread over a five-month period, time did not appear to increase awareness or understanding. Workshop 1, November 2023, 56% (n=5), workshop 2, March 2024 29% (n=6) and workshop 3, April 2024 67% (n=6) of respondents had not heard of the term Gen AI or they had heard of it but did not know what it was.

There was a much stronger awareness of Chatbots. 31 of the 39 respondents (80%) reported having either a limited or good understanding of Chatbots.

### Use of Gen AI prior to workshop

49% (n=19) reported prior use of a Chatbot or Gen AI whilst 51% (n=20) reported no prior use. The percentage indicating they had used them is higher than expected given the self-reporting of having no or limited prior understanding. It is speculated that because the workshop outlined what artificial intelligence is, the participants may have reflected upon their experiences and realised for the first time that they had encountered such platforms and tools.

31% (n=12) had used AI as a tool for learning or teaching and 69% (n=27) had not. AI had been used to help write assignments including summarising information, generating resources and references, and improving the written content. They had also used it to design presentations, prepare for workshops and reflective practice sessions, to develop statements and for report writing. It was noted that Gen AI is good for saving time.

## Value of the workshop

Although 51% (n=20) of the survey respondents reported having no or little prior experience or knowledge of Gen AI, it would appear the workshop did inspire a significant majority to consider engaging with it. Across all workshops, only two respondents indicated that their practice would not change as a result of attending the workshop. One person did not answer the question, and all of the others (n= 36) did express interest and their responses ranged from 'interested in it but not sure what my next step is' (22%, n=8), 'interested in it and would like to engage with it /hope to make time to explore further /potentially use as a learning tool' (53%, n=19), and 'used it and the workshop has stimulated more ideas about its potential use as a learning tool' (25%, n=9).

The qualitative aspects of the survey generated rich insights into the potential value of the initial workshop:

*very good and informative...wasn't aware of the potential AI has (Emily)*

*I wasn't familiar with all the tools available so that was really useful (Daniel)*

The workshop outlined some of the complexities of using Gen AI including confidentiality, ethical practice and good academic conduct (to avoid cheating and plagiarism) and these themes were also noted by the survey respondents:

*I was very concerned before today but think we need to embrace but with caution. I have had concerns regarding GDPR breaches (Farah)*

*... really concerned about clicking the 'i agree' to terms of conditions on AI sites and that anything you upload or generate is owned by them. ... concern about whether students might upload personal details from their placements (Sienna)*

*I do have concerns though about whether or not it's a form of cheating or if advanced technology is creating a generation of lazy thinkers (Stefan)*

The social work educators who attended the workshop gave insight into how they felt inspired to have a go and try using Gen AI for teaching and learning:

*Would like to use this more and have it as a handy tool (Soraya)*

*has really helped me to start thinking about embedding GAI in academic and formal learnings (Jayden)*

*I have not used these tools for learning or work purposes. The message around accepting and embracing AI rather than opposing to it was an eye-opener. (Hannah)*

Qualitative comments also reflected upon the limitations of a one-off workshop:

*I would self-describe as technologically anxious and would need support to experiment with it (Sophie)*

The workshop appears to have been an introduction to an emerging area of technology that most had not previously experienced and knew little about in relation to teaching and learning. However, as the data from the one-to-one interviews explores, the workshop alone is not enough for some people, and participants have a more complex journey into why and how they begin to accept and use Gen AI within the social work practice environment.

## **Findings from the interviews**

### **Workshop raised awareness**

The thematic analysis of interview data highlighted the value of the initial workshop in terms of raising awareness of what Gen AI is and what it can do:

*It completely shifted my perception as to how useful it could be, which was really eye opening for me (Charlotte)*

*I'd never really thought about how it could be used in social work education until you presented it (Marsha)*

There was recognition that because social work is a fast-paced and busy profession, there is potential for Gen AI to be used to make better use of time:

*the time and energy that it can save. It's brilliant, you know (Charlotte)*

*could be very significant timesaver (James)*

*it's much quicker (Dwayne)*

*actually work more effectively and efficiently (Mark)*

### Need for more training and support

Despite the perceived success of the initial workshop in raising awareness of Gen AI, the participants explored the need for more bespoke and in-person sessions, including demonstrations of how social worker's day-to-day tasks could be done using Gen AI:

*Someone showed me how to do it, and it made my life easier. ... And that's how you get me to use generative AI. You're telling me it's something that's that I'm already doing that. It can be done in a different way (Amina)*

*[a series of workshops] would really enthuse' (James)*

A suitable topic for a workshop would be the refining of prompts:

*had to go back a few times and rewrite [the prompt] (Jane)*

### Data concerns

Using Gen AI within social work was linked to concerns about data protection and confidentiality:

*You put this data and information in. You're asking things. What's then happening to it? You know, where's it all being held? (Charlotte)*

*breaking some form of confidentiality rules (Mark)*

*I'm nervous about uploading stuff. Even if it's all anonymized and stuff like that. I don't want that information in there (Aisha)*

*there's a risk that students may inadvertently use personal information (Maryam)*

### Cutting corners and misuse of AI

Participants considered how easy it was for students and practitioners to overuse AI which may lead to not developing the cognitive skills required to be a good social worker:

*There is a risk that students may become overly reliant on AI and not develop critical thinking and analysis skills ... regurgitating that information ... not actually learning (Wendy)*

*[AI] does all the thinking rather than the social worker doing the analytical or the student doing the analytical thinking around that. ... because as human beings, we always look for the easy way to do things, don't we? (Jane)*

*we need to be very careful. Cautious of how people might misuse it. Umm, you know to stop doing the proper work (James)*

There was also concern from participants about their own potential academic (mis)conduct:

*there's an element of I shouldn't be doing this because I should sit down and just do it all myself ... It feels like cutting corners ... the embarrassment of using AI (Aisha)*

*It does feel a little bit like a dark art and a little bit like, is it OK or not? (Dwayne)*

*plagiarising somebody else's report ... and then we need very strict guidelines (James)*

Wendy was 'terrified' that the student would be accused by the University of using AI in their portfolio if she used Grammarly on the placement reports:

*and it wasn't them at all. It was me (Wendy)*

### Access challenges

Not all participants appeared to know whether or not they were able to access Gen

AI on work computers:

*technical barriers with using things like zoom [and I do not know] whether AI was blocked (Rochelle)*

*We can download Grammarly, ... I've only looked at that. I've not tried the others yet, but I don't know if we have them (Wendy)*

Where social work employer had firewalls in place, blocking the use of Gen AI, some participants used Gen AI on their private device and emailed content to their work account.

### Social work employer policies

None of the participants had seen a policy relating to AI use:

*the policies of my organisation. As far as I know, we don't have one (Marsha)*

*They need a policy on that, so the employment context we're not quite sure what to do (Aisha)*

*So I've asked my head of service around that and she says we don't have policies (Mark)*

The lack of policy is making people unsure whether or not they are doing something wrong:

*I was talking to [manager] about this and she was like, oh, I don't know about that ...Is it the right thing to do? ... I think it's the permission and it's the confidence to use something ... like you're not just going off on your own and being kind of a bit of a lone wolf (Rochelle)*

*almost like slyly using it ... like, don't look at me when I'm using this (Mark)*

### Bespoke Gen AI in the workplace

Dwayne and Wendy considered that a bespoke Gen AI tool would be advantageous:

*bespoke systems that kept data secure would give more confidence in using Gen AI (Dwayne)*

*they could put a model together. We can use an AI bot. Just design one (Wendy)*

### Neurodiversity

Although the participants expressed a range of different concerns about using Gen AI they did speak about the advantages and an emerging theme related to neurodiversity:

*I have to work really, really hard to get there, you know, much harder than somebody else who doesn't have dyslexia. ... I found myself up to half ten last night writing case notes. Do you know, like it will literally change my whole life (Mark)*

*I'm dyslexic. ... [my boss] said that e-mail was so well written. I was like, that's my AI for you (Wendy)*

### Guidance from universities

One participant expressed confidence that they would be able to spot if a student had generated text through AI but others were less confident:

*how do I spot somebody's been using that? I may think the work is brilliant with references but how do I know? (James)*

*there's no way I know ... I certainly haven't been brave enough to query whether any pieces of work have been supported through the use of AI (Dwayne)*

Reflecting upon the need for guidance from universities:

*I'm guessing there probably is in terms of plagiarism and bits and pieces there is bound to be a policy within the universities about it, but I've never come across it (Dwayne)*

*[The university] they don't mention it at all (Aisha)*

*I'd hate to encourage the use of something in the wrong way (Charlotte)*

### Guidance from professional bodies

Two participants both registered with Social Workers England, wondered about the stance of the specialist regulator:

*Social Work England have they got any guidance around sort of the ethics and the use of it within our practise because I'd be interested to find that out as well and how it fits (Charlotte)*

*I always feel the unis are always a little bit behind practise and then Social Work England are far behind the unis and it's so frustrating ... I don't understand why they're not on it now (Wendy)*

### Summary of the findings

The participants who completed the survey appear to have had little prior knowledge about artificial intelligence and the workshop introduced many to its capabilities. The workshop inspired participants to consider engaging with it, however, the interviews highlighted that Practice Educators require more than a one-off workshop. They need more tailored support, and reassurance that they are not breaching data protection requirements or other policies.

## Discussion

Gen AI is currently a hot topic with AI developments 'moving at a breathless pace' (Giannini, 2023:4). There are pockets of innovative practice being reported particularly within educational institutions (Singer, Báez & Rios, 2023), however, this research suggests

that Gen AI use has easily permeated into social work practice settings. Many of the research participants in this study had no or limited prior understanding of Chat Bots or Gen AI before attending the workshop. Those who had previously used it for teaching or learning had used it to help with their own writing and for the preparation of training materials. The survey data indicated that the initial workshop appeared to inspire most participants to consider experimenting with Gen AI. However, even those more open to engaging with AI in social work, experienced barriers. The interview data illuminated participant challenges in terms of access to Gen AI, lack of support in the workplace, uncertainty about how using AI would be perceived, deficit in knowing which tools to use, and concerns regarding data breaches and confidentiality. The participants experienced these features as barriers to either engaging with AI or to being open with colleagues about their use of Gen AI. Reflecting upon these findings, it is timely for social work employers, universities and social work regulators to develop AI strategies to address these barriers and concerns. These strategies need to incorporate access to AI, the use of AI in social work environments, and a regime of training and support.

### Social work employers

The participants in this research were largely unaware of what Gen AI platforms were accessible to them on work computers nor what their employer permitted. There was extensive concern about the potential for data breaches, being accused of cheating, and general confusion as to whether it was acceptable to use Gen AI themselves or to encourage learners and colleagues to use it. As Reamer (2023) advocates:

*Ideally, organizations that employ social workers and use AI would create a digital ethics steering committee comprised of key staff who are familiar with digital technology in general, AI technology, and prevailing ethical standards and best practices. This committee would have oversight responsibilities related to the design and implementation of AI. (Reamer 2023: 64)*

The insights generated in this research support Reamer's suggestion because it is timely for social work employers to communicate what Gen AI platforms are accessible and how they are to be used. Clear policies have the potential to positively support engagement with technology and deter inappropriate use (or allay fears that AI is being misused).

As two interview participants identified, there is potential for social work employers to develop their own bespoke system to harness the advantages of Gen AI without the same concerns regarding ownership of data and confidentiality of information. Bespoke systems and clear policy have the potential to stop social workers who are using it feeling that they are '*a lone wolf*' (Rochelle) or using things '*slyly*' (Mark). It will also remove the need for social workers and students, to use AI on private computers and email documents to work accounts as has been uncovered in this research.

Whether bespoke systems are developed or more open AI is permitted, a training and support strategy is required. A one-off workshop may inspire some to 'have a play' with AI, but is inadequate to provide the depth of training and ongoing support required to ensure ethical and competent use. Individuals need to know how to use Gen AI efficiently and how carefully crafted prompts yield better outputs. The participants in this research indicated that Gen AI could save a great deal of time for themselves as practitioners and also as educators, but they lacked the depth of understanding about the range of Gen AI capabilities. Social workers need to 'watch it work' (Goldkind, et al., 2024: 103) and see how their day-to-day work activities can be performed more efficiently using Gen AI. A series of workshops and accessible ongoing support in the workplace has the potential to embed the use of AI in social work practice and learning.

An employer strategy must consider the ongoing developments in Gen AI which continue to be fast-paced and evolving. Social work is also fast-paced and evolving and the potential to harness the capabilities of Gen AI for the good of the profession cannot be underestimated. In 2022 ADCS reported that 'the size of the workforce is not keeping up with social care demand, and cost and sufficiency issues are a significant concern for leaders of children's services' (ADCS, 2022: 6). They also identified that 14.6% of children's social work posts were vacant (ADCS, 2022) and within two years the reported figure rose to 18.9% (Community Care, 2024 no page). It is therefore imperative that social work practitioners are supported in their roles whilst trying to protect and empower themselves (as well as those who rely on social work services). This is particularly important for Practice Educators who often do that role in addition to carrying a full case load.

In a survey of social workers, Johnson et al. (2023) found 'on average, 24 hours per week were spent on completing case-related paperwork' (Johnson et al., 2023: 57). Despite

this bureaucratic load, 46% of social workers reported they did not have 'the IT systems and software at their workplace [to] support them to do their job' (Johnson et al., 2023: 72). Therefore, social work employers need to ask themselves how they can harness the abilities of Gen AI to build more capacity and resilience within the workforce. Kinman and Grant have extensive expertise in exploring how social workers' resilience can be bolstered (Grant & Kinman, 2012 & 2018; Kinman & Grant, 2022). They identify that leaders in social work need to provide a secure base that 'identifies signs of struggle and support needs', 'lead by example', 'tackle challenging issues', 'unlocks potential for service improvement' and 'makes reasonable adjustments according to need' (Grant, et al., 2021). This latter point speaks to those who are neurodiverse and this was an emerging theme in this research. The participants identified how AI helps those with dyslexia yet some used private devices and emailed content to their work account due to the lack of AI access. Rather than people finding their own solutions, or making reasonable adjustments for those with protected characteristics, the workplace ought to be inclusive by design to ensure that all people can engage, learn and perform on an equal footing.

Indeed, whilst this research was being undertaken, The Guardian newspaper reported that seven British local authorities piloted the AI tool Magic Notes (Booth, 2024). Social workers recorded meetings on their phones and the AI tool generated summaries, produced letters and suggested actions. This resulted in a more inclusive workplace because the 'tool particularly benefited practitioners with learning difficulties and visual impairments, along with those who were not native English speakers' (Koutsounia, 2024: no page). This is an important finding in so far as it extends the range of student and practitioner support, beyond those who are neurodiverse. It also contributes to the significant lack of information currently available about how AI may benefit people with disabilities (Bentley et al., 2023).

As noted in the research data, Gen AI has many benefits in terms of saving time on administrative elements of social work and the BBC reported that Magic Notes 'cut the hours that social workers spent on admin tasks by more than 60%' enabling social workers to have more meaningful engagement and 'person-centred conversations with those they support' (de la Mare, 2024: no page). This finding can equally apply to the administrative elements of the Practice Educator role.

Microsoft announced that Barnsley Council in England, integrated Copilot into programmes and apps their staff commonly use, including PowerPoint and Teams (Dawson, 2024). Although this is currently being evaluated, the advantages of using it are noted in terms of administrative time. None of the participants at the time of this research were part of the Magic Notes pilot, nor from Barnsley Council. However, it is possible that some of the participants may have subsequently been encouraged by their employer to engage with AI. Gen AI is evolving and the infiltration into workplaces is fast paced and aligns with the UK government's drive to make better use of technology within the public sector. A Government panel is currently creating a 10-year vision with the objective to drive innovation and transform services (DSIT, 2024). What is certain is that the social work sector around the world, needs to embrace such advancements and evaluate the impact on students, practitioners and most importantly those who use social work services.

## Universities

The launch of ChatGPT in November 2022 'rattled the higher education sector' across the world (Netto, 2023: 2). Some identified the potential for Gen AI to become 'a catalyst for increasing personalised education and promoting augmented teaching' whilst others 'perceive it as an existential threat' resulting in some universities banning 'generative AI tools within assessment all together' (Bentley et al., 2023: 1). As universities grapple with the wide range of complexities brought about by Gen AI, Bentley and colleagues recognise the limited understanding and AI awareness that academic staff and students have (Bentley et al., 2023). Indeed, if those within the university setting lack awareness, it is crucial to consider the position of those in the workplace who contribute to education. This research spotlights the challenges that social work educators face within social work settings. The research participants were aware of the potential for AI to help students to cheat, yet as workplace educators, there was no insight into whether they could use it within their own assessment reports or if they should encourage students to use Gen AI as a learning tool. Reamer recommends that 'social work education programs should incorporate content on AI in their curricula to ensure that the next generation of social workers uses AI responsibly' (Reamer, 2023: 66). To ensure this also includes the practice learning curricula and workplace education, universities need to lead the way.

Universities around the world have begun to develop and refine policies and guidance about the use of Gen AI. From those viewed, it is evident that many are broadly similar to The Russell Group principles:

*1. Universities will support students and staff to become AI-literate. 2. Staff should be equipped to support students to use generative AI tools effectively and appropriately in their learning experience. 3. Universities will adapt teaching and assessment to incorporate the ethical use of generative AI and support equal access. 4. Universities will ensure academic rigour and integrity is upheld. 5. Universities will work collaboratively to share best practice as the technology and its application in education evolves. (Russell Group, 2023: no page)*

These principles can easily apply to learning and assessment off campus in the workplace. However, it is evident from looking across the literature that those who advocate for an AI educational policy tend to forget about learning in practice settings as an integral element of current university programmes. Simpson, Thanaraj and Durston (2023) write about graduates needing AI literacy for the future and Chan advocates for 'preparing students for an increasingly AI-driven workplace' (Chan, 2023: 21). Workplace learning is a feature of initial qualifying social work education across the world and it is time for universities to issue guidance to those educating students in the workplace and outline how Gen AI may and may not be used in teaching, learning and assessment.

### **Social work regulators and professional bodies**

Exploration of the websites of different countries' social work regulators and professional bodies found little if anything using the search terms 'artificial intelligence' or 'Information technology'. However, due to concerns around 'multi-directional surveillance' (Byrne, Kirwan & Mc Guckin, 2019: 1) and social workers misuse, there are documents about social media. The Australian Association of Social Workers has three guidance documents about social media (AASW, 2023) and the British Association of Social Workers has a social media policy and guidance (BASW, 2018). Although we need to ensure professional bodies offer appropriate guidance it is not practical to have specific policies for all technological advances and I reassert that 'globally there is ethical framing upon which social work can draw in relation to using and misusing technology' including Gen AI (Stone, 2023).

The participants in this research were not clear about the perception that their professional body has in relation to Gen AI within social work. Rodriguez and colleagues request for Gen AI to be added to their professional competency list in the USA (Rodriguez, et al., 2024). It is interesting to observe that the newly developed list of knowledge, skills and behaviours that social work graduates must have at the point of registration in England, includes mention of digital tools and technologies:

*3.16: Demonstrate effective, ethical and appropriate use of digital tools, technologies, spaces and platforms. (SWE, 2024: no page)*

There is opportunity for other specialist regulators to follow suit but also demonstrate leadership in terms of articulating what they consider to be effective, ethical and appropriate.

### The AI strategy

This discussion section has drawn upon empirical research to promote the position that AI strategies need to be developed which give consideration to access, the use and ongoing support. Reamer (2023) promotes the idea of:

*'a digital ethics steering committee comprised of key staff who are familiar with digital technology in general, AI technology, and prevailing ethical standards and best practices. This committee would have oversight responsibilities related to the design and implementation of AI'. (Reamer, 2023:64)*

Although Reamer correctly identifies that committees must consider the key ethical challenges faced by using AI in social work (such as confidentiality, surveillance and bias) there are a greater range of issues to draw attention to. Social Work must also consider wider concerns and potential threats which include but are not limited to; AI replacing human jobs (Wilson & Daugherty, 2018; Cerullo, 2023; Chan & Tsi, 2023); algorithm biases (Banh & Strobel, 2023); misrepresentation and inaccuracy (Bentley et al., 2023); the increasing negative impact on the environment through AI's excessive utilization of power to operate AI servers and water to cool them (Kshetri, 2024), exploitation of workers from developing countries during the training stage of AI development (Kalota, 2024) and inequality in access to AI brought about through digital poverty (Seah, 2020).

These factors ought to resonate with social workers around the world whose core values include human rights and social justice.

## **Conclusion**

This mixed methods research found that Practice Educators had a general lack of awareness about what Gen AI platforms may be used and how to use them effectively and safely within social work settings. Although a small number of Practice Educators are experimenting with different AI tools, they appear to be doing this in isolation and often covertly. The survey data indicated that an initial workshop that demonstrated potential uses of Gen AI, appeared to inspire most participants to consider experimenting with Gen AI. However, even those more open to engaging with AI, experienced barriers in the workplace both in terms of their own social work practice and when working with social work learners.

This article concludes that it is timely for social work employers to develop a strategic approach to Gen AI which will include practice guidance, training and ongoing support to enable social workers to ethically and competently use Gen AI. There is also a role for universities and social work professional bodies to lead the way in this emerging technology and harness its capabilities within social work education and practice.

While this research was being conducted, some councils in England piloted the use of Gen AI in social work practice. Initial press releases highlight the positive impact of AI tools in terms of the administrative elements of the social work role and on those who are neurodiverse (Booth, 2024; Dawson, 2024; de la Mare 2024; Koutsounia, 2024). This resonates with the findings and insight generated from this empirical research and further supports the proposition for the development of AI strategies. However, strategies must also include teaching and learning activities within social work settings. Comprehensive training and support are required to upskill social workers and students, to ensure they use Gen AI confidently, ethically and competently. An open culture needs to be developed where individuals feel knowledgeable and supported to use Gen AI, thereby stopping AI use, by Practice Educators, being driven underground. Students coming into the workplace on

placement must be supported by educators who understand how Gen AI can be used for learning and within their own developing social work practice. Practice learning placements are a key element of social work education and therefore university AI policies and guidance must also apply to learning and assessment within the workplace. It is timely for professional bodies and social work regulators across the globe to lead in this area and promote their stance on Gen AI in practice learning placements.

## Statements and Declarations

Although this article is about harnessing the advantages of Gen AI, it has not been used to generate data or text for this article. Qualtrics was used to host the survey questionnaire and summarise the quantitative data; including the generation of percentages. NVivo was used to aid the management of coded data. Traditional methods of emersion in research data, coding and recoding were undertaken. The content of the article is the original work of the author. Gen AI was used on occasion to rephrase some sentences.

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