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An experiential framework for social work education in Africa: Insights from Bachelor of Social Work curriculum development in a Ugandan University

Bwambale V. BHANGYI and Senkosi M. BALYEJJUSA

ABSTRACT

To an increasing extent, social work education is on an upward expansionary trend in both Uganda and Africa. Thus, existing social work education programs continue to undergo rigorous redesigns while new ones push the limits to offer relevant social work education. This article is a submission of an experiential design of a Bachelor of Social Work curriculum for two reasons: first, our departmental staff have severally been approached by some local universities for guidance in curriculum design review while the department also received a formal approach from an East African university seeking mentorship in starting a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program. Second, while Ugandan and African Universities regularly design or review social work curriculum, this critical practice knowledge remains inaccessible and largely undocumented. This article therefore draws from our most recent curriculum design review for the BSW program to provide informative insights for teaching in social work. We share the conceptual framework, methodology, processes, and implications of our curriculum design review. Lessons for those seeking to review their curriculum or design new social work education programs are suggested. This article contributes to ongoing discussions on decolonization of social work epistemology in defining contextual curriculum that is relevant in Africa

KEY TERMS: Africa, contextual curriculum, curriculum development, social work curriculum, social work education, Uganda

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Bhangyi, Venesio, Bwambale, MSW, (corresponding author), PhD Student, Dept. of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Assistant Lecturer in social work, Department of social work, Kyambogo University, Uganda. Email bhangyiven@yahoo.co.uk
- Balyejjusa, Senkosi, Moses, PhD, MSW, Lecturer in social work, Department of social work, Kyambogo University, Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

This article explicates an experiential framework in developing an innovative Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program's curriculum in a Ugandan university. It shares this framework since social work in Uganda as is in most of Africa is at a critical juncture. In Africa's English-speaking countries, Schools of Social Work (SSW) are deeply engaged in how to decolonize, indigenize, and therefore have contextual curriculum. This debate started in the 1950's when African countries began to gain independence from European colonization. However, in many other African countries, social work education is only beginning to emerge. In both Africa's English and non-English speaking countries, social work education (SWE) curriculum designers face critical questions: how do you start designing or reviewing a social work curriculum? Where does the process of designing or reviewing curriculum start from? What methods and frameworks can be followed to design or review social work curriculum? And what practical steps are essential to undertake a proper curriculum design or review? This article seeks to contribute to this gap in knowledge and to inform teaching in social work for a better social work education not only in Uganda but in Africa as a whole.

BACKGROUND

Social work has gained its status as a global profession, with its education well established in some countries than in others. At a global level, the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) assert that social work is both a practice-based profession and discipline. As a discipline, global standards for social work education and training have been developed. In part, they recognize that ideal social work training should include knowledge learning from research, experience, policy, and practice (Ioakimidis and Sookraj, 2021). Thus, specific social work curriculum design or review would need to pay attention to both global standards and local contexts. In this way, the global standards for social work education put emphasis on social work in context and social work in practice.

In Africa, social work education takes the form of two dimensions, the classroom instruction and the fieldwork education (Bhangyi & Makoha, 2024; Mupediziswa, 2024). Generally speaking, the classroom instruction is considered to be the theoretical instruction while the fieldwork practicum is considered to be the practical instruction. A general critique of both theoretical and practical instruction in social work is that it has taken the neoliberal focus, thereby taking on individualising and blaming forms in which moral, behavioural, and psychological aspects of social work education are propagated (Fenton, 2022). As such, radical social work, one which attends to the wider circumstances in which populations of social work interest find themselves is sidelined.

Therefore, the challenge remains on how schools of social work (SSW) that are embedded in a neoliberal university, can design, develop, or review curriculum and produce one that breaks this bondage. In many situations, social work education is under constant control of government, employers, and market-oriented endeavours. These imply that SSW constantly focus on developing programs dominated by the neoliberal need for graduates to exhibit marketable skills and vocational capabilities. Indeed, a simple scan through webpages of many SSW will reveal social work programs that focus on issue-based courses, with deep historical, theoretical, philosophical, and conceptual knowledge taking a back seat. Carey (2022) has concluded that: first, social work graduates have become ill-prepared to deal with complex situations; and second, the universities are preparing students that seek to empower, pathologies, and manage structured disadvantaged groups.

Therefore, in this paper, we share how we re-designed, reviewed, and developed a new BSW program that fits in the Ugandan context. In sharing this experience, we seek to contribute to answering the questions posed in the introduction section above and to offer a program that equally tackles wider social issues. To harmonize reading and facilitate understanding for readers, some terms are operationalized as follows. First, we use Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) to refer to a program of study leading to an award of a bachelorette degree or a BSW. Second, we use the term program to refer to a series of learning activities, consisting of classroom instruction, fieldwork instruction, and research practice that satisfy the requirements for the award of the BSW. Third, we use the term course to refer to a unit of study, consisting of either taught or practice hours or both, sometimes called a paper or course-unit in Ugandan nomenclature. Courses can therefore be: core course (those focused on theoretical social work knowledge), method courses (those focused on the application of social work theory into practice with client populations), issue courses (those that focus on specific conditions e.g. health care social work), foundational courses (those that bring knowledge from the social sciences or other welfare disciplines into social work), fieldwork courses (those that focus on internships or fieldwork placements), or research courses (those that focus on the theory and methods of knowledge building for social work).

This paper is structured as follows: we started with the introduction in which we set-forth the key questions that we seek to address and followed with the background. The next section shares the core features of the BSW program at Kyambogo University and is followed by the deconstruction framework that should inform any curriculum design review. The review methodology and technical considerations follow. The paper then shares

some challenges, implications, and recommendations for curriculum design reviews. We conclude by stating that any design review starts as soon as the implementation of any new curriculum starts. Overall, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of BSW program design review and to contribute to the decolonization of social work education. We hope that this paper offers impetus for the innovative design of new and old social work programs alike in Africa.

Core features of our BSW program

According to the Department of Social Work and Social Administration [DSWSA] (2023; 2025), the revised BSW program at Kyambogo University has a number of unique features. First, it is provided as a generalist program, thus allowing graduates to practice in all social work fields. Second, it emphasises the local-global integration of knowledge, thereby supporting decolonization and indigenization. Tusasiirwe (2020) has advocated for decolonization before indigenization. Third, it frames courses into three categories: foundational courses (for knowledge from social sciences and liberal welfare fields), core courses (focused on social work knowledge), and issue courses (tackling selected contemporary social issues). Four, there is equal attention to theoretical courses and fieldwork training so that graduates gain both knowledge and practice skills. And finally, it uses an integrated stance where fieldwork training experiences are actively integrated in class discussions through seminars and theory course classes to unlock professional orientation.

Across a number of SSW in Uganda, social work is taught under the Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration model following the historical roots of the colonial introduction of social work in the country as an administrative program for training clerks and administrative officers in colonial government structures (Twikirize, 2014). Whereas in 2019, the minimum standards and competency framework for social work education and training in Uganda outlined the core social work knowledge areas (National Council for Higher Education, [NCHE], 2029), many programs still offer mostly social administration courses. These largely focus on teaching and studying issue courses such as HIV/AIDS, poverty, health, child protection, refugees, etc. with limited offers of social work theory and social work methods courses. This was highlighted by Bhangyi and Rømer (2025) as being part of the limitations to critical and macro-policy analysis essential for Uganda's social workers to engage in effective policy, advocacy, and political social work.

Our BSW program departs from this historical capture. For example, it offers 45% of learning as practical fieldwork hours and 55% as theoretical class hours (DSWSA, 2023; 2025). Of the 36 courses on offer in the program (see DSWSA, 2023): 18 courses focus on core social work knowledge, 6 courses focus on various methods of social work practice, only 5 courses focus on issues/problems, while 7 courses focus on foundational knowledge (knowing from other social sciences and humanities). Social administration knowledge which is pronounced in other BSWs in the country has been subsumed in the core and method courses in this program and not given independent courses offerings. On the other hand, ten (10) of the courses offered directly focus on theoretical frames from micro to macro theories. These courses offer theoretical, practical, historical, ideological, conceptual, ethical, and professional knowledge and beliefs to practice as a social worker with any issue or population. This BSW differs from others in the country in that it was designed on the principle that the different courses that engage in the conceptual, theoretical, historical, methodological, and philosophical argumentations will enable learners to practice with different populations and social issues (DSWSA, 2023).

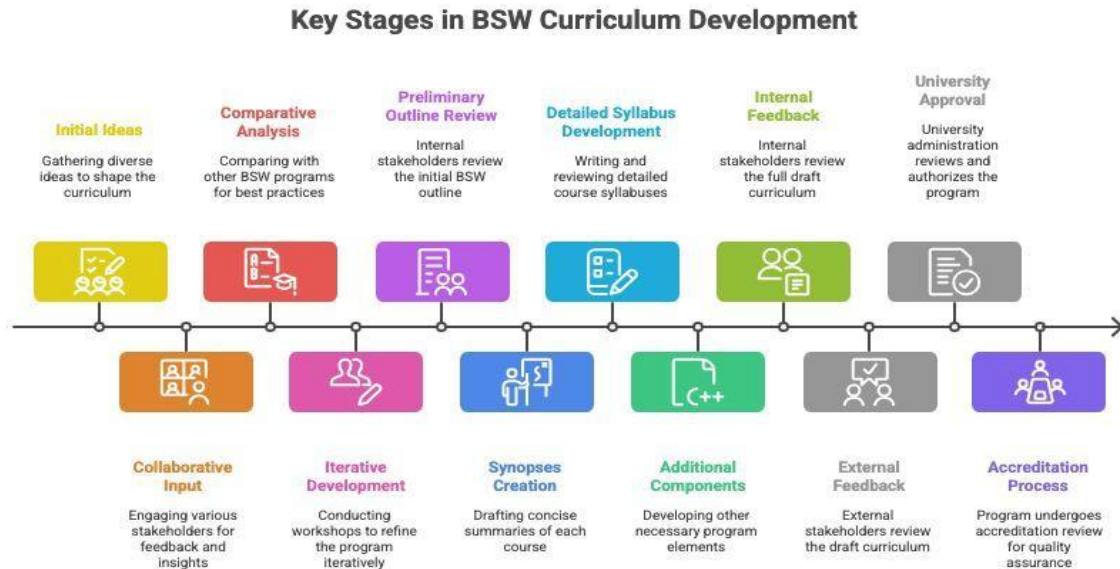
Curriculum review by deconstruction

We suggest that curriculum design and review should be viewed as a process of deconstruction, a kind of Kiswahili metaphor for *kujenga ni kubomowa* (to build is to break). This deconstruction process occurs at various levels. In these levels, all ideas are broken into small pieces, each small piece scanned individually, and then the various pieces reconstituted into tangible themes that constitute courses. This process starts with "sensing" and *kubomowa* (breaking) e.g. what does industry, current and previous students, current and past faculty, or other university programs tell you about what needs to be taught? What do your professional experiences, local context, social needs, and problems in your country or globally require of a BSW graduate?

The next level involves scanning. Here, the "tray of ideas" generated in the sensing level above are then looked at independently. Each idea is scanned for its unique properties, how it fits with other ideas, and where it can be located into the program. Eventually, ideas are placed into a tray of similar ideas, put on a waiting bench, or discarded. At the third level, there is movement into rebuilding (*kujenga*) by grouping and re-grouping similar ideas or needs into a category where they can collectively tackle a knowledge or skill gap. This is followed by conducting a re-alignment of these grouped ideas to ensure that they achieve that aim i.e. of tackling the knowledge or skill gap. At this level, new, revised, improved, or complete course formats begin to emerge. Finally, the deconstruction tunes into finding curriculum coherence by ensuring that the jigsaw and ideological streams fit together. Now, the design moves into what comes first, what comes next, or what comes alongside the other. This produces the course layering into semesters or years of study.

CURRICULUM DESIGN REVIEW METHODOLOGY

We used a number of methods, processes, and modalities to conduct our program design review. The core stages in the design review methodology are summarized in the figure below.



Source: Conceptualized by the authors

First, we generated *initial ideas*. This involved a half day departmental brainstorming workshop to build the work plan, take stock of the existing program, develop tentative course units based on experiences, assemble the core design team, and distribute up-coming tasks.

Second, we conducted stakeholders' consultative meetings (min-workshops, panel meetings) with different interest groups. This *collaborative input* included: industry employers in government and other social sectors, current final year students, past program students, the National Association of Social Workers (NASWU), and two other SSW in Uganda. This was aimed at understating and identifying needs, adjustments, and expectations.

Third, we conducted a *comparative analysis* through a wide benchmarking exercise with a number of other SSW to learn from them. We sampled two schools in Uganda (Makerere University and Uganda Christian University). We added three SSW from East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda) and three SSW from the rest of Africa (Ethiopia, Botswana, and South Africa). We sampled two SSW from each of Australia, Canada, USA, and the United Kingdom. We also sampled one school from Hong Kong and Singapore. We scanned through their BSW programs and noted the core features e.g. program name, length, courses taught, fieldwork education, etc.

Fourth, the review taskforce conducted numerous *iterative workshops* during curriculum development. After the benchmarking, the core team met in several half day workshops to harmonize the findings. It also generated an initial list of program courses and preliminary core features of the program. At this stage, a sketch of the BSW program was produced. We followed a simple philosophy to categorize the courses into three areas: foundational courses (social science knowledge) to be taught in year one, core courses (social work methods, research, theory, and fieldwork) to be taught in year two, and issue-based courses to be taught in year three. To balance semester loading, some core courses were placed in year one and three depending on the program's logical flow.

Fifth, we engaged in a *preliminary outline review*. This was conducted through a one-day internal stakeholders meeting to discuss the preliminary program outline and make adjustments. This engagement consisted of the review team and all the other teaching staff in the department.

Sixth, we embarked on *synopses creation* which involved developing and writing synopses for all courses as brief course descriptors. The members of the taskforce shared detailed course development assignments, with a clear structure including: the wider need of the course, specific course goal, the main topics of study, and expected broader outcome. Each member developed a number of course synopsis and presented drafts for review by the taskforce in one of the many mini workshops. Any agreed upon synopses were then developed into detailed course syllabus (also called course outline in Uganda). We then moved each accepted course synopsis to the full course syllabi development stage conducted by the very member who drafted the synopsis in order to fully utilize their earlier research.

Seven, we conducted *detailed course syllabus development* and review min-workshops. The taskforce conducted a series of these min-workshops, aimed at receiving, hearing, considering, reviewing, and accepting each detailed course syllabus. Where minor changes were suggested, the course syllabus was then handed to the taskforce chair after making the corrections. If major adjustments were required, the course syllabus was presented again until it was acceptable to the taskforce.

Eight, preparation of *additional components* to build other essential elements of the program document. This activity was led by the taskforce chair with support from taskforce members. These additional components for example included the program background, rationale, justification of the review and the changes, program objectives, resources, and budgets. These normally vary from university or country to another due to administrative and legal guidelines. The draft was also presented in the taskforce's mini workshops for discussion and refinement.

Nine, we conducted a second internal stakeholder's workshop for *internal feedback*. Participants included the departmental academic staff, selected academic staff from other social science departments, and current third year social work students. Noted comments, feedback, concerns, suggestions, and ideas were integrated into the morphing program document after careful scrutiny.

Ten, soliciting *external feedback* through a one-day external stakeholder's workshop that we conducted. We invited participants mainly from social sector agencies, who are the potential employers of the proposed BSW graduates. For example, participants came from NASWU, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social development, Ministry of local government, Ministry of Public Services, select District Local Governments, heads of hospital social work, lecturers from three other universities, non-governmental organization (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and former graduates of the department.

Eleven, we sought *university approval*. This involved internal administrative reviews within the university following the integration of comments from the external feedback and validation workshop. These internal administrative reviews were held at the faculty board, the University senate, and University council.

Twelve, the *accreditation process* is the final stage. The final program document was submitted to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) for accreditation review. This is the body mandated by law to accredit all university programs in Uganda. In 2023, the program was approved with minor adjustments marking the transition from Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration (BSWASA) to the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) for the first time in the history of the university. Renaming the program as BSW aligns with the global nomenclature and attests to the strong focus of the program on social work. In our review, we held the view that social administration is a method within social work (DSWSA, 2023).

Generally speaking, the methodology for BSW curriculum design review comprises several aspects: iterative taskforce workshops, situational (needs) mapping, benchmarking, validation workshops, university approvals, and accreditation review. While the internal and external stakeholder workshops are mandatory in our case, we found that benchmarking was very insightful and educational. It offers a crash course in global trends and styles in BSW education. It's highly recommended that any design review must conduct this benchmarking component, since it comes at the lowest cost in this digital age where possibilities for online views of SSW are plentiful.

Technical and practical considerations

We find that any initial BSW design needs to consider three important technical and practical elements: subject depth, practice relevance, and operational fit. In subject depth, a key consideration is the level of rigor that the various courses can have. Normally, this depends on if the program will admit participants with a diploma in social work or direct high school applicants or both. In our case, we designed subject content that can stimulate intellectual curiosity in both. One idea is to try and ensure that the intellectual rigors experienced by reviewers in their graduate education does not influence the amount of rigor appropriate for BSW content. Another solution is to use the knowledge acquired through the benchmarking of the common core knowledge courses for BSW that seem to cut across most BSW programs surveyed.

In practice relevance, your design team needs to think carefully and logically about the social needs or social problems that your BSW graduates will be dealing with in your context. Are the courses included relevant to your setting and in which way? This informs the nature and extent of issue-based courses in your program design.

The final technical and practical consideration focuses on the operational elements of the program. Once your program has been approved, you need to think about how it will be delivered. Consider the technical issues like field work education, infrastructure requirements (e.g. library or study rooms), and staffing (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2019). For example, concurrent field work requires that students incur travel and feeding costs, which many students may not afford. Equally, the host university may not have the experience and capacity to support both students and field educators. You may also need to consider minimizing the number of elective courses if you do not have sufficient qualified teaching staff. In the case of Uganda, you need staff with at least a BSW or MSW to teach core courses in the BSW program (NCHE, 2019).

CHALLENGES & RESISTANCES

In the first instance, there is resistance to curriculum design review, especially when changes are radical, sweeping, and obvious. This resistance is both overt and silent. In our case, current and past students opined that the changes in the curriculum while making it strong would make what they studied appear outdated, obsolete, and unrequired. They wondered how their academic transcripts would compare with and hold value against those of the new curriculum.

Additionally, there was also resistance from practitioners and industry who demanded for more issues-focused (read practice) courses. This would take us back to what Carey (2022) calls social work in a neoliberal university that focuses on skill and vocationalization of training. To deal with this challenge, we emphasised our philosophical stance that the core and method courses in the program will create a graduate with deep historical, philosophical, ideological, theoretical, and socio-political knowledge that can deal with any social issues (practice aspect). The point here is that issues change all the time. Besides, this is the focus of generalist social work.

Furthermore, there was hostility from among the faculty who thought that changes were too radical, and that they were being locked out of the program due to their training, and that they would have nothing to teach on the program. On this issue, one must recall that in Africa, it is quite often to find faculty who are trained in other social science disciplines teaching core social work courses. Lembuka (2025, pp. 49) for example has pointed out this problem in Tanzania. While they bring strong foundational knowledge from other disciplines like sociology, gender studies, political science or psychology, staff shortages quite often mean that they also teach some “pure” or core social work courses. This involves hard work, reading, un-learning, and relearning of new materials.

In the second instance, there were program accreditation and approval obstacles in addition to the resistances above. The process of program approval and accreditation in our case was very long and tedious, with many obstacles. In the first place, within the university, you need approval from the department board, faculty board, senate humanities board, main senate, and university council. The accreditation review by NCHE also took a long time, delaying an urgently needed program. These are necessary processes, but time-consuming actions that delay program start time. They also come with a lot of questions and structured impositions.

In the third instance, we think that curriculum design reviews come with burdens of program implementation. There are challenges in regard to the new curriculum in the context of resources. For example, we introduced concurrent fieldwork education which requires students to find placements in the capital city within commuting distance from the university. Such placements may be limited. However, Bhangyi and Makoha (2024) have suggested the use of un-structured spaces for training in social work fieldwork education which are plentiful.

Finally, our curriculum reviews centred decolonization and indignity. However, this indigenous infusion requires locally produced teaching materials which are very limited. A study by Nielsen et al. (2023) on re-imagining social work education in East Africa found a widespread lack of indigenous study materials for teaching social work. It appears that little has changed about this problem since Twikirize (2014) had also noted a lack of local teaching and learning materials as an obstacle to indigenization of social work in Uganda. Nevertheless, we suggest a working solution in the recommendations section of this article.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN

First, BSW curriculum design is a social dialogue. This dialogical contest occurs among multiple interest groups, some more powerful than others. These include and go beyond current students, past students, current instructors, past instructors, employers and industry including-government, private sectors, social sectors, non-governmental, foundations, and non-profit organizations. While we did not include tuition paying parents or guardians in this dialogue, we think that their opinions should be heard as well as those of previous students who have not secured employment. This dialogue should happen at the preliminary design stage, so that you can obtain aspirations, needs, hopes, possibilities, and fixes in current programs. Feedback is essential to share your design production with those who offered these ideas.

Second, country contexts are essential for BSW program design. This is because of the in-and-between country differences in histories, geographies, resources, needs, issues, problems, population, politics, socioeconomics, and other variables. In addition, one must pay attention to the levels of social work education in their context. Existing quality and quantity of lower-level social work training programs such as para-social work education, volunteer training, certificate, and diploma education may impact on how you frame the BSW program. Overall, the rigors must be sufficient for the bachelorette level education.

Third, BSW program review is a continuous process. In the Ugandan context, the BSW program is reviewed every five years, since any three-year bachelor’s program is reviewable every 5 years (Mukhaye, 2023). This implies that once the program has been approved, the SSW has to make notes of issues, challenges, and possible ideas for change to feed forward into the next review. Changes in the social conditions, staff availability, reading materials availability, feedback from students or teaching staff, policy, and legislation must be noted. Where country specific legislations allow for within SSW changes, these must be fixed as soon as they arise.

And finally, the SSW must possess some form of radical stubbornness, one that is resistant to distractions, opposition, and ideological colonialism. Many shifts in curriculum may be resisted by some sections of the stakeholders who are unfamiliar with the purpose and potency of such changes. In all, we find support in the work of Baynesagn et al. (2020) who report that social work education in Ethiopia has been strengthened by overcoming challenges.

LESSONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our learning from our BSW review process, we offer a few recommendations. First, faculty retraining or orientation programs on curriculum design are needed. These are essential in contexts where some faculty may be non-social workers, learned the old social work and fear the new, or to make staff feel adequate to engage with the new curriculum.

Second, contextualizing social work education programs will require usage of local teaching materials. These can be media reports, news bulletins, local films/movies, blogs, reports, policy documents, and program documents. The social work text book will need to be re-visited, re-invented, or re-written. Wilson (2025) has argued that this is essential for understanding shifts and movements in local contexts that inform social work education.

Third, local problems/needs that influence local practice should be the organizing threads of any social work curriculum design. To achieve this, design or reviews must constantly answer the question: what kind of issues shall our graduates deal with and how can we equip them to deal with such challenges? Here, care must be taken to avoid the temptation of teaching issue-based courses at the expense of historical, theoretical, comparative, or ideological grounding courses that offer a framing of the social issues. We think that students who are theoretically grounded can practice with any emerging social issue.

Fourth, the curriculum that will adequately train future generations of social work professionals must strike a strategic balance between theory (history, knowledge & ideological learning) and practical training (doing, observing, and trying). This can be achieved through balancing theory courses, fieldwork education, and applied research projects in the program. This is what, in our view, the global standards of social work education in part refer to when they ask social work education to focus on social work in context and social work in practice (Ioakimidis and Sookraj, 2021).

Lastly, SSW need to urgently, vigorously, and deeply engage in discussions surrounding teaching and pedagogy in social work. This is a neglected but crucial ingredient for building social work that is contextual. Dialogue and research on questions of content, depth, educational assessments, study materials, learning by doing, etc. in social work is needed.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we make an entry on the social work bachelorette design review in our SSW. Our motivation is that, while BSW design review is common practice, the processes, methodologies and approaches of conducting these design reviews are in-house, practice wisdom, and rarely documented for posterity and learning. As such, we speculated that while these practices may be varied and informative, they would learn and improve from crossbreeding with practices elsewhere. By openly sharing the thinking, methodologies, processes, and lessons from our BSW design review, we hope to inspire others to document and share their reflective practices. We also hope to attract scholarly critique of our approaches so that we can learn. This is very important in Uganda and Africa at large because social work education is in rapid expansion. New SSW can read this article and thereafter gain insights on how to design their BSW program. In all, we hope that our paper can spur scholarship about social work education curriculum design as well as the decolonization of teaching and pedagogy in social work in Africa.

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