

Social Work Regulation in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Purpose: The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is currently developing a social work licensure process to serve as a quality assurance mechanism and enhance the quality of care for service beneficiaries. **Methods:** This article outlines the opportunities, challenges, and contextual issues associated with the UAE regulation such as differing licensing processes and structures in three of seven emirates that are progressing licensure. With a paucity of information about this process in the UAE, this article reviews a range of international literature to situate the status and development of UAE social work licensure regionally and internationally. **Results:** The UAE is currently utilizing a social work regulatory process similar to the United States in which regulation is implemented at the Emirate level and licensure is the primary regulatory process. **Conclusions:** Benefits and risks of the current UAE regulation process are provided that include recommendations for culturally relevant supervisory frameworks and regulation processes.

Keywords

licensure, social work, United Arab Emirates, professionalism, registration

The protection of service users is a key reason in the decisions made to establish processes such as social work licensure or registration, education accreditation, and/or robust field education programs to ensure a social work graduate's fitness for practice (FtP). Yet if, when, and how these processes develop are dependent on context and a great deal of variability exists within and among countries. For countries where processes are new or emerging, regulation development can present both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities include the occasion to study other global regions to understand their regulatory practices and how they evolved. Challenges include considerations of how to adapt social work practice and regulation to local contexts, and finding a balance between international social work values and regional and local values and concerns.

In this article, an account of a new and developing social work regulation process in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is provided. The UAE is one of the first countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region to establish licensure and a formalized system of regulating the profession (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2019). As such, processes are developing without the benefit of wider regional guidance such as regional professional accreditation, practice standards, or fully developed social work professional organizations. Although this lack of regional guidance presents an opportunity to contextualize processes for an emerging profession, risks also exist in adopting processes that do not meet the needs of all UAE social workers due to variations

in education, training, and practice supervision. Thus, this point-in-time review detailing the current status of UAE social work regulation is timely and provides an in-depth review of its development to date, degree of adaptation to the local context, and degree of integration with supporting systems such as social work education and accreditation.

Literature Review

Rationale: Protection of Public, Standardization, Professionalization of Practice

Professionalization of social work during the 20th century has often included processes in which professional expertise such as practice credentialing was recognized and regulated by entities beyond the public (Worsley et al., 2020). Worsley et al. (2020) describe key components of practice regulation: (1) registration or licensure which includes a national and/or

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state method of documenting approved professionals, (2) FtP or the approach used to assess social work behaviors against benchmarks, and (3) protection of the social work title and who can be called a “social worker.” Common forms of credentials include licensure, registration, or certification (Miller et al., 2015).

The usefulness of licensure includes assurances to clients that a professional social worker has met the standards of the professions for practice and competency within a specific context, and usually encompasses some form of examination and ongoing professional development requirements (Miller et al., 2015). In the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and others, a similar yet distinct state-sanctioned process referred to as registration, uses registry lists and formalized registration procedures (Breda & Addinall, 2021; Simpson et al., 2020; Worsley et al., 2020). Registration involves an application to a government or public entity and often a fee, but does not necessarily include an examination, although clinical social workers typically do sit for an exam (Breda & Addinall, 2021). Certification is most often used to demonstrate practice specialty and unlike registration, is often regulated by professional organizations as opposed to government entities (Miller et al., 2015).

Although professional accountability to the public remains a primary purpose of practice regulation there are other positive benefits. For example, the credibility of the profession can be enhanced through the recognition that social workers have the professional knowledge and skills base needed for practice (Lightfoot et al., 2016). Indeed, in some jurisdictions, it offers protection for the title of “social worker,” and only persons who are licensed as social workers can use the title (Miller et al., 2015). In turn, individual social workers also benefit through the enhanced credibility that credentialing can provide and potentially increase their identification with the profession of social work (Lightfoot et al., 2016).

Yet, its merits notwithstanding, ongoing debates about how regulation should be implemented are common issues among countries. Issues such as the powers given to regulatory bodies, the political nature of regulation, disconnects between educational and regulation systems, and regulation assessments remain topics of debate (Apgar, 2019; Simpson et al., 2020; Worsley et al., 2020). Thus, a global review provides a broader understanding of challenges countries may experience when situating a regulatory framework within a specific context, such as the UAE.

International Regulatory Comparisons

It is important to acknowledge that not all countries have developed licensure processes and bodies without difficulties. In England and Wales, “social worker” became a protected title under the law in 2005 (Worsley et al., 2020). Prior to this time, many allied professionals who undertook the role of supporting vulnerable people could and did use the title

of social worker. This is also due to the fact that a Certificate in Social Work was the main qualification between 1975 and 1991. This was later changed to a Diploma in Social Work between 1991 and 2009 and social work became a regulated profession in England in 2001 (Worsley et al., 2020).

The Bachelor’s degree in social work only came into being in 2003 and from 2005 anyone who was not registered with the then General Social Care Council (GSCC) was in breach of the law if they referred to themselves as social workers. This created a need to ensure that practitioners who were left without the “social worker” title were appropriately positioned in the social care workforce. The GSCC previously registered student social workers who could also be de-registered if any FtP concerns arose.

Following this period, Health Care Professions Council became the regulator of social workers in England and Wales alongside being the regulator for allied health professions such as Occupational Therapists, Dietitians, Paramedics, Radiographers, and Physiotherapists, to name a few (Worsley et al., 2020). In 2018, Social Work England came into being as a profession-specific regulator for social workers in England. It currently regulates and reviews social work academic programs (which includes field education) as well as registers social workers who must keep their registration up to date through submitting evidence of continuous professional development (CPD). The website can be used to confirm the registration status of social workers by using their names only (socialworkengland.org.uk).

Regulation of the social work profession was also an uneven process in the United States (US), where over the course of the last 75 years, tensions surrounded the subject of licensing (Grise-Owen et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015). Apgar (2019) provides an overview, explaining that social work licensure adoption happened state by state. Today the profession is regulated in all 50 states and is regulated individually by respective state licensing boards (Worsley et al., 2020). This diversity in regulation, while reflecting the diversity of state regions, can also be problematic. Worsley et al. (2020) found that the title of social worker was not protected in all states, which could negatively impact the profession’s credibility. Other differences included the state-level regulation of a BSW degree, and differing requirements for licensure supervision (Boland-Prom et al., 2018). Moreover, the connection between social work education programs and licensure is not as strong as it could be, as evidenced by a study of U.S. faculty who stated social work licensure had little impact on program curriculum (Apgar, 2019). Other issues include the licensing process and its emphasis on micro and clinical practice as opposed to the macro practice (Lightfoot et al., 2016). Lightfoot et al. (2016), for example, argue that this emphasis on clinical practice makes licensure increasingly irrelevant for macro social workers. However, some states now address this issue by

offering a nonclinical practice license at the MSW level (Boland-Prom et al., 2018).

Yet problems also arise in contexts that lack regulation frameworks. Baikady et al. (2021) note that without a national accrediting council in India, “every school is unique and different in its curriculum structure and content” (p. 1001). The profession, according to the authors, goes unrecognized due to the absences of regulation, standardized education, and professional organizations that could mandate a code of ethics (Baikady et al. 2021). In a similar situation in Jordan, Al Makhmreh & Libel (2012) surmise the status of the profession as an unrecognized and semi-profession, which limits its influence, compounds training deficiencies, and limits resources.

Although variability and inconsistencies exist in how social work regulatory processes have developed globally, a lack of regulatory systems can limit the growth of the profession due to limited public accountability and professional obscurity (Miller et al., 2015). Indeed, a UAE emirate regulatory body, the Department of Community Development (DCD), has documented how the emirate of Abu Dhabi perceives the role of regulation as one of public protection and ensuring social workers have the correct qualifications (ADDCCD, 2020b). Nevertheless, developing regulatory systems for specific contexts is complex and becomes more complex in global regions where social work is an emerging profession.

Middle East and Northern Africa

Social work education has existed within the MENA region or the 22 countries that encompass Northern Africa and the Middle East, since the 1930s (Graham & Al Krenawi, 2013). Egyptian, Western-trained social workers established the Cairo School of Social Work in 1936, and by the 1960s, social work spread to other countries within the region (Albrithen, 2012). Historically, social work education and practice have followed Western models, and although recently Arabic social work education has attempted to adapt social work practice to local communities, and balance Islamic values with social work values, Western approaches to social work education and practice continue to dominate regionally (Albrithen, 2012; Crabtree & Baba, 2001; Graham & Al Krenawi, 2013; Ibrahim, 2018; Wagner & Majeed, 2021). As Ibrahim (2018) notes, efforts to indigenize social work practice within Arab countries have been hindered by a lack of social work professional organizations and weak support from the Ministries of Education. Additionally, Makhamerah and Libal (2021) point out that regionally the “limited role research plays in informing practice” (p. 461), albeit the limited regional research base, are obstacles to adapting practice to context. As Sloan et al. (2017) emphasize, “there is still a dearth of localization of social work in the Arab Muslim world” (p. 204). This limited localization leads to gaps in

understanding culturally relevant practices and developing models adapted to the cultural context (Sloan et al., 2017; Veeran, 2013). For example, unlike in the west where professionalization of social work is often equated with secularization, in Arab Muslim countries, such as the UAE, clients may have cultural expectations that Islam and Islamic values are integrated into practice (Sloan et al., 2017).

As regulatory structures have developed, they too have often followed Western frameworks. Veeran (2013), for example, argued that regional and Islamic values were not reflected in accreditation frameworks adopted in the UAE which led to disconnects between professional social work training and the cultural context. However, accreditation, a form of quality assurance and gatekeeping for education and training programs to prepare social work graduates for practice, is currently regulated only by the Commission on Academic Accreditation of the Ministry of Education in the UAE, and not by a regional or countrywide entity specific to social work (CAA, 2020; Veeran, 2013; Yan et al., 2021). Similar to accreditation, the process for establishing licensure in the UAE has, to date, followed a structural approach similar to western countries, specifically the United States, in which a licensure model has been adopted and regulated emirate-by-emirate as opposed to a national regulatory system.

Beyond the UAE, some regulations of social work and social services sectors have been established in Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iran, yet none of these countries have a centralized registration, licensure, or database of workers (UNICEF and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2019). Professional organizations that could provide advocacy and coordination of regulatory tasks do exist in many of these countries, however, a UNICEF and Global Social Services Alliance (2019) study found that none of the associations had mandates to support or regulate the social work profession among the eight participating MENA countries. The study recommendations included establishing minimum standards, qualifications, and regulations for social work and the social sectors (UNICEF and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2019).

An overview of the developing social work regulatory structures in the UAE is provided next. The UAE, a federation of seven states or hereditary monarchies referred to as emirates, shares similarities with other MENA countries, concerning social work’s emerging status (Kamal & Trines, 2018). Thus, how regulatory structures develop within the UAE have the potential to influence the growth and professionalization of social work practice within the country and region.

The UAE Context

Discussions around licensure and regulation in the UAE have been debated for a considerable period of time,

particularly at universities that have been keen to connect with and adopt global education standards and practice processes such as regulation. This is mainly because the existing social work education programs have evolved and are delivered from mostly western curricular frameworks as opposed to indigenized models (Ibrahim, 2018; IFSW, 2020). Only in the last 10 years have these discussions started to yield results in the areas of codes of ethics, licensure, and supervision.

Overview of UAE Social Work

The first social work education program, a BSW program, was initiated at United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in 1994, followed by an MSW program in 2013, and a second BSW program at Higher Colleges of Technology in 2011 (Abu-Sarhan & Tadam, 2021). To date, approximately 2,300 social work graduates have completed their studies in the UAE. However, there is no definitive information on the number of practicing social workers in the UAE. Additionally, due to the limited number of practicing social workers, historically a postgraduate degree was not always required for the use of the title of a social worker. Indeed, the Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development (ADDCD) which oversees social service regulation and the new social work regulatory process in Abu Dhabi uses a definition of “social worker,” which is not wholly aligned with the international definition, and this could be due in part to the rationale for the multiple routes to licensure due to limited numbers of practicing Emirati social workers. A social worker, according to the ADDCD is defined as:

a professional who supports individuals, families or groups of people (including Children, the Elderly and People of Determination) with social problems, by conducting an assessment of their needs, causes and impact, and working with them and/or their caregivers to identify, coordinate and manage appropriate solutions to enhance their personal, social, and economic competencies (ADDCD, 2020d, p. 11).

Common duties of UAE social workers include assessing and working with children who have been abused or are at risk of various forms of abuse. Although Crabtree and Baba (2001) argues that cultural sensitivities brought on by the notion of family privacy further complicates interventions by school and hospital social workers in the UAE, the recent passage of the 2016 UAE Child Protection Law has made child protection a priority. Other common practice areas for social workers include a variety of robust health and social welfare programs such as programs for persons with disabilities, community development initiatives and more recently, substance misuse rehabilitation which are in line with the ADDCD definition of social work (Sloan et al., 2017).

Education and Supervision

Currently, three of the seven UAE emirates have begun developing licensure or registration processes. In the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, a BSW degree is required to initiate the process. Similar to other countries, a BSW is a four-year undergraduate degree. Although the localization of UAE social work education remains a problem, and American and British social work textbooks continue to be heavily utilized across the Arab Gulf, there have been recent efforts to localize the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) Global Standards of Social Work Education at UAEU by emphasizing national and cultural concerns in the curriculum such as family well-being, child development, and community services (Makhamerah & Libal, 2021; Sloan et al., 2017). Due to overlaps between social work field education supervision and licensing supervision, both will be described and compared next.

Yan et al. (2021) describe the importance of field education supervision as having a gatekeeping function in preparing students for practice. Indeed, in the United States, field education evaluations are used to provide evidence that students are able to demonstrate social work competencies (Apgar, 2019). On the other hand, field education and supervision of UAE social work students and licensees are varied in terms of quality and depth due to the limited number of qualified supervisors. In regard to obtaining a provisional license or renewal, for example, supervision is mostly dependent upon the organization where the social worker is employed and not all organizations employ social workers who have obtained a professional social work license and who could offer supervision (ADDCD, 2020c).

Accessing supervision that aligns with the local culture to address social problems can also be a challenge. Issues such as domestic violence, mental health, child abuse, and sexual abuse are often viewed as familial or personal issues, may be considered taboo to speak about, and must be addressed in culturally sensitive ways (Al Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Crabtree & Baba, 2001). These issues make it even more urgent to develop a supervision framework for field education and licensure that are culturally sensitive to the needs of the population and delivered by trained field educators and supervisors. Thus, one of the authors is currently involved in developing a proposal to deliver bespoke training to social workers to become field educators for students and supervisors for qualified practitioners. Additional considerations include Akhter's (2021) “Tawaf” model of social work supervision that is designed for Muslim social workers and/or Muslim supervisors and integrates values of Islam into the supervision process.

Current Regulation and Licensure Procedures

Similar to the United States where the licensure process and practice regulation can differ between states (Apgar, 2019),

the licensure process is regulated by the emirate. However, unlike the United States, where all 50 states and some Canadian provinces use exams developed and administered by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) (Grise-Owen et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015), the UAE licensure exams are currently developed and administered by each emirate.

In terms of regulation processes, only two emirates, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, have regulatory bodies that have implemented licensure processes that include specific standards for supervision, assessment, education and practice experience requirements, continuing education requirements, some limited FtP guidelines, and codes of ethics. A third emirate, Sharjah, utilizes a regulation system similar to registration in which applicants pay a fee, submit paperwork which is reviewed by the Social Service Department of Sharjah, and then can receive a license if approved (SSSD, n.d.).

The regulatory body that oversees licensure in the emirate of Dubai is the Community Development Authority (CDA), the institution that develops and regulates the Dubai social sector (CDA, 2016). Only graduates who hold a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or higher, can sit for the licensure examination. A BSW degree earned in the UAE comes from either the UAEU or Higher College of Technology (HCT) both of which are accredited by the UAE Commission on Academic Accreditation in partnership with the UAE Ministry of Education (CAA, 2020). Holders of BSW degrees from outside the UAE, are required to go through a UAE Ministry of Education equivalency process to have their degrees formally recognized prior to practice. All persons applying for licensure must sit for the exam. Licensure applicants are also required to have a minimum of one year of experience and a good conduct certificate issued by the local police department (CDA, 2016). This good conduct certificate is analogous to criminal background checks required by some U.S. states, prior to receiving licensure (STEPS, 2021).

The regulatory body that oversees licensure in the emirate of Abu Dhabi is the Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development (ADDCD), which has two types of social work licensure: a provisional license and a professional license. It is important to note that only UAE nationals qualify for a provisional license, or a license that requires the holder to have a BSW but does not require practical experience (ADDCD, 2020c). This license is then valid for 24 months from the date of issuance and can be renewed once based upon a case evaluation by the ADDCD (ADDCD, 2020d). Additionally, a provisional license allows the holder to practice under onsite supervision by a licensed social worker. In order to qualify for a professional license an applicant must have a BSW degree or higher with 3,000 hours of practical experience that equates to 2 years in social work or in a related field (ADDCD, 2020c). This license is also valid for 24 months from the date of issuance

with unlimited renewals as long as the applicant is practicing (ADDCD, 2020c) (Table 1).

Professional Development

In the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, once a social worker completes 3,000 hours of supervised professional social work practice and subsequent licensure exams, they are required to engage in ongoing learning, development, and enhancement of their skills through continuing professional development (CPD). CPD is fundamental to the growth and development of social workers at all levels and stages of practice and could potentially address a finding from a 2018 study of social work education programs in Arab universities that indicated graduates and supervisors from Arab universities were weak or inconsistent in staying abreast of current international research and literature (Ibrahim, 2018). CPD is delivered through partnerships with training providers, universities and employers. For example, there are consultants who are commissioned to provide CPD in many areas, and with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, much of CPD is being delivered remotely online.

Codes of Ethics

Codes of ethics are emerging emirate by emirate. The need for a professional social work association has been recognized as an important step towards realizing a countrywide UAE, social work code of ethics, consequently both are currently being considered (Abu-Sarhan et al., 2021). At present, the ADDCD has a professional code of conduct and ethics for all social services professions but is not specific to social work (ADDCD, 2020b). Although this lack of specificity could present ethical ambiguities for practice, some of the ethical standards are similar to the IFSW Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018) such as protecting and acting in the best interest of the beneficiaries, effective and appropriate communication with beneficiaries and their related parties, working within the boundaries of professional practice, knowledge, and expertise, and maintaining confidentiality and trustworthiness in all professional relationships.

Challenges to Professionalization and Regulation

Title Protection. There may be a lack of clarity regarding those currently practicing without a BSW degree. One of the authors, for example, was a part of a team of social work educators, subject knowledge experts, and practitioners that collaborated with a U.S. University and the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority to create a two-week Child Protection Certification course that is now being implemented (Georgetown, 2020). The course was designed for those who were already in social work roles or practicing in the area of child protection, some of whom did not hold BSW degrees but worked in that capacity. However, as argued by

Table 1. A Description of sources used in this Review.

Case Sample Sources						
Author and Date	Topic	Region	Source	Peer Review	Research Design	Regulation Examples
Abu-Sarhan et al. (2021)	Social work codes of ethics from Arab countries	Arab countries of Western Asia	<i>British Journal of Social Work</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Emerging social work codes of ethics in Arab countries.
Abu Dhabi Dept. of Community Development (2020)	Code of conduct for Abu Dhabi social sector, continuing professional development licensing of social care professionals and practice and educational standards	Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development	No	Grey papers	New and developing standards for UAE social care professionals.
Akhter (2021)	Model of social work supervision for Muslims	New Zealand (NZ)	<i>Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Journal</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Outlines a model of social work supervision that imbeds Islamic values during phases of supervision.
Al Krenawi and Graham (2000)	Culturally sensitive practice with Muslim clients	International	<i>Health and Social Work Journal</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Outlines methods for culturally sensitive practice, and interventions with Arab clients.
Al Makhamreh and Libel (2012)	Status of social work practice in Jordan	Jordan	Book Chapter: <i>The Sage Handbook of International Social Work</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Discusses the current status of Jordanian social work practice and issues.
Albrithen (2012)	Social work in Arab Countries	Middle East	<i>The Indian Journal of Social Work</i>	Yes	Conceptual, Historical	Historical overview of social work development in the Middle East Region.
Apgar (2019)	Disconnects between social work education and licensure	United States (US)	<i>Social Work Education Journal</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Discusses differences and disconnects in social work education accreditation standards and licensure.
Baikady et al. (2021)	Social work education in India	India	<i>Social Work Education Journal</i>	Yes	Conceptual, Reflective	Discusses social work education, and practice in India.
Boland-Prom et al. (2018)	Social work educators' evaluations of regulatory boards	US	<i>Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics</i>	Yes	Quantitative (Surveys)	Social work educators' evaluations of state regulatory boards.
Commission on Academic Accreditation [CAA]. (2020)	UAE guidelines for accreditation of academic programs	UAE	UAE Ministry of Education	No	Grey Papers	Guidelines for UAE accreditation of academic programs.
Community Development Authority (2016)	Code of conduct for Dubai social sector, continuing professional development, licensing of social care professionals	Dubai, UAE	Government of Dubai	No	Grey Papers	Outlines conduct code for social care professionals.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Case Sample Sources						
Author and Date	Topic	Region	Source	Peer Review	Research Design	Regulation Examples
Crabtree and Baba (2001)	Islamic perspectives on social work education and practice	Malaysia	<i>Social Work Education</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Dearth of academic material for social work education and practice from an Islamic perspective.
Breda and Addinall (2021)	Clinical social work in South Africa	South Africa	<i>Clinical Social Work Journal</i>	Yes	Quantitative Review (survey)	Outlines registration process for South African clinical social workers.
Furness (2015)	UK-regulation of social work practice	United Kingdom (UK)	<i>British Journal of Social Work</i>	Yes	Conceptual, Historical	History of UK regulation of social work practice.
Graham and Al Krenawi (2013).	Social work within Arab countries	Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	NASW <i>Encyclopedia of Social Work, 20th ed.</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Status of social work in the MENA Region.
Grise-Own et al. (2016).	Reconfiguring social work licensing	US	<i>Journal of Social Work Education</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Developing a framework of competency with licensure as one component of the framework.
Ibrahim (2018)	Educators' perspectives on social work education in Arab universities.	Arab Middle East	<i>Social Work Education</i>	Yes	Quantitative (survey)	Arab social work educators perceptions of the profession and societal recognition of the profession.
Lightfoot et al. (2016)	Licensure and social work identification of community practice social work	US	<i>Journal of Community Practice</i>	Yes	Qualitative	The views of community practice social workers towards professional regulation and identification.
Miller et al. (2015)	Preparing social work students for licensure	US	<i>Journal of Teaching in Social Work</i>	Yes	Program Description	An MSW program example of licensure preparation.
Peter et al. (2020)	Assisting social workers with professional transitions	NZ	<i>International Social Work</i>	Yes	Qualitative	Transitional experiences of transnational social workers and recommendations.
Sharjah Social Services Department (n.d.)	Licensure guidelines for Sharjah, UAE	UAE	Sharjah Department of Social Services	No	Grey Paper	Sharjah, UAE social work licensing information.
Simpson et al. (2020)	Social work regulation in the UK	UK	<i>British Journal of Social Work,</i>	Yes	Case Study	Regulation issues and social work professional identity in the UK.
United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance. (2019)	Social sector status in the MENA region	MENA	UNICEF	No	Grey literature	Reviews the status of professional organizations, social work practice, and regulation of practice within eight countries in the MENA region.
Veeran (2013)	Use of Western	UAE		Yes	Conceptual	Highlights the cultural and

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Case Sample Sources						
Author and Date	Topic	Region	Source	Peer Review	Research Design	Regulation Examples
	frameworks for accreditation with the Arab world		<i>Social Work Education</i>			value discrepancies when using Western accreditation processes to evaluate UAE programs.
Wagner and Majeed (2021)	Culturally responsive social work education	UAE	<i>Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education</i>	Yes	Conceptual	Reviews English Medium Instruction within social work education in the UAE.
Worsley et al. (2020)	International comparison of social work regulation	UK, NZ, and US	<i>British Journal of Social Work</i>	Yes	Comparative Case Studies	Reviews status and issues of regulation. Comparison of registration and licensure.
Yan et al. (2021)	Descriptions of social work regulation in Canada, Hong Kong, and South Korea	Canada, Hong Kong, South Korea	<i>British Journal of Social Work</i>	Yes	Case Studies	Describes the development of social work education/regulation in three countries.
Zeng et al. (2020).	Social Work Licensure Exam	China	<i>Research on Social Work Practice</i>	Yes	Quantitative	Chinese regional differences among social work licensure passage rates.

McFadden et al. (2015), child protection is a challenging profession in which workers are particularly susceptible to burnout, and even more so when their training and preparation for the field are limited. Therefore, a two-week course could be deemed inadequate to prepare professionals to work in this complex field and provide a route to potential licensure.

Efforts by the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi; however, mostly do require specific lengths of practice, supervision, and assessment prior to licensure, while the emirate of Sharjah requires the submission of paperwork and the payment of a processing fee for licensure.

Integrating Social Work Education and Regulation

The potential for disconnects exists between UAE social work education and requirements for licensing which warrant further investigation. Emirates that have developed a licensure structure typically consulted with social work programs in UAE federal (public) higher education institutions, and faculty from these programs assisted with licensure exam development. In Abu Dhabi, all questions had domains and standards set by the ADDCD, and faculty were asked to develop multiple-choice questions based upon these

domains and standards. This provided some alignment between social work education and licensure. An area of disconnect; however, is the lack of national and regional social work-specific accreditation bodies which could provide standardized criteria for curriculum content and instruction and in turn, potentially guide licensure assessment (Yan et al., 2021). Another disconnect or limitation was that the licensure exam external reviewers did not always hold a degree in social work as the reviewers provided oversight for a variety of licensure exams for various helping professions. Without this structure and oversights, variations in what programs emphasize can create problems of alignment between social work education, and alignment with licensure examinations and expectations (Zeng et al., 2020). Additionally, as Peter et al. (2020) opine, social work is unique because it is considered a global profession, enabling practitioners to move between countries to live and work. Where social work programs are not accredited or social workers are not licensed, could result in complicated and lengthy processes for obtaining licensing or registration outside of where one is qualified. The authors add that due to cultural differences and language barriers, Western-trained social workers must consider if they have the requisite skills and knowledge needed to practice competently within the MENA region.

Finally, due to the field education experience of the students in the UAE and oftentimes insufficient number of placements or supervisors without the requisite qualifications, it would be difficult to meet the requirements of international accreditation in the UAE. This will also have an impact on the students if they are not acquiring what is needed in terms of field experience and knowledge to be able to pass the licensure exam.

Discussion and Applications to Practice

There are benefits and risks to developing a regulation process for an emerging profession. Benefits could include strengthening title protection for social workers, codifying professional development requirements, and elevating the credibility of the profession. Problems, however, are also inherent and include the potential for disconnects between regulatory structures and social work education, a lack of a supervisory framework adapted to the UAE context, limited FtP guidelines, and the regulatory gatekeeping mechanism of licensure which may be less suitable than a process such as registration for an emerging profession.

Although there are some inconsistencies regarding the definition of a UAE social worker, the newer policies implemented by Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah limit only those who have a BSW degree or higher to either sit for a licensing exam or register with the emirate (ADDCCD, 2020c; CDA, 2016; SSSD, n.d.). Thus, the process of regulation could potentially lead to title protection, particularly if agencies seek licensed candidates (Miller et al., 2015).

Codifying professional development ensures that social workers and their supervisors stay abreast of current research and practice models. Current policies for Abu Dhabi state that all licensed Social Care Professionals fulfill a minimum of 40 hours of CPD activities and that 30 of these hours must comprise “formal” learning such as undertaking face-to-face or distance learning courses, undertaking research and the remaining 10 hours are considered “self-led” and can be flexibly undertaken (ADDCCD, 2020a). This is similar to the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the United States that also require requisite numbers of CPD (Miller et al., 2015; Worsley et al., 2020). Perhaps the most important benefit of the developing regulatory process, however, is raising the credibility of the profession. Unfortunately, societal recognition of the profession of social work in the MENA region is weak or undervalued due to work with populations that are often stigmatized by the public as well as a lack of professional organizations that could positively enhance the profession (Byers et al., 2022; Ibrahim, 2018). Licensure signals to the public that graduates are professionals who have the requisite training.

Yet risks are also inherent. The aforementioned potential for licensure assessment passage rates can be impacted by social work education and disconnects between what is taught within social work education programs and the

content of the licensure exam (Apgar, 2019). UAE social work regulation is developing within a country and region that lacks other regulatory structures such as social work accreditation entities and developed social work professional organizations. Although national higher education accreditation entities exist, a lack of social work-specific accreditation increases the risks of disconnects between social work education, field education, licensure, and practice expectations.

Other risks include a lack of supervisory training for field instructors and practice supervisors. The importance of training field and practice supervisors has been widely documented yet there is variable practice around the world with some countries making training mandatory for supervisors whilst in others, such as the UAE, field supervisor training is an optional activity (Field et al., 2014; Finch, 2017). Supervisors need to understand the profession and be able to guide students in their practice to become trained social workers who are able to apply theory to practice and uphold ethical and legal standards (Field et al., 2014). Once qualified, social workers must have access to regular supervision, which has already been highlighted, and could benefit their professional growth and development.

There has been some recognition of the need for supervisory frameworks in the UAE. This includes ongoing discussions between representatives of UNICEF and the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority about developing a supervision framework for social workers. The absence of such a framework has resulted in disparate approaches to the supervision and support of social workers, who may have different levels of experience and confidence. A supervisory framework could provide supervisors with the skills to support social workers as they aim for licensing or renewal (ADDCCD, 2020a). However, a supervisory framework should be tailored to the local context so that supervisors provide culturally sensitive supervision. Examples of localized models include the Kaupapa Maori approach for Maori social work supervisors and indigenous Polynesian persons of New Zealand, in which “the self identified culture of the social worker ... creates and shapes the supervision process” (Akhter, 2021, p. 23). Also, the aforementioned Tawaf model for Muslim supervisors which integrates Islamic values and actions to guide supervision (Akhter, 2021).

The current discussion around licensure in the UAE does not adequately address FtP issues. According to Furness (2015), the processes of FtP protect clients from harmful, negligent practice and provide formal mechanisms by which complaints can be reviewed and disciplinary processes are undertaken. For example, the ADDCCD does require what would be analogous to a criminal background check, however, the conduct and good standing criteria are vague stating “DCD may request additional evidence or conduct investigations if deemed necessary to prove the status of good conduct of the social care professional” (ADDCCD,

2020a, p. 30). Although not an end to itself, FtP procedures need to be in place to serve as a deterrent for poor practice and to encourage accountability and adherence to social work standards of practice, values, and ethics.

A final risk is the current type of regulation. Although used interchangeably, the licensure process typically involves taking exams which in the UAE are in English, yet UAE social workers will mostly practice in Arabic (Wagner & Majeed, 2021). Moreover, licensure exams test social work knowledge but cannot sufficiently capture the extent of a social worker's professional competency or what they do (Apgar, 2019). Thus, a registration process could be more suitable. In the United Kingdom, all four nations (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) have their own regulatory bodies with different registration and re-registration criteria. In England, upon successful completion of a Bachelor's or Masters in Social Work, newly qualified practitioners can apply for registration (Social Work England, 2022). A re-registration process that requires submitting a portfolio of evidence, mapped against specific requirements, and containing an overall summary or self-study of individual growth and achievements within a specified time-period, as is the case in England, could provide a more relevant form of assessment for an emerging profession (Social Work England, 2022). In addition, clients and interested parties could verify the credibility and authenticity of social workers through a website with a bid to protect the public. Arguably, such a strategy would need to be carefully thought through and adapted to suit the cultural norms of the UAE especially in relation to gender.

A summation of recommendations is as follows. The development of a regional or UAE social work accreditation body that could provide consistent and culturally relevant accreditation criteria and potentially inform licensure expectations could enhance the current process (Veeran, 2013). Additionally, requiring all field education supervisors to have, at a minimum, licensure in the UAE and hold a degree in social work in order to adequately train students and new graduates. Training could be provided for new supervisors which include utilizing a supervisory framework that is contextually responsive such as the Tawaf model (Akhter, 2021).

For social workers who have obtained licensure, encourage ongoing access to supervision to benefit their professional growth and development. This could be accomplished through strengthening and developing professional associations. Social work professional associations could also increase the recognition of the profession as well as play an active role in formally identifying the number of practising social workers in the UAE (Byers et al., 2022). Addressing gaps in the current UAE regulation process is also important. This includes strengthening procedures to address FtP, and implementing regulation processes in emirates that currently do not have them. Finally, developing a regulation process that could be more suitable for an emerging profession such as an assessment process that focuses more on the

demonstration of competencies as opposed to a knowledge-based multiple choice exam.

There are limitations to this study. This review is not an empirical study, and further research is needed to understand the influence of the current licensure process on social work practice. Additionally, further research is needed to (1) identify the number of practicing UAE social workers which would include those with and without a BSW and those with and without licensure and (2) explore differences in practice and client outcomes. This information could be collected through both a social service governmental centralized database and further studied through qualitative methods such as focus groups to compare social work and nonsocial work graduates who work in practice settings to understand their capacity to work with vulnerable populations. Future research will also need to evaluate the extent to which licensure affects front-line practice and how different Emirates develop licensure renewal processes for their practitioners. At the time of writing (July, 2022), the Social Work Program at UAEU has received international accreditation, by the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) which means that future graduates from this program are eligible for licensing as social workers in Australia. Future research is needed to examine the impact and potential benefits of this in more depth.

Conclusions

This article has examined the current state of licensure in the UAE emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi, and while the progress made to date should be applauded, there is an acknowledgement that there is much more to do in order to achieve a regulatory process that meets the needs of this young country and profession.

While many argue that licensure will improve practice protections and enhance the professional status, continued attention to the cultural context of an emerging social work profession and processes that could support licensures such as social work education and supervision are considerations going forward so licensure can deliver on the expected outcomes for the profession and the public at large.

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