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# Creation of a social work practice plan: an attempt to learn from business and logic modelling

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## ABSTRACT

Social work practice is often criticised for lack of support of theories and research evidence. This article attempts to learn from business practice and proposes the creation of a plan as an essential part of social work practice and education to encourage the use of theories and research evidence in social work practice and to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and accountability of social work practice. Based on logic modelling, a modified logic social work practice plan is presented and illustrated using a case example. The plan incorporates basic social work elements and the elements of alternative interventions, monitoring and control as well as cost. The potential benefits of inclusion of practice plan in social work practice and the ways to promote the adoption of a practice plan in social work education and practice are discussed.

社会工作实践时常被批评缺乏理论和研究证据的支持。本文尝试向商业实践学习并提出把社会工作实践计划的建构作为社会工作实践和教育的基本构成要素，以鼓励社会工作者在实践中应用理论和研究证据，提升社会工作实践的效能、效率和责信度。基于逻辑模型，我们提出并通过案例来呈现一个修正的逻辑社会工作实践计划。此计划包含社会工作的基本要素以及社会工作介入的替代方案、监控和费用等要素。我们也探讨在社会工作实践中引入实践计划的潜在益处和推动在社会工作实践和教育中采用实践计划的途径。

## KEYWORDS

Logic modelling; business plan; cost effectiveness; social work practice; accountability

## Introduction

Social work practice is often said to be based on common sense, experience, tacit knowledge and practical wisdom (Munro 1999; Nevo and Slonim-Nevo 2011; Rosen 1994; Van de Luitgaarden 2009). Efforts have been made to change these perceptions of social work practice by advocating evidence-based practice (Gambrill 1999; Gilgun 2005; Thyer 2004) and promoting the adoption of a systematically planned, empirically based and outcome-oriented practice (Savaya, Altschuler, and Melamed 2013). This article contributes to these efforts by proposing the creation of a modified logic social work practice plan as an essential part of social work practice and education. This

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proposal is based on the understanding of the significance of a business plan in doing business and entrepreneurship education and the importance of logic modelling in social work programme development and evaluation. It is argued that the creation of the plan may facilitate the evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and benefits of practice; it also encourages the use of theories and research evidence and promotes the transparency of and people's support for social work practice.

This paper has five sections. The second section introduces the business plan and its implications for social work practice. Based on logic modelling, a modified logic social work practice plan that incorporates the basic elements of social work practice and alternative interventions, monitoring and control and cost is presented in the third section. A case example is also provided to illustrate the adoption of this modified model in practice. The fourth section discusses the benefits of a modified logic social work practice plan for social work practice and presents suggestions to promote its adoption in social work education and practice. The paper ends with a brief conclusion.

### **Business plan and its implications for social work education and practice**

A business plan has been essential in doing business and entrepreneurship education. It was argued that the construction of a business plan is the most important step when starting or growing your business (Barrow, Barrow, and Brown 2008). The development of a business plan was also found to be the most important course feature of entrepreneurship courses in research of leading entrepreneurship educators (Hill 1988). A business plan is “a written document that describes the current state and the presupposed future of an organisation” (Honig and Karlsson 2004, 29). It must include the goals of an enterprise, a description of products or services and market opportunities, an explanation of the resources and means employed to achieve the goals (Barrow, Barrow, and Brown 2008). A business plan can serve as a map for the entrepreneurs, guiding them from the basic business concept toward a healthy and successful business (Abrams 2003), and as a blueprint for them to achieve their targets (Barrow, Barrow, and Brown 2008). It can also provide the entrepreneurs with a sense of control on their business, serve as a framework for a wide range of critical activities such as the identification and costing of alternative promotional strategies, bolster their ability to convince potential funders of the value of the business and so on (Castrogiovanni 1996; Karlsson and Honig 2006; Zinger and LeBrasseur 2003). Research indicated that business planning reduces the likelihood of venture disbanding and accelerates product development and venture organisation by helping entrepreneurs make decisions, balance resource supply and demand and transform abstract goals into concrete operational steps (Barrow, Barrow, and Brown 2008; Delmar and Shane 2003). In recent years, a new business plan method called the lean start-up has contributed to making start-ups less risky and has become increasingly popular (Blank 2013).

Social work practice has been recognised to undergo a scientific planning process since Mary Richmond (1917) published *Social Diagnosis* that associated diagnosis with a type or planning for practice. The problem-solving model which involves clarifying the facts of the problem, thinking through facts and making choices or decisions (Perlman 1957). The generalist intervention model which covers the dialogue phase of building relationships and describing situations, the discovery phase of assessing

resources and planning change, and the development phase of implementing, evaluating and stabilising change (Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois 2016) may also be seen as other types of planning for practice. Furthermore, the development of action, treatment, service, intervention or practice plans was regarded as an important social work skill (Cournoyer 2016), particularly in social work programme development and evaluation (e.g. Brueggemann 2013; Parker and Bradley 2010; Rubbin and Babbie 2013; Savaya and Waysman 2005).

An action or practice plan in social work is similar to a business plan in business theoretically and practically. However, an action plan in social work generally focuses on either social work skills or guideline for interventions, rather than providing a clear blueprint or roadmap for practice such as a business plan in doing business and entrepreneurship education. A search of social work literature indicated that little empirical research was conducted to examine social work intervention, service, action, treatment, or practice plans. There were also few studies that address different ways or methods to do social work intervention, service, action, treatment, or practice plan.

It is acknowledged that business is centred on profit, while social work is centred on human rights and social justice. The contexts of social work practice are likely to be more complex given that social workers are often confronted with oppression and deprivation (Coulshed and Orme 1998). However, in businesses, entrepreneurs strive for maximum profits by providing the best products or services to clients. In social work practice, social workers strive for clients to obtain maximum benefits by providing the best interventions and services. Although entrepreneurs may be concerned more about their own interests and social workers are concerned more about client's interests, both of them need to provide the best services, interventions and/or products to achieve their aims. Considering such similarities, if a business plan has become essential in doing business and entrepreneurship education, a social work practice plan may also be promoted to be essential in social work practice and education due to the following reasons.

First, a social work practice plan would provide social workers with a sense of control in practice and serve as a valuable blueprint for the achievement of practice goals. Particularly, it will help keep the practice evaluation on a course and thus facilitate practice evaluation. Alter and Murty (1997, 104) argue that, “[u]nless there is a clear conceptual model at the beginning for short-term results and long-term outcomes, then baseline indicators cannot be selected and measured, and measurement, in general, will be error-prone and ineffective.”

Second, the provision of a social work practice plan to funders and other stakeholders would lead social workers to examine and reflect on their practice and develop awareness and responsibility for the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and benefits of their practice. Meanwhile, the provision of a social work practice plan to stakeholders provides transparency of the social work practice. Consequently, funders and other stakeholders can easily access or evaluate social work practice, which may inspire social workers to strive for creative thinking and self-improvement in their practice continuously.

Third, social work has been obsessed with professional status (Ehrenreich 1985; O'Neill 1999). The status of social work in the hierarchy of professions is relatively low (Khinduka 2001). If we expect the public and the government to increase respect

and support the social work profession, social workers may need to exert efforts for continuous improvement and show the public and the government the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and benefits of social work practice. Though a practice plan may not be required by funders and other stakeholders in social work practice, the provision of a social work practice plan will provide them with a better understanding about social work and will likely increase their support to social workers. Meanwhile, creating a practice plan and working in a planned manner will encourage social workers to function in a more logical and systematic manner, making practice more effective, efficient and accountable, and eventually contribute to an enhanced professional status and reputation.

Additionally, a social work practice plan may be specifically useful for China's social workers given that social work is still an emerging profession. There is a lack of qualified field supervisors (Chen, Wu, and Peng 2018; Liu, Sun, and Anderson 2013) and professional social work practice remains nascent. Creating a social work practice plan and working in a planned manner may serve as a roadmap to guide frontline social workers toward effective, efficient and accountable practice outcomes and partially compensate the lack of quality supervision in practice. Furthermore, China's government has adopted neoliberalism in social welfare, and the purchase of social workers' services has become a national policy (Wen 2017). A social work practice plan is likely to provide the government with a better understanding of social work practice and facilitate practice evaluation.

### **A modified logic social work practice plan**

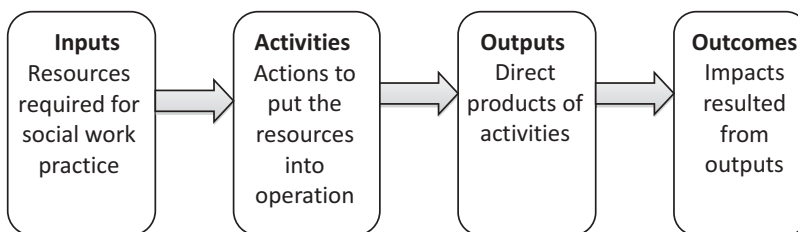
Planning is defined as the process of setting goals and courses of actions, developing rules and procedures and forecasting future outcomes (Snell and Bateman 2007). Researchers have outlined different approaches to creating a business plan. For example, Abrams (2003) suggests a five-step process consisting of (1) laying out the basic business concept, (2) gathering data on the specifics and on the feasibility of the concept, (3) focusing and refining the concept based on gathered data, (4) outlining the specifics of the business and (5) placing the plan in a compelling format. Snell and Bateman (2007) propose a six-step planning process, which included the following: (1) situation analysis, (2) alternative goals and plans, (3) goal and plan evaluation, (4) goal and plan selection, (5) implementation and (6) monitoring and control. Mason and Stark (2004) argue that the content of a business plan must be customised to suit the needs and requirements of different audiences. However, some central issues, such as viability, potential profit, downside risk, probable life cycle time and potential areas for dispute, must be noted by all audiences (Vesper 1996).

In social work, Parker and Bradley (2010, 66) indicate that a social work plan 'represents a detailed picture of a situation, those involved and what action might be taken, and by whom these actions might be taken in order to meet assessed or identified needs'. They also argue that a social work plan should include the elements of characterising a client, the client's environments, the client's needs, the interventions and the social workers who conduct the interventions. Cournoyer (2016) also points out that a social work action plan needs to answer who, what, where, when and how social workers and the clients will pursue the agreed-upon goals. Although different

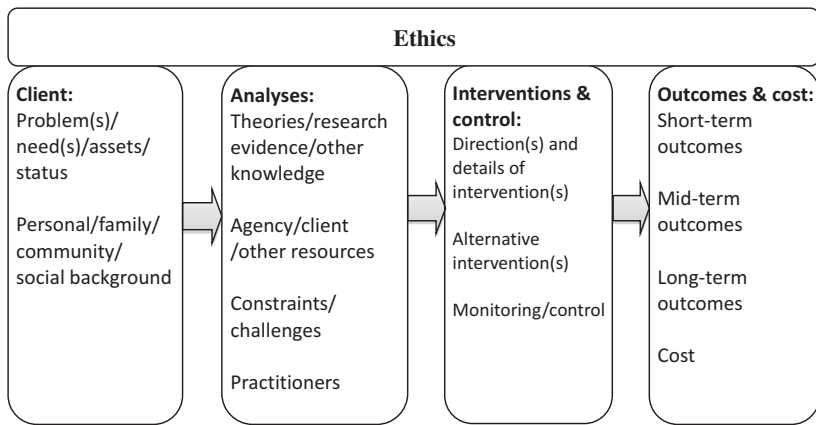
approaches or formats may be used to integrate social work elements into a detailed picture or do a social work practice plan, logic modelling, which has been introduced in social work literature (e.g. Alter and Egan 1997; Alter and Murty 1997; Brueggemann 2013; Randolph 2010; Rubin and Babbie 2013; Savaya and Waysman 2005), may provide social workers a compelling format with which to make a social work practice plan.

Logic modelling is based on the logical argument, “If X, then Y”, and arrows are used to convey the direct connection. Logic modelling is regarded as both a process of planning for purposive change and a structured method to plan an intervention (Alter and Egan 1997; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). In essence, logic modelling provides a perspective and also a framework to integrate the elements of social work practice into a systematic and detailed picture. A basic logic model of social work practice is shown in Figure 1. As shown in the Figure, inputs for practice may include human, financial, organisational and community resources. Activities are the actions that will subject resources into operation. Outputs are direct products of practice and may include various types and levels of services. Outcomes are changes in clients’ functions, such as behaviour, health, knowledge and skills. Other elements may also be included in a logic model. For example, the logic models illustrated by W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004) include the element of effect, which is defined as the fundamental change of practice and may be regarded as a long-term outcome. Alter and Egan (1997) suggest that the seven basic elements of a logic model for social work practice include a stated problem/need, a goal to be achieved, an objective that leads to goal achievement, input that refers to resources, methods that refer to activities, results that refer to short-term effects and outcomes that refer to long-term effects. Conrad et al. (1999) present a logic model template consisting of four elements: population and environment, theory and assumption, intervention, and outcomes. In summary, there have been a variety of types of logic models. Logic modelling has generally been regarded as a tool or technique in learning or practice. Even though some academics (e.g. Alter and Egan 1997; Alter and Murty 1997) indicate the usefulness of logic modelling in social work education and practice, little empirical research has been conducted to examine whether logic modelling does contribute to social work practice or social work students’ learning.

Based on logic modelling like the model in Figure 1 and the elements generally included in business plans (Abrams 2003; Barrow, Barrow, and Brown 2008; Vesper 1996), a modified logic social work practice plan, as shown in Figure 2, is proposed. The modified plan adopts logical thinking and includes the basic elements of social work practice and alternative intervention(s), monitoring and control and cost. As illustrated



**Figure 1.** A basic logic model of social work practice.



**Figure 2.** A modified logic social work practice plan.

in [Figure 2](#), the first step of this plan is to understand the client. Social workers must identify or assess the client's problem(s), need(s), strength(s), asset(s) and/or the status of their personal, family, community and social backgrounds. After obtaining information about the client, the second step is to perform analyses, which includes searching and examining theories, obtaining research evidence and/or gathering other knowledge related to the client's problem(s), need(s), strength(s), asset(s) and/or status, identifying an agency, client and other available resources for the practice, elucidating potential constraints and challenges in the practice and describing the qualification, capabilities, specialisation and role of each practitioner in the practice. The third step is to decide the direction(s) and details of intervention(s), suggest alternative intervention(s) that will be conducted if the primary intervention(s) is(are) not viable under some circumstances and design or arrange the monitoring and control of interventions such as supervision, implementation of rules and regulations to avoid mistakes, handling of possible risks and maximisation of effectiveness and efficiency of interventions. The last step is to define desired or expected outcomes, including short-term, mid-term and long-term outcomes and then estimate the cost of the practice. Given the value-based nature of social work, ethics is considered in all four steps. The unique characteristic of this modified logical model is the inclusion of alternative intervention(s), monitoring and control, ethics as well as the cost, which were rarely addressed in other logical models in social work literature.

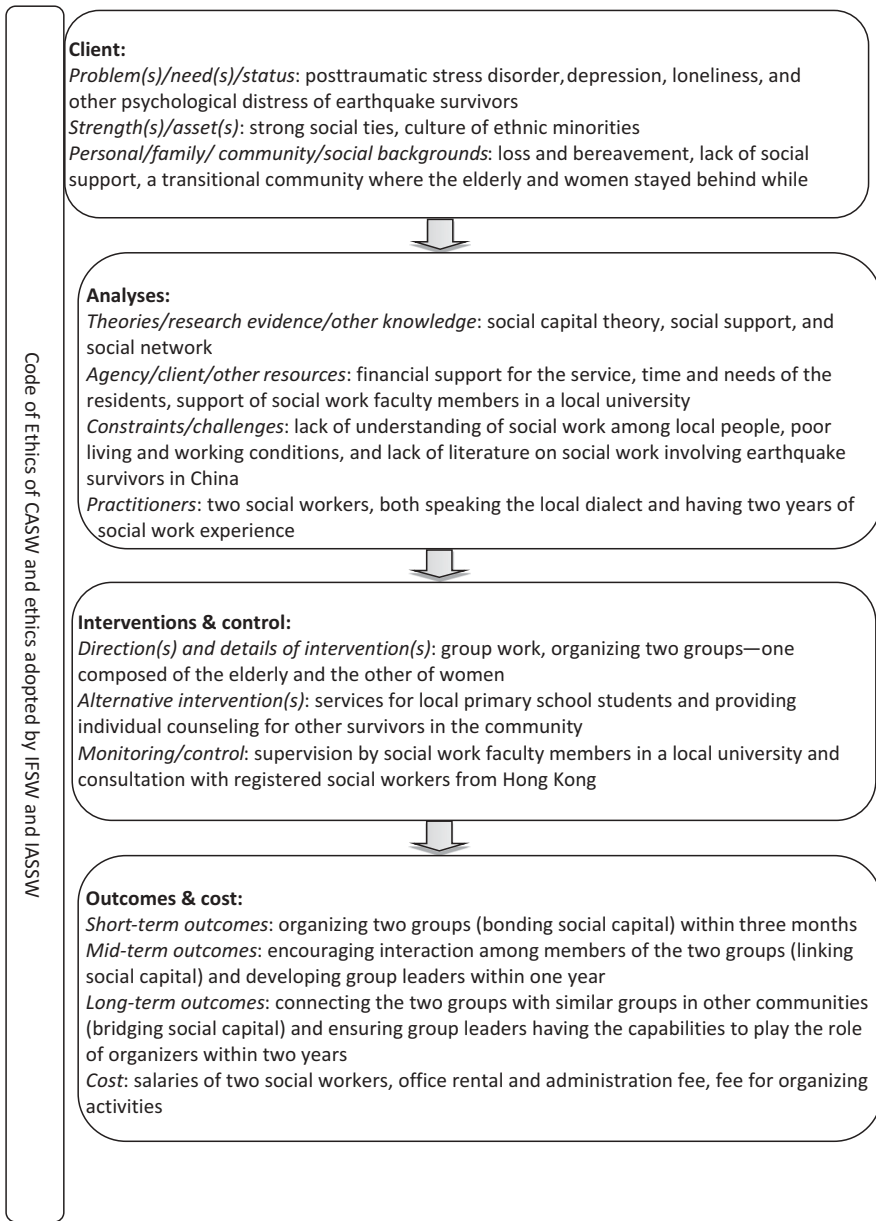
To illustrate the use of the modified logic model in a social work practice plan, a case example is provided. The case is a post-earthquake social work project in China, in which the two authors of this article served as supervisor and consultant, respectively, from 2009 to 2011. The project was financed by a Hong Kong funding body, and two social workers were recruited to provide social services for the survivors of the Wenchuan earthquake for three years. The Wenchuan earthquake measured intensity 8.0 on the Richter scale and hit the county of Wenchuan, Sichuan, China and its neighbouring regions on 12 May 2008. The community where the project was implemented was a portion of a village that the government selected to build transitional dwellings for homeless survivors. The community comprises around 1,800 transitional

houses and approximately 3,800 residents in early 2009. The residents, who were mainly Qiang ethnic minorities and thrived mainly on farming and whose houses collapsed during the earthquake or were transformed to transitional houses, were peasants from the local community or nearby villages and had almost never heard of social work before the earthquake. In the community, many young people, especially young men, either left their homes or worked in nearby construction sites during the daytime. The elderly, women, and children were mainly left behind. No social workers resided in the community. Occasionally, some volunteers visited the residents and provided services such as playing games with children. A needs assessment of the residents was conducted in June and July 2009, and the results revealed that many survivors felt distressed or depressed and were suffering from the trauma of the earthquake. Many reported that they did not know what to do and felt lonely and bored. Using the acquired data, a modified logic social work practice plan for earthquake survivors was created and is presented in [Figure 3](#).

In this case, the problem(s), need(s), strength(s), asset(s) and/or status of the clients were assessed to include the problems of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, loneliness and other psychological distress, and the strengths and assets as the strong social ties in the rural community and the culture of the ethnic minorities. The clients' personal, family, community and social background mainly included loss and bereavement after the earthquake, lack of social support and a transitional community where the elderly and women stayed behind as young people left and worked in urban areas.

In the second step of the analysis, the review of the literature indicated two main perspectives of working with psychological distress and other problems of disaster survivors. One perspective focuses on the individuals and the applied casework, counselling or clinical work conducted to change their cognition, perceptions and behaviours. The other perspective focuses on group or community and applies group or community work to strengthen the social support of clients or broaden their social network to enhance their resilience for various types of loss. The second perspective was selected for this case mainly because of the following three reasons. First, few social workers in China had strong clinical experience of working with disaster survivors. Second, residents are not familiar with or used to psychological counselling or seeking psychological support from professionals. However, they often gather together to dance the Shalang dance (a kind of circle dance) and have dinner or lunch in festivals and special events such as weddings and funerals. Third, given that only two social workers were hired due to limited financial resources available, group or community work can potentially help more survivors and tends to be more cost-efficient. The social capital theory that stresses bonding, bridging and linking capital (e.g. Hawkins and Maurer 2010) and the research on social support and social network (e.g. Kaniasty and Norris 2004) were drawn on to support the practice. Agency/client/other resources mainly included financial support for the service, time and needs of the residents, and support of social work faculty members in a local university. The constraints/challenges comprised (1) the lack of understanding of social work among local people, (2) the poor living and working conditions in the community and (3) the lack of literature on social work involving earthquake survivors in China. With respect to practitioners, two social workers with a bachelor's degree in Social Work were recruited. Both had two years of social work experience and can speak the local dialect.





**Figure 3.** A modified logic social work practice plan for the project with earthquake survivors.

For the third step of intervention and control, group work was selected as the direction of the intervention. Two groups would be organised. The first group was composed of the elderly and the second group was composed of women. To encourage the people to join the groups, recreational activities were launched. The alternative interventions were to provide services for children in the local primary school and to provide counselling for other earthquake survivors in the community because the two social workers had contacted and built a good relationship with the local primary

school and some residents. The monitoring/control involved the supervision by social work faculty members in a local university and consultation with registered social workers from Hong Kong.

Regarding the fourth step of outcomes, the short-term outcome was to organise the two groups (enhancing bonding social capital) within three months. The mid-term outcomes were to promote interactions among members of the two groups (building linking social capital) and to develop group leaders within a year. The long-term outcomes were to connect the two groups with similar groups in other communities (bridging social capital) and to ensure that group leaders had the capability to play the role of organisers within two years. The cost of the project included the salaries of the two social workers, the office rental fee and the administration fee and the fees for organising group activities such as tea for group members and parties for special Chinese festivals that include spring and autumn festivals.

With respect to ethics, the practice plan followed the *Code of Ethics* of the China Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2007) and the ethics of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2004). Principles, such as respecting the clients' right to self-determination, promoting the right to participation, recognising diversity and working in solidarity, were emphasised in the process of intervention.

It should be noted that the above-proposed practice was implemented in practice. As planned, social workers approached and invited older people and women to join the groups, taught them recreational activities, promoted group harmony, fostered group leaders and connected groups with other groups outside the community from 2009 to 2011. An evaluation study was later conducted to examine the outcomes of group work (Huang and Wong 2013). Research indicates that group work contributed to the social network, social support, mental health and physical health among members of both groups of older people and women. The planned short-term, mid-term and long-term outcomes were largely achieved.

The practice also has local characteristics. About the two groups, waist drum beating and dance were chosen by older people and women as their group activities respectively. One social worker learned waist drum beating and the other learned dance to teach older people and women the activities. Later the two groups were invited to play in some local events such as National Day's celebration organised by the local government and grand opening of local stores. Regarding two social workers, they lived in the community from 2009 to 2011. Their working hours mainly depended on the available time of local residents, and sometimes they worked in the evening or at night.

## Discussion

Unlike a business plan, a social work action, intervention, service, treatment or practice plan has not been well emphasised in social work practice and education. This paper suggests the creation of a practice plan is an essential part of social work practice and education. Based on the concepts of business planning and logic modelling, a modified logic social work practice plan is proposed. The modified logic practice plan shown in [Figure 2](#) may have its advantages. Potential benefits and suggestions to promote the adoption of this modified logic practice plan are discussed below.

### ***Potential benefits of the modified logic social work practice plan***

The modified logic practice plan adopts logic modelling, which can convey benefits to social work practice. First, logic modelling breaks down social work practice into parts and enables practitioners to picture the entire practice and understand the causal relationships between the parts (Alter and Egan 1997; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). Second, logic modelling clarifies the connection among theories, evidence, and interventions (Conrad et al. 1999; Schon 1987), which would encourage social workers to use theories, research evidence and other knowledge in their practice. Third, logic modelling “enables the application of critical thinking to assessment, intervention planning, and evaluation at the individual, organisational, and community level” (Alter and Egan 1997, 87) and a logic model can be used as a framework of and a blueprint for practice evaluation (Alter and Murty 1997).

Besides the basic elements of social work practice, the elements of alternative interventions, monitoring and control, and cost were incorporated. These new elements will likely bring the following benefits to social work practice. First, in some circumstances, even the best-planned interventions may be postponed because of changes in the environment and policies or the resignation of practitioners. The inclusion of the element of alternative interventions in the practice plan considers possible changes and enables social workers to prepare in advance to avoid negative consequences of possible changes. Second, in social work interventions, actual implementation activities often deviate from the plan (Alter and Murty 1997). The inclusion of the element of monitoring and control in a social work practice plan allows social workers to be more sensitive to possible changes, challenges, risks and/or barriers in practice and be prepared for them. Third, references to social work practice rarely mention the cost of social work practice. This lack of information on the cost of social work practice may result in the insensitivity of some social workers regarding the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of their practice. The inclusion of the element of cost in the social work practice plan requires social workers to examine costs and benefits and recognise their accountability to social work practice. Recent social welfare practice, such as the launch and practice of social impact bond (Social Finance 2011; The Centre for Social Impact 2012), has incorporated and highlighted the importance of private investment and cost in social welfare services and has attracted worldwide interest. This practice also implies that social workers need to be more sensitive to the concept of cost in practice. Furthermore, the inclusion of cost may inspire social workers to learn from other disciplines such as business and economics, which will aid in increasing the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of social work practice.

Ethics is one of the core elements of social work practice (IFSW and IASSW 2004). The inclusion of ethics in the practice plan highlights its importance in the actual practice of social workers and that they should be highly sensitive to this subject. Ethics also makes the practice plan comprehensive and systematic and cover elements of social work ethics, theories and/or research evidence and skills or techniques. Given that social work education is mainly to nurture students and practitioners’ understanding of the above three elements and to improve their capabilities to integrate and handle these elements in professional ways; the modified logic social work practice plan can be regarded as a channel for lifelong learning and education for social workers.

### ***Suggestions to promote the adoption of a modified logic social work practice plan***

Given the potential benefits of the modified logic social work practice plan for social work practice, the adoption of this practice plan is advocated in social work education and practice. To promote the adoption of this plan in social work practice, the following suggestions are provided.

First, social work educators may recognise the significance of a social work practice plan for social work practice and strengthen teaching social work practice planning in the classroom. Although the elements of social work practice, including ethics, theories, research evidence and skills are taught in the classroom, having these elements and skills does not mean that social work students are able to conceptualise the elements systematically in their practice. It was argued that the most serious hindrance of the practical judgment of social workers is that many of them are unaware of the factors that actually influence their judgment (Alter and Egan 1997; Arkes 1981; Goldstein 1993). If social workers are expected to conceptualise and conduct their practice in a scientific, systematic and/or professional manner, they may be taught the skills and processing abilities to create a social work practice plan. Meanwhile, concepts such as cost-benefit analysis and risk control, may be included in social work courses to help students perform an accurate estimation of required costs and aid them in preparing for possible risks in social work practice. In the field placement of social work students, educators may require students to submit a practice plan, which can be assessed and validated by both social work educators and practice supervisors before the students conduct their placement.

Second, social work agencies may support the idea of creating a social work practice plan as an integral part of social work practice. The agencies may invest in skills and knowledge training of social work practitioners in creating a practice plan. Furthermore, independent researchers may be hired to evaluate the practitioners' practice based on the practice plans, and seminars may be organised to help practitioners reflect on their practice plans and outcomes to facilitate self-improvement.

It should be noted that this article proposes the idea of making a social work practice plan essential in social work practice and education and presents an example to illustrate the use of the modified logic social work practice plan. Other approaches or frameworks may be used to create social work practice plans that have elements unlike those included in this article because of the diversity of social work clients and the complexity of social, political and economic contexts of social work practice. More research is needed to examine the applicability of social work practice plans, such as the one suggested in this article, in diverse circumstances or contexts of social work practice. The potential benefits of the inclusion of practice plans in social work practice and education should also be empirically studied.

### **Conclusion**

This article argues for learning from business practice and suggests the creation of a practice plan as an essential part of social work practice and education. Based on logic modelling, a modified logic social work practice plan is proposed. The plan

incorporates the basic social work practice elements and those of alternative interventions, monitoring and control, and cost. Adoption of this practice plan may contribute to the effectiveness, efficiency and accountability of social work practice. Social work educators and agencies are therefore recommended to encourage social work students and practitioners to create social work practice plans in their study and practice. More studies are also suggested to examine the potential benefits of the social work practice plan and the applicability of the plan in diverse social work practice contexts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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