1 Introduction

1.1 In 2006, Social Workers Registration Board conducted a large-scale survey on the practice of supervision among all social workers in Hong Kong. After that, a discussion paper was sent to every registered social worker (RSW) for consultation. In the consultation process, various social work organizations (e.g. Hong Kong Council of Social Services, Hong Kong Social Workers Association, Hong Kong Social Workers General Union, training institutes, staff associations, and agency heads) and were also consulted. One of the recommendations proposed after the consultation is to formulate a set of guidelines for the practice of supervision in Hong Kong.

1.2 In 2007, a task force on supervision guidelines under the Working Group on Professional Development was formed to look into the issue. A review of the practice of supervision in 14 human service organizations was conducted. The guidelines adopted by overseas social workers organizations were also examined. It was found that the supervision guidelines used by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the most comprehensive one in developed countries. Based on the AASW supervision guidelines and the context of the social work field in Hong Kong, the task force drafted this document for the purpose of collecting the views of social workers in Hong Kong.

1.3 The aim of this document is to develop a set of recommended standards for discussion in the social work field. It has clarified the responsibility of the agency, the worker, and the supervisor in relation to professional supervision.

1.4 Supervision is one of the core elements in the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice. Supervision is important to the quality of human service delivery and professional development of frontline social work practitioners. The primary objective of professional supervision is to enhance, ensure, and enable humanistic, competent, and independent social work practice. Ultimately, supervision should benefit service users.

1.5 The term “supervision” has a specific meaning in the social work field. It goes beyond the concept of line management which mainly monitors the job performance of the employees and efficiency of service programs.

1.6 The concept of supervision is broader than consultation. Supervision encompasses hierarchical administrative responsibility, which is part and
parcel of social work practice as it is practised in an organizational context of
a social service agency.

1.7 Supervision is most effective when it is valued by the agency, the supervisor,
and the supervisee, when all these parties give supervision a high priority, and
where there is recognition of the importance of supervision to the quality of
service and the needs of the supervisee as a professional practitioner.

1.8 Social work supervision consists of administrative, educational, and
supportive functions. All these three functions are inter-related and should be
fulfilled, but the ration could be based on the service context and needs of the
staff.

1.8.1 Administrative Function

This is a management function which includes the setting of service
objectives and priorities, clarification of roles, planning and
assignment of works; review and evaluation of work, and
accountability of and responsibility for the supervisee’s work.

1.8.2 Educational Function

This involves socialization of professional values, provision of
knowledge, and training of practice skills, which are the worker’s
necessary tools for effective professional practice. It also includes the
development of self-awareness and sensitivity of the social worker.
Educational supervision should be emphasized as a core component in
the professional development of the worker.

1.8.3 Supportive Function

It enables the supervisee deal with job-related issues, and with
developing attitudes and feelings conducive to effective job
performance. It sustains staff morale and gives the supervisee a sense
of professional self worth, and a feeling of belonging to the agency and
the profession.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL STANDARDS

2.1 Supervision should meet the needs of the supervisee, the supervisor, and the
agency; in order to provide effective services to the client(s) within the context
of the human service agency.
2.1 Rationale

Supervision should serve administrative, educational, and supportive functions unless it is specified with reasonable considerations.

2.1.2 Operationalization

It is preferably to have written supervision agreement in the human service agency which includes long-term professional development objectives and should be mutually negotiated and periodically reviewed by both the supervisor and supervisee. A reporting form of the supervisory practice or practice-related records, appropriate to the service setting(s) of the agency, should also be developed. While the criteria for assessing supervision will differ from agency to agency, the following simple guidelines are provided for reference:

a. Are both the supervisor and the supervisee(s) well prepared for the supervision sessions?

b. Is the supervisee’s workload monitored by the supervisor regularly?

c. Is the supervisee’s practice-related records reviewed by the supervisor regularly?

d. Is the process of professional intervention discussed in the supervision sessions?

e. Is there professional advice on service delivery giving by the supervisor?

f. Are the client outcomes reviewed and discussed?

g. Is there discussion on evaluation of service effectiveness and efficiency as accountability to the service agency and the community?

h. Are the ethical and legal issues implied in direct practice considered?

i. Is there discussion of the working relationships with other colleagues within the agency?
j. Are there opportunities for the supervisee to give feedback to the supervisor and the supervision?

k. Are issues related to the supervisee’s roles, professional identity, and staff morale discussed?

l. Are the supervisee’s long-term professional development needs addressed in supervision sessions?

m. Is there a supportive learning atmosphere for both the supervisor and the supervisee(s)?

2.2 The job duties of a social work supervisor related to supervisory responsibility in terms of time allocation, accountability, and lines of authority should be formally recognized by the agency. The duty list should also be periodically reviewed and assessed in regard to the feasibility of carrying out the specified duties.

2.2.1 Rationale

Adequate resources, accountability, and authority should be provided to support the practice of effective supervision.

2.2.2 Operationalization

The time fraction required for the supervision of each supervisee should be calculated (including time for preparation and evaluation) and the other responsibilities of the supervisor should be adjusted accordingly. A minimum level of individual supervision should be one uninterrupted hour every two months, exceptional cases could only be allowed with substantial reasons.

The proposed supervision time is subject to the following conditions of the supervision interview:

a. for professional growth
b. scheduled and prepared, and with aim
c. one-to-one
d. periodic and progressive
e. regular and systematic (Reasons should be recorded if not conducted.)

2.3 The agency should provide opportunities for the further development of the supervisor’s knowledge and skills in relation to supervision.
2.3.1 Rationale

The quality of supervision is dependent on the supervisory capacity and practice expertise of the supervisor.

2.3.2 Operationalization

The agency should enable the supervisor to attend courses, seminars, and conferences etc. relating to supervision and this should be included in the budget for staff development.

2.4 Agencies should develop an appropriate mechanism to assess and negotiate situations in which the supervisor-supervisee relationship is in difficulty.

2.4.1 Rationale

Supervision can be implemented effectively in an atmosphere of trustful and positive working relationship.

2.4.2 Operationalization

Procedures for dealing with a potential conflict which cannot be directly resolved between the supervisor and supervisee should be developed and this should be specified in the supervision agreement. Conflicts could be resolved by different means. For example, (a) peer mediation; if this fails, (b) the superior of the supervisor should try to mediate and review the possible structural sources of the conflict which are being expressed in the supervisor-supervisee relationship; (c) ultimately, of course, it may be necessary for the top management of the agency to arbitrate in relation to this conflict.

3 SUPERVISOR STANDARDS

3.1 It is recommended that the supervisor should possess at least five years of practice experience preferably in a relevant field of practice (but not necessarily in the particular sub-field).

(Note: The term ‘field’ used here refers to a broad client population and service system, such as “youth”. Specialized ‘sub-field’ is the specific areas which constitute the broad ‘field’ such as ‘outreaching services’. It should be recognized that where a supervisor does not meet these standards they will have to get professional support in carrying out their supervisory duties.)
3.2 It is encouraged that the supervisor has successfully completed a course in social work supervision.

3.3 It is encouraged that the supervisor has undergone further training in a field of practice or method of intervention relevant to the service, for example, specific training in a field or method on the job.

3.4 Rationale

Supervisors should have a higher level of practice experience than their supervisees and have had some training in supervision. It is unlikely that a person would be able to acquire and integrate the complexity of social work theory and practice without basic working experience.

4 MINIMUM SUPERVISION STANDARDS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE

4.1 Recent graduates (less than three years of full time experience) should receive face-to-face supervision at least one uninterrupted hour individual face-to-face supervision every month. The form of the supervision may vary according to the characteristics of the agency and practice situation. Group supervision is also encouraged to provide as a supplement. Attendance at staff meetings, team meetings, in-service training, workshops, and seminars, while constituting valuable sources of professional development, are not acceptable substitutes for supervision.

4.1.1 Rationale

Recent graduates have a particular strong need for supervision in order to consolidate the knowledge and skills attained in their social work education; successfully manage the stress related to assuming the responsibilities of a social work position; and be adequately prepared for becoming a supervisor themselves.

4.1.2 Operationalization

Supervision programs for recent graduates need to be tailored to the specific practice context which can be described as supervised practice.

4.2 Social workers with three or more years’ full time experience should have the equivalent of one uninterrupted hour of supervision in every two months. If peer supervision (by a colleague of the same rank) is chosen, responsibility for
accountability and review should remain the duty of the occupant of a senior position.

4.2.1 Rationale

a. Experienced social workers also need and have a right to expect an opportunity to formally use social work colleagues as a “sounding board” for consultation and reflection upon their own practice.

b. On occasions it may be appropriate for an experienced social worker to use the expertise of consultants of other professions/disciplines to further their own professional development goals.

c. If peer supervision is to be effective it is necessary that members be sufficiently experienced to know their own limitations as well as be able to share their strengths.

5 ALTERNATIVES IN THE ABSENCE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

5.1 In situation which these standards of supervision cannot be met within the agency, the agency should provide equivalent supervision or consultation opportunities. These may include:

a. Hire a qualified supervisor from another service unit with extra pay.

b. Hire a qualified supervisor from another agency.

c. Employment of a social work consultant on a part-time basis to provide educational and supportive supervision (administrative supervision remains a managerial responsibility).

d. External private consultation funded in part or whole by the agency (at least time in lieu for travelling and attendance). Where the person providing the consultation is paid by the agency, issues of accountability, confidentiality, and other possible ethical dilemmas need to be anticipated and clarified between all three parties (the agency, the consultant, and the social worker.)