

PROMOTING SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT THROUGH THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM: EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF UNISA'S NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS ..... 341

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**KEYWORDS:** employability, newly qualified social workers, fit for practice, employers' perspectives, open distance learning university, social work curriculum, qualitative research

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The silence about employers' perspectives on the employability of newly qualified Social Work graduates from the largest open distance-learning university in South Africa was highlighted as the problem for this study. Underpinned by the theory of collaborative advantage as the theoretical framework adopted for this study, and following a qualitative research approach, the researcher entered into a research partnership with the social work fraternity. The aim was to explore employers' perspectives on the employability of Unisa's newly-qualified social workers and to gather suggestions for promoting graduates' employment, and accordingly informing Unisa's social work curriculum. This paper reports on these perspectives and suggestions.

## PROMOTING SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT THROUGH THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM: EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF UNISA'S NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS

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### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

In striving for excellence and relevance institutions of higher education (IHEs) are confronted with two mutually related and influencing complex task-orientated processes.

Firstly, they have to maintain and improve the quality of their programme offerings and learning activities (Pavlin, 2014:586; Cai, 2013:457). Whilst executing this task, they need to impart to their students an array of knowledge, skills and competencies, personal attributes, attitudes and values as achievements or potentially measurable outcomes of their undergraduate teaching and learning that will promote gradueness that will favour their students' prospects of gaining professional employment (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK in Deeley, 2014:41; Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2012:809; Yorke, 2004:410; Minten, 2010:68). Fulfilling this fundamental educational function, which is considered to be a moral and social obligation, IHEs have to produce graduates who benefit from and contribute to society, their profession and the economy (Yorke, 2004:410; Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2012:809; Cai, 2013:1), as employers are increasingly looking for employees with particular skills and competencies that are aligned to and developed in relation to specific services (Agllias, 2010:345). Graduates are required to be prepared to meet the labour market's needs (Cai, 2013:457), to be "fit for purpose", or display a measure of "practice readiness" (Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens & Hussein, 2011:1345).

Secondly, the progressively competitive and ever changing labour market imposes a task on IHEs, namely that of increasingly reflecting on employment and employability, and to innovatively identify ways to ensure the employability of their own graduates (Pavlin, 2014:586). This task transports the "notion of employability" (Holmes, 2013:540) into the higher education (HE) arena, compelling IHEs to grapple with the question of what can or should be done to produce graduates "fit for practice" (Frost, Höjer & Campanini, 2013:329) and gainful employment (Holmes, 2013:541).

Governments and/or employers' pressure on IHEs prompts them to seek answers to this question. As a result, and on the basis of the literature consulted, various initiatives are proposed and called for to deal with this, such as an employability agenda; a discourse on employability that is clearly interlinked with the competency to practise the profession, and the inclusion of employability development courses embedded in academic programme offerings (Tymon, 2013:841,846; Holmes, 2013:541; Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2012:815). Cai (2013:466) summarises this train of thought as follows: "Universities should provide support for their students' preparation for the work force, with special attention to the relevance of their education programmes to the labour market's need and the quality of their graduates." This is pivotal, as employability is determined and influenced by the individual's gradueness attributes articulated in knowledge, experience, skills and personality traits; the university system's curriculum and pedagogy; and the expectations of those employers who employ the newly qualified graduates (Sumanasiri, Yajid & Khatibi, 2015:88). In addition, students' gradueness and

preparedness for practice are important in any professional occupation. It confirms the ability of the degree obtained to meet employers' and service users' needs, and it legitimises the quality of the university's education in providing properly prepared practitioners with professional identities that match the particular profession's standing (Frost *et al.*, 2013:329).

The respondents in Pavlin's (2014) study, comprising HE professors and managers from six European countries, and from six different study fields (including the social sciences), focusing on the role of HE in supporting graduates' early labour market careers, suggested that the best way to support graduates in terms of their career fit and being employable is to "tailor the study programmes to labour market needs ... and employers' demands" (Pavlin, 2014:583). In addition, they emphasise the importance of practical training as being quintessential in preparing graduates for the world of work (Pavlin, 2014:583). Other scholars (Tymon, 2013:853; Deeley, 2014:41) also regard work-based training and work-relevant skills as crucial, especially given employers' reports that graduates are not ready for the world of work, with some even lacking the most basic skills, attitudes and dispositions needed for employment (Tymon, 2013:841; Cummings in Tymon, 2013:842). With reference to the South African scene, the skills mismatch between scholarly programme offerings and labour market needs is given as the reason for the exacerbation of the country's existing skills shortages and this factor adversely affects the employability of tertiary-educated individuals (Kraak in Van Broekhuizen, 2010:1).

This notion of a "custom-built" or "tailor-made" curriculum "focusing on learning for and from professional practice" to address the mentioned skills mismatch, and contributing towards rendering employees fit for frontline practice, is also called for in the sphere of social work education (Domakin, 2014:719). In this regard, Engelberg and Limbach-Reich (2012:809), focusing on the employability of Bachelors graduates in social and educational work in Luxembourg, call for students to be equipped with the skills necessary to perform the roles and responsibilities related to their chosen professions. Concerning social work education and training specifically, these authors state that it should "be more closely interwoven with, preparedness or readiness to practise" (Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2012:809). Various reasons for justifying such calls are provided. In England and Scotland, as well as in Italy, for example, concerns have been raised about the significant level of disjunction and the gap between theory and practice learning; the perceptions that qualifying Social Work programmes do not foster the required practice skills, and criticisms about the teaching of abstract, non-practice connected and context-relevant theories and material in Social Work curricula (Domakin, 2014:719; Frost *et al.*, 2013:355). A perceived lack preparedness for frontline practice of Scotland's newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) has also been highlighted (Grant, Sheridan & Webb, 2017:488). Hiller (2010:15), in an editorial for *Children & Young People Now* on the topic "Social workers must be prepared", states that an alarming 93 per cent of social workers in the UK believe that new staff entering the profession lack the necessary skills to do their job properly. The Social Work Task Force launched by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in the UK in 2008 (quoted in Manthorpe, Harris & Hussein, 2012:638) voiced similar concerns, concluding that the country's then current social work education, training and career pathways were not producing social workers suited to the demands of frontline practice (Moriarty *et al.*, 2011:1341). A third of the 27 employers interviewed in the UK study by Manthorpe, *et al.*, (2012:641), which focused on employers' experiences and views in terms of growing employer-sponsored schemes for social work training, remarked (with concern) that from their organisations' perspectives, the general social work training programmes offered did not produce graduates fit and ready for practice.

In a South African study undertaken in the Cape Peninsula in the Western Cape province, De Jager (2013) investigated the preparedness of social work practitioners for beginning practice based on the reflections of newly qualified BSW graduates. These graduates, in reflecting on their undergraduate training, admitted to a lack of knowledge concerning the various pieces of legislation/Acts relevant to the different practice service fields. They felt poorly prepared to implement the Children's Act (Act No. 38 of 2005) and lacked the confidence required to assert themselves within the legal system. In their reflections they also mentioned challenges in applying the knowledge, theory and skills obtained during

their undergraduate studies in the various practice contexts as the terminology used by training institutions and in practice settings is not synchronised.

These concerns are noteworthy given the fact that social work education and practice worldwide have become increasingly controlled by legislation and open to public scrutiny with demands for service delivery (performance) and accountability (Agllias, 2010:345). Apart from being an academic discipline, social work is also an applied professional discipline (Shardlow, Scholar, Munro & McLaughlin, 2011:206), or a practice-based profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014) in which theory and practice are intertwined and mutually constitutive (Frost *et al.*, 2013:335). Social work practice – inclusive of legislation, policies, practice policy frameworks, the nuts-and-bolts of ‘how’ to do social work, as well as the current societal conditions – inform the Social Work curriculum and teaching. In turn, what is taught within the Social Work curriculum is utilised to promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). On the other hand, the social work theoretical curriculum focuses on the theory of the methods and skills of social work; the theories of social work; the social sciences and humanities; indigenous knowledge and the knowledge of human, social and economic development.

With social work theory and practice mutually interdependent and informing each other, understanding the nature and function of the interface between social work employers (or practice) and universities is crucial. Shardlow *et al.* (2011:206) endorse this view, stating that employer engagement is essential, especially where social work educational programmes require practice experience. Employers and employer organisations are probably the best placed to provide work-based training and experience (Tymon, 2013:846). This point of view underscores the role of employers in the education and training curricula of their current and future workforces (Haynes *et al.*, 2013:220). Moriarty *et al.* (2011:1348) also acknowledge the importance of close partnerships between schools of social work and social work agencies and employers both in developing and delivering curricula, and in contributing to the employability agenda of rendering social work graduates fit for practice as well as employable. Developing better working partnerships between universities and employing agencies to improve both social work education and practice standards featured as one of the key goals among a range of proposals following the critical review of social work performance in the UK (Wilson, 2014:4).

This led the author to reflect on the following questions: To what extent, if at all,

- are social work employers involved in evaluating the NQSWs’ employability and fitness for practice?
- do social work employers overtly and/or covertly inform the employability agenda imbedded in the programmes of the schools of social work to deliver NQSWs that are employable, fit and ready for beginning social work practice?
- are social work curricula a reflection of market needs, market participation and shared responsibility between schools of Social Work and the social welfare fraternity?

In turning to the literature to find answers to the questions posed, the study by Shardlow *et al.* (2011) of the nature and extent of employer engagement in qualifying social work education programmes across 10 countries (including South Africa) found the following:

- Employer engagement in the process of social work-programme accreditation was not a universal requirement;
- Prescriptions for employer engagement in the qualifying social work education programmes were not mentioned;
- The collaboration between the universities and employers centred mainly on the issue of providing students with practical work placements and experiences;

- Little evidence was found of clear strategies and mechanisms for employers and universities to take into account local and national workforce requirements as far as both the selection of students and admission processes were concerned;
- Employers had very little to no influence either on the number of students recruited or on the selection criteria or admissions process of these students;
- Scattered best-practice examples, testifying to the involvement of employers in the design and the development of the curriculum on a small scale by key individual staff members within each university/social care agency, were reported. This was in most cases in response to the mutual needs of social work employers and the university.

Apart from the abovementioned summary of the findings from the study by Shardlow *et al.* (2011), no reference was made to employers' involvement in the evaluation of Social Work programmes and in evaluating the NQSWs' employability and fitness for practice. Manthorpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Hussein and Sharpe (2014:97, 108) in a study conducted in England of 23 line managers to investigate, inter alia, how well their social work education prepared NQSWs for beginning social work practice, point to the neglect of social work managers' perspectives in terms of supervising NQSWs and their readiness to practise. Perry (in Moriarty *et al.* 2011:1344) also emphasises the fact that line managers' and supervisors' ratings (as representatives of the social work employer agencies) of NQSWs' practice-fitness are largely absent.

This lacuna in the body of knowledge on employers' perspectives on the employability of NQSWs, in view of promoting graduates' employment by informing the Social Work curriculum, is regarded as the research problem for the proposed study. Creswell (2016:88) classifies this as a "literature-related" problem, because "the topic has been understudied", and "there is little research on the topic." Maree (2016:29) claims that such "stillness" in the literature should prompt an investigation of the specific topic.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

The Unisa Department of Social Work, 2013, (UDSW), as the only open and distance-learning IHE for social work in South Africa, is cognisant of:

- its responsibility to prepare and assist students to enhance their prospects of employability; and
- the fact that social work education and training need to be relevant and responsive to the demands of social work practice and to the requests of practice that NQSWs must be ready and prepared to enter social work practice.

Therefore, the UDSW acknowledges the necessity to engage peers at regular intervals in reviewing its social work programme as part of the Department's continuous agenda for maintaining quality assurance. The aim of these reviews is to ascertain the viability and fitness of the undergraduate programme offered. To this effect, the Department of Social Work underwent three programme peer reviews during the period 2009 – 2013.

The first Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme review was internally organised by Unisa and was conducted on 28 and 29 October 2010, using external peers in the profession. Professor D Thabede<sup>‡</sup> from the Department of Social Work, University of Venda and Professor S Green of the Department of Social Work, University of Stellenbosch, were contracted for this programme review.

A second external review was conducted in May 2012 by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). As the statutory body established in terms of Section 2 of the Social Service Professions Act, (Act No. 110 of 1978, as amended), the SACSSP is mandated to serve by protecting the best interests of the social service practitioners, professions and service users by regulating, leading and promoting the social service professions in an innovative and responsive manner. The SACSSP's review focused on evaluating the 27 exit-level outcomes of the Bachelor of Social Work qualification registered on the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) database. It had to assess if the Department's programme covers all 27 prescribed exit-level outcomes inclusive of the associated

assessment criteria and critical cross-field outcomes. Meeting these outcomes eventually makes Unisa's student social workers eligible for registration as social workers with the Council, in terms of the Social Service Professions Act (Act 110 of 1978 as amended).

The third review (also external) was conducted in August 2013, based on the self-evaluation report (SER) prepared by the Department of Social Work (Unisa Department of Social Work, 2013) for a site visit by the CHE's Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). This was part of the national review of all the programmes of the Schools/Departments of Social Work in South Africa conducted by the South African Council for Higher Education (CHE).

As far as the students in the UDSW are concerned, various research projects have been conducted to investigate the students' personal and learning-related situations in the context of open and distance learning (Lawlor, 2008; Lintvelt, 2008; Schenck, 2009; Wade, 2009; Alpaslan & Lombard, 2011, Alpaslan, Schenck & Angelopulo, 2013; Schenck, Alpaslan & Angelopulo, 2014).

To date, the UDSW has not embarked on a research project focusing specifically on the topic of the employability of its NQSWs with a view to informing the employability agenda and its social work curriculum. The proposed research project will address the recommendation in the CHE review framework stipulations calling for such reviews at regular intervals. The Department in its SER submitted for this CHE's National Reviews of the Bachelor of Social Work (2013:432), stated: "The reason for not 'commending' the Department in this regard [i.e. in terms of programme reviews] is that the review processes should be more planned in terms of its regularity pertaining to intervals, as well as incorporating the alumni and employers in the review processes."

This research endeavoured to address the previously mentioned limitation by exploring employers' perspectives on the employability of Unisa's NQSWs and factors influencing their employability. In addition, it was planned to gather suggestions on how the curriculum needs to be adjusted to promote the prospects of graduates' employability.

Cai (2013:466) recommends that employers' perceptions of the factors affecting employability need to be investigated in order to assist HE providers to develop relevant strategies to promote their graduates' future employment. In addition, research into the experiences of employers' engagement with NQSWs will also address another related aspect of employability, namely the transition from student social worker to social work practitioner (Agllias, 2010:359).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For Thomas (2017:97), the concept of "theory", refers to "a developing body of explanation" – some sort of organising template one might use in approaching the phenomenon under investigation and the research findings emanating from it, so as to uncover their interconnectedness to understand how and why it exists. The theory can act as a tool for explaining aspects related to the topic being investigated (Thomas, 2017:99).

The *theory of collaborative advantage* of Huxham and Vangen (in Wilson, 2014:5) was adopted as a theoretical framework to function as tool for illustrating the partnerships between universities and communities, and their mutually constitutive advantages for teaching, research and practice benefitting both social work education and social work practice (Huxham & Vangen in Wilson, 2014:5; Strier, 2011:82). For Wilson (2014:5), the spinoffs resulting from collaboration between schools of Social Work and the social welfare fraternity are the following:

- It provides and ensures access to a greater range of resources. The partnerships of schools of Social Work with welfare organisations may result in practical work placement settings being made available for student social workers to do their practical work;
- It allows for the cross-pollination of theory, skills and insights from practice – creating opportunities for mutual learning, enhancing the efficiency of social welfare service delivery, benefiting both the social work profession and the service users.

These spinoffs prompted the researcher to adopt this theory of collaborative advantage and to enter into a research partnership with employers of the social welfare fraternity aiming to find answers to the following research questions:

- What are employers' perspectives on the employability of Unisa's NQSWs?
- What are employers' suggestions concerning the adjustment of Unisa's Social Work curriculum to promote social work graduates' employability?

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher opted for a *qualitative research approach* for this investigation. This decision was informed by Creswell's (2014:20) suggestion to follow a qualitative research approach when an issue, such as employers' perspectives on the employability of Unisa's NQSWs (UNQSWs), has being understudied (Creswell, 2016:88). In addition, as the aim of this investigation was to explore and understand the perspectives of participants and obtain suggestions from them, the qualitative lens for this investigation seemed appropriate (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011:10; Green & Thorogood, 2009:38). The researcher consequently employed *a collective instrumental case study design together with an explorative, descriptive and contextual strategy of inquiry*.

Investigating a phenomenon (as with the case of the employability of UNQSWs) from the perspectives of multiple cases (various employers) can then be called a "multiple case study" or a "collective case study" design (Creswell & Poth, 2017:99; Thomas, 2016:172; Stake, 2005:445). Case study research can also have instrumental purposes, such as to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic being explored (Creswell & Poth, 2017:98), to assist with the refinement of a theory (Thomas, 2016:121; Snow, Wolff, Hudspeth & Etheridge, 2009:234-244), or to inform policy development or professional practice (Simons in Thomas, 2016:10). The latter purpose applied to this study; as the collective case study design was instrumentally used with the intention of eliciting employers' perspectives on the employability of UNQSWs and to request their suggestions to inform Unisa's social work education and training curriculum development, ultimately benefiting social work practice and its NQSWs' employability prospects.

*Explorative research* is embarked upon when the need is to generate knowledge about a relatively understudied topic (such as the one being reported on) (Flick, 2015:111; D'Cruz & Jones, 2014:21). *Descriptive research* entails comprehensively observing the issue being investigated and subsequently providing a detailed description of the outcome of such exploration (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:80-81; Marshall & Rossman, 2011:69). Qualitative research is *contextually* situated. For this reason it is important to explain the context in which the research topic and its findings are situated (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:272). This will be provided before the presentation of the first theme below.

The aspect of participant recruitment in qualitative research touches on the aspects of *population and sampling procedures to recruit participants for the study*. A prerequisite to participant recruitment is clearly defining the study's population (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:85), with this concept denoting the total group of people concerned with the issue being investigated from which a sample is drawn to obtain the information required (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008:552). The population for this study was all state departments (SDs) and non-governmental welfare organisations (NGOs) in the nine provinces of South Africa that had UNQSWs in their employ who had graduated less than 36 months before.

As Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (in Punch, 2016:82) rightly point out, "you cannot study everyone, everywhere, doing everything"; a sample has to be drawn. In qualitative research purposive sampling is the best strategy to obtain "information-rich" cases from which one can learn a great deal about the issues central to the purpose of the study, providing in-depth insight into the topic being investigated (Creswell, 2014:189; Maxwell, 2013:97; Reybold, Lammert & Stribling, 2012:700). The researcher applied the following selection criteria in purposively selecting information-rich participants:

employers/social work managers/supervisors from the Provincial Departments of Social Development (DSD), other SDS and NGOs in the nine provinces of South Africa,

- who directly supervise UNQSWs in their employ;
- who were willing to participate in the research, irrespective of gender and age; and
- who were able to converse in English or Afrikaans, as these are the languages spoken by the researcher.

Especially where human subjects are involved, obtaining ethical clearance and permission to conduct a research project is essential and non-negotiable (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:66). Prior to embarking on this research journey, the researcher sought ethical clearance and permission from the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Social Work at Unisa (Ethical Clearance Number: DR&EC\_2015/10/27/90160355/002) to conduct this study. In addition, he formally applied for permission to conduct the study amongst the social workers in the Department of Social Development (DSD). This was requested from the national DSD and once it had been granted, he requested permission from the respective provincial offices of the DSD.

The researcher opted for *email-interviews* (King & Horrocks, 2010:86-87), to *collect the data* required on the topic being investigated from 22 participants. Guest, Namey. & Mitchell, (2013:162) explain this asynchronous type of interviewing as follows: the researcher “conducts the interview by sending the interviewee the list of questions and having her send back the responses.” In this research project, and as contracted, this was not a once-off activity. In some instances the researcher responded to the answers provided by participants and requested further elaboration and clarification of the information provided. The 15 participants from the State Department (SD) completed the data-collection questions as a writing exercise in a group-administered set-up when the researcher met with them on 15 June 2018. Afterwards the researcher facilitated a focus group discussion where topics central to this research were further discussed and elaborated for the purpose of providing additional data, leading to methodological rigour or data triangulation (King & Horrocks, 2010:61-62; Guest *et al.*, 2013:172).

The researcher employed the six-phase outline of Braun and Clarke (2006:87) to analyse the collected data thematically. This entailed immersing himself in the data generated; developing codes for topical segments of data, and coding them; turning codes into themes and grouping together the data belonging to a specific theme; scrutinising the data grouped under each theme for any mismatches; consolidating the theme names, ensuring that they were clear, descriptive and self-explanatory; and then commencing with reporting the research findings under the established themes.

Concerning the aspect of the trustworthiness of the study and the findings being reported, Creswell (2016:191-194) proposes lenses for use by the researcher, the participants and the readers and reviewers of a report to assess and ensure that the research process and findings are logically and factually sound. The researcher accordingly used triangulation of data sources and data methods employing different and multiple data-collection methods (such as email-interviews and a focus group discussion) and various participants to enhance the study’s legitimacy (Thomas, 2017:153; Creswell, 2016:191; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:193; Shenton, 2004:66). Their perspectives and suggestions established, informed and substantiated the themes presented in this article. He also employed the strategy of member checking by requesting some of the participants to check their responses to some of the questions for further elaboration and clarification. In order to allow for the readers and reviewers of this publication to make an assessment of the transferability or fittingness of the findings to other contexts and the credibility of the research findings (Creswell, 2016:194; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195), the researcher endeavoured to provide a detailed, thick description of the research methodology employed, the research setting, the participants and the themes with supporting storylines.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The research findings are presented in two sections:

- the biographical profile of the participants; and
- a discussion on the themes and sub-themes substantiated by the participants' accounts and complemented by a literature control.

### The biographical profile of participants

A total of 37 participants from the nine provinces in South Africa, with the largest concentration from the Gauteng province, participated in this study. The biographical particulars are presented in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1**  
**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON THE PARTICIPANTS**

Pseudonym <sup>1</sup>	Gender	Age	Job title	State Department (SD)/ Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) employed at
Sipho	Male	49	Deputy Director, Social Work Services	SD, Gauteng
Desiree	Female	46	Area Manager, Social Work Services	SD, Gauteng
Alice	Female	57	Social Work Manager	SD, Gauteng
Blommie	Female	41	Social Work Supervisor	SD, Gauteng
Megan	Female	52	Social Work Supervisor	SD, Gauteng
Deidre	Female	39	Social Work Supervisor	SD, Gauteng
Pomp	Female	54	National Deputy Director, Social Work Supervisor	SD, Gauteng
Lefa	Female	45	Social Work Supervisor	SD, Gauteng
Samson	Male	47	Area Manager, Social Work Services	SD, Gauteng
Jenna	Female	44	Area Manager, Social Work Services	SD, Gauteng
Matshediso	Female	53	Social Work Manager	SD, Gauteng
Olivia	Female	49	Social Work Manager	SD, Gauteng
Jennifer	Female	46	Social Work Supervisor	SD, North West
Jaansi	Female	49	Social Work Manager	SD, Western Cape
Dlamini	Female	48	Social Work Manager	SD, KwaZulu-Natal
Evert	Male	62	Social Work Manager	NGO, Free State
FS Mentor	Female	52	Social Work Supervisor	NGO, Free State
Albertina	Female	60	Social Work Manager	NGO, Eastern Cape
Alet	Female	53	Regional Manager & Supervisor	NGO, Eastern Cape
Lurencia	Female	61	Deputy Director (Retired)	DSD, Gauteng
Loluthando	Female	63	Director	NGO, KwaZulu-Natal
Dinah	Female	61	Director	FB (Faith-based) NGO, Eastern Cape
Jolinda	Female	34	Social Work Manager	NGO, Free State
Annabel	Female	56	Programme Manager & Supervisor	FBO, Gauteng
Susanne	Female	40	Supervisor	NGO, Mpumalanga
Sonita	Female	51	Supervisor	NGO, Mpumalanga
Nita	Female	34	Manager Psychological Services	NGO, Gauteng <sup>2</sup>
Lerato	Female	39	Social Work Supervisor	NGO, Gauteng <sup>3</sup>
Mpepsho	Female	64	Social Work Manager & Supervisor	SD, Health Services, KwaZulu-Natal
Veshanti	Female	56	Social Work Manager & Supervisor	NGO, KwaZulu-Natal
Suveshni	Female	50	Regional Manager & Supervisor	NGO, KwaZulu-Natal
Rhonah	Female	62	Supervisor	FB-NGO, Gauteng
Uneska	Female	56	Regional Manager & Supervisor	NGO, Western Cape
Isolde	Female	38	Social Work Supervisor	Social Worker in Private Practice, Gauteng
Cindy	Female	45	Regional Manager and Supervisor	NGO, Limpopo
San-Mari	Female	53	Manager Social Service Programmes	FB-NGO, Western Cape <sup>4</sup>
Thombekulu	Female	46	Chief Social Worker & Supervisor	NGO, Gauteng <sup>5</sup>

**Note:**

Key: 1- Some of the participants chose their own pseudonyms, while others left it to the researcher to do so.

Key: 2, 3, 4, 5 – Apart from the three NGOs in Gauteng identified with a 2, 3 and 4 providing social welfare services to people with physical disabilities and to clients in respect of end-of-life care, respectively, all the other NGOs and FB NGOs primarily render child and family welfare services.

Table 1 shows that three participants were male and the rest female. This corresponds with the trend that social work is a female-orientated profession (Alpaslan & Lombard, 2011:434). The participants' ages ranged from 34 to 64 years of age. All the participants, irrespective of their job titles, confirmed their previous and current involvement in supervising UNQSWs in their employ who had graduated less than 36 months before.

### Discussion of the findings

The research findings are presented under three main themes, with sub-themes under themes two and three. Before commencing with the presentation of the first theme, the context against which this thematic presentation must be read needs to be provided. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the UNISA Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme was reviewed as part of the CHE's National Review of the BSW programmes that was concluded in 2014. Following this review, the decision by the HEQC was that "The Unisa BSW programme was to be 'put on notice of withdrawal of accreditation' and an Improvement Plan (IP) developed to address the recommendations in the report" (Council for Higher Education, 2015:2). As requested, an improvement plan was submitted by Unisa at the end of March 2015. The CHE's National Review Committee (NRC) met on 27 May 2015 to evaluate all the improvement plans received. After the evaluation of the Unisa improvement plan, the NRC recommended that the programme not be accredited and this decision was endorsed by the HEQC (Council for Higher Education, 2015:10). Unisa then had to submit a teach-out plan to serve the cohort of students currently still in the system. Therefore, the findings presented here reflect the perspectives of the participants on this de-accredited programme, but their suggestions have relevance for the new BSW qualification accredited by the SAQA and which is currently being phased in (since January 2018).

### THEME 1: FACTORS RENDERING THE UNQSWs TO BE EMPLOYABLE

Being employed at an NGO or a SD whilst studying towards qualifying as a social worker and/or doing their practical work at these settings assisted some of the UNQSWs in obtaining employment afterwards. Confirming this, the following accounts are provided:

*"The benefit ... is that we already know the person whilst studying through UNISA as well as working with us."* (Sonita)

*"...only students from UNISA who have done their practical work at our organisation were appointed."* (Jolinda).

*"X [Name of NGO] prefer students who did their practical work at a statutory welfare organisation, preferably at the [name of NGO] itself."* (Annabel)

*"We give preference to those who did prac [practical work] in the X [Name of SD] ... they have knowledge, experience of the organisations ... we do not have to teach them from scratch when they are appointed."* (Alice)

Another aspect mentioned by some participants which made UNQSWs to be employable is that they were more mature in terms of age, and that they already had some life experience, as well as experience in the world of work. Alet wrote: *"The 2 social workers I have appointed were more mature and they paid for their own studies ... [and] were more serious about the profession they chose."* Cindy's comment related to this aspect was: *"...wat ook waardevol was ... sy [referring to the UNQSW] het eers gewerk ... iets anders gedoen en dus baie meer lewenservaring gehad."* San-Mari wrote: *"Ek het ookal 'n ouer werker gehad wat by UNISA ... studeer het nadat sy in 'n ander beroep was. Sy was gemotiveerd, hardwerkend en het baie*

*goed aangepas. Sy kon ook druk hanteer.*” The aspect mentioned and the participants’ comments correspond with a belief held by the English social workers in the study of Campanini, Frost & Höjer, (2012:38) that age and experience are important assets in social work education and practice.

Some of the UNQSWs’ tendencies to be self-driven and their ability to work independently were also highlighted as an aspect favouring them in terms of employability. The following accounts testify to this:

*“... some have the ability to work well independently and under pressure. Their attitude is always a positive ... and ... open for more learning.”* (Samson)

*“Both Unisa social workers and Unisa students in the past, as well currently, normally come to the organisation with a positive attitude. They seem to be eager to learn about X [Name of NGO] as organisation.”* (Uneska)

*“... eagerness to function in an X environment [Name of the SD] ... positive and willing to learn.”* (Pomp)

*“Some of them are self-driven; they have the ability to work independently, as they are used to that. [This is especially true] if they did do their practicals in the X [Name of the SD]; they understand the immediate working environment.”* (Jenna)

*“UNQSWs are employable in our organisation because ... [they are] able to function independently ... They have a positive attitude to render services to clients.”* (Lefa)

In a few instances participants mentioned that the knowledge and skills levels of particular NQSWs worked in favour of their employability. Cindy’s account about a mature UNQSW appointed is provided as an example: *“...haar KENNIS van hoogstaande gehalte. Sy is heeltemal in staat om haar teorie in die praktyk te integreer ... ek was verbaas in haar vaardighede in terapie (speltherapie) en rapport met kinders.”*

Sipho commended the UNQSWs’ knowledge about the person-centred approach when he wrote: *“It seems that Unisa only focuses on it – person-centred approach and they [referring to the UNQSWs] know it well.”*

Uneska also wrote: *“They have a thorough understanding of the person-centred theory.”*

## **THEME 2: FACTORS CAUSING UNQSWs TO BE UNEMPLOYABLE**

The participants’ accounts related to this theme led the researcher to the decision to present it under various sub-themes.

### ***Sub-theme 2.1 Lack of passion for the profession and a service attitude; lack of self-confidence; and inability to function independently led the UNQSWs to be unemployable***

This sub-theme emerged during the focus group discussion. To substantiate it, the following accounts are provided:

*“Some lack the passion for really doing social work.”* (Jolinda)

[An attitude where] *“they feel ‘in charge’ of clients, instead of displaying a service attitude.”* (Olivia)

*“Expecting to be “spoon fed” and not willing to adhere ... to organisation practices and traditions.”* (Jennifer)

*“The UNQSWs are very unprofessional ... Following instructions is very hard ... they tend to behave like non-professionals ... both personally and professionally.”* (Loluthando)

*“They ... lack self-confidence. You really need to take them by the hand; it takes long for them to work independently. Lack the theory to integrate into practice. Many of them are undisciplined ... lack self-knowledge and self-confidence ... and the basic skills of what a social worker should do and how to run an office.”* (Sipho)

*“Very unsure to work independently and needs assistance ... Insecure to move out of the office into the work environment – prefer casework only” (Blommie)*

*“UNQSW ... take longer ... to adjust to organisation’s work procedures and processes. Too much dependency on supervision and case management guidance [which] ... does not add value when organisations are short staffed.” (Jaansi)*

This aspect of “*lack of self-confidence*” also surfaced as theme during the focus group discussion.

Thombekhulu specified the lack of self-confidence surfacing in relation to job interviews: they are not “*able to express themselves in [a] convincing way in the interview.*”

Linked to this Nita wrote: “*[job] applicants lack professionalism regarding the application procedure. Many CVs are highly unprofessional, riddled with typing errors and lack ... thorough background information ... such as where and when qualifications were obtained.*”

### ***Sub-theme 2.2 UNQSWs’ lack of exposure to statutory and court work and their lack of knowledge about the relevant pieces of legislation and various court reports cause them to be unemployable***

The following participant accounts support this sub-theme:

*“[Lack of] statutory intervention experience ... knowledge of [the] relevant act and policies [and] ...knowledge of court work ... None of UNQSWs had any exposure to children’s court or statutory procedures. Their knowledge of ... parenting plans, individual plans and assessments is all theoretical (superficially) and was never executed in practice. They bluntly state that they are not adequately prepared for statutory social work.” (Evert)*

*“... there is the lack of thorough knowledge on the Children’s Act and the statutory process at court.” (FS Mentor)*

### ***Sub-theme 2.3 Poor command of the English language and poor report-writing skills as factor rendering UNQSWs unemployable***

Eight of the participants, (Alice, Blommie, Pomp, Jenna, Evert, Anabel, Veshanti and Suveshni) in their email-interviews wrote about UNQSWs’ poor command of the English language and poor report-writing skills. This is also confirmed by Thomas, Schuster and Fuller (2016:35), stating that “*it is common for BSW students to enter practice settings without first learning to write documents.*” The following accounts reflect the participants’ common views:

*“I think English as a second language is a challenge.” (Alet)*

*“[They] write very poor reports as their English/grammar is poor.” (Veshanti)*

*“Report writing is not up to standard.” (Blommie)*

*“Report-writing skills are extremely bad.” (Jenna)*

*“When it comes to report writing referring to specific act or sections or regulations of the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 the Unisa graduates [had] less or no exposure while studying. They have no idea what the different forms in the Children’s Act are for, and how to complete [them]. The same applies when it comes to working with foster care.” (Evert).*

### ***Sub-theme 2.4 Unisa’s primary focus on the person-centred approach and NQSWs’ inability to integrate theory into practice***

While the UNQSWs’ knowledge about the person-centred approach was commended, Siphon mentioned as a critique: “*They know about the person-centred approach – and that is the only [theory] they know and sometimes want to know. [This creates] a challenge for them to integrate the other theories.*”

Lurencia shared a similar view: “*PCA [referring to the person-centred approach] overshadows or models which hampers the social worker’s effectiveness [as they tend to] allow their clients to direct*

*the interviews and they see their role as to just reflecting ... [As a result] they find it difficult to integrate the theory into practice because in using mostly the PCA approach."*

Alet wrote: *"Up till now the main focus of Unisa's training was ... based on the person-centred approach, while in the child protection field an integrated approach is followed with the main focus [being] on the developmental approach and the strength-based perspectives. The curriculum only includes one portfolio on the Children's Act. No practical requirements on statutory report writing seem to be included in the practical requirements. The focus seems to be on counselling and less on the protection of children, which, in the child protection field, is the other way round."*

Dlamini: also noted that *"UNQSWs are unable to integrate their theory into practice."*

### ***Sub-theme 2.5 Lack of earlier, varied and more practical work exposure during undergraduate training***

In each of the interviews conducted with the 14 NQSWs in the study by Campanini *et al.* (2012:45), "field placement was considered one of the pillars in the socialization for the profession, affording the possibility of developing skills to meet the realities of the work but in a protected context." In supporting this notion, the researcher even wants to equate the practical work placement partnerships with "a living green house for social work" (Strier, 2011:88) education and training; from the participants' accounts below, it is clear the UNQSW graduates need more exposure to.

*"They are not exposed enough, practical-wise, and how to manage an office by themselves."* (Blommie)

*"Previously, some students had never done practicals at organisations in their first or second year and only in their fourth year."* (Jaansi)

*"The UNQSWs have less knowledge regarding the field work."* (Lerato)

*"... lack of experience within the child protection field."* (Jolinda)

*"... a lack of practical experience and limited theoretical knowledge about social work practice."* (Albertina)

The theme of "lack of practical experience" also surfaced during the focus group discussion.

### ***Sub-theme 2.6 UNQSWs' lack knowledge about the fields of social services and their inability to plan and implement intervention plans***

The following accounts substantiate this sub-theme:

*"Some do not know where to begin to draw up any treatment plan, cannot apply the treatment plan. Do not understand the difference between foster care supervision services and family reunification services and preventative services."* (Annabel)

*"Did not know how to compile ... the planning part of the report to ensure effective intervention plans."* (Jaansi)

*"[Lack] knowledge of family work (preservation, foster care, parenting skills and how to work with children)."* (Evert)

### ***Sub-theme 2.7 Not having a driver's licence as a factor rendering the UNQSWs unemployable***

Having a motor vehicle driver's licence and being skilled in driving is a prerequisite for being employed as a social worker (Nita, Jolinda, Alet). Evert wrote: *"No driver's licences."* Jolinda's view was that most of the UNQSWs *"that finishes their degree don't have driver's licences (almost 90%) of them."* Annabel added: *"They all have driver's licences, but they cannot drive! A lot of car accidents within the first six months when they start to work."*

**THEME 3**  
**EMPLOYERS' SUGGESTIONS IN TERMS OF UNISA'S SOCIAL WORK**  
**CURRICULUM AND TRAINING TO PROMOTE UNQSWs'**  
**EMPLOYABILITY PROSPECTS**

The suggestions offered by the participants are mostly related to addressing the aspects presented as sub-themes under the previous theme that render the UNQSWs unemployable. However, additional non-curriculated suggestions were also provided. These are presented next in a tabulated format.

**TABLE 2**  
**EMPLOYERS' SUGGESTIONS IN TERMS OF UNISA'S SOCIAL WORK**  
**CURRICULUM AND TRAINING TO PROMOTE UNQSWs'**  
**EMPLOYABILITY PROSPECTS**

Participants' suggestions	References to participants and/or excerpts of participants' accounts in substantiating their suggestions
More practical work and earlier exposure to practice, and other practical work-placement-related recommendations.	Let the students " <i>get early practical exposure</i> " (Mpepsho); do " <i>more practical [work] hours</i> " (Alet; Albertina) to ensure "[gaining] <i>practical experience in all social work methods</i> " (Samson; Blommie), and " <i>expose them [to] how to function in a social work office</i> " (Sipho) " <i>Introduce practical sessions</i> " (Thobekulu); placing " <i>students ... at an organisation [to gain] practical experience from [their] second year</i> " (Dlamini). " <i>...Placement in organisations [must] ensure effective integration of theory into practice... As it is important [to lay] a ...foundation of practising generic social work ... [they should be] ... placed for practicals in a child welfare organisation</i> " (Dlamini) Critically review practical work placement settings as " <i>Hospitals and clinic do not provide opportunity for long-term cases – clients are often seen once off and this makes it difficult for a student to obtain clients for casework or group work</i> " (Veshanti) " <i>Unisa needs to select the agencies that will supervise students ... as students are left to find their own placements. Unisa should do this</i> " (Megan)
More social work approaches and theories to be included in the undergraduate curriculum.	Embrace and expose students to different approaches and theories in social work (Mpepsho; Thombekulu), " <i>not just PCA</i> " (Alice). " <i>More attention should be paid to the systems theory</i> " (Jenna)... " <i>The Developmental Approach, Strengths Perspective and Ecological Systems Approach should be included in the curriculum</i> " (Alet) Students should have a " <i>Theoretical knowledge [on] and understanding of the Developmental Approach (model) [as this] Approach [is] applied and integrated in all aspects of service delivery</i> " (Rohnah) " <i>Students should be exposed to the different legislation used in ... social work services in general ... and crisis intervention with involuntary clients</i> " (Lurencia)
On modules in English, critical thinking and report writing, and computer literacy.	Improve students' command of the English language (Dinah); " <i>improve report writing</i> " (Blommie); introduce " <i>English, report writing and critical thinking modules</i> (Alice), or a " <i>report writing course</i> " (Sipho; Matshediso); " <i>focus on English as a subject (make it compulsory) and ... especially on grammar</i> " (Jenna) " <i>Students should be [enabled] to compile the following reports... process notes, progress reports and psychosocial reports</i> " (Lurencia) " <i>Students should also be forced to do a typing and computer course</i> " (Dinah); they need to have " <i>computer skills</i> " and be " <i>computer literate</i> " (Susanne; Isolde; Desiree), " <i>having the ability to use all the MS-Word computer packages</i> " (Nita; Annabel; Deidre)
Students should have knowledge about legislation pertaining to child and family work; have exposure to and be prepared for	Introduce students to pieces of legislation such as " <i>The White Paper on Families</i> " (Evert), " <i>The Children's Act</i> " (Veshanti), " <i>and other legislation where SWs are legally mandated to act ... [for] protection of a child/person</i> (Alet) Provide information on and skills-training to do " <i>Foster Care, parenting plans, and family preservation; how to work with children in the family situation and in Child and Youth Care Centre (not play therapy)</i> " (Evert)

rendering statutory and non-statutory child and family welfare services.	<i>“Prepare social worker students to work in the statutory field”</i> (Annabel), provide <i>“statutory work and court exposure”</i> (Evert), focusing on the <i>“statutory work ... processes, assessment techniques, evaluation, and report writing for court”</i> (Alet) Provide <i>“examples of statutory reports that the students will use in an office responsible for child protection. ... also [examples of] the Victim Impact Report, as well as the referral of an alcohol abuse person.”</i> (FS Mentor)
Screen prospective students to assess their suitability for the social work profession.	<i>“Unisa has to employ stricter criteria upon enrolment of students”</i> (Veshanti); <i>“Screen your students each year – select the best”</i> (Alice), as this would <i>“help in preventing people who are not suitable for the profession”</i> (Jennifer) from entering it. Consider <i>“Pre-admission screening criteria”</i> and by looking at the <i>“history and background of a person; [the] Psychosocial stability of person; level of commitment and passion to become a Social Worker, [and] patience and tolerance”</i> (Mphempsho) One focus group participant underscored the fact: <i>“If you study Social Work or Auxiliary Social Work at UNISA, you must submit a Police clearance certificate”</i>
Teach students how to draw up and implement treatment plans and interventions.	<i>“Students must ...have the skill to develop a therapeutic plan [and] need to be taught to implement therapeutic interventions ... in compliance [with] relevant legislation and policies.”</i> (Lurencia)
Prepare students for job interviews.	<i>“Assist ... students in preparing for job interviews”</i> (Desiree)
Make it compulsory for students to have a driver’s licence when entering their final year of study.	<i>“Make it compulsory for fourth-year students to have their driver’s licences.”</i> (Jolina)
Unisa students enrolling for a BSW-qualification should follow a fixed curriculum.	<i>“The degree should remain four years”</i> (Megan) <i>“...fixed curriculum”</i> (Pomp; Jennifer); <i>“Modules that would enhance the understanding of human behaviour should be compulsory, such as Psychology III and Sociology III and ... Criminology I and Practical English ... [are] recommended”</i> (Pomp). Taking these modules up <i>“to third year level will help to enrich their social work knowledge”</i> (Samson) and provide students with <i>“a better holistic understanding of their client population and to manage cases effectively with appropriate diagnosis”</i> (Dlamini).
Sharpen students’ office management and administrative skills.	<i>“Students must be knowledgeable regarding office-keeping ... the correct way to deal with senior Social Workers and Supervisors. They ... need to have good and proper telephone etiquette; they need to know about keeping files up to date and how to properly use a planner. Students need to learn about keeping records and following deadlines for reports”</i> (Isolde)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

The employers’ perspectives highlight the fact that UNQSWs are in certain respects basically unprepared to begin practice as they fall short, to varying degrees, in terms of knowledge, experience, skills and personality traits as attributes of gradueness (Sumanasiri *et al.*, 2015:88) required by social work practice. However, the researcher came to the conclusion that some of the factors mentioned which are causing them to be unprepared for beginner social work practice should not only be viewed as uniquely related to the UNQSWs. Being ill-prepared for court work and statutory interventions; having poor report-writing skills; and being unprepared for the realities of social work practice, practice processes and routines have all been reported by other scholars, at home and abroad, focusing on the topic of NQSWs preparedness for practice (Thomas *et al.*, 2016; De Jager, 2013; Bates, Immins, Parker, Keen, Rutter Brown & Zsigo, 2010; Marsh & Triseliotis in O’Connor *et al.*, 2009:438).

Given this reality of the UNQSWs’ unpreparedness for beginners’ practice, the researcher therefore recommends that the SACSSP and the DSD consider introducing a year of community service similar to that for medical practitioners. This will, to quote Veshanti, one of the participants, help to *“polish... our students.”* In addition, this will address the call of the unemployed NQSW graduates for employment (Nkosi, 2018) and will strengthen the capacities of NGOs countrywide which are

hampered in delivering, including their social work services, as a result of subsidy cuts (Skhosana, Schenck, Botha, 2014:223,224).

Given the level of disconnection or lack of cohesion between theory and practice learning, and the fact that qualifying social work programmes do not foster the required practice skills, and also that the theories and material taught within social work curricula are not practice-relevant as highlighted by the participants of this study and other scholars (Domakin, 2014:719; Frost *et al.*, 2013:355), the researcher wants to call for more collaborative partnerships between the UDSW and social work practice. A synergy in this respect will inform and fine-tune the new Social Work curriculum currently being phased in, as per the suggestions provided, and social work practice will become the proverbial “greenhouse” where the skills of UNQWS graduates can be honed to produce beginner social workers who are fit for practice.

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