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## An approach to empower social work students with entrepreneurial skills: Reflections on the social work curriculum in South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

Unemployment remains an unresolved social problem that has culminated in major socio-economic challenges across the globe, and South Africa is not an exception. Many young people in South Africa, including social work graduates are unemployed, contributing to the high rate of poverty. South Africa have endured a wave of unemployed social work graduates for the past decade, yet the increase in social problems justifies the need for more practitioners. This paper acknowledges the gap between the current social work curriculum and the need for innovation. The empowerment theory is used as a lens to explore innovative strategies to integrate entrepreneurial skills into the social work curriculum to curb the scourge of unemployment amongst social work graduates. Whilst the unemployment of social work graduates is alarming, there is limited research that rigorously explores this area from a social work perspective. There is a need for the social work curriculum to empower social work students with entrepreneurial knowledge and skills to mitigate the impact of unemployment faced by social work graduates. A desktop systematic review was used as a research methodology to conduct the literature review by purposefully focusing on social work education, social work unemployment and entrepreneurship.

**Keywords:** empowerment; entrepreneurship; social work curriculum; social work graduate; unemployment

## INTRODUCTION

The social work profession has existed for more than hundred years, evolving from a charity-based model to one focused on development, empowerment and human rights. This shift from charity (dependency) to empowerment and human rights (strength-based) has led to a greater appreciation of human strengths, capabilities and potentials (Parsell & Clarke, 2022). The charity model labelled the recipients of charity services as poor and dependent (Adams, 2014; Mittermaier, 2019). In contrast, the welfare model focused on social security, economic wellbeing and standards of living for individuals and communities. It also aimed to mitigate social injustices and provide relief of distress (Bhatt & Sanyaal, 2022), which helped individuals to make a living. The evolution of social work has also expanded the fields where social work services can be rendered to assist individuals and communities to overcome their social ills.

South Africa's welfare system has transitioned from a charity-based model to a developmental approach, which is now the cornerstone of the country's social development paradigm. According to Nhapi and Dhemba (2020), this shift was formally adopted at the Copenhagen Summit in 1995, and it emphasises the treatment of people as active participants in their development rather than passive recipients of aid. The developmental approach focuses on harnessing human creativity, skills and resources to build capacity and promote self-reliance. Its aim is to reduce dependency by creating opportunities for individuals and communities to engage in productive employment, self-employment and sustainable livelihoods.

At a national level, this approach aligns with South Africa's goals of addressing unemployment, poverty and inequality by empowering citizens to contribute meaningfully to the economy. For social workers, the developmental approach means actively involving service users in planning and decision-making processes, while fostering their ability to support themselves and their families. Despite the focus on empowerment, unemployment among social work graduates remains a challenge, limiting their ability to practise and contribute fully to social development. Entrepreneurship emerges as a potential solution to this issue and aligns seamlessly with the principles of the developmental approach. Entrepreneurs create opportunities by identifying, evaluating and utilising resources to introduce new goods, services and innovations (Ratten, 2023). In a social work context, entrepreneurship could enable social workers to establish self-sustaining initiatives which will address community needs and generate income. By integrating entrepreneurial principles into social work practice, professionals can use innovation, opportunity recognition and strategic management to overcome challenges such as unemployment, while enhancing their impact on communities. This approach not only aligns with South Africa's overarching welfare paradigm but also reinforces the developmental goal of empowering individuals and communities to achieve sustainable and independent livelihoods.

Social work has been a scarce skill since its inception in South Africa. This scarcity mounted between the years 2000 and 2005, leading to a retention strategy in 2008 to recruit and retain social workers in the social development sector (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2008). As part of this strategy, bursaries and scholarships guaranteeing employability were implemented by the South African government, attracting many students to study social work,

resulting in a surge in the number of graduates in higher education institutions. However, from 2009 to 2013, the increase in the number of graduates led to a decreased demand for the profession; hence, social work was no longer considered a scarce skill.

Given that social work was previously classified as a scarce skill, it is crucial to acknowledge that the profession is now haunted by high unemployment rates marked by severe waves of poverty and related socio-economic circumstances. South Africa's second quarterly labour force survey for 2023 shows that 3.4 million young people, inclusive of social work graduates, are unemployed, representing an unemployment rate of 32.6%. This escalation has contributed significantly to the country's poverty level, which stands at 40% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). While there are no specific statistical projections and baseline data on social work unemployment rates globally, the unemployment rate is generalised across all professions in Africa and beyond. However, the data projected in a South African context reveals that between 2021 and 2023 there were 9 000 unemployed social work graduates in the country. Despite this, there are 1 279 vacant social work positions across all nine provinces (Maqhina, 2023). According to the annual report by the Portfolio Committee on Social Development in the national parliament, these vacancies remain unfilled because of financial constraints in the social development sector resulting from the global recession. Furthermore, among the 9 000 unemployed social work graduates in the country, only 7 000 have registered on the Department of Social Development database for employment purposes. The other 2 000 have not considered registering on the database. Consequently, many qualified social workers are seeking job opportunities across the globe (Adenutsi, 2023).

Clearly, an innovative and quality education system is needed to alleviate unemployment in the immediate future. It is against this background that the social work profession should acknowledge the human potential, creativity and innovation to sustain itself, especially in South Africa, for the sake of its beneficiaries.

## **BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM FORMULATION**

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, particularly in its 2017 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2020-2030 emphasise the need to devise strategies for reducing poverty, unemployment, and social and economic inequality (Derera et al., 2020). These are intertwined and pressing issues in the global economic landscape and must be addressed together through an integrated approach (Cordoba & Bando, 2022; Weiland et al., 2021). Social work is a human rights profession and plays a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Cordoba & Bando, 2022). However, the literature on engaging social workers in this effort is limited. Therefore, it is necessary to create new avenues and innovations for integrating Sustainable Development Goals with social work practice (Cox, 2020). On this note, the writers propose that introducing entrepreneurial thinking and innovation within the field of social work can be a significant intervention to mitigate the dilemma of unemployed social work graduates in South Africa. This approach holds the potential not only to alleviate poverty and unemployment, but also to contribute towards the rebuilding of the economy in the post COVID-19 pandemic (Adenutsi, 2023). In acknowledging the negative impact of COVID-19, Zahra (2021) highlights the concern about the future of global business, including the role of

multinational firms, large and small. Similarly, Chavez (2016) as well as Morris et al. (2020) emphasised that during this crisis and beyond, entrepreneurship has been considered as a key economic solution in developing countries. However, scholars such as Wadhvani and Lubinski (2017) argue that entrepreneurship is not a novel concept, as it has played a fundamental role in the history of business for a considerable period. These authors further highlight that entrepreneurship serves as a basis for understanding the origin and evolution of businesses, markets, industries and economic systems. Chaves (2016) and Morris et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of entrepreneurship in creating jobs, making it a valuable option for unemployed social workers to consider as a way to generate income and sustaining livelihoods. Building on this idea, entrepreneurship serves as a powerful and adequate means of changing and amending the economy.

Considering the recent developments within the social work profession in South Africa, unemployment has emerged as an unresolved impediment contributing to escalating levels of poverty (Diraditsile, 2021). Graduating with a university degree marks the beginning of a journey fraught with struggles and vulnerabilities for many social work graduates, as they face the harsh reality of joblessness within the profession, leading to a sense of despair (Ali & Anwar, 2021). This challenge has exacerbated unfair and exploitative labour practices in the social sector, with qualified social workers often receiving salaries that are far below the appropriate remuneration thresholds (Adenutsi, 2023).

Given the realities of poverty that have been perpetuated by the problem of unemployment among social work graduates, and the related challenges, it is essential to integrate entrepreneurial skills into the social work curriculum. In addressing this challenge, Diraditsile (2020) explains that beyond mere empowerment, such an initiative will enable students to rediscover and redefine their purpose as persons and professionals. Diraditsile's (2020) assertion that the unemployment experience is personal but also has a societal impact means that not only unemployed social workers suffer the impact, but also the profession as a community as well. Entrepreneurship can help to allay such professional challenges. When students are capacitated with innovation skills, it provides them with the added advantage of economic problem-solving, and the creation of employment and functioning on a proactive level. Moreover, equipping social work students with entrepreneurial skills will provide them with a competitive advantage upon graduation, enabling them to pursue alternative employment opportunities in diverse contexts. On this note, entrepreneurship can promote the sustainability of the profession and facilitate ongoing and uninterrupted services to the needy. In doing so, they can continue to enhance the social functioning of vulnerable and marginalised populations, while also sustaining livelihoods through the application of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills (Diraditsile & Ntseane, 2022).

The social work profession has consistently been a dynamic and vibrant discipline, making remarkable contributions to the enhancement of the social functioning of vulnerable populations in South Africa (Mapara, 2021). However, the profession has traditionally been not assigned a notable role in economic matters and has not fully participated in the broader development agenda across the African continent. Historically, social work has primarily focused on addressing social issues such as poverty, inequality and social injustices (Jongman,

2020). This narrow focus has created a gap in practice, as social and economic challenges are often interconnected, and addressing them simultaneously can lead to more sustainable solutions. Incorporating entrepreneurship, which is inherently developmental in nature, into the social work curriculum could bridge this gap thereby integrating social and economic development in service delivery (Diraditsile, 2021). This approach aligns with the social development perspective, which emphasises that economic growth should be accompanied by social investments in human capabilities (Patel, 2015). Such investments are crucial in enabling people to participate in the economy, fostering economic growth and improving livelihoods. Being pro-poor and people-centred, the social development approach supports holistic solutions to both social and economic challenges.

Introducing entrepreneurial skills into the social work curriculum would not only address the unemployment crisis but also enhance the practice of young professionals by equipping them with specialised and versatile helping skills (Diraditsile & Ntseane, 2022). This is particularly important in the context of today's complex societal challenges, which require broader expertise and innovative approaches (Jongman, 2020).

The writers of this article accordingly stress that entrepreneurship should be introduced as a compulsory module in the social work curriculum. This module could cover essential topics such as business venture operations, business management and marketing to equip social work students with the skills needed to navigate and create opportunities in social and economic domains.

Incorporating an entrepreneurial mentality in the development of social work students could be a significant empowerment factor that could mitigate the increasing number of unemployed social work graduates in South Africa. Despite the limited attention given to the concept of social work entrepreneurship in social work literature in South Africa (Adenutsi, 2023), the writers argue that infusing entrepreneurial skills into the training of social work students is likely to create opportunities that reflect positively on professional sustainability, job creation and ultimately economic growth. This could be achieved by equipping students with practical skills such as identifying social needs, designing innovative business solutions, and launching sustainable community-based projects or businesses. For example, students could learn how to establish successful small and medium businesses, social cooperatives, social investment strategies, social entrepreneurship initiatives and social work private practices. As already highlighted, social work services would be rendered on a continuous basis without any interruption.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In explaining the importance of equipping social work students and young emerging social work professionals with entrepreneurial skills as a response to the critical unemployment predicament, the empowerment theory can serve as a guiding framework (Joseph, 2020). The theory posits that unemployment exists because of structural barriers (Adenutsi, 2023). To mitigate the structural barriers for employment, strong principles of self-determination, autonomy, competence and collaboration should be adopted (Wood et al., 2021). Thus, the theory places the emphasis on imparting entrepreneurial knowledge to social work students,

which will be helpful in gaining insights into how they can blend their academic knowledge with an ability to initiate projects and develop competitive entrepreneurial ideas. This approach does not focus only on job creation, but also in ultimately addressing specific social issues, needs and problems (Santos et al., 2019). In the context of addressing the problem of social work unemployment in South Africa, the empowerment theory argues that equipping social work students with entrepreneurial skills could initiate a prominent turnaround (Santos et al., 2019). This strategy should focus on instilling confidence in their ability to create opportunities and encourage a sense of efficacy in tackling unemployment in the social work profession (Wood et al., 2021).

The core basis of social work lies in the use of specialised knowledge, skills, values and principles as the profession's fundamental components to address issues, needs and problems (Rautenbach & Nadesan, 2022), by fostering critical thinking to strengthen problem-solving capabilities (Joseph, 2020). The blending of these traditional social work knowledge sets with entrepreneurship skills can contribute to the empowerment of social work students to enable them to launch innovative income-generating ideas such as social enterprises, sustainable small and medium businesses, and sustainable cooperatives. The scope of their professional knowledge can ultimately create an enabling environment for job creation and poverty alleviation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

An integrative literature search was conducted, focusing on the empowerment of social work students with entrepreneurial skills, with specific reference to the South African social work curriculum. The search was conducted on digital platforms and databases, namely ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ABI/INFORM Collection, PsycINFO and Google Scholar. The literature search was accessed using keywords such as 'social work unemployment,' 'Entrepreneurship in Social Work,' 'Entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods,' 'Entrepreneurship and job creation,' and 'Social Work Curriculum.' These keywords helped identify relevant studies published in peer-reviewed journals. The inclusion criteria were studies and other published materials that focused on explanations, experiences and narratives related to unemployment, entrepreneurship, and the significance of entrepreneurship in job creation, with the purpose of building an argument for the necessity of incorporating the study of entrepreneurship into the South African social work curriculum.

### **Determinants of successful entrepreneurs**

The literature identifies various determinants of entrepreneurial success. According to Yalcintas et al. (2021), personal determinants such as personality traits, risk preference, gender and educational background play an important role in shaping entrepreneurial potential. Within the context of social work education, these factors are equally relevant in determining how social work students develop and apply entrepreneurial skills. For instance, personality traits such as resilience and adaptability can influence their ability to be innovative in social service delivery, while risk preference may affect their willingness to initiate and sustain business and social enterprises. Similarly, gender and educational background shape students' access to

entrepreneurial opportunities and resources. The following sections discuss these determinants in relation to empowering social work students with entrepreneurial competencies.

### ***Personality traits***

The writers posit that a strong entrepreneurial trait is usually rooted in personality components such as resilience, adaptability and willingness to take calculated risks. This implies that incorporating entrepreneurial skills into the social work curriculum in South Africa could influence the personality of the students to empower them towards becoming innovative change agents. Personality refers to the thoughts, feelings and behaviour that differentiate one individual from the other, and that persist over time (Shyam & Monolisa, 2018). It is the integration of the biological and experienced behaviours of an individual that forms their responses to environmental stimuli. For the individual to be differentiated from the others, their behaviour, characters and attitude are observed by others on how they act and react. This element of personality trait is particularly relevant for social work students. Yalcintas et al. (2021) confirmed that there is a link between personality type and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship as a skill at innovation complements different personality traits by fostering creativity and encourages individuals to use their innovative ideas to achieve self-employment. For social work students, developing entrepreneurial skills could help them gain the confidence and capacity to design sustainable interventions and create innovative solutions to social problems, start income-generating initiatives, or establish ongoing independent private practices.

Many scholars have established that personality plays an important role in determining whether or not someone will be a successful entrepreneur (Lien et al., 2022; Yalcintas et al. 2021). For example, traits such as creativity, resilience and risk-taking can help individuals to identify and pursue business opportunities. However, some scholars also point out that selfishness can influence entrepreneurial behaviour. They argue that selfish individuals may focus on opportunities that benefit them personally, even if these actions have negative effects on others or society (Lien et al., 2022; Urbig et al., 2012). For instance, someone might exploit community resources to start a business without considering its long-term impact on the environment or local population. These scholars suggest that selfish people are more likely to engage in harmful activities if they see a chance for high personal profits. This highlights the importance of enforcing and strengthening ethical considerations when incorporating entrepreneurship into the social work curriculum for the purposes of balancing personal success with social good.

### ***Risk preference***

The writers believe that entrepreneurship goes hand in glove with risk-taking. Anwar and Saleem (2019, p. 284) define a risk-taking propensity as “the capacity of an individual to take or avoid risks when posed against perilous situations”. In entrepreneurship, risk is a fact and cannot be ignored (Ge et al., 2016; Neneh, 2011). We view this risk as comprehensive, because it ranges from financial and social to psychological or emotional risks. Financial risk implies that the business might be able to make either a profit or loss (Anwar & Saleem, 2019). In

support, we posit that entrepreneurs' ability to identify risk elements is pivotal to enhancing the business operation's proactive advantage for sustainability purposes.

We view social, psychological and emotional risk as having negative implications because of the stress and low morale from which family members, significant others and the community might suffer. Anwar and Saleem (2019) also draw attention to the negative dimensions of entrepreneurship, because people may start accusing and pointing fingers at one another when things are not going as planned.

Furthermore, these comprehensive risks have the potential for creating unpredictable situations and environments that might compromise the wellbeing of those involved. Entrepreneurship is a symbol of business achievement and persistence, but some scholars emphasise that risk and stress are unavoidable elements of the process (Chavez, 2016; Liu et al., 2019). A study conducted by Anwar and Saleem (2019) confirmed that entrepreneurs show a higher propensity for risk-taking when compared to other people. They posit that in this situation, the skill of mastering risk should be strengthened as starting a business is characterised by risk and, thus, requires a risk-taking attitude (Block et al., 2015; Chanda & Unel, 2021; Neneh, 2011).

By being educated on risk-taking and management, social work students can build confidence in starting and sustaining innovative business enterprises. They will learn how to anticipate challenges, make calculated decisions, and develop strategies to overcome these challenges. This will not only enhance their ability to manage business enterprises effectively, but will also strengthen their resilience in professional practice. Therefore, teaching social work students the skills of risk management will equip them with essential entrepreneurial skills, helping them to thrive in both business and social service settings.

Risk-taking is closely associated with setting challenging goals, pursuing self-development and exhibiting enthusiasm (Chavez, 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Neneh, 2011). The need to achieve these set goals is described by Anwar and Saleem (2019), as well as Yangailo and Qutieshat (2022), as the driving force that motivates individuals to strive for success until it is attained. Thus, risk-taking is a crucial element for achieving these goals (Chavez, 2016; Liu et al., 2019).

Some scholars also suggest that a strong desire to succeed combined with enthusiasm is closely linked to having an internal locus of control and high self-confidence (Chavez, 2016; Yangailo & Qutieshat, 2022). An internal locus of control refers to an individual's belief that their actions and decisions will directly influence what happens in their lives (Anwar & Saleem, 2019; Munawir et al., 2018). Individuals with an internal locus of control trust their own thoughts and ideas, and take ownership of mistakes without blaming anybody. Munawir et al. (2018) emphasise that someone who has an internal locus of control has a high level of motivation and sees success as something achievable. A sense of self-efficacy, in addition to the internal locus of control, can thus not be excluded from the process of innovation (Yan, 2022).

Taking the responsibility for one's own actions and having self-confidence bring hope, thereby impacting positively on the development of one's life and work. This implies that when social workers are taken through entrepreneurship training, they will be empowered to have high self-confidence in innovative processes. Munawir et al. (2019) state that high self-confidence is triggered when somebody has achieved something positive because of their own operations



and behaviour and feel fulfilled as a result. High-level training in social work can lead to social workers identifying and minimising the risks associated with entrepreneurship and in so doing promote self-confidence in striving to achieve set goals (Hameed & Irfan, 2019).

### ***Gender***

Gender also plays an important role in the context of entrepreneurship (Lindqvist et al., 2021). These authors highlight that there are strong elements of stereotyping and bias leading to women having limited networking and mentorship. We posit that the lack of networking and mentorship is likely to lead to an absence of prominent female figures in entrepreneurship, which ultimately means a lack of female role models. For example, societal norms often assume that men are better suited to pursuing business ventures, while women are expected to prioritise caregiving responsibilities. This prevailing cultural perception in many societies makes it harder for women to balance their roles as entrepreneurs and family caregivers, creating additional challenges in their business journey. Marlow (2020) also found that men dominate in the field of entrepreneurship compared to women.

Gender studies may be defined as a way of looking at how social norms and power structures impact on the lives and opportunities available to men and women (Lindqvist et al., 2021). In the context of this definition, the writers accept the view that gender is not only innate but socially constructed. Thus, integrating gender perspectives into the training of social work students in entrepreneurship can help them recognise systemic inequalities and advocate for gender equity within the entrepreneurial space. Additionally, learning about these issues, social work students can develop the necessary skills to challenge stereotypes, promote fairness and support women in overcoming obstacles such as limited networks, mentorship or opportunities. This approach would also equip students to create programmes or entrepreneurial initiatives that would ensure that both men and women have equal chances to succeed in business. Interestingly, while entrepreneurship is male-dominated, social work is widely recognised as a female-dominated profession (Marlow, 2020). This contrast raises critical questions about societal perceptions of gender roles. Entrepreneurship is often associated with traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness, qualities traditionally linked to masculinity; whereas social work emphasises caregiving, empathy and support, traits often associated with femininity. These stereotypes not only reinforce gender divisions in these fields but also limit opportunities for individuals to break free from such traditional expectations.

Reflecting on this disparity, it becomes crucial to challenge these entrenched norms through education. Incorporating gender issues into the social work curriculum can help students critically examine the social constructs that contribute to gendered patterns. For example, equipping social work students with entrepreneurial skills can encourage more women to step into leadership roles in business, challenging the stereotype that entrepreneurship is a "man's domain." At the same time, empowering men to enter the caregiving-focused field of social work can help balance representation and highlight the value of diverse perspectives in professions.

Relating gender to poverty clearly reveals that men and women are not equally affected. According to Molino et al., (2018), women have a lower probability of becoming self-

employed than men. However, the writers also support Carr (1996) and Lim (2019) in observing that the presence of children in families and the increase in household needs heighten the likelihood of female self-employment. This is particularly evident in South Africa, where most informal self-employment is undertaken by women, who often sell soft small goods as street vendors or at schools to support their families. The notion of women becoming self-employment is supported by Muchemwa and Odimegwu (2023), who submit that an increase in the number of children in a household usually prompts unemployed women to seek self-employment.

From a professional perspective, self-employment provides women with more freedom, flexibility and autonomy to manage small children compared to their taking up salaried employment, a view echoed in the literature (Carr, 1996; Lim, 2019). According to Chauke and Obadire (2020) as well as Liñán et al. (2022), entrepreneurship has traditionally been male-dominated. Consequently, broad global and national policy goals such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) prioritises entrepreneurial support for women to close the gaps stemming from their past social exclusion. Hence, it is important to recognise that entrepreneurship can be a solution in dire socio-economic circumstances characterised by high unemployment. Yet it is crucial to acknowledge that males also face unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to self-employment. Men may consider pursuing self-employment for different reasons, including economic or financial stability, the desire for autonomy and the lack of formal employment opportunities. Our view is that addressing the specific needs and circumstances of both men and women in the context of self-employment can lead to the development of more comprehensive support systems and regulations that will help promote gender equality and economic empowerment for all.

### ***Education***

Educational exposure is not only a key determinant of a successful entrepreneur, but is also regarded as one of the primary survival models of entrepreneurship on the basis of such critical components as the knowledge, skills, confidence, self-discipline and problem-solving capabilities that it encompasses (Mayr et al., 2021; Neneh, 2011). These survival components are not only important for readiness to run a business, but also help entrepreneurs to navigate various forms of risks and business threats (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Education plays a valuable role in enhancing effective entrepreneurship as the knowledge gained helps individuals identify sustainable entrepreneurial opportunities. A good assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of potential business ventures can be undertaken through applying the skills learnt through formal education (Yalcintas et al., 2021).

We firmly hold the view that knowledge and the exposure to education helps build competence in entrepreneurs, which is an important tool for effective business operations, including planning, budgeting and financial record management. Adenutsi L(2023), emphasises that adequate entrepreneurial education and practical knowledge provide entrepreneurs with a roadmap for competitive advantage, which is crucial for entrepreneurial strategic management. The notion of education being a determinant of success in entrepreneurship is supported by several authors, who argue that highly educated entrepreneurs have higher earnings than top earning wage/salary workers (Hameed & Irfan, 2019; Lofstrom, 2013). Yalcintas et al. (2021)

stipulates that education is a determinant of successful entrepreneurship. In the context of social work students, integrating entrepreneurial education into the curriculum could offer similar advantages as alluded to above. Learning key business operations skills such as strategic planning and financial management could prepare social work students to establish innovative and sustainable business enterprises. For instance, entrepreneurial education could empower social work students and graduates to create their own non-profit organisations and micro enterprises (small enterprises) aimed at addressing societal needs, rather than relying solely on traditional employment opportunities.

With an advanced level of social work education, and its alignment with entrepreneurship skills, providing social work students with entrepreneurial knowledge would enhance their ability to navigate the competitive job market, offering them more alternative career paths (Hameed & Irfan, 2019; Lofstrom, 2013).

### **Characteristics of a successful entrepreneur**

In the context of social work education, incorporating entrepreneurial skills for students can help enhance their capacity to adapt to the dynamic demands of their profession. A successful entrepreneur, whether in the business or social sector, typically demonstrates a set of distinctive characteristics that drive their ability to identify opportunities, mobilise resources and implement solutions effectively, and can empower social work students to become proactive agents of change. These traits include innovation, opportunity recognition, strategic management practices and integrity, all of which are essential for initiating a sustainable business.

### ***Innovation***

The study adopts Kahn's (2018) definition of innovation as an outcome, a process, and a forward thinking mindset. This definition is particularly relevant because it provides a broad understanding of innovation, which is important when teaching social work students entrepreneurial skills. This definition is more suitable than others, such as Neneh's (2011) definition, which focuses only on creativity. While creativity is important, Kahn's (2018) definition goes further by explaining how innovation happens and why a specific mindset is necessary.

Kahn (2018) describes innovation outcomes as the introduction of new products and services, including improvements in processes, marketing, business models, supply chains and organisation. This is relevant for social work students, because they need to develop innovative ways to provide social services and create sustainable business enterprises. Innovation as a process refers to the steps needed to turn ideas into practical solutions. Social work students must learn how to organise their ideas and resources effectively to bring about meaningful change.

The mindset aspect of innovation, as described by Kahn (2018), highlights the importance of a risk-taking attitude. This is especially important for social work students in capacitating them with entrepreneurial skills, as they will need the confidence and resilience to start and sustain business enterprises. By choosing this definition, the writers posit that equipping social work

students with entrepreneurial skills should not only prepare them to think creatively, but also to take action and develop solutions. Social work practice often requires professionals to take informed decisions when advocating for marginalised groups, designing interventions, or establishing sustainable community projects (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020). By incorporating entrepreneurial skills into the curriculum, social work education in South Africa can empower students to create self-sustaining initiatives that promote economic and social development, while staying true to core social work values of empowerment, self-determination and sustainability.

According to Liu et al. (2019), a risk-taking attitude has to do with acknowledging and normalising the understanding that entrepreneurship cannot be effective without risks. Innovation relates to the ability by individuals to internalise, support and own the creation or production process (Kahn, 2018). It is regarded as a catalyst for effective entrepreneurship that ultimately contributes to economic growth and job creation (Evbuomwan & Mrwebi, 2017). Entrepreneurial ideas and strategies must be innovative to address the issues of unemployment and poverty. Recognising the importance of innovation in enabling effective entrepreneurship in South Africa, enterprise development hubs were established (Nkontwana, 2022). These hubs, along with business incubators, small, medium and micro-sized enterprise support, can serve as key support structures for young emerging individuals from various disciplines seeking to establish businesses for the purpose of poverty alleviation and job creation.

Enterprise development facilities and resources were established to support entrepreneurs in accessing the necessary resources to ensure the success of their business operations (Schachtebeck & Tshelepis, 2023). As a practice-based profession and an academic discipline, social work emphasises innovative skills to bring about improvements in society (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020). This implies that a certain degree of social work knowledge, values and skills in the humanities correlates with entrepreneurship education. Consequently, social work students can adapt well to entrepreneurial education because of the similarities.

### ***Opportunity recognition***

Opportunity recognition in entrepreneurship is the process during which the production of goods and services is innovated. This innovation process includes the identification and introduction of strategies as well as the methods of how profit can be maximised (Kuckertz et al., 2017). Through education, entrepreneurs can identify the market-related needs and interests, and know how to deliver and meet those needs. Ge et al. (2016: 500) suggest that “opportunity exploitation includes opportunity identification, assessment, and utilisation”. Kuckertz et al. (2017) are of the view that opportunity recognition cannot be addressed separately from opportunity exploitation in entrepreneurship. We concur that the two concepts cannot be separated, because once the opportunities are provided, there must be a maximisation of value through the utilisation of identified and available resources. Successful opportunity exploitation depends on full resource identification and utilisation (Ge et al., 2016).

Ge et al. (2016) elaborate that there are three different opportunities in entrepreneurship: identification, discovery and opportunities for creation. Diandra and Azmy (2020) view identification opportunity as the innovation and development of new business opportunities as

a career. They emphasise that innovation requires talented teams, which focus on a business model, process and technology. According to Acquier et al. (2019), from an economic point of view, entrepreneurship is based on the creation of business opportunities in exchange for profits, which links the creation type of opportunity to identification. We concur that viewing identification and creation as one type of entrepreneurship opportunity, as the discovery type of opportunity is about the recognition and exploitation of opportunities and conversions of new ideas into innovative ways (Acquier et al., 2019; Limaj & Bernroider, 2019). Entrepreneurship is a continuous process and not a one-time activity. It involves creating new products and services, identification and transforming them in innovative ways that have not been seen before. It also includes consistently taking advantage of the opportunities that have been identified (Acquier et al., 2019).

### ***Business growth***

Funk (2022) defines business growth as a corporate strategy where net profits, assets and sales increase significantly. This growth enhances the likelihood of reducing the unit cost per sold item, thereby increasing profit (Funk, 2022). Business growth can be measured through four indicators: business outcomes, outputs, capacity and qualitative indicators. In the business context, Funk (2022) defines business growth in terms of the expansion difference between the costs and revenues resulting from the growth in terms of product and services diversification, size and market share. This means that a business achieves growth not only by generating higher revenues, but also by strategically broadening its offerings and capturing a larger segment of the market. Funk (2022) further explains that the profitability of this growth process is determined by the revenues generated relative to the associated costs. For example, a company may diversify its product line or enter new markets, leading to increased sales, but the overall growth will be meaningful only if the additional revenue exceeds the costs incurred in these activities.

Output indicators are the sales and or the products of the business (Funk, 2022). In this way, Funk (2022, p. 3) stresses that

*an increase in the number of products a business produces are clear signs that a business is growing. Capacity indicators, on the other hand, shows the business's ability to generate these products and outcomes.*

Capacity indicators include assets, production capacity, workforce size and increment, capital invested and others (Funk, 2022). According to Funk (2022), qualitative indicators refer to the management practices, formalisation degree, and the structure of the business. When the business structure is expanding and the practices of management are increasing, the business will decentralise, resulting in growth. Incorporating entrepreneurial knowledge into the social work curriculum can empower social work students by teaching them how to apply business growth strategies to create sustainable small and medium business enterprises and social enterprises. Additionally, students can learn how understanding business growth indicators, such as outcomes, outputs, capacity and qualitative indicators, is crucial for running successful business operations and ultimately, create job opportunities. With entrepreneurial knowledge, social work students can also be able to apply capacity indicators, such as resource management

and workforce planning to maximise the efficiency of these services. Moreover, we suggest that understanding qualitative indicators such as effective management practices and organisational structure can help students establish and grow social and business enterprises that are well organised. Drawing from empowerment theory, we think that this integration will reinforce economic independence and resource generation which are critical for individual and community empowerment (Acquier et al., 2019). When social workers understand entrepreneurship, they can foster economic resilience in their clients and communities, thereby breaking the cycles of poverty and marginalisation. In this way, entrepreneurial education becomes a tool for both personal empowerment and societal transformation, aligning with the core mission of social work.

### ***Strategic management practices***

Ferreira et al. (2020) posit that strategic management practices play a central role in the expansion, development, stability and finally success of the business. These practices allow organisations to increase their market share and develop new markets, new products and services (Muzaffar, 2022). Teaching these principles in the social work academic programmes can help students apply strategic thinking in their field, giving them entrepreneurial skills that go beyond traditional social work methods. For example, social workers often manage programmes in their practice where overseeing tasks such as planning, directing, staffing, coordinating and controlling are key responsibilities within their respective organisations. If students learn how to use strategic management approaches, they can create innovative solutions in their professional practices. For instance, a student running a youth development programme might identify a chance to start a skills training workshop that also generates income, turning it into a social enterprise. Additionally, teaching entrepreneurial skills in the social work domain will equip students with the strategic management skills, they can use these skills to start and manage successful private social work practices, such as counselling centres or wellness companies that could compete effectively in the entrepreneurial space.

We suggest that leveraging these strategic management capabilities is likely to contribute to gaining a competitive advantage. Despite its influence on growth and competitive advantage, effective strategic management as a characteristic of entrepreneurship plays an important role in controlling risks by providing a structured framework for identifying, assessing and mitigating potential risks. For example, if a social work graduate wants to start a community-based support centre for victims of gender-based violence, strategic management can help them plan effectively. They can identify funding sources, assess possible risks (such as financial instability or community resistance), and develop long-term strategies to keep the centre running.

Therefore, the relevance of strategic management in social work lies in its ability to equip social work students and professionals with essential skills to enable them to gain broadened entrepreneurial insights necessary for their adaptability, innovation capabilities, self-empowerment, and the ability to contribute towards sustainable economic development. Another example is a social work graduate who wants to start a social enterprise, such as a skills training program for unemployed youth. By using strategic management, they can create

a clear business plan, find partners or investors, and adjust their approach when challenges arise. This helps them stay competitive and make sure their programme remains sustainable.

### ***Integrity***

In the context of entrepreneurship, the term "entrepreneurial integrity" often conveys the original notions of "wholeness," "intactness" and "purity" within a firm. Various facets of a person's life are believed to reflect on their integrity (Wijaya & Wijaya, 2019). Two main characteristics of entrepreneurs with integrity are professionalism and intellectual curiosity. An entrepreneur's actions and words directly reflect their character, which is grounded in the principle of integrity (Daradkeh, 2023). When referring to entrepreneurs or their actions, the term "entrepreneurial integrity" encompasses their moral integrity, including their commitments, honesty, trustworthiness and values (Yusoff et al., 2016). An entrepreneur with a strong ethical sense will usually be dedicated to the 'right' action, a 'desirable' goal, or a 'just' concept (Vallaster et al., 2019; Daradkeh, 2023).

Understanding the conceptual basis of integrity relates to social work ethical standards which require social workers to demonstrate a high level of professionalism in dealing with clients, managing cases, and collaborating with other professionals and organisations. Entrepreneurs with integrity are characterised by professionalism, which is also a valued trait in social work practice. Entrepreneurs with ethics are dedicated to "right" actions, "desirable" goals, or "just" concepts, as asserted by Daradkeh (2023). This commitment to ethical behaviour aligns with the core values of social work, which include the promotion of social justice, the empowerment of individuals, groups and communities; and advocating for vulnerable populations.

The proposition is that the knowledge of entrepreneurship, especially the concept of entrepreneurial integrity is relevant in social work, and suggests that social workers possess the foundational qualities and values necessary to excel as entrepreneurs if equipped with the requisite skills. This assertion underscores the potential for social workers to transition into competent entrepreneurs when given the appropriate training and development opportunities.

### **Connection between social work knowledge and entrepreneurship**

The concept of integrating social work knowledge with entrepreneurship is particularly intriguing, and offers a unique perspective on how these disciplines can complement one another. This interdisciplinary approach has the potential to enrich both fields, providing social workers with innovative strategies to address social issues, and empowering entrepreneurs with a deeper understanding of social dynamics and community needs. This complementary relationship underscores the value of a holistic approach, fostering sustainable and socially responsible business practices. For instance, social work knowledge in terms of skills, values and principles can bring about sustainability when effectively applied in entrepreneurship. Incorporating entrepreneurship into social work can foster and enhance both social and economic benefits, and so promote self-employment, social enterprises and social cooperatives. This integration will create opportunities which ultimately may benefit vulnerable populations and contribute to the broader goals of South Africa's social development framework.

### ***Communication skills***

In functional entrepreneurship, communication skills serve as the umbrella that generates other sets of skills such as negotiation, interpersonal relations, leadership and personal accountability (Chakravarti & Chakraborty, 2018). According to Abaci (2022), effective communication skills help entrepreneurs (who are social work graduates in the context of this paper) to build rapport with customers and business partners, playing a valuable role in sustaining the business enterprise as per the developmental approach. Communication skills should be more emphasised in the social work curriculum when including entrepreneurship as a developmental solution to mitigate the discourse of unemployment of social work graduates. Social workers are trained to excel in both verbal and non-verbal communication. When utilising this skill in entrepreneurship, social workers would excel in networking and building relationships with customers, business partners and other stakeholders forming part of the business operation (Haris et al., 2019). The writers suggest that these communication skills will assist social work graduates to recruit more customers to accept their product in the marketplace. By including communication skills in the social work curriculum when teaching entrepreneurship, social work students will be better prepared to run successful businesses. This can help reduce unemployment among social work graduates by giving them the skills to create their own job opportunities and contribute to economic development.

### ***Cultural competence***

The competence of an entrepreneur depends highly on possessing an adequate set of knowledge, skills, principles, attitudes and abilities that enable entrepreneurs to run successful business enterprises (Ferreira et al., 2022). With appropriate flexibility, social workers are capacitated to work with individuals, groups and communities from diverse cultural backgrounds (Rautenbach & Nadesan, 2022). This cultural competence skill can play a valuable role in enabling social workers (as entrepreneurs) to understand and serve diverse customer bases (Pasaribu et al., 2022). This means that as advocates for the voiceless and marginalised, social workers will ensure that the human rights of all individuals are promoted, and ethnocentric behaviour does not become part of entrepreneurial endeavours (Campanini & Lombard, 2018).

### ***Empathy and compassion***

We observed that in general businesses are not characterised by empathy and compassion. A possible reason for this could be that if a seller becomes too generous with his or her products to the buyer, s/he is more likely to suffer loss of profits. However, we argue that one of the core areas of social work knowledge includes the ability to understand and empathise with the needs and experiences of others (Pasaribu et al., 2022). In teaching social work students about entrepreneurship, the expression of empathy and compassion should be strongly emphasised and handled sensitively to accommodate the needs of the broader society. This empathetic competence can play a significant role when applied in entrepreneurship, mainly in developing products and services intended to address the needs and problems of the broader society. Recognising the importance of an empathetic mentality, Sajilan and Tehseen (2015) posit that an entrepreneur with empathetic competence is likely to increase self-awareness while



maintaining resilience. Moreover, we posit that, unlike a traditional business that focuses mainly on profit making, social work entrepreneurs with empathy and compassion can balance making money with making a difference. Empathy helps them build trust with customers, create meaningful products and services, and develop strong relationships with business partners (Abaci, 2022). By including empathy in entrepreneurship training, social work students will learn how to run businesses that not only generate income but also improve people's lives. This approach ensures that their businesses remain sustainable while having a positive social impact.

### ***Ethical conduct/practice***

While developing rapport and personal accountability with clients and stakeholders, skilful interpersonal relations are required for functional entrepreneurship. Social workers as custodians of ethical principles are encouraged to uphold integrity, confidentiality, accountability and honesty in all areas of practice (Pasaribu et al., 2022). Applying these principles in the context of entrepreneurship can help maintain trust and credibility in business dealings (Abaci, 2022). For example, a social work entrepreneur running a private counselling service must protect clients' personal information and avoid misleading advertising to maintain trust.

Thus, it is important to integrate the skill of ethical conduct in teaching entrepreneurship in social work education. This will also play a significant role in enabling social work graduates to become ethical entrepreneurs. Ethical entrepreneurship means being fair in pricing, treating employees and customers with respect, avoiding exploitation and consistent integrity (Haris et al., 2019). Practising integrity and accountability, social work students can build businesses that are not only profitable, but also socially responsible and sustainable. Teaching these ethical principles in entrepreneurship training will help social work students develop businesses that contribute positively to society while maintaining professional credibility.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is evident from recent statistics in South Africa that the country is experiencing a rise in the number of unemployed social workers, and consequently higher instances of poverty. Against this background, it is argued that the country's social work curriculum needs to incorporate entrepreneurship for the sake of job creation and economic competence. Successful entrepreneurship relies on key determinants such as innovation, recognising opportunities, business growth, strategic management practices and integrity. These determinants are crucial as they foster the creation and operation of new ideas, distinct from prevailing views. Creativity in entrepreneurship is enhanced by advanced education, assisting in the identification of risk and opportunity. These opportunities, once recognised, should be explored to maximise profit.

Moreover, social workers as managers manifesting integrity as a fundamental professional skill will ensure a fair distribution of wealth/profits generated from entrepreneurial endeavours. Incorporating entrepreneurship into the curriculum will empower social work graduates to be innovative and able to create their own employment opportunities, thereby alleviating the problem of unemployment in the country. The strategy will also play an important role in

fostering economic growth and development in the country beyond the social work profession itself.

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