

**TRANSFORMING "POSTGRADUATE" OFFERINGS\***

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**INTRODUCTION**

Social work programmes, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level, must be context relevant (Van Rooyen 1996). The call for relevance, transformation and change has become almost desperate as we enter the new millenium, with the government also heeding this call via the White Paper for Welfare (1997).

This paper will discuss research findings in order to facilitate the planning of feasible programmes at postgraduate level. Two sets of research data will be presented, viz.:

- current postgraduate programmes at universities;
- expressed educational and learning needs of practitioners in the field of social work.

The author will thereafter summarise key concerns/issues that need to be addressed in attempting to reconcile the developmental paradigm with future postgraduate programmes. Amongst the variety of factors that need to be considered when planning modules will be marketing of the programme, accreditation, inter- and intra-university collaboration, territoriality and financial constraints. These will be highlighted briefly to stimulate communication and problem solving.

**WHAT CLASSIFIES PROGRAMMES AS DEVELOPMENTAL?**

Midgley (1996:2) asserts that a developmental perspective is essentially one that harmonises social and economic policies within a dynamic developmental process. Gray (1996a) helps with narrowing this broad definition for the purposes of this paper by identifying the following features of developmental social work:

- commitment to the eradication of poverty;
- linking welfare and economic development;
- focusing on human resource development.

Therefore it stands to reason that modules taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels should strive to accommodate these characteristics and in addition cover the following (Gray 1996a, 1997):

- discourage dependence;
- promote people participation;
- employ multi-sectoral collaboration;
- encourage partnerships amongst all stakeholders;
- promote economic growth in the individual, community and in the nation.

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The White Paper for Welfare in South Africa (1997) outlines these features in the preamble referring to a democratic, equitable, people-centred welfare system. The Paper also refers to releasing people's creative energies to build human resources and reiterates the need to reintegrate the marginalised and impoverished into society.

Unlike Gray's (1996a, 1996b) suggestion that community development be a key interventive strategy to implement developmental social work, and Midgley's (1995) emphasis on social development as promoting wider community and societal development rather than providing for the individual, the White Paper (1997:8) refers to the need for sustainable improvements in the well-being of **individuals, families and communities**. This is also supported in the Paper's preamble, which mentions that there should be a continuation of existing services, but with the added commitment to re-orient such services towards a developmental approach. Hence, it would appear that the targets for intervention are the individual, family and community, but with a fresh approach directed at the characteristics and features just listed.

Can traditional outputs and modes of intervention in social work be accommodated within the developmental perspective? In this vein Rankin (1997:186) asks how much room must be left for other, more conventional approaches to welfare in adopting a developmental perspective. This dilemma is reiterated by Midgley (1995), who refers to the individual or enterprise approach to social development as a rather unpopular approach in developmental social work. It is almost as though individual work is seen as incompatible with community-focused empowerment. Yet there are various approaches and foci within developmental social work sanctioned by government as well as being enshrined in theory. The individualist approach has already been covered. Vilikazi cited by Gray (1997) also mentions the populist or communitarian approach which serves the developmental approach via developing communities at the local community level, and the statist approach which focuses on initiatives by the state in promoting development. Clearly then, the target population to be serviced within the developmental perspective is wide ranging and includes the individual as well as groups of marginalised communities (Lombard 1996).

Now, are we more confused than before? There is a government policy on what needs to be the preferred umbrella strategy for use; we are told to use the old but adopt a new approach; there are popular and unpopular views on what constitutes developmental social work. The author agrees with Rankin (1997) when he says that it is indeed difficult to change course when there is a lack of clarity on operationalising developmental welfare. Have we been given the directive to change and not to change simultaneously? To what/who do we owe allegiance? Is it that we do not have to depart too much from the present because, as Gray (1997:210) suggests, it is about the ecosystemic perspective in a new guise? Perhaps this means that as long as we are able to link our syllabi with features of a developmental perspective, we have a justification for the existence of a course! Indeed the call for clarity on what constitutes developmental social work is well stated by Kaseke (1998:148) when he requests that social welfare face its responsibilities head-on instead of churning out abstract ideas on what ought to be.

Now that there is some understanding of the multi-variant nature of the developmental perspective, maybe we can proceed further. Indeed, the general lack of clear direction could be seen as advantageous in that so many programmes can be accommodated within this interpretation and still be regarded as relevant and appropriate within our new macro policy.

Let us now examine university offerings with regard to content and duration.

## FINDINGS IN RESPECT OF UNIVERSITY OFFERINGS

Eight university postgraduate social work programmes were analysed with a view to comparing their content and duration during the process of curriculum development at the academic institution where the author is employed. One of the universities (offering only a research Masters at present) was in the process of developing a taught or coursework Masters, whilst all the others were offering coursework programmes, some alongside a research Masters.

The duration of programmes ranged from 1 year to 3 years on a part-time basis, with reduced time if undertaken on a full-time basis. Core modules included research coursework and a mini dissertation that carried varied weight, depending on the number of modules required for completion of the degree. Only one university offered a choice to the student in respect of the modules. Listed among the modules offered by these universities were:

- Advanced Theory in Social Work
- Management and Social Policy
- Developmental Social Work
- Advanced Knowledge of Contextual Issues (Industrial Social Work)
- Development Theories
- Development Institutions
- Rural Development
- Urban Development
- Health and Development
- Sustainable Development
- Gender and Development
- Development and Policy
- Development Project and Programme Management
- Health Care
- Management
- Play Therapy
- Social Work - Science of Helping
- Community Work and Development
- Supervision, Management and Policy
- Contributing Disciplines Studies
- Family Therapy
- Anatomy and Pathology for Medical Social Work
- Physiology for Medical Social Work.

Universities were offering modules towards certain specialisations, e.g. Industry, Medicine, Child and Family, etc. Incorporated within the specialisation was evidence of courses regarded as generic, such as in the case at one institution which offers a specialised degree in Medical Social Work, but which incorporates child and family work and a community health and development focus as well.

The modules listed above provide us with a rudimentary outline of the range taught at these universities. Taking cognisance of the developmental perspective, these courses are suggestive of political appropriateness and perhaps even relevance in terms of the White Paper for Welfare (1997)! It is highly likely that institutions are currently changing programme structures, accreditation and even entrance requirements to attract students both to complete the Masters degree and to allow for multiple exits should an entire programme be unmanageable. Most respondents in this study (74%) opted for registering for individual modules rather than for a Masters degree.

Bearing the existing programmes in mind, let us examine what potential students are requesting and if indeed their needs have a developmental focus.

### MARKET NEEDS

The learning needs of practitioners associated with the university at which the author teaches were investigated. These practitioners are expected to provide the pool of potential students by virtue of the university being accessible to them. Altogether 29 practitioners participated in this phase of the study. This number is small, but it was nevertheless regarded as offering some guidance to the Department in planning programmes in accordance with the university's move towards allowing multiple exits and towards modularisation.

Respondents came from both generic and specialised areas such as child welfare, medical social work, law, physically challenged, substance abuse and epilepsy. Their range of experience was extensive (79% had more than 4 years of practice experience), this being expected since the target sample came from practitioners who were connected with student supervision at the university. Despite this extensive experience, only 9 (31%) of the practitioners held senior positions.

Let us now examine findings in respect of learning needs:

Module	Frequency	Percent
Community Dev and Work	17	57%
Mental Health	5	17%
Research	12	41%
Family Therapy	14	48%
Physiology for Med SW	6	21%
Anatomy for Med SW	6	21%
Family Law	14	48%
Management	13	45%
Advanced SW Theory	8	28%
Groupwork	3	10%
School SW	5	17%
Child/Youth Care & Dev	8	28%
Conflict Resolution	12	41%
Developmental SW	15	52%
Dissertation	2	7%
Pathology for Med SW	9	31%

The choice of modules was based on available expertise in the institution where the author teaches. The purpose of the investigation was to formulate a programme/s based on available

expertise, taking market needs into account. To cover the possibility that there were going to be modules that were not listed, but which were deemed desirable by respondents, an open question pertaining to other learning needs was asked. The response to this was for:

- Religious and Cultural Study (1 respondent),
- Child Disorders (1 respondent),
- Lifeskills (2 respondents),
- Social Policy (2 respondents),
- Geriatric SW (1 respondent),
- Counselling and Assessment Scales (1 respondent).

Clearly, these responses indicate a wide range of interest, with completing a dissertation being least desired. Interestingly, practitioners were nonetheless keen to have knowledge of research, presumably in accord with the need for accountability and evaluation of programmes at their organisations.

All except one respondent wished that modules were offered on a part-time basis with some innovative suggestions for accessibility. These were for courses to be offered on Saturdays, in the evenings and for in-house (agency) lectures during work hours. Most respondents wanted time granted by their agencies to enable them to study further for self-fulfilment.

Reasons for undertaking further study were:

Self-fulfilment	90%
Financial Remuneration	62%
Being allowed time by organisation	52%
Promotion	59%
Presenting knowledge	52%

Despite the reasons given for further study, only 41% (N=12) respondents indicated interest in further study within the next two years as compared to 48% (N=14) who indicated no interest. The rest of the respondents were undecided. It is important to contextualise this finding; as one respondent reported, "There is no scope for social work in this country ... no jobs ... furthering one's studying is not purposeful". It would appear that Mupedziswe's (1997:233) concern regarding the frustration around an inappropriate training within shoestring budgetary allocations, along with minimal job satisfaction if indeed a job is secured, all contribute to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness within the profession. However, Mupedziswe (1997) notes that the developmental approach can rescue social work and social workers in that many students hail from impoverished backgrounds themselves. They would therefore feel motivated on the basis of experience to study further on how to make a difference. This is in accord with the findings in this study, which indicate that if students were to study further, it would mainly be for self-fulfilment. Hence also the finding that modules dealing with disadvantage enjoyed greater responses than those that were not as directly linked, viz. Modules in Community Development and Community Health, Developmental Social Work, Family Work and Management.

## MATCHING MARKET NEEDS AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT WITHIN A DEVELOPMENTAL PARADIGM

Having considered that the "developmental" could well be an all-embracing perspective that focuses on empowerment, the task now remains on re-curricularising programmes to make them marketable and relevant at the same time. What would pave the way for this to occur?

1. Inter-university and intra-university collaboration. This has become crucial for the survival of tertiary education and has been recommended at several forums. If one imagines that setting up meetings with other universities is difficult, experience has shown that engaging with other departments within one's own university is just as difficult. The task is made complex by concerns relating to financial viability, the accumulation of LE points for modules taught or just simple ego enhancement/bashing when re-curricularisation takes place. However, a united front at the face of threats to the very survival of the profession is crucial.
2. Accreditation of modules. Students should ideally be able to take modules of interest to them regardless of which department/university is responsible for their teaching. This means a team effort at joint planning, agreeing on minimum standards and examining multiple exits so that students are encouraged to study and achieve short-term goals. Departments need to examine their various areas of expertise in a spirit of serving the student and community first and foremost, rather than be primarily concerned with self-survival and financial gain. This may appear simple to accomplish when stated as a goal, but indeed has been the biggest stumbling block to transforming curricula.
3. International recognition. With students being exposed to the attraction of international experience for a variety of reasons, it is incumbent on universities to collaborate internationally. Structures are already in place. More deliberate focus on international accreditation needs to take place.
4. Motivation for study. Social workers in the main may be regarded as study-shy. Several factors contribute to this, viz. opportunities for promotion being linked to minimal financial gains, minimum opportunity for upward mobility for further study, high burn-out and disillusionment with a practice that is perceived as having limited impact. Authors such as Osei-Hwedie (1996), Mupedziswe (1997) and Kaseke (1998) are desperately calling for transformation in curricula and training based on indigenous theory that may promote relevance, improve job satisfaction and generally enthuse social workers.
5. Service conditions. Clearly, service conditions of social workers have to provide incentives for excellence in performance and further qualifications. Time to attend to further study should be allowed ungrudgingly. Perhaps, then, agencies will need to concern themselves less with job-related stress and absenteeism than at present.
6. Government sanction. Alongside changed service conditions must emerge a genuine recognition of the social work profession. Salaries must affirm this recognition and posts should be unfrozen so that social workers may adequately display their professional worth.
7. Clarity on the meaning of "developmental". In this paper, an attempt has been made to demonstrate how much confusion surrounds the concept "developmental". The responsibility for clarity should be jointly shared by academics, practitioners as well as government. Then there would be meaningful consensus that could guide practice.
8. Co-ordination of changes. It is abundantly clear that widespread transformation of curricula

has to take place. So many role players are involved! So who takes overall responsibility for orchestrating these changes? Perhaps the answer lies in answering the question that whoever has minimal personal investment in these changes be the great convenor. Then we stand a chance of collaborating with one another with minimal suspicion.

## CONCLUSION

Planning innovative curricula today appears to be daunting, given the lack of clarity on what constitutes or may be accepted as being developmental. Luring potential candidates to study further is another challenge within a depressed economic climate. Yet the very same outcomes of a developmental approach need to be applied to the social work profession, viz. recognition and affirmation of social work as a marginalised profession, economic empowerment of this professional community, commitment to multi-sectoral collaboration, eradication of poverty in the area of knowledge and focusing on building human resources within this community! Let us together commit to collaborate, to stand united to transform curricula and promote our relevance and survival.

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