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Outcomes-based education and deep learning in first year social work in South Africa: Two case examples

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Abstract
South African social work education changed from norm-based to outcomes-based education soon after the first democratic government came into power in 1994 and a new Bachelor of Social Work has been in existence since 2007. The article argues in support of deep learning principles and presents narrative constructions from two differently advantaged departments of social work, illustrating how lecturers and students there have adapted to outcomes-based education. Conclusions indicate that statutory requirements and institutional pressures militate against the development of deep learning. The urgency to incorporate transformative learning in meeting professional standards is placed in the international context.

Keywords
Deep learning, institutional pressure, narrative construction, outcomes-based education, South African Bachelor of Social Work, statutory requirements

Soon after democracy was introduced in 1994, South African social work education changed from norm- to outcomes-based education. This shift was consistent with changes in the collective national education system (SAQA, 2001, 2005). Internationally, there has also been movement from norms as comparisons within a group to outcomes as measurable skills, for example, in instructional assessment in the United States (Browning, 1997) and in the United Kingdom in the professionalization of vocations (Cree and Macauley, 2000). In South Africa, the focus has been on redressing general educational inequities post-apartheid according to a National Qualifications Framework (Republic of South Africa, 2008). As outcomes-based training is also person-centred in its transparent presentation of evidence by the learner, its philosophy is suited to the (racial) inclusion policies that the post-apartheid government espoused.

This article investigates the implementation of outcomes-based education with regard to a Bachelor of Social Work by examining the personal experiences of lecturers and students at two

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historically diverse universities. Ways in which deep learning is incorporated in the educational structure are discussed. The findings are not only relevant locally, but have application to other resource-poor societies where criteria for proficiency can be indigenized by appropriate purposes and skills. Additionally, the results may be useful to contexts where student populations are becoming increasingly diverse.

South African social work education

The statutory departments, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), introduced and now monitor the changes from the previous norm-based degree towards a criterion-referenced approach. These bodies were established by the post-apartheid government to transform education into a democratic, non-racial system, and provide quality education to all through a single, integrated education system (SAQA, 2004). Outcomes-based learning (OBE) was identified as central to quality education. OBE can be described as the transparent application of a set of measurable criteria for setting a standard of proficiency. Consistent with these purposes, the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), with 27 exit level outcomes (ELOs)[1] was developed over two years by a standards generation committee. SAQA approved the minimum criteria in 2003 (Lombard et al., 2003). All 17 social work training institutions were obliged by 2007 to institute the new criterion-referenced degree and to annually demonstrate that students have reached the ELOs and their associated assessment criteria. By 2010 they were expected to be familiar with the concept of constructive alignment, in which objectives, activities, assessments and outcomes are linked (Biggs, 2003). As a statutory requirement, these concepts are presented explicitly in student learning material. The 27 ELOs have to be achieved as the final outcome of the BSW programme, thus at the end of the fourth year of study. First year students are expected to demonstrate a selection of ELOs, based on autonomous decision by the universities according to the structure of their curricula.

OBE is not linked to deep learning by definition alone as the former is observed by performance and not by process. This is not to say that OBE does not incorporate deep learning but that its focus is on demonstrable criteria and not on a foundation of internalized understanding. Consequently, the underlying critical thinking (deep learning) in reaching ELOs remains implicit. Deep learning can be described as making sense of ideas (Biggs, 2003). It seeks constructivist integration between components of ideas as well as between tasks and new concepts. It abhors surface/passive learning (unthinkingly reproducing others' ideas) and strategic learning (learning based only on what is required to pass). Indicators of deep learning which provide guidelines for achieving this level in the classroom are the following: student selection and planning of activities, making connections by doing, testing own views and hearing others in interaction, building on existing knowledge, self-monitoring through reflection, development of meta-cognitive skills, having a variety of experiences, ensuring a feasible workload and applying feedback (Biggs, 2003). Where students are subjected to instructive or didactic teaching it becomes more difficult for deep learning to take place and for the outcomes related to deep learning to be evident. Ideally, social work students should be compliant with both the performance outcomes of OBE and the indicators of deep learning. Deep learning is essential in the social work discipline where theory is applied to practice and where values and ethics are expected to be internalized. Practitioners are expected by international norms to be critical and self-reflective and both students and practitioners should apply scholarly attitudes of reasoning to the domain of social work (Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession, 2004). In South Africa, the existence of such critical thinking has been questioned, and the achievement of specified criteria in the form of ELOs has been

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considered antithetical to such critical thinking (Gray and Fook, 2004; Sewpaul, 2006; Sewpaul and Lombard, 2004; Sewpaul et al., 2011; Simpson, 2010). In this article, the personal experiences of teachers and learners are researched to explore the association between outcomes-based education in the current South African BSW and deep learning. It will be seen that it is very difficult to establish a balance between the achievement of outcomes in the form of the measurable realization of new knowledge and the aspirations for deep learning in the form of making sense of concepts from own position.

Except for students from formerly white schools which now include all race groups and from some other notable schools,[2] South African school leavers tend to lack solid academic backgrounds and are not adequately prepared for tertiary education (Bloch, 2009; Boughey, 2010; Collins and Millard, 2012; Jansen, 2009, 2012; Ross, 2010; Taylor, 2003). The state – through SAQA standards in 1995 and 2001 and the NQF Act No 67 of 2008 – has obliged universities not only to employ race-based admission quotas to redress historical inequities of white privilege, but also to increase numbers of formerly disadvantaged graduates. University support programmes have been established to equip lecturers (Boughey, 2008, 2010) and address the challenges higher numbers of under-prepared students and the high rates of attrition amongst first year students create (Council on Higher Education South Africa, 2009; Harvey and Drew, 2006; Opening Conversations on First-year Success, 2008; Scott, 2008; Scott et al., 2007).

Social work in South Africa as a discipline-specific qualification has been supported through: i) a statutory council (established as The South African Council for Social and Associated Workers in 1980 and known as The South African Council for Social Service Professions – SACSSP since 2006) which regulates social work registration, educational standards and practice; ii) an academic association (from 1962 the Joint Universities Committee and since 2002 the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions – ASASWEI) of which all South African social work educational institutions are compulsory members and which is accredited by the International Association of Schools of Social Work; and iii) the state Department of Social Development. The latter in 2007 instituted a recruitment and retention programme including financial assistance for students.[3] Although the SACSSP had to ensure that universities in 2009 completed a departmental assessment schedule regarding the outcomes-based model, by 2010, apart from textually based analyses (Hochfeld, 2009; Simpson, 2010) no external investigation had been implemented. Departments of social work do, according to statutory requirements, document the fulfilment of criteria, but it is not known if lecturers have adjusted their attitudes to the implementation of outcomes-based education, how putatively under-prepared social work students experience outcomes-based tertiary education, or the extent to which deep learning takes place.

To answer these questions and mindful that the BSW had to be revised in 2012, ASASWEI commissioned research on teaching and learning in the first year of social work (Collins, 2011). (Ultimately, the qualification was not revised, but, on the request of the South African Council for Social Service Professions, re-registered by SAQA for a further period of three years, ending in 2015.) Qualitative research was carried out in focus groups with lecturers and students. Quantitative research was also undertaken in the documentary analysis of learning material. Findings drawn from the thematic and the documentary analyses have been published separately. These papers highlight contradictions between the universities in the application of ELOs (Collins, 2012a) and emphasize constraints in human and material resources which limit the achievement of ELOs (Collins, 2012b).

This article discusses another aspect of the broader research project, namely the narrative construction of the experiences of lecturers and students in two universities with extremely different histories. The purpose is to highlight how lecturers and students have constructed outcomes-based

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education and deep learning and to illuminate how the lived realities of both groups have impacted this construction. It is expected that their different histories will be reflected in the constructions of education by these two universities. I shall first present the design of the broader research project, thereafter in the form of case studies, the history, teaching context and narrative constructions of each university and conclude with a discussion on the effectiveness of outcomes-based education and the place of deep learning. I assume that deep learning is required for effective training in social work as a professional discipline.

Research project on first year social work teaching and learning

Scope

The research project focused on identifying and describing teaching and learning practices applied by educators (lecturers) and experienced by learners (students) in the first year of the South African BSW in 2010.

Sampling

To represent South African diversity, a purposive sample of five out of the 17 South African universities offering social work training was selected. Dimensions considered were race, city size, rural and urban and coastal and inland localities. Participants in the educator focus groups comprised the full population of first year lecturers and in the learner focus groups a purposive sample of expressive (not necessarily high-achieving) participants, as selected by their lecturers. Learners were mainly black,[4] representing the racial composition of the first year social work class.

Ethics

University ethical considerations were applied in the form of signed consent to detailed information on the project's procedures including withdrawal from participation without consequences. Although participants were anonymous, universities were identified and some academics were recognizable. Universities gave informed consent to their identification.

Data collection and analysis

Curriculum documents, including course outlines and departmental assessment reports were collected. Two focus groups were conducted at each university with separated groups of lecturers and students. The schedule of questions was pre-read and each group lasted two hours. Questions were strengths-based, for example, for lecturers: *What human and material resources exist at the university to support your work? How do you know whether students are achieving the learning outcomes (ELOs) set for the first year programme? What are the obstacles to being the facilitator of learning you would like to be?* And for students: *Do you get specified learning outcomes in your course outlines? (Give examples). How do you see the relationship between the learning outcomes and your motivation as a social work student? What do you think is the role of a student to learn well?* The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Documentary analysis, thematic analysis and narrative construction were applied to the data. The narrative is constructed by the researcher, incorporating participant descriptions and quotes.

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Two case studies

The first case study is set at the North West University (Mafikeng), a formerly disadvantaged (under-resourced) institution under the apartheid regime and the second at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, a formerly advantaged institution.

Case study of the North-West University (NWU) – Mafikeng campus

Background. Prior to 1994, NWU, then known as the University of Bophuthatswana, served primarily a black population at its Mafikeng campus in Bophuthatswana, a region designated by the apartheid regime as an independent state. In 1994, it changed its name to the University of North-West (2011). The University of North-West Mafikeng campus is a merger between the previous University of North-West and the Potchefstroom University of Christian Higher Education. The campuses emerging from the merger include the campus in Mafikeng, a rural area, Potchefstroom, an urban setting (in the North-West Province, formerly Western Transvaal), and the Vaal Triangle, an industrial setting (in Gauteng Province, formerly Witwatersrand). Now one of the largest universities in South Africa, with 55,650 students in total and 8554 at Mafikeng in 2010, NWU is innovative in catering for students in a developing province(University of the North West, 2011).

In 2010 there were four (with one on sabbatical leave) lecturers teaching at first year level. With 159 students, the first year ratio of staff to students was 1:53. The Academic Development Centre (ADC) trained senior social work students and paid them a stipend to tutor first years.

Responses. I shall first discuss, based on the focus groups, how *lecturers* experienced their situation and then report on the students' experience.

The three lecturers in referring to management's attitude believed they were expected to do too much teaching and marking, and had insufficient time for research. One expressed this dissatisfaction as: 'We cannot be commoditized.' Institutional constraints required them to move simply from one assessment to the next.

> Two, two [formative assessments] for each module yes, so when I finish with the second one I start with the exams so I don't see anything to support me, to say even if you are teaching you've got this big class we still demand research from you, not this is what we can help you with to help you to do research, so sometimes I feel just de-motivated and say under these circumstance it will just be teach and teach and teaching and I will never get promoted I'll just die in this level.

Infrastructure was inadequate as the library service was slow and classrooms lacked Power Point facilities. Participants did acknowledge that the e-site for class material was useful and lecturers assisted one another with this resource. They also identified the support of the ADC, which helped by providing regular tutoring for lecture content and for writing assignments and the SACSSP which conveyed the importance of ethics and in the BSW criteria as useful:

> They [students] are definitely taking their work seriously. . . I mean it stands to reason they are registered now with the South African Council for the Social Service Professions. We are telling students that, we are doing that; you know we are doing everything within the parameters of Council…

Participants believed that students who were committed would achieve the learning outcomes because tutorial help and resubmission opportunities were available. Such students would also overcome any personal problems. Lecturers were scathing regarding the student scholarship

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provided by the government as it was being abused and used for luxuries like alcohol and telephone time instead of study-related needs. Lecturers further believed students viewed the scholarship as a university entrance ticket rather than as motivation to study social work.

> I . . . tell you that when our students get paid it would be a party and they would disturb everybody so. I walked into Pick 'n' Pay [supermarket] the last month it was like I'm walking into a social work class (laughter).

Lecturers believed themselves to be committed teachers. They had overcome personal problems. Working conditions had improved in that only recently the entry level for social work was so low that social work students were called 'rejects' by other academic departments, but was now stringent enough to avoid such labelling. The number of lecturers in the department had also increased over the past two years from only three lecturers to seven, for a total of 600 students.

As a researcher, I was tasked with examining how the outcomes-based model was being implemented. Instead of having been able to access this information, I was left with a sense that lecturers were focussed on survival due to the minimal resources available to them. As lecturers they have access only to the barest essentials. Furthermore, students have limited (academic) capacity. These lecturers believed students' success was dependent on student commitment to the profession of social work, rather than on educational standards set by the curriculum. They looked forward to the day when they would walk into class with just a memory stick. Deep learning was not in evidence as there was no reflection of student understanding and application of knowledge but rather a repetition of content. With restricted time, lecturers were not pursuing their own scholarly interests, so important if they are to teach authentically (Ragland, 2008).

I will now turn to the narrative emerging from the student focus group. The 14 *student-participants* wanted to convince me that it was important for them to receive a clear, straightforward message about what is required of them as learners. In addition, they needed to know what materials were available to them, what information they had to process and what support structures were there to assist them. Tertiary education, which they described as 'serious' (school having been 'not serious') was an unfamiliar experience to them. Students reported feeling disadvantaged having to complete tasks in the English language. However, while Sesotho was often spoken in the academic support programmes, they did not see this as helpful.

Students called their teachers 'inspirational' role models who were passionate social workers. Students needed their lecturers and the Academic Development Centre staff to be easily accessible and to explain university procedures and their work itself. They found any deviation from the study guide difficult. Students described feeling overwhelmed if they found a reference to a non-prescribed book, an assessment task with no background or an activity with the wrong outcome. They could not absorb 'too much [information] at once' especially if they could not hear the lecturer. Some objected to having to listen and take notes simultaneously as this was too difficult. Having class notes provided on the e-site was useful. Faced with an overcrowded classroom which created physical obstacles and not understanding the lecturer, an option was to ask for help.

> If you can see what clearly what [*sic*] has been said or written upfront it is okay but if you can't see or if you can't hear or if you don't get along or if you don't follow you still have a chance to say – I can't see what's written up front on the white board or whatever.

The students noted that anyone could progress ('achieve') provided that they obtained the reading material, prepared their work and could find quiet ('peaceful') places to study. These participants

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felt that while others were distracted (by peer influence and substance abuse), they as a group were nevertheless learning.

> I thought wow, write an essay – aren't we going to do something better than writing an essay? I collect [*sic*] that from high school, but after writing an essay it came in several parts and the lecturers explained everything so great my mind became broader and I was like wow – this is what I want to do.

The students' image of the lecturers being strong messengers for the profession, tallies with the lecturers' expectations of them as expressed in the previous focus group. There is no evidence of deep learning. Instead students have become accustomed to being given direction and are not meeting the challenge of having to take decisions on how and what they are learning.

Case study of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU)

Background. The NMMU resulted from the merger in 2004 of the Port Elizabeth Technikon, the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) (the latter both having previously served primarily white students) and the Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University (having served primarily black students). This merger was part of a government-wide restructuring of higher education institutions. The social work programme originated in UPE, the country's first dual-medium (Afrikaans and English) residential university (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 2011).

The first year class comprised 190 students, this expanding to 360 when combined in the second semester with psychology students. Two lecturers each ran double classes. The first year ratio was 1:95/180. Practical work was tutored by fourth year students in groups of 25 under the supervision of a co-ordinator. Supplementary instruction was available to a limited extent: students attended a university preparatory course in study methods and assignment writing.

Responses. The three *lecturer-participants* related that the student population had outgrown the institutional accommodation. To me, the rooms indeed looked overused and classrooms were derelict and dark. To manage large classes, the lecturers used multiple choice assignments and marking by senior students. Lecturing was firmly structured with norms for attendance and co-operation, for example, regular tests each semester, strictly referenced by ELOs; 80 percent compulsory attendance in the double periods. 'I wanna see paper and I wanna see pens' referred to students having to take notes in class as the lecturers deliberately did not provide handouts in order to promote concentration and summary-taking skills. Lecturers felt the university disregarded the extensive load carried: for example, invigilation duties did not take into account the practical exams of social work students, thus overlooking the additional work invested by the lecturers. Students' lack of resources and capacity was also overlooked, targets being more important:

> . . . you are dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, disadvantaged in terms of their homes, in terms of their schools and communities and you have said you would like to get this number [120] as your quota and you are getting more than you can handle [180] . . . they [university authorities] do not understand the quality of students that we are dealing with.

Lecturers had to rely on their teaching strengths and management of difficult tasks. They noted it had been challenging to shift paradigms from norm-based approaches to outcomes-based education. They were concerned that there was not much evidence regarding students' connection between activities and outcomes in terms of a process of learning, despite this explanation in the study guides.

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Nevertheless, the SACSSP accepted the improvement plans submitted and the curriculum feels nicely on track to the lecturers. The social work pass rate at mid-year was 66 percent, which created a double bind for the lecturers, who needed to show a good pass rate but thereby deprived themselves of institutional support given to departments with a pass rate below 60 percent.

Conflicting views of teaching and learning emerged: On the one hand, there was joy in helping the students to understand the work; through clear structures and self-study moving beyond a focus on the ELO to scaffold the contents of the curriculum. On the other hand, lecturers expressed the opinion that 'Given the situation of the students we really must not expect too much of them', thus apparently not pursuing standards of excellence while being sympathetic to the socio-economic deprivations faced by their students. I concluded that the lecturers had accepted an outcomes-based philosophy. However, they did not seem to believe that they could or should promote deeper learning.

The final narrative construction reflects the discussion in the *student* focus group at NMMU. Here the core sentiment seemed to be 'Just let me pass'. Students were referring to the effort they invested and the inevitability of results. The nine student-participants had not anticipated the volume of work that confronted them in first semester.

> . . . I was still amazed by this huge work in front of me and it has happened at times where you have to write two or three things at a time and you cannot differentiate where to put your power in or your strength in. If I wrote two I was ending up passing one and failing the other one…

They also had to reorient their expectations, some having to learn that social work is not simply about distributing food parcels. The students spoke about different levels of learning: cramming did not lead to integrated knowledge even though many resorted to it; it was possible to aim for 50 percent and achieve this by strategic preparation; the deeper the knowledge, the deeper the complexity, and high self-expectations depend on a good self-image. In addition, the students believed that good lecturers were those that encouraged students.

Being initially shocked by the volume of the workload, students suggested that they responded by managing their time; dividing work into sections; engaging closely with the study material; participating in group discussions; consulting peers; sitting close to the lecturer; attending the smaller evening classes; asking questions in class; approaching the lecturer for individual assistance and finding quiet places to study. They seemed to understand alignment of activities and assessments in their course content:

> For me the continuous assessments is [*sic*] also nice, it helps you to prepare for the big exams and the learning outcomes I have expected to reach in social work.

The students noted that while didactic lectures supplemented by class notes were useful because these were easy to memorize, they appreciated being able to transfer their knowledge from theory to practice, for example, through role plays. They found that their learning was aided by outcomes having been explicitly articulated at the outset:

> Right from the start we just received the outcomes and it was like you receive the outcomes and know when is the next test and put it away, that is actually the backbone of the first semester, and even throughout your life of being at varsity, if you pay attention to your course outline and you do the assessments that they give to you it will ease up the pressure…

I was impressed by the determination of these students to apply principles of deep learning to outcomes-based education despite dealing with continuing socio-economic stress that many of

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them reported having to deal with. There was evidence of meta-cognition in planning their studies, they were learning by doing and by making connections in the role plays and most importantly they understood the vulnerability of gaining knowledge. Like their lecturers, they reflected ambivalence between the didactic and the transformative. The students did not show a sense of independence in learning, as they felt they needed their lecturers constantly to provide clear guidelines about the university expectations and continually to respond to problems surrounding the learning role.

Discussion

There are certain similarities between the two universities with regard to the operationalization of outcomes-based education in the first year of the BSW. Lecturers utilized a criterion-referenced approach and presented a curriculum which followed the ELO competencies as students were being introduced to formative assignments which were aligned with objectives, activities, assessments and outcomes. Students found the application of clear criteria useful. It appeared that despite not delineating the process as constructive alignment, they were in fact implementing this approach. Overall, in pursuit of ELOs as viewed by these participants, deeper learning principles tend to be overlooked.

The impact of resource constraints

While it can be argued that resource challenges are pervasive in the higher education system in South Africa and these were identified in the broader research project (Collins, 2012a, 2012b), the limitations that the social work educators and learners faced at the two institutions documented in this article had particular consequences. At the first site, lecturers felt that it was up to students to find the resources to deal with personal problems, particularly as they were required to do so (and had done) themselves. At the second site, lecturers were not prepared to provide e-notes and expected students to write notes during class, even though this was likely to prejudice students with poor educational backgrounds.

In both student focus groups, participants suggested that they were coping and complying with the outcomes expected of them, but implied that many of their colleagues were struggling. They suggested that the less successful students were not committed/became uncommitted to studying, instead succumbing to typical first year behaviour of socializing, partying and in some cases, of substance dependence, relying on strategic learning for their university work. Lecturers also referred to the responsibility of students in their role as learners. It is difficult to distinguish in this research between the systemic and the personal issues preventing successful learning, whether ‘success’ is indicated by deep learning or by reaching ELOs, because responses by participants were subjectively based. Moreover, the institution approaches throughput as an individual teaching and learning responsibility, thereby avoiding structural factors in the consideration of student ‘success’.

Formal statutory expectations and deep learning

The lack of resources appears to intersect with high formal statutory expectations, a finding confirmed in the broader research project. This interaction has direct consequences for outcomes-based education and deep learning. First, reaching the high number of 27 ELOs with each one requiring observation leads to inappropriate or at best, superficial achievement. Second, by specifying separate outcomes, dynamic concepts also become separated from any flow or transferral. The difficulty of building an integrated picture of student work in outcomes-based education has been forcefully argued at international (Cree and Macauley, 2000; Maki, 2011) and at

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national levels (Bozalek, 2009; Hochfeld, 2009; Simpson, 2010; Sewpaul et al., 2011). Third, within a semester, there is usually time for only one formative task before the summative assessment, insufficient for assimilation of concepts by under-prepared students. Multiple choice questions, group presentations and peer and self-marking, resorted to in high student-lecturer ratios are not student-centred. Fourth, large class size,[5] without sufficient or any tutoring, also inhibits student-centred teaching. Values and ethics of a discipline require more time and practice than they presently receive in order to be internalized. Fifth, the size of student workload with many needing extra scaffolding in mastering an activity or completing an assessment leaves no space for the phase of reflection in their learning cycle. Reflection is recognized as essential in creating curiosity and ownership of learning, see for example, Bryan and Clegg (2006), Butcher et al. (2006), Frankland (2007), Fry et al. (2009) and Wee (2010), and self-reflection is central to qualified practitioners in managing their professional responsibilities as well as satisfying global standards. Finally, educators in the study did not feel that they were supported by their institutions. It also seems that the very programmes needed to develop teachers and learners lack the necessary institutional support (Boughey, 2008, 2010; Carnell, 2007; Collins and Millard, 2012; Hénard, 2010; Hughes and Mighty, 2010; Murray, 2002). All these pressures compel lecturers to turn to didactic approaches simply to cover the content for ELOs. However, the research also identified that while teaching and learning expertise is needed, many educators were not making use of training opportunities provided by their universities. This issue merits further investigation.

The institutional emphasis on pass rates created pressures. The change from norm to outcomes-based teaching and learning has not affected the pass rate in social work significantly; it ranges from 66 percent to 95 percent, with a mean of 76 percent. Using the pass rate as the indicator of success does not reflect deep learning as it is possible to reach 50 percent with both surface and strategic methods (Biggs, 2003; Butcher et al., 2006; Wee, 2010). The pass rate can also be biased by institutional pressure on throughput where the individual teacher is held responsible for student failure.

Socio-political influences

Despite radically different institutional histories, the resource and statutory pressures appear to have had the same effect at each university studied. This can potentially be attributed to the student demographic now being similar in both institutions.

Conclusion

Efforts are being made by South Africa's social work lecturers and students to implement outcomes-based education. However, obstacles regarding inadequate resources, an overrepresentation of students with inadequate secondary school formation and unrealistic statutory expectations constrain the ability of South African universities to incorporate deep learning principles. This has significant implications for the quality of work delivered by future social workers. Because international student populations are becoming increasingly diverse and university budgets are shrinking (Adams et al., 2007; Harvey and Drew, 2006; Harvey and Kamvounias, 2008; Strydom et al., 2010), it is important for all social work academics to consider the impact of limited resources and high statutory expectations. There is a dire need for the statutory bodies and universities to examine how social work training programmes can be supported to execute transformative learning in the face of major resource shortages.

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Notes

1. As an example, ELO no. 1 is: Develop and maintain professional social work relationships with client systems. The associated assessment criteria are: 1) Professional relationships are purposefully founded on knowledge of and insight into the nature of client systems and their dynamics. 2) Professional relationships are characterized by the purposeful implementation of social work principles at the individual, family, group, community and organizational level. 3) Professional relationships clearly demonstrate an understanding of ethical parameters. 4) Enabling environments are created for client systems to develop their full capacity.
2. Prior to democratization in 1994, universities along with all educational institutions had been separated on racial grounds accompanied by unequal state resources. Despite political and policy changes towards equity in South Africa, inequities in power relations favouring whites remain. One important aspect that pertains to standards of education is that the geographical communities from which the students are drawn, house separate racial groups, associated with very different histories and levels of socio-economic resources, including schooling.
3. Social work as a profession was included in the National Master Scarce Skills List for South Africa (2006) by the Minister of Labour. In terms of social work, a shortage of 5000 was calculated at that time, from a base of 11,000 registered social workers. In 2011, 14,867 social workers were registered. Social work student scholarships numbered 5574 in 2010. Graduates of the scholarship numbered 4000 in 2011.
4. The term ‘black’ in this context refers to the generic term, defined by the ruling party (African National Congress), including black Africans, coloured and Indians and considered previously disadvantaged in the Employment Equity Act of 1998.
5. In South Africa, there are no nationalized norms for class size but 80 is the number set by most social work departments for first year admissions. In the United Kingdom, most classes are under 50 and 80 is considered large; in Canada 70 is considered large and in the United States, most classes are under 20 (e-mail correspondence).

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