

# Online Self-Coaching Programme to Enhance Employability of Social Work Students

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## Abstract

In view of an increase in access to tertiary education and intense competition among graduates to find jobs in the labour market, the questions, “Who is responsible for ensuring the employability of students?” and “How can the employability of students be improved?” are of paramount importance. This article endeavours to answer these questions by focusing on the part that students themselves can play. An online self-coaching programme is introduced as an alternative strategy for enhancing the employability of social work students. The experiences of students from residential learning (RL) and open distance e-learning (ODEL) contexts who participated in a pilot study in South Africa are presented. The self-coaching programme is based on research conducted on the support needs of social work students using the Intervention Design and Development Model of Rothman and Thomas. Two online versions of the programme emerged and were piloted as part of content preparation by 10 social work students in two universities in South Africa, representing ODEL and RL contexts. A qualitative approach and purposive sampling were employed in the study. The data were analysed using the eight steps formulated by Tesch. The participants averred that the online self-coaching programme could be used effectively to facilitate social work students’ academic, professional and personal development, and to prepare them for employment in a competitive labour market.

**Keywords:** employability; online self-coaching; social work; professional development

## Introduction

The 21st century is characterised by an increase in access to higher education among individuals from all economic classes throughout the world (Makhanya 2012). Statistics on student enrolments provide evidence of the massification of tertiary education. In 1991, 68 million students were enrolled in higher education globally, while in 2004 this number reached 132 million. It was estimated that the demand for higher education will have expanded to 262 million by 2025 (Makhanya 2012).

After 1994, South Africa's efforts to obtain equality in society were driven through the massification of higher education. However, the under-preparedness of disadvantaged students due to a dysfunctional schooling system contributed to a low throughput rate and a high dropout rate (CHE 2013). Research also shows that the uptake of graduates in the labour market has been declining (Bernstein and Osram 2012; May 2012). This could be attributed to a rapidly changing, shrinking and increasingly competitive labour market (May 2012). It became more difficult for graduates to find a job in a "congested and competitive labour market" (Tomlinson 2007, 49). Despite a high financial burden on the government and institutions, the needs of society and the economy are not met. Students feel betrayed if they are not employed after they have completed their studies (Bernstein and Osram 2012, 54).

Concerns about graduates' employability and quality of education became visible in literature in the 1970s and developed into a public discourse in the late 1990s (Grotkowska, Wincenciak, and Gajderowicz 2015; May 2012). Employability is a part or subset of graduate attributes and includes such dimensions as life skills, career management, communication, teamwork and self-management (Jackson 2016; Kinash et al. 2016). Two key questions arise in the employability debate.

The first question is whose responsibility it is to ensure graduates' employability. According to literature, government, higher education institutions (HEIs), employers, employees or graduates and society have a collective responsibility for student employability (Bernstein and Osram 2012; Sin, Travares, and Amaral 2016). Although HEIs have to ensure quality education, employers have to make their needs known to training institutions, and government has to provide funding to underpin this endeavour. Tran (2015) indicates that graduate employability depends on relations between higher education and the employment market, but that the primary responsibility lies with individual students who have to take advantage of opportunities provided by the HEIs. Employees or graduates are the only role players who can take responsibility for lifelong learning (Jackson and Wilton 2017).

The second question posed in this debate is how employability can be developed. Kinash et al. (2016) refer to 12 strategies linked to graduate employability, including capstone projects, career advice, volunteer work, networking and work experience. For example, employability skills can be embedded in programme curricula of HEIs. In Portugal, Sin,

Travares, and Amaral (2016) found that students took responsibility for developing their own employability through extracurricular activities, including work within related and non-related fields, participation in student clubs or activities, and voluntary work.

The research focus on employability shifted over the years to include the identification of skills, competencies and attributes that enhance employability, strategies for developing employability, and the experiences of all stakeholders in relation to existing programmes (Grotkowska, Wincenciak, and Gajderowicz 2015; O’Leary 2017; Tran 2015). Recently, the employability discourse has focused on employability on an individual level. This includes the development of a pre-professional identity (PPI), which relates to a student’s connection with the skills and culture of his/her intended profession, as well as perceived employability (PE), which refers to an undergraduate’s belief in his/her ability to be successful within the changing job market (Jackson 2016; Jackson and Wilton 2017). It is argued that graduate employability should be redefined to incorporate the development of a PPI and strategies to achieve this (Jackson 2016). The process of PPI formation can be facilitated by means of identifying strengths, weaknesses and developmental opportunities for the achievement of professional goals. While it is agreed that a student is the driver of the formation of his/her professional identity, the HEI should connect the student with learning opportunities (Jackson 2016; Jackson and Wilton 2017).

This article describes a self-coaching programme in an online format that was developed as a strategy to enhance the employability of social work students, as well as pilot studies undertaken in open distance e-learning (ODEL) and residential learning (RL) contexts as part of the content preparation of the online programme. The programme focuses on facilitating employability on an individual level by developing the professional identity of social work students.

## **Development of the Self-Coaching Programme**

Through postgraduate research, the Department of Social Work at an ODeL university in South Africa identified a need for student support specifically aimed at social work students to ensure that students are ready for the world of work (Lawlor 2008; Lintvelt 2008). As part of her doctoral studies, the first author undertook qualitative research in 2010 to explore and describe the specific support needs of social work students in an ODeL context. Data were gathered from nine focus groups of purposefully selected social work students, comprising 71 students from all levels, and individual interviews with five recently graduated and employed social workers, selected purposefully from a list of newly graduated social workers. The Intervention Design and Development (IDD) model of Rothman and Thomas (1994) was adapted and selectively employed. This model consists of six phases, each characterised by key activities. The IDD model could be implemented with flexibility. In this research, Phases 1, 2, 3 (only Step 2) and 4 were utilised. The data were analysed according to Tesch’s steps (Creswell 2009).

Data verification was ensured by integrating Guba's model (Krefting 1991) with Yin's (2011) three objectives for building trustworthiness and credibility.

As part of an initial pilot study, eight students from all four levels, selected purposively for their knowledge in the area, provided feedback on the printed version of the programme regarding the meaningfulness and clarity of activities.

## **Development of the Support Programme**

The development of the support programme was informed by Max-Neef's taxonomy of human needs and poverties (Schenck 2008) and a socio-critical model and framework for improving student success in open and distance learning at Unisa (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011). The self-coaching support programme was developed to

- enhance student success and throughput,
- facilitate the personal, academic and professional development of students,
- enable students to learn self-reflection and self-development skills as part of their lifelong learning,
- empower students to take ownership of their learning process, and
- use coaching knowledge and skills to advance the development of social work students.

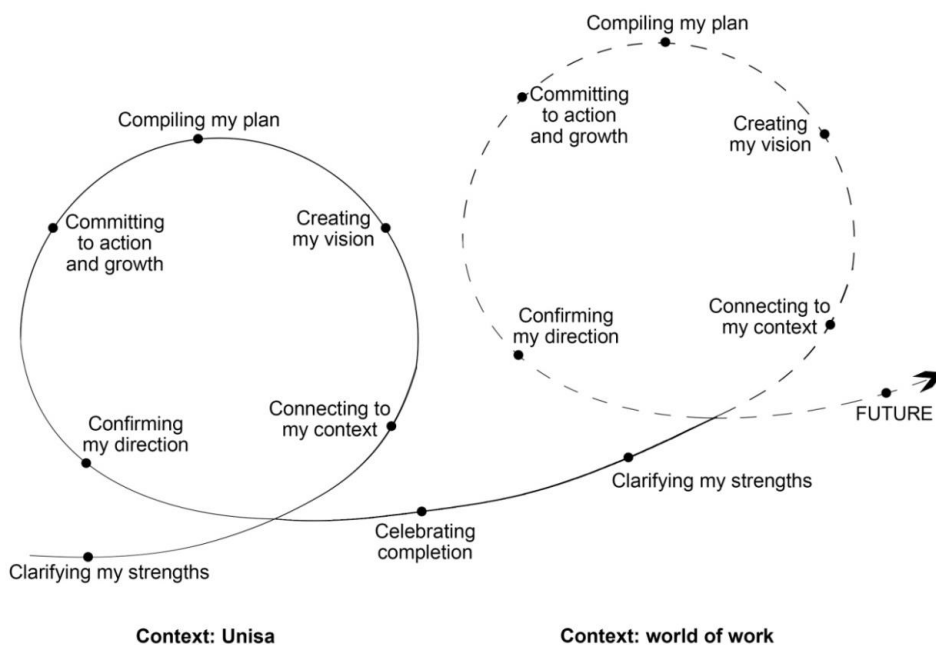
Employability is dealt with in the programme through the personal and professional development of students, which includes the nurturing of self-development skills as part of lifelong learning, enabled and assisted through coaching.

Coaching can be defined as the process of facilitating self-awareness, setting goals and facilitating personal and professional growth and development (Botha 2015). Life coaching, more specifically, focuses on the whole person and all areas of life. Coaching usually consists of a series of conversations that one person, the coach, has with another person, the coachee, and that focuses on the coachee's learning and development. It is not possible to have personal coaching sessions with all students, therefore the intention was that the self-coaching programme should be presented online.

In the programme, a lecturer becomes students' online "coach voice" and has eight coaching conversations with them, extending across the four years of the degree. Two conversations take place on each level. These conversations create a space where students can discover and develop their potential during their journey in becoming social workers.

To structure and give direction to these coaching conversations, the first author developed a life-coaching model called the Seven Cs and I, where "I" represents the

student and the “Seven Cs” refer to the seven actions in the process of the student’s personal, academic and professional growth (Botha 2015). The process is depicted as repeated, ascending spirals, implying that the same process can be followed in any context as a guideline for self-development, thus becoming part of lifelong learning (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The Seven Cs and I – A life-coaching model to support social work students in an ODeL context (Botha 2015)

The programme consists of information, stories, quotes, activities, discussions, references to resources, assignments and an opportunity to evaluate the conversations. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the conversations.

**Table 1:** Overview of conversations

Level	Conversation	Content	Example of activities
Level One	Conversation One “Clarifying my strengths”	Students articulate their strengths, passion and values	Values in action survey of character strengths
	Conversation Two “Connecting to my context”	Conversation focuses on opportunity awareness relating to social work and resources within the university	Videos on social work

Level	Conversation	Content	Example of activities
Level Two	Conversation Three “Creating my vision”	Students set their academic, personal and professional goals	Students measure themselves against the then 27 outcomes of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree
	Conversation Four “Compiling my plan”	Students plan actions to achieve their goals	Personal development plan (PDP)
Level Three	Conversation Five “Commitment to change”	Students focus on personal and interpersonal growth	360-degree feedback
	Conversation Six “Confirming my direction”	Students monitor their progress	PDP
Level Four	Conversation Seven “Celebrating completion”	Students prepare their own career portfolio	Students prepare a career portfolio setting out their competencies to market themselves
	Conversation Eight “Celebrating completion”	Students evaluate their journey and prepare for lifelong learning	Students celebrate their success and deal with any unresolved challenges

## Development of the Online Programme

The researcher was awarded funds to develop the self-coaching programme for social work students into an online programme and to pilot it within the respective contexts of ODeL and RL institutions. Although the same self-coaching programme was used, two different online programmes emerged as a result of the different contexts and resources. The first author developed the programme with the support of various role players in the ODeL university. She focused on including internal and external resources, for example, videos, podcasts and documents from various support departments. The second author developed the RL programme together with the e-learning section of the RL institution. The focus was on involving students in completing activities and assignments and participating in online discussions.

## Pilot Studies

The online versions of the programme were piloted at both institutions as part of content preparation. Ten fourth-level social work students, five from each university, were conveniently and purposively selected from the population of fourth-level students of 2015. Fourth-level students who were willing to complete the online programme and signed the consent form were selected to participate.

The students were requested to complete the eight conversations of the programme online and to provide feedback on the content, use and user-friendliness of the online programme. After each conversation, the students had to complete a questionnaire on how they experienced the section. At the end of the programme, both pilots included a focus group with the students, where they discussed and evaluated their experiences. The qualitative data were analysed thematically using Tesch’s eight steps (as quoted by Creswell 2009). Findings were verified by the triangulation of data sources seeing that information had been gathered from questionnaires and focus groups of students from both an ODeL and RL context. Peer examination was also utilised to verify the data as both authors coded and interpreted the data.

Ethical clearance was obtained from both institutions and the ethical principles of informed consent, doing no harm and anonymity were respected. The students completed an informed consent form after reading and discussing an information letter. The participants’ identities were kept anonymous to outsiders.

## Findings

The individual questionnaires focused on whether the activities were meaningful and whether the students had encountered any technical difficulties. The focus group discussions provided an overview of the students’ experiences of the online self-coaching programme within the two contexts. The main themes and sub-themes that emerged in the data analysis are given in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Main themes and sub-themes

THEMES				
SUB-THEMES	Content and structure	Learning new skills	Institutional enablements and constraints	Participants’ recommendations
	Discovering strengths, growth areas and resources	Online communication and etiquette	Availability of online coach	Reasons for implementation
	Constructing a PDP	Discovering self-coaching	Varying access to Wi-Fi and computers	Recommendations for improved implementation
	Preparing a career portfolio			
	Identifying technical difficulties			

## **Content and Structure**

The first theme showcased the participants' experiences about the content and structure of the programme.

## **Discovering Strengths, Growth Areas and Resources**

Aspects of PPI include students' self-awareness, ability to reconcile personal values with their intended profession, sense of purpose and self-esteem. Enhancing self-awareness as part of the development of PPI, facilitates students' productivity and career success (Jackson 2016). The discovery of own strengths, self-reflection and self-awareness were experienced positively, as illustrated by the following remarks of participants:

The exercises served as a reflection as to create self-awareness. If one was unsure about choosing social work as a career, the conversation would have been instrumental in clarifying this. (RL participant)

In Activity 2, mapping my strengths, I realised that I have the gifts of the hands and the gift of the heart. (ODeL participant)

The participants found the information on the expectations of and resources in the ODeL university valuable, as illustrated by the following remark:

It enables the students to understand what is expected of them and what resources there are in the [name of the university] community. (ODeL participant)

Reflecting on professional development and self-development can help social work students when they enter the world of work (Bruno and Dell'Aversana 2017). Ivanova and Skara-Mincāne (2016) confirm in their studies among student teachers that reflection is beneficial if it is guided and if reflective activities are used. Czerniewicz, Williams, and Brown (2009) state that students (or people) are significantly skilled and creative despite the resources they may lack, although resources undoubtedly do play a role.

## **Constructing Personal Development Plans**

A PDP can be defined as "a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect on their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development" (Kumar 2007, 20). PDPs helped the participants to have a long-term vision and to do time management, as demonstrated by the following comments:



I was able to do a study plan. The PDP is a good activity. I was able to plan for my academic, personal and professional goals and how to achieve them. I can sit down and draft something for my future. (ODeL participant)

To use a PDP to articulate goal changes and evaluate my progress to achieve these goals throughout my academic journey. (RL participant)

PDPs help students to articulate and reach personal goals. Moreover, they facilitate the achievement of employability goals and produce self-reliant and motivated students (Kumar 2007). PDPs should not be viewed merely as to-do lists or lists of skills but should be connected to graduates' well-being through their values, engagement, intellect and performance (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2010). The study of Hinchliffe and Jolly (2010) confirm that the use of a PDP increases employability.

## **Preparing a Career Portfolio**

As part of workplace readiness, students need to be able to identify and promote their skills and personal attributes verbally and in writing. Recording their achievements in a CV and a portfolio of evidence is an important skill to develop and can enhance their perceived employability (Jackson and Wilton 2017; Kumar 2007). The participants particularly enjoyed completing the career portfolio and recognised the value of reflecting on their professional development and future careers, as illustrated in the following responses:

It [level four] talks about the career plan and things we can do to improve our skills for the workplace. (ODeL participant)

There is a career portfolio and you learn how to write a CV. Now I know I have to plan for next year, in terms of a career and where I will be in five years' time ... (ODeL participant)

Rust and Froud (2011) contend that personal literacy (i.e. the ability to comprehend oneself) and self-reflectiveness are key ways of unifying academic and employability outcomes.

## **Identifying Technical Difficulties**

Poore-Pariseau (2015) states that online programme designers should understand how to effectively utilise appropriate technology and guide students in this regard. The following responses of the participants reflect technical difficulties encountered in the online environment:

For me what I didn't understand was Activity 19. The table is not correct. I could not fill in all the modules. (ODeL participant)

We were unable to access Activity 42. You can see the content but you cannot complete it. (RL participant)

To be ready for work, students need to be technically proficient (Jackson 2016). Studies have lauded the advent of online courses but have also exposed various technical difficulties inherent in online learning, which lead to higher than usual dropouts and non-completion compared to face-to-face courses (Fetzner 2013; Lee, Choi, and Kim 2013).

## **Learning New Skills**

The perceptions that participants shared in respect of learning new skills within the online environment can be divided into two sub-themes.

### **Online Communication and Etiquette**

Digital ethics and e-safety form part of digital literacy, while various technical systems and technologies such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram can form part of e-learning (Allan 2016). Participants underscored their engagement with each other in the online environment specifically with reference to trust, authenticity and ethical behaviour.

Futuristic/mobile/paperless. (RL participant)

... [L]earning a new social value ... netiquette [rules of engagement in online discussions]. (RL participant)

The online coach and the participants were linked through WhatsApp, which enabled them to chat and ask questions when not online.

Wi-Fi and the online coach. We interact with her on WhatsApp and as a group we meet. (ODeL participant)

WhatsApp group for quick and easy communication. (RL participant)

Abulibdeh (2019) found that there is a high correlation between online etiquette and belief-orientation, suggesting that students' belief systems and values act as a foundation for their engagement online.

### **Discovering Self-coaching**

Self-coaching is a form of self-directed learning that is important for professional identity formation because it encourages lifelong learning (Jackson 2016). Incidental to undertaking self-coaching activities, the participants reported gaining coaching skills, as demonstrated by the following responses:

It enables you to be the coach of your own life to facilitate your academic, personal and professional development. (ODeL participant)

... appreciated the self-coaching method ... also gaining coaching skills. (RL participant)

Although there have been varying results on the efficacy of self-coaching, ranging from low usage of online tools (Shannon, Snyder, and McLaughlin 2015) to self-coaching being insufficient for high learning outcomes (Losch et al. 2016), it is contended that students do learn additional skills such as interpersonal and team-playing skills through self-coaching (Losch et al. 2016).

The second theme reflects the participants' capacity for learning new skills, which may be aligned with their affinity to the online environment and the promotion of their future employability.

## **Institutional Enablements and Constraints**

Bozalek and McMillan (2017) contend that the coalescence of factors within an institution, such as the institution's geographical and political location and student and staff resources, creates enablements and constraints. Two sub-themes of institutional enablements and constraints were identified with regard to the functioning of the online self-coaching programme.

### **Availability of Online Coach**

The enablements focused on the particular structure of the online coaching programme and the importance of a positive attitude and the availability of the coach. The availability of online coaching was experienced differently by the participants from the two institutions. The participants felt that the online coach of the ODeL institution needed to be more active and that she should have clarified expectations and ensured active group discussions.

... appreciated the coach and the good relationship with [the] coach ... and availability ... (RL participant)

I think the online coach should communicate with the students more often. ... More often means two to three times a week. (ODeL participant)

In online teaching the teaching role moves from the main source of learning to a facilitator or guide on the side (Hubbard 1998). This move necessitates new roles and responsibilities of lecturers. Generally, students expect an immediate response from coaches so that they feel and experience the presence of the coaches and expect coaches to be flexible (Baran, Correia, and Thompson 2013).

## **Varying Access to Computers and Wi-Fi**

Technological access not only means access to material resources such as computers and cell phones but also practical access that determines control over the when and how of access (Czerniewicz, Williams, and Brown 2009). All participants had physical access to personal computers or computers provided by their institutions.

For me for example I live in [a] residence so I was able to have access to computers and I have access to [the] Internet ... (RL participant)

[Name of the university] has computers; if you have a challenge with a laptop you can access [name of the university] computers. (ODeL participant)

In respect of practical access, not all participants had access to Wi-Fi. Some participants stressed the personal expense attached to accessing the Internet from home.

A lack of internet access. You can't log in without internet access. (ODeL participant)

Students expect their learning institution to provide a conducive digital environment where Wi-Fi is available ubiquitously, where they can easily connect their own devices to university systems and where they have ready access to desktop computers and software (Allan 2016).

The third theme illustrates the importance of having constant resources for optimal learning.

## **Participants' Recommendations**

The participants averred that the online self-coaching programme should be implemented at both institutions and other departments, and offered some insights for improvements.

### **Reasons for Implementation**

The participants asserted that the programme could benefit social work students for the following reasons:

It helps students to know who they are. (RL participant)

Personal and professional goal setting especially for students. (RL participant)

It helps you realise whether you are passionate about social work. If you are first level and you are not passionate, you can change it. (ODeL participant)

If the programme can be part of the BSW, it can benefit many students. When you are from high school level, you are used to an environment of spoon-feeding. There it is

different. You are motivated to have time management. You make your own timing. (ODeL participant)

With the programme, we can produce quality social workers. I didn't know myself before I did the programme ... I will be able to be motivated while completing the programme. (ODeL participant)

These storylines link with aspects of PPI formation of social work students, namely the development of a clear understanding of professional standards, values and culture, and a sense of purpose and meaning related to their intended profession (Jackson 2016). The key to successful online learning is that devices such as laptops and smartphones are transportable (Gikas and Grant 2013). Moreover, students can transpose their informal learning experiences to the formal context, which Gikas and Grant (2013) argue is where most learning takes place, thus underscoring situated and context-driven learning. Salmon (2004, 12) observes that the premise for online learning is incorporating "good human activity from an e-moderator (for example a coach), and appropriate e-tivities to promote action and interaction".

### **Recommendations for Improved Implementation**

Some recommendations focused on preparing students for the programme:

There should be a workshop for students on the first level where they are introduced to the programme. (ODeL participant)

People must be computer literate ... from 1st year ... sufficient preparation must be done. (RL participant)

As we know, there are people who are technologically challenged. They can maybe fill in a survey. (ODeL participant)

Jung, Kudo, and Choi (2015) identify stressors in online collaboration, namely a lack of skills or high anxiety in using technology, and insufficient explanations about the aims, rules and protocols of working online.

Other recommendations related to the importance of participation during implementation were as follows:

Commitment from participants. (RL participant)

Discussions should be to facilitate engagement and participants must participate. (RL participant)

Students might experience stress during online collaboration due to difficulties in building online relationships with other students, participating in group decisions and responding to group pressure (Gikas and Grant 2013).

The fourth theme concerns the participants' suggestions, ranging from topics such as the implementation of the programme to accountability and the commitment of fellow participants.

## **Discussion**

Employability has been the focus of debate and academic endeavour for a long time. This article strives to engage in this debate by introducing the online self-coaching programme as an alternative strategy for enhancing the employability of social work students.

The programme is aimed at making students aware of the academic, personal and professional knowledge and skills they need to be effective social workers. By utilising a PDP throughout the four levels of study, the programme will help students to set their own goals and to develop the self-directed commitment needed to fulfil these goals. It is thus the intention to facilitate the development of a pre-professional identity of social workers. The online programme is further aimed at enhancing students' employability by assisting them in finding a fit between who they are, their choice of social work as a career and the context in which they are studying towards a qualification. It is also aimed at preparing students to find a niche employment area, to compile their CVs and to search for employment, thereby enhancing their perceived employability.

The objective of this support programme is to empower students to take responsibility for building their employability throughout their study years. The programme can either be integrated with the curriculum or be used as a stand-alone support programme, supplementing the work-integrated learning, which is part of the social work curriculum.

The participants indicated that they had developed greater insight and self-awareness and could confirm their career choice as a result of the support programme. The opportunity to do reflection or introspection was highly valued. They found the PDP useful in guiding their study journey and in motivating them to complete their studies. The participants felt that they were better able to manage their time and to prepare themselves for employment. However, they identified certain technical challenges and emphasised the important role of the online coach in helping them to master the technology.

The participants recommended that the programme be used in both a residential and ODeL context to facilitate students' growth and preparation for employment. They were of the opinion that the programme could also be used in fields other than social work or in other learning institutions.

Several research limitations can, however, be identified. The number of students who participated in the pilot studies was limited. Only fourth-level students worked through

all the conversations since it was not practical to involve students from all four levels. Although two very different online formats were developed within the same coaching programme, there were strong correlations between the findings that emanated from the ODeL and RL institutions because the participants responded to the essence of online self-coaching.

Seeing that the programme will be implemented from 2019, further research could be undertaken to evaluate the implementation of the programme, considering the impact on the attitudes, behaviour and employability of social work students who participate in the online self-coaching programme.

## Conclusion

The discourse on employability will continue within the ever-changing global society. In answer to the questions, “Who is responsible for ensuring the employability of students?” and “How can the employability of students be improved?”, we conclude that all stakeholders have to take responsibility for contributing to the employability of students. However, the responsibility of students themselves stays paramount. In view of the feedback of the students who participated in the pilot studies, it seems that the online self-coaching programme, as an alternative strategy, has the potential to fulfil its goals and to enhance the employability of social work students by facilitating their academic, professional and personal development and preparing them for employment in an overcrowded and competitive labour market.

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