

Strategies for Sustaining the Accreditation of Bachelor of Social Work in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) play vital roles as accreditation bodies in ensuring the quality of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programmes in South Africa. However, the intermittent de-accreditation of BSW programmes poses a significant and recurring challenge for numerous South African higher education institutions (SAHEIs). This article, grounded in William Pinar's curriculum theory within a constructivist paradigm, proposes strategies to sustain BSW programmes in alignment with CHE and SACSSP norms and standards. Given the limited literature on this topic, a narrative literature review methodology was employed, drawing thematic insights from related articles, CHE and SACSSP documents, and my firsthand experience being involved in institutional audits. The thematic analysis of the findings reveals challenges, such as gaps in curriculum design, misalignment of norms and standards with CHE and SACSSP objectives, a shortage of qualified staff, infrastructural deficiencies, and insufficient capacity development. Therefore, the article proposes practical strategies to address the complex issues associated with de-accreditation of BSW programmes, aiming to help SAHEIs sustain accreditation for this crucial programme.

KEYWORDS

Social work education; accreditation; higher education institutions, South African Council for Social Service Professions; council on higher education; curriculum

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social work is widely acknowledged on a global, regional, and local scale as both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, fosters social cohesion, and empowers individuals and communities (Sewpaul, 2014). Hence, it can be argued that the fundamental tenets of social justice, human rights, *ubuntu*, and respect for diversity hold a pivotal position in the field of social work and its corresponding educational programmes (Chigangaidze, 2021). The attainment of a BSW degree equips students with the requisite knowledge and competencies essential for embarking upon a vocation as a social worker. Nurius et al. (2017) emphasise the fact that the BSW programme typically provides students with a comprehensive framework for engaging in generalist social work practice. It is imperative to acknowledge that a considerable number, specifically 17 universities in South Africa offer a BSW programme within their academic offerings (Collins, 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in recent years, some universities encountered difficulties in upholding the accreditation of their BSW programmes (SACSSP, 2016). Consequently, the BSW programmes were discontinued at these institutions to facilitate improvement plans and refinements before they were allowed to offer the programme again (SACSSP, 2016). According to social work education scholars, various difficulties that universities encounter concerning social work education primarily stem from the need to adapt the curriculum to conform with local and international requirements (Gray & Lombard, 2008; Sewpaul & Lombard, 2004). Thus, the importance of this study.

The BSW is a bilateral programme that operates under the regulatory oversight of both the CHE and the SACSSP. According to Lange (2017), the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in 2001 marked a significant development in the field of higher education. As such, the HEQC aimed to create a robust quality assurance system that not only considered global trends and practices but also catered to national objectives and local requirements. In recent decades, there have been notable institutional audits within SAHEI. The increase in institutional audits within SAHEI can be attributed to the objective of enhancing the provision of quality education (CHE, 2021). The elucidation of the framework for programme accreditation, as stipulated by the Higher Education Act of 1997, establishes the role of the CHE in ensuring the quality of higher education in South Africa. Hence, it is the duty of the HEQC, which operates as a permanent sub-committee of the CHE, to fulfil this obligation (Lange & Singh, 2013; Mkuzangwe & Mgutshini, 2019). The mandate of the HEQC encompasses three key areas: quality promotion, institutional audit, and programme accreditation. Research, as well as the framework established by the CHE for conducting institutional audits, shed light on a diverse range of challenges encountered by SAHEI. The challenges faced in this context encompass various aspects, such as the accreditation of programmes, governance issues, inadequate funding, and a student population that faces financial disadvantages (Crawford, 2017; Lekgau, 2022; West & Moore, 2015).

The Bachelor of Social Work National Standard Alignment Report (BSWNSAR) guides institutions in aligning their BSW programmes with the National Qualification Standard (CHE, 2022). The comprehensive report encompasses a set of guidelines that pertain to various aspects of curriculum design, teaching and learning strategies, assessment methods, progression criteria, and monitoring protocols for evaluating the academic and professional aptitude of students throughout the programme (CHE, 2022). Nevertheless, numerous institutions are non-compliant with the aforementioned national standards (SACSSP, 2016), leading to a loss of accreditation. Consequently, these institutions experience a loss of accreditation. The standards for the BSW programme encompass various aspects such as the inclusion of core social work knowledge within the curriculum, while also highlighting the importance of connecting this knowledge to practical application (Mwansa, 2010). Additionally, the standards emphasise the adoption of student-centred and participatory teaching and learning strategies that foster critical thinking and reflection (Crisp & Lister, 2002; Sewpaul & Lombard, 2004). According to these authors, it is important to note that these standards are not exhaustive and may encompass additional elements. The evaluation process should encompass a diverse range of methods, ensuring authenticity and alignment with the desired learning outcomes. The implementation of peer and self-assessment mechanisms is crucial, especially in the context of field practice (Crisp & Lister, 2002; SACSSP, 2020). The SACSSP Self-Evaluation Report (SER) underscores the provision of both vertical and horizontal progression opportunities for graduates (SACSSP, 2020). The SACSSP (2020) underscores that information regarding external progression options is accessible, even if it is not immediately apparent within the internal system. It is imperative to maintain a vigilant assessment of students' academic and professional aptitude throughout the BSW programme (SACSSP, 2020).

In a similar vein, the SACSSP has devised a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) tool to guide institutions that offer a BSW degree, in their efforts to uphold a social work programme of the highest calibre (SACSSP, 2020). The SER offers a comprehensive evaluation instrument that encompasses multiple dimensions of the BSW programme. These dimensions include academic programme administration and resources, curriculum development and implementation, student support and growth, assessment and evaluation practices, as well as research and community involvement (SACSSP, 2020). Each section of the SER document includes a collection of established norms and standards that BSW programmes are expected to adhere to. Additionally, the document provides sources of evidence that can be utilised to evaluate the extent to which BSW Programmes comply with the prescribed norms and standards.

A significant amount of research has been published regarding social work education, both in South Africa and on a global scale. However, there has been a lack of comprehensive examination regarding the challenges contributing to the de-accreditation of social work programmes, especially in the South African context. Drawing upon a diverse range of literary sources and documents, this review article proposes practical strategies that have the potential to effectively uphold a BSW programme of the highest quality.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In light of the above problem, the article aims to address the following critical questions that serve as the guiding principles for the study:

- What does the literature assert on challenges that SAHEIs face in sustaining a BSW programme?
- How can SAHEIs employ viable strategies to sustain the accreditation of their BSW programmes?

CURRICULUM THEORY

William Pinar's curriculum theory is a branch of study that explores the principles, concepts, and approaches involved in creating and implementing educational curricula (Pinar, 2019). It scrutinises the ideologies, philosophies, and methods guiding the design, delivery, and assessment of educational programmes (Pinar, 2019). Essentially, curriculum theory aims to comprehend how knowledge is chosen, organised, and transmitted in educational settings. Pinar highlights the dynamic nature of the curriculum, emphasising continual reconstruction over a fixed set of instructional materials (Pinar, 2019). Pinar advocates for educators to engage critically with societal issues, shaping the curriculum to encompass diverse perspectives and address contemporary challenges.

In the article's context, curriculum theory gains significance as the accreditation of the BSW programmes is closely linked to their curriculum design and delivery. Accreditation bodies frequently evaluate the quality and relevance of a programme's curriculum as part of their assessment process (CHE, 2021). Consequently, Pinar's reconceptualist perspective can be applied to sustain accreditation in social work programmes. This involves not only meeting established standards but also adapting to societal changes and ensuring a curriculum that equips students for evolving challenges in social work. Thus, Pinar's reconceptualist ideas align with the necessity for a flexible and responsive curriculum, extending beyond mere compliance with accreditation standards to produce graduates who are well-prepared for the intricate and ever-changing demands of social work in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The article is situated within the framework of the constructivist and interpretive paradigm, prioritising the understanding and interpretation of social phenomena, through the perspectives of individuals and organizations involved (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In essence, the research interprets the findings from literature and reports of the SACSSP and CHE to gain a deeper comprehension of the real world (Boboyi, 2024a).

Further, a narrative review approach is used as a methodology to produce data that responds to the critical research questions of the study. Narrative reviews are comprehensive narrative syntheses of previously published information such as articles, policies, and reports (Boboyi, 2024b; Ferrari, 2015; Reyneke, 2020). Similarly, Boboyi (2024b) and Reyneke (2020) note that there appears to be no consensus among researchers regarding what narrative

reviews should include. As such, some argue that authors should critique every article they include in a review, while others do not think this is necessary (Reyneke, 2020). For policies and reports by the social work accreditation bodies, the researcher visited the CHE and SACSSP websites. This data and the reports were thematised and synthesised to present the challenges that SAHEIs face in sustaining the accreditation of BSW programmes. As part of the inclusion criteria, the article included searches from EBSCOhost and Google Scholar to ensure a comprehensive search of articles from 2004-2023, and library books not older than 10 years. Consequently, the majority of findings were derived from reports by SACSSP and CHE. The keywords included social work education, social work accreditation in South Africa, and de-accreditation of social work. Over 639,000 results were shown for “social work education” keywords, 29,000 for “social work accreditation”, and 20,300 results for “de-accreditation of social work”. In a nutshell, only 16 articles were analysed, and 5 reports from accreditation bodies were used. The table below presents inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sources used in this article:

Table 1: The Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EBSCOhost, search 2010-2023. • Google Scholar, search 2010-2023. • Library books not older than 10 years. • The keywords included, inter alia: social work education; social work accreditation; and social work de-accreditation. • My own experience working on the accreditation of social work programmes with the accreditation bodies during the reviews was also considered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The exclusion criteria included non-scholarly articles, research articles older than ten years, and articles not written in English.

FINDINGS

This section primarily draws from the SACSSP, CHE reports and other sources to elucidate the various challenges encountered by SAHEIs in sustaining their BSW programmes:

Curriculum Deficits and Misalignment with Social Work Norms and Standards

The process of accreditation holds significant importance as it serves to guarantee the quality and uniformity of educational programmes, with a particular focus on professional domains such as social work (CHE, 2021). The CHE and the SACSSP play a crucial role in ensuring the quality and standards of BSW education in the country. These professional bodies have established unit standards and curriculum guidelines, which universities are required to follow to provide accredited BSW programmes. However, the presence of curriculum gaps and misalignment with established standards has presented notable obstacles that hinder the

accreditation of BSW programmes in South Africa (Mkuzangwe, 2020; SACSSP, 2016). The concept of curriculum gaps in the BSW programme pertains to the presence of deficiencies, omissions, or inadequacies within the educational curriculum's content, and structure (Barsky, 2019). These gaps can be observed in multiple ways, including inadequate inclusion of essential subjects, use of outdated educational resources, and insufficient consideration of emerging matters within the realm of social work. The SACSSP report indicates that a South African university has experienced the loss of its accreditation due to identified deficiencies within its curriculum (SACSSP, 2016). To undergo a thorough evaluation and obtain re-accreditation, it was necessary to develop an improvement plan for the BSW programmes in affected institutions (SACSSP, 2016). The presence of curriculum gaps in social work programmes in South Africa poses a clear and undeniable risk to their accreditation status. According to the scholarly work of Block et al. (2016), it is argued that social work education plays a crucial role in preparing students to effectively meet the intricate and ever-changing demands of diverse client populations. Nevertheless, the deficiencies within the curriculum may impede students' ability to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge essential for effective professional practice.

On the other side of the coin, the establishment of norms and standards by the CHE and the SACSSP plays a crucial role in ensuring the standardisation, and uniformity of education within SAHEIs (Mkuzangwe, 2020). Misalignment arises when the curriculum of a BSW programme diverges from the prescribed norms and standards, whether deliberately or inadvertently. The misalignment discussed herein has had significant ramifications on the accreditation of social work programmes within certain institutions of higher education that offer a BSW degree (SACSSP, 2016). It is crucial to note that both the CHE and the SACSSP have established unit standards that must be followed to ensure the provision of high-quality social work education (Collins, 2012). Misalignment can lead to non-compliance, posing challenges for programmes in their pursuit of acquiring or upholding accreditation. The attainment of accreditation according to the SACSSP (2016) is based upon the requirement for the BSW programmes to ensure that their curricula are in line with the minimum norms and standards of social work (Collins, 2012). The failure to attain this alignment can ultimately result in the forfeiture of accreditation, thereby carrying substantial implications for the credibility of the programme and the employability of its graduates.

Shortage of Qualified Staff

A noticeable challenge confronting social work programmes in South Africa pertains to the scarcity of staff (SACSSP, 2016). This dearth of qualified staff has a substantial impact on the programmes' capacity to fulfil the necessary accreditation requirements and uphold the established norms and standards. The SACSSP (2016) identified two universities that have been impacted by a shortage of staff. As a result, these issues, among others, led to the discontinuation of the programmes in 2015 (SACSSP, 2016).

The SACSSP report highlighted an important outcome of staff shortages in social work programmes, which is the inability to uphold sufficient staff-to-student ratios (SACSSP, 2016).

Accreditation bodies frequently establish explicit guidelines regarding the minimum quantity of proficient staff members necessary to guarantee that students are provided with suitable guidance and instruction (Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). Observably, in situations where there is an insufficient number of adequately skilled personnel, institutions face challenges in meeting the prescribed ratios. The existing disparity in the ratio of staff members to students poses a significant obstacle to the provision of high-quality education. This discrepancy not only impedes the ability to provide individualised attention to students but also undermines the effectiveness of teaching and supervision, by reducing the level of depth and engagement. Meeting the expectations of the BSW profession requires staff and managers to not only possess academic qualifications but also demonstrate a comprehensive understanding and practical knowledge in the domain of social work (Coulshed et al., 2018). Observably, during the accreditation process, accreditation bodies evaluate, among others, the qualifications, experience, and competence of the staff. It is important to note that staff shortages can impede a programme's capacity to fulfil these criteria (SACSSP, 2020).

In addition, it is a common practice for social work programmes to incorporate practical fieldwork or internships as an integral component of their curriculum (Shokane et al., 2016). The acquisition of practical experience holds significant importance for students as it allows them to effectively apply theoretical knowledge within real-world scenarios. Rautenbach et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of staff members' involvement in supervising and mentoring students during fieldwork experiences. The presence of insufficient staff members poses a significant obstacle in ensuring proper supervision and affects the overall quality of the practical training segment within social work programmes. As a result, this leads to concerns during accreditation evaluations.

Infrastructural Deficits

The CHE and the SACSSP standards are designed to ensure that BSW programmes are of the highest quality. According to the CHE (2021), a significant obstacle to the accreditation of social work programmes in the country is the existence of infrastructural inadequacies. Accreditation of programmes requires a well-equipped library and resources to facilitate research and enhance the learning experience (Ogunode & Adah, 2022). The presence of infrastructural deficiencies, specifically the constrained availability of library collections and the utilisation of outdated resources, presents a significant obstacle for students seeking access to contemporary literature and research within their respective academic disciplines (Ankrah & Atuase, 2018). The SACSSP (2016) notes that the lack of appropriate resources hinders both staff and students' ability to engage in research activities.

Further, insufficient classroom and laboratory facilities possess the potential to undermine the effective provision of high-quality education within any accredited academic programme (Dicker et al., 2019; Motala & Menon, 2020). The BSW programme frequently incorporates practical training, case studies, and simulation exercises, which necessitate the availability of suitable spaces and equipment (Bogo, 2014). The lack of these facilities can hinder

the acquisition of crucial hands-on proficiencies, which are often evaluated during accreditation assessments (CHE, 2021; SACSSP, 2016).

Accreditation bodies also conduct assessments to determine the level of accessibility and inclusivity offered by these programmes (CHE, 2021). This evaluation is crucial to ensure that educational institutions can accommodate the needs of diverse student populations effectively (Khan, 2020). The presence of infrastructural deficiencies to cater for individuals with disabilities can lead to the failure of programmes to meet established standards (Collins et al. 2019). To meet accreditation requirements, promote academic excellence, and create an optimal learning environment for students, institutions of higher learning must allocate resources to enhance infrastructure, upgrade facilities, and facilitate access to contemporary resources and technologies.

Lack of Capacity Development for Staff

According to Watters et al. (2016), it is common for accreditation bodies to mandate that institutions possess a competent staff capable of effectively imparting social work education. This requirement emphasises the importance of maintaining a staff that is both qualified and experienced in the field. Similarly, as stipulated by the SACSSP (2016), it is anticipated that the individuals appointed as heads of departments possess a doctoral degree and possess a certain level of professional experience. Lack of investment in capacity development, particularly in staff training and professional development, can result in teaching staff being ill-equipped to meet required accreditation standards (Mulà et al., 2017). In the absence of continuous training, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff members may encounter difficulties in keeping abreast of the ever-changing best practices, theories, and ethical standards within their respective fields. The presence of this deficiency can have a direct impact on the educational standard and the ability of the BSW programme to fulfil accreditation prerequisites.

According to Bogo (2015), it is anticipated that social work programmes will actively participate in research and scholarly endeavours that not only enhance the progress of the field but also provide valuable insights to shape their curricula. Lack of capacity development in research and scholarship within social work programmes may lead to difficulties in meeting required criteria, potentially impacting their accreditation status negatively.

In addition, to conform to the ever-changing landscape of social work practice and meet the requirements set forth by accreditation standards, Grise-Owens et al. (2016) emphasise the necessity for social work programmes to consistently evaluate and revise their curricula. Successfully executing this task requires a deep understanding of curriculum development and the ability to respond effectively to evolving industry demands. Insufficient attention given to capacity development in the process of curriculum design and adaptation can result in the creation of curricula that are outdated and misaligned with the expectations set forth by accreditation bodies (Chan et al., 2017). The process of accreditation assessments has the

potential to bring attention to deficiencies within a curriculum, thereby posing a risk to the accreditation status of a particular programme.

Proposed Strategies for Sustaining Accreditation of Bachelor of Social Work Programmes

In the pursuit of maintaining the relevance and accreditation of BSW programmes, the adoption of William Pinar's curriculum theory provides a framework for dynamic and responsive educational practices (Pinar, 2019). To maintain good standing with accreditation bodies, the institutions offering a BSW programme must consider the following strategies:

- Encourage academics to critically engage with current societal issues. Infuse the curriculum with content that reflects diverse perspectives and addresses contemporary challenges in the field of social work.
- Foster a curriculum that is flexible and responsive to the evolving landscape of social work practice. This involves regularly reviewing and updating course content, methodologies, and assessment tools to stay abreast of emerging trends and demands.
- Embrace emerging theories such as *Ubuntu* and practices within the field of social work (Boboyi, 2024b). Integrate new and innovative approaches into the curriculum to ensure that students are exposed to the latest knowledge and methodologies.
- Align the curriculum with accreditation standards while also going beyond mere compliance. Consider Pinar's reconceptualist ideas to create a curriculum that not only meets criteria but also exceeds expectations, producing graduates well-prepared for the complexities of social work (Pinar, 2019).
- Foster collaboration among academics, administrators, and practitioners in the ongoing development of the curriculum. This collaborative approach ensures a comprehensive and well-rounded curriculum that draws on diverse expertise.
- Integrate reflective practices within the curriculum, encouraging students to critically examine their assumptions and biases. This aligns with Pinar's emphasis on critical engagement and self-awareness in the learning process (Pinar, 2019).
- Involve the community and relevant stakeholders in curriculum development. This ensures that the curriculum reflects the needs and expectations of the broader community, reinforcing the practical relevance of the social work programme.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The only limitation of the study was finding pertinent literature on the de-accreditation of social work programmes. Minimal research has been published on the accreditation of social work programmes. A useful contribution was found in accreditation reports from the CHE and the SACSSP. Consequently, this has made it impossible for the researcher to use a systematic literature review, which is more rigorous.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a need for empirical studies on the accreditation of social work programmes in South Africa. Empirical evidence from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could contribute to understanding why many HEIs fail to maintain the accreditation of their BSW programmes.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this conceptual article offers significant insights into the difficulties faced by SAHEIs in maintaining the quality of social work programmes. By applying curriculum theory, the article identifies obstacles leading to the de-accreditation of BSW programmes and proposes practical strategies for addressing these challenges. The contribution of this article extends to ongoing efforts to uphold social work education standards in South Africa and globally. Future research should prioritise empirical evidence, particularly insights from universities, and advocate for a more comprehensive approach by reinforcing curriculum theory with other frameworks to address not only curriculum deficits but also other aspects leading to the de-accreditation of BSW programmes.

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