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Preparing graduates for the job market: A strength-based skill development approach

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Authors:
Mathashwane J. Matabane[1] ◉
Roslyn Lodewyk-Raliphada[1] ◉
Lené I. Graupner[1] ◉

Affiliation:
[1]School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, WorkWell Research Unit, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Lené Graupner,
lene.graupner@nwu.ac.za

Orientation: The lack of skills, such as communication and teamwork among graduates, is a major concern for employers. Graduates should prioritise developing skills in demand for the evolving job market.

Research purpose: The purpose of the study was to explore the impressions of graduates regarding the skills they need to enter the job market and to develop and present a strength-based skills training programme for graduates in the South African labour market.

Motivation for the study: Graduates can be equipped through a strength-based approach, which could assist them in applying their strengths to find employment in the South African labour market.

Research design/approach and method: A qualitative research approach with a social constructivism paradigm was used. The participants were unemployed graduates, with a sample size of $N = 10$. Data was collected by using qualitative surveys captured on the QuestionPro platform. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Main findings: The findings highlight the challenges faced by unemployed graduates. The participants reported feeling empowered by the training programme, helping them recognise and utilise their skills and strengths.

Practical/managerial implications: The study highlighted that a strength-based training program for unemployed graduates could enhance the skills necessary for employment, such as self-awareness and emotional intelligence. A comprehensive understanding of the barriers to decent work is crucial for developing interventions to equip graduates for the labour market.

Contribution/value-add: This research provides a basis for training and developing unemployed graduates from a strength-based perspective.

Keywords: unemployment; graduates; skills development; strength-based training; South African labour market.

Introduction

Although an individual may have graduated from a tertiary institution, there is no secure path to obtain employment in the labour market (Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2019). Despite extensive efforts to reform South Africa's higher education system, many students persist in enrolling in programmes that do not align with labour market needs (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Wolhuter, 2014). Given the limited number of students entering higher education in many countries, ensuring that their educational experiences are of the highest quality is essential. These graduates must be equipped to meet the needs of their countries and societies, with a well-rounded understanding of economic, social and political contexts (Boughey & McKenna, 2019). It is significant to bear in mind that graduate unemployment rates vary depending on a range of variables, including geography, gender and race. For instance, Vlotman and Clayford (2023) indicate that graduates who are black, female and who reside in rural areas are more likely to be unemployed. Additionally, fields of study such as human resources, government or political studies and education have recently been identified as having higher graduate unemployment rates (Seilane, 2023). These careers are based on a university model that is primarily academic and, in some cases, even irrelevant for unemployed graduates to meet the job skill requirements of the labour market (Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2019). Ndebele and Ndlovu (2019) suggest that graduate unemployment may be attributed to factors such as a lack of soft skills, poor cultural fit and inadequate management skills, all of which are crucial for enhancing organisational competitiveness. There is a growing recognition that traditional academic education may not adequately prepare graduates for the

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practical demands of the workplace. Vlotman and Clayford (2023) indicate the importance for higher education institutions and science councils to assume a more active role in addressing this gap. One suggestion could be to develop curricula that are more closely aligned with labour market needs and to make job opportunities such as internships available that provide graduates with work experience.

This study aims to fill a gap in the research on unemployed graduates by using a strengths-based approach to enhance their skills. Specifically, it seeks to apply a strength-based training programme, positioning with sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), two of the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development established by the United Nations (2015). Equipping graduates with essential skills from a strength-based programme, this study highlights the need for educational programmes that include practical skills that are in demand in the job market. Also, the strength-based training programme focusses on empowering graduates by helping them recognise and utilise their strengths, thereby improving their chances of finding decent work.

Key skills for graduates

Research indicates that developing interpersonal skills significantly increases graduates' chances of employment (Cimatti, 2016; Klynveld, 2015). Interpersonal skills are competencies not tied to specific tasks but essential in the workplace as they involve interactions and relationships within the work environment (Cimatti, 2016). Interpersonal skills are considered strategic for organisations because their success relies on the capabilities of their people (Cimatti, 2016). Communication, as one example of such skills, allows an individual to engage with others publicly, in a sensitive manner, which enables one to understand and resolve conflicts by sensing others' emotions as their own (Doyle, 2020).

For unemployed graduates to be suitable for any organisation, they need a broader skillset that employers value (Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2019). According to the World Economic Forum, the future workforce will prioritise skills such as complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management (leadership) and coordination with others (Meyer, 2019). Organisations often seek a mix of technical and soft skills, including corporate fit, communication, collaboration and leadership abilities (Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2019). To compete in the South African labour market, unemployed graduates must possess value-adding specialisations (Dawi et al., 2019). Given the complexity of the 21st-century work environment, investing in human capital through strength-based training programmes is crucial (Holland, 2015; Rutigliano, 2012).

Strength-based approach

Buckingham and Clifton (2001) define strength as an individual's consistent, almost-perfect performance in a specific activity. Strengths develop through unique patterns influenced by factors such as goals, interests and situational factors and have the potential to create better performance by increasing awareness, accessibility and effort (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Therefore, for an activity to be considered a strength, one must be able to perform it consistently, making it a predictable aspect of their performance (Buckingham, 2007, 2022; Louis, 2012). Understanding the challenge of building people's strengths requires acknowledging two core assumptions (Buckingham, 2022). Firstly, each person's talents are unique and enduring. Secondly, an individual's greatest potential for growth lies within their strengths. This approach helps unemployed graduates identify their strengths, skills and talents, enhancing their effectiveness and efficiency in the workplace (Buckingham, 2007). To appreciate and harness these skill sets, it is essential to recognise and develop an individual's natural talents into genuine strengths. This can be achieved by carefully managing these strengths through identification, reinforcement, practice and learning (Buckingham, 2007; Hodges & Clifton, 2004).

Talent is closely linked to strength development and is described as 'any recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behaviour that can be productively applied, such as having a natural special ability' (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 28). Talents are often seen as innate physiological and psychological traits, such as being mathematically, musically or artistically-inclined and having physical strength, ambition or charisma (Ahlberg, 2020). For example, an individual with a natural aptitude for mathematics is considered a talent because it can be productively applied (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). An individual's talents, knowledge and skills are combined to form their natural pattern of perception, emotion or action (Buckingham, 2022). It was discovered that using strengths was linked to achieving goals and various motivational philosophies (Hiemstra & Van Yperen, 2015).

Buckingham, who pioneered the strength-based life principle, introduced the StrengthsFinder, which illuminates 34 themes or patterns aimed at discerning an individual's core competencies (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The method, grounded in a comprehensive study involving over 2 million individuals from diverse professions and backgrounds, has been instrumental in identifying strategies to enhance employees' performance by leveraging their inherent abilities in the workplace (Buckingham, 2007). Strength-based programmes have been linked to improving student outcomes in educational settings, including enhancing psychological, intellectual, social and emotional well-being (Soria et al., 2019).

In light of this, the present study employed the strengths-based framework to aid graduates in connecting with their strengths, talents and skills. Furthermore, this study explored the skillsets South African graduates need to secure employment.

Research design

The next section includes the research approach, strategy and method followed.

Research method

The study follows a qualitative descriptive research strategy to explore the participants' impressions regarding the skills they need to enter the job market and, consequently, to develop and present a strength-based skills training programme. The qualitative descriptive research strategy allowed the researchers to focus on understanding and developing rather than testing the programme's effectiveness. This strategy is particularly suitable for exploring and describing the graduates' perceptions and experiences, as it provides insights into their perspectives that can be incorporated into the strength-based skills training programme (Struwig & Stead, 2013). The paradigm employed for this study was social constructivism. Social constructivism is the conceptualisation of how people try to comprehend the society in which they live and work, developing subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). The ultimate goal of the paradigm is for the researcher to focus as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2014).

Research setting

The research setting was unemployed graduates in South Africa. Literature highlights the challenges faced by graduates in securing employment. Graduates struggle because of a mismatch between what the labour market expects and what education provides. Additionally, they face two significant informational challenges: firstly, finding job openings across different platforms, both formal and informal, and secondly, effectively marketing themselves as suitable candidates to potential employers or organisations (Vlotman & Clayford, 2023; Schöer et al., 2012). Therefore, an invitation was placed on social media for unemployed graduates to participate in the study, and participants who responded were then contacted. They submitted signed consent forms prior to commencing the workshop.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Once the study was approved by the university, the researcher distributed an invitation via social media platforms to engage unemployed graduates in the study, granting access to potential participants. It was important that the participants were available to attend an online workshop and complete the qualitative surveys. For the study, the researchers assumed the roles of conceptualising the research (R.L-R.), planning of research process (M.J.M. and R.L-R.), workshop introduction (M.J.M.), workshop presenter (R.L-R.), organising and executing the research (M.J.M.), actively monitoring findings (M.J.M. and L.I.G.), and ultimately transcribing (M.J.M.) and interpreting the gathered data (L.I.G.) (Creswell, 2009).

Research participants and sampling

According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling is a type of qualitative sampling that involves selecting participants who are especially knowledgeable about or have experience with a phenomenon of interest. This type of sampling is often used to gather in-depth data from a small group of participants. Because this study focussed on the experiences of unemployed graduates in South Africa, purposive sampling was utilised so that the researcher could select a group of unemployed graduates who had recently graduated from different universities and who represented a diversity of backgrounds. An invitation was extended to all unemployed graduates through social media, such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Subsequently, participants who showed interest in participating in the study were contacted through email or phone calls, by which they were invited to engage in a multi-stage process. This process included completing a pre-workshop survey, attending a virtual webinar, and after the webinar, completing another survey. The entire participation procedure required an approximate time commitment of 5 hours from the participants, encompassing 30 min for the pre-workshop survey, a 4–hour duration for the online workshop and an additional 30 min dedicated to the post-workshop survey. Initially, 16 participants responded and were contacted and issued with the study information, such as the consent form. A final number of 10 participants participated in the study; all graduates were unemployed and searching for employment; their characteristics are shared in Table 1.

Data collection

Data were gathered in two phases. A pre-workshop qualitative survey conducted on the QuestionPro online platform formed Phase 1 of data collection. The participants completed a survey before the workshop, sharing their views on the topic. QuestionPro, known for its credibility in survey and research facilitation, allows for effective survey creation, distribution and analysis (QuestionPro, 2023). During Phase 2 of the data collection, the data were analysed and combined with literature review findings to shape the strength-based training programme. The following questions were posed in the pre-workshop survey:

- What is your understanding of being a graduate?
- What is your experience of being a graduate without formal employment?
- What skills do you think graduates need before they enter the workplace?

TABLE 1: Profile of research participants (N = 10).

Participant nr	Gender	Language	Age (years)	Location	Field of study
1	Male	Xitsonga	25	Gauteng	Arts and Design
2	Female	Setswana	25	Gauteng	Humanities
3	Female	isiXhosa	23	Gauteng	Economics and Management
4	Male	Swahili	32	Gauteng	Animal and Wildlife Sciences
5	Female	Sepedi	25	Gauteng	Health Sciences
6	Female	Sepedi	24	Gauteng	Health Sciences
7	Female	Setswana	23	Gauteng	Health Sciences
8	Female	Setswana	24	Gauteng	Law
9	Female	Setswana	25	North West	Economics and Management
10	Female	French	24	Gauteng	Law

Following the webinar, participants were again asked to complete a survey. This second survey aimed to capture their experiences of the webinar, including any recommendations they might have. The following questions were asked in the survey after the workshop was presented:

- What was your experience of the strength-based skills training programme presented during the webinar?
- What was your experience of how the strength-based skills training programme was presented?
- What recommendations do you have to improve the content of the programme?

Data analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the findings related to the themes of the study. Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate that thematic analysis is a method used for analysing, identifying and reporting themes within the data. It requires the active involvement of the researcher to interpret, identify and describe both explicit and implicit themes. This approach proved useful as the researchers had a predefined set of questions identifying the main themes and categories. After the data were gathered, the dataset was shared with the co-coders (supervisors and co-authors), who also read through the data. The data were sorted into initial codes to establish meaningful and systematic categorisation. The co-coders checked the codes and where necessary, the data were sorted again. Common issues were singled out, and these issues were further subdivided into different facets that, in turn, were categorised into themes and subthemes. These themes were discussed in the 'Results and findings' section.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and trustworthiness

Several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness and accuracy of the research study. Credibility was ensured by accurately presenting the findings of the participants. This was achieved by applying methods such as co-coding (McLeod, 2013). Transferability was ensured by describing the research data in-depth within the specific context and setting to facilitate potential replication in other studies. Dependability demanded honesty and truthfulness from both the researcher and participants throughout the research process. This involved providing a detailed description of the research methodology (Creswell et al., 2016). Confirmability was ensured by maintaining an objective and neutral stance to prevent personal values and theoretical biases from influencing data collection or analysis (Creswell et al., 2016).

Ethical considerations

Before commencing the study, the researcher needed approval from both the Faculty's Research Ethics Committee and the Scientific Research Committee. The research proposal was approved and awarded ethical clearance with reference number NWU-00988-21-A4. Throughout the research, the researcher meticulously observed key ethical principles. The researchers ensured the participants' respectful treatment, safety and the confidentiality of their data (Creswell et al., 2016). Therefore, protocols were in place to uphold privacy and confidentiality, safeguarding participants' personal information from unauthorised access or use that might compromise their reputation or well-being. The study also adhered to the mandates of the *Protection of Personal Information Act* (*POPIA*), South Africa's data protection law (*Protection of Personal Information Act* [*POPIA*], 2013), highlighting the responsibilities of the organisation as the custodian of legitimate personal information processing.

Results and findings

During Phase 1 of data gathering, the impressions of the graduates regarding skills needed in the South African labour market were enquired. These are presented next, including responses from the participants.

Phase 1: Impressions of the graduates

The findings are provided in the order the survey questions were posed to the participants. During Phase 1, the participants were asked what their understanding of being a graduate was, what their experiences of being a graduate without formal employment were and what skills they thought they needed before they entered the workplace. Phase 1 yielded various themes, as reported next:

Theme 1: Understanding of being a graduate
Qualified

The participants acknowledged that being a graduate means having a qualification, such as a diploma or degree from any higher education institution. This is an individual who has completed 3–4 years of coursework in a university or college and is qualified in a particular profession, as indicated by Participant 4:

> 'A graduate is a person who has successfully completed a course, often a degree or a diploma at an accredited institution of higher learning.' (Male, 32 years old, Animal and Wildlife Sciences graduate)

Focussed

The participants pointed out that to be a graduate is to persevere and show endurance in order to reach that end goal, as shared by Participant 8:

> 'Being a graduate means surviving through university and making it to the end. It's a combination of perseverance and determination to reach a specific goal.' (Female, 24 years old, Law graduate)

Theme 2: Unemployed graduate experience
Hindered from reaching the goal

In the first sub-theme, the participants indicated feeling hindered from reaching their career goals. The participants indicated feeling frustrated by the education system and not

being able to find employment right after their degree immediately, as shared by Participant 1:

'I sometimes question the point of going to school and studying further if all that's going to do is land you in a worse of place than you were while you were studying. If there's no formal employment, who needs formal education then?'(Male, 25 years old, Arts and Design graduate)

Difficulty in finding employment

In the second sub-theme, the participants reported the frustration of needing experience to secure employment, as indicated by Participant 9:

'My experience of being a graduate without formal employment is a bit daunting, considering that companies may come with requirements for their prospective employees which seems impossible or unreasonable to graduates or incoming entry-level workers.' (Female, 25 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Participant 2 shared a personal experience, which involved enduring months of unemployment despite their persistent efforts in applying for jobs and actively seeking employment opportunities. The only available job opportunities they managed to secure were temporary positions under the presidential stimulus employment programme for youth. Participants shared that a lack of income was significant and wide-ranging. It can lead to difficulties in meeting basic needs leading to financial insecurity and stress.

Affects well-being

The third sub-theme showed that searching for formal employment without success negatively affected participants' well-being, as shared by Participant 5:

'My experience of being a graduate was out formal employment has been very negative, it's caused me a lot of stress, self-doubt and it has had a bad impact on my mental health.' (Female, 25 years old, Health Sciences graduate)

Lack specific skills

The participants' responses highlighted a significant obstacle in the job-seeking process: the lack of essential skills. Many job opportunities require specific licences or personal vehicles for easier commuting, which is often lacking among the youth. This presents an additional barrier to accessing employment opportunities, as indicated by Participant 3:

'Mainly lack of experience and a proven track record of ability to conduct work required. This also results in a graduates without employment lacking necessary soft skills that are appealing to recruiters.' (Female, 23 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Furthermore, the participants indicated that they feel the challenge that unemployed graduates face in South Africa is a lack of technical skills. Many jobs require employees to have specific technical skills, such as using certain software programs or operating certain machinery. Unemployed graduates who do not have these skills may find it difficult to find a job. One participant mentioned feeling nervous and anxious, especially about the interview session, as mentioned in the following quotes from Participant 8: 'Not having the necessary interview skills. (Female, 24 years old, Law graduate)', and Participant 6: 'Some people do not make it through the interviews, due to being nervous.' (Female, 24 years old, Health Sciences graduate)

Key role-player involvement

The participants mentioned that the causes of unemployment may be a result of the lack of communication between key stakeholders in the economy. The participants referred to the disconnect between key role-players because of a lack of communication, as mentioned by Participant 9:

'The causes of unemployment may be a result of the lack of communication between the key players in the life of a graduate's career, which are institutions, government and companies that have capacity and are willing to be key players.' (Female, 25 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Theme 3: Skills needed

Communication skills

The participants indicated that specific skills are instrumental in determining an individual's effectiveness within a professional setting. Among the qualities highlighted were the ability to collaborate effectively as part of a team, strong communication skills, self-motivation, leadership abilities and the capacity to tackle and solve problems, as shared by Participant 1:

'Good communication skills, the ability to get along with anyone while maintaining a level head, able to work under pressure, a good team player.' (Male, 25 years old, Arts and Design graduate)

Critical thinking

The participants emphasised the importance of having a curious mind in the workplace. They indicated that it is important to understand how different individuals think and behave differently, and thereby critically analysing situations is an important skill, as mentioned in this quote by Participant 9:

'As well as being curious, having a curious mind helps you help the company and colleagues to observe the company's product or service offering, or operations per department through a different perspective.' (Female, 25 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Hardworking

The participants highlighted the significance of graduates being hardworking and demonstrating their commitment to going the extra mile when required, as shared by Participant 2:

'Graduates should be hard workers and prove themselves to others that they can always go the extra mile when necessary.' (Female, 25 years old, Humanities graduate)

Emotional intelligence

Respectful interaction with colleagues was highlighted as another crucial aspect. The graduates emphasised the importance of treating fellow colleagues with respect and courtesy in the workplace, as stated by Participant 7:

'Being able to respectfully interact with your fellow colleagues is important … Being a trustworthy and reliable person is also important for maintaining good work relationships.' (Female, 23 years old, Health Sciences graduate)

Self-discipline

The participants recognised that self-motivation and accountability were necessary characteristics contributing to a graduate's effectiveness in the workplace. The participants shared that their own anxiety, the lack of motivation, confidence and self-motivation hindered them from moving forward and persisting to achieve their goals, as shared by Participant 3:

'Anxiety and a lack of confidence. As jobs become increasingly complex and deadlines ever slimmer in a fast-paced world, the amount of responsibility that individuals are expected to shoulder becomes heavier.' (Female, 23 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Phase 2: Strength-based training programme

In her study, Lodewyk (2018) utilised the strength-based perspective to develop a training model for human resource (HR) practitioners. The elements of strengths identified by Buckingham and Clifton (2001), namely talents, knowledge and skills, combined with coaching, were incorporated into the training model and presented in a workshop series.

Table 2 shows the content and methodology of Lodewyk's strength-based training programme for HR practitioners.

The programme of Lodewyk (2018) focussed on equipping HR practitioners with the necessary skills to function effectively in both intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. The programme was presented in a series of workshops, supplemented by group discussions. During these sessions, the participants completed practical workbook exercises that reinforced the concepts. The participants were guided to identify and understand their own character strengths. The training involved a presentation to explain the strengths, followed by workbook exercises and group discussions to help practitioners apply these ideas to their personal and professional lives.

For the current study, the model of Lodewyk (2018) seemed fit to be incorporated and adapted into a shortened version (webinar) to suit the needs of the graduates as reflected in the findings. The themes from the study of Lodewyk (2018) were consulted to compare to the themes from Phase 1 of our study. In her study, the theme, *helping skills*, was described by Lodewyk (2018) as intrapersonal skills that are skills inherent within individuals and interpersonal skills, those

TABLE 2: The content and methodology of a strength-based training programme for human resource practitioners.

Topics	Description	Objective	Method
Basic helping skills such as interpersonal skills	Listening and paraphrasing skills	The practitioners should be able to support employees within their work environment	**Activity 1:** Workbook paper-and-pencil exercises **Activity 2:** Group discussion
Basic helping skills such as intrapersonal skills	Show understanding of helping skills and, in the process, experience growth as a helper	Be able to focus on your own functioning at an optimal level	**Activity 1:** Practical workbook paper-and-pencil exercises **Activity 2:** Group discussion
The strengths-based principle	Understand the concepts of knowledge on a strength-based life	Be able to understand and apply the strengths principle in their lives	Activity in the practical workbook. Group discussions on their views of strengths
Components of strengths-based approach	Understand the components of strengths: talent, knowledge and skills	Be able to understand and apply strengths-based principles	Contextualisation on the principles Individual and group activities
Strength-based training	Understand how to apply the four criteria (spontaneous reactions, yearnings, rapid learning and satisfaction). Identify character strengths	Be able to apply the criteria to identify character strengths	Administer StrengthsFinder and discuss results Presentation: Activity on the 34 themes Group activity Individual activity: Application of skills to solve a problem in the workplace

Source: The content and methodology of a strength-based training programme for HR practitioners developed by Lodewyk (2018)

skills visible to others, encompassing an individual's ability to comprehend and regulate their own and others' emotions, behaviours and motivations within social settings. The identified theme emphasised the practical application of these skills, enhancing understanding and aiding HR practitioners in effectively interacting with clients and senior managers. For our study, *helping skills* were matched to Category 1: Theme 1 (Understanding being a graduate) and Category 1: Theme 3 (Communication skills and emotional intelligence).

Lodewyk (2018) identified *Fostering a strength-based life* as focussing on cultivating a strength-based life for HR practitioners. Strength-based theory within this context is instrumental in identifying and evaluating strengths, as formulated by Buckingham. In our study, this theme is linked to Category 1: Theme 2 (Lack of specific skills) and Category 1: Theme 3 (Communication skills and emotional intelligence).

In her study, Lodewyk (2018) identified the theme, Foundations of a strength based life. Training processes based on this theme would enable organisations to identify, manage and leverage discovered strengths. This theme matched our study, addressing Category 1: Theme 2 (Key role-player involvement) and Category 1: Theme 3 (Emotional intelligence, critical thinking). From this discussion, the following topics were identified to include in the training programme for the current study (as reflected in Table 3).

Topic 1: Components of strength

This topic delved into the components of strengths, talent, knowledge and skills. It is important for the graduates to

understand the distinctions and relevance of these components in their professional roles. The topic guided the participants in identifying their character strengths, focussing on understanding and recognising their individual strengths. The presenter discussed and facilitated discussions relating to strength-based life, and the definition and principles of the components that form part of the strengths-based life.

The methodology used included illustrative presentations, and workbook exercises to reinforce the connection between the concept and individual character strengths.

Topic 2: Strength-based skills

This topic aimed to enhance the participants' proficiency in the interpersonal domain as identified from the research findings as a skills development need. This segment was included to focus on differentiating and applying interpersonal skills (as identified above) essential for the participants. Because the participants reflected much in the data on acquiring specific skills, it was important to spend time discussing how to foster skills that promote a strength-based life and career, equipping participants to handle challenging situations such as job interviews. Different interpersonal skills were included, such as incorporating emotional intelligence, and how to manage challenging emotions such as anxiety and stress. Similar topics to Lodewyk's (2018) were discussed, and more details were added based on our findings, such as how to be a good team player and where to obtain effective interviewing skills.

TABLE 3: A strength-based skills training programme for unemployed graduates in the South African labour market.

No.	Topic	Description	Presenter	Time
1	Welcoming	Provide an outline of the training	Researcher	10 min
2	Introduction to strength-based life	Components of strengths: Providing theoretical background on the strength-based life; definitions and principles of strength-based skills Sub-topics: Introduction to the strength-based life, theory and skills	Researcher	60 min
3	Identifying strengths	Components of strengths: The training session focusses on identifying strengths and utilising the strength-based finder to enhance areas of improvement Sub-topics: Identifying strength-based skills for graduates	Presenter	60 min
	Coffee break			10 min
4	Strength-based skills	Strength-based skills Sub-topics: Interpersonal skills Communication skills Emotional intelligence How can I be a good team player?	Presenter	60 min
	Coffee break			10 min
5	Reflection on webinar	Facilitate discussions regarding insight into own strengths and utilise these strengths in job-searching and placement Facilitate group discussions for graduates to reflect on their own growth process	Presenter	30 min
	Complete post-workshop survey	Provide a link to QuestionPro	Researcher	

Source: Programme adapted from Lodewyk (2018)

The training methodology involved having discussions and reflecting on each sub-topic to ensure optimal comprehension and application. PowerPoint presentations, practical workbook exercises and discussions to deepen the participant's understanding of these vital skills were included.

Topic 3: Reflections

The third topic was included to facilitate the participants' perceptions of the significance of acquiring knowledge on a strength-based life and career. The methodology encompassed a discussion to gauge participants' perspectives on the newly acquired concepts.

Table 3 outlines the details of the training programme.

Phase 2: Experience of graduates after training

Phase 2 included exploring the experiences of the participants after attending the strength-based skills training programme. The phase yielded various themes, as reported next:

Theme 1: Empowering

The participants shared how they were able to do introspection and identify their strengths, which led to a feeling of empowerment, as can be seen by the following responses from Participant 8:

> 'This information was extremely helpful in identifying any deficits I may be looking past. It certainly pushed me out of my comfort zone.' (Female, 24 years old, Law graduate)

Theme 2: Skills development

The participants indicated that they better understood their own skills through the training, as shared by Participant 9:

> 'We don't often consider the skills we don't learn directly during our studies, or how important they might be in getting a job so I appreciated that aspect of the programme.' (Female, 25 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Theme 3: Improving employability

The participants reflected on their journey in the learning process, moving from a place of not knowing to a point of understanding. They indicated that they gained awareness of their skills and learned to appreciate their importance. The participants shared that it is a journey of self-awareness, as shared by Participant 1:

> 'Elevating one's desire to gain new strengths that can be converted into skills, knowledge or competencies to be transferred to work performance or team collaboration, and I gathered that one needs to use him/her strengths to help improve their skills in order to have a better chance of finding employment that strengthen their strengths.' (Male, 25 years old, Arts and Design graduate)

Theme 4: Improved confidence

The participants reflected on how they became more aware of their strengths and how to harness them. Some of the

participants, such as Participant 9, shared that they experienced a notable increase in their self-assurance:

'… [S]trengths boost one's confidence, strengths can be utilised in achieving personal, professional and organisational objectives.' (Female, 25 years old, Economics and Management graduate)

Discussion

This research aligns with global efforts to ensure that all youth, including graduates, have access to decent work. The findings from the first phase of the study show that graduates often face challenges in finding employment. These include a lack of experience and opportunities, as well as feelings of frustration, discouragement and uncertainty about their future. According to Mkhize (2021), these challenges, both individually and collectively, take a toll on the physical and mental well-being of unemployed graduates. The stress and uncertainty of prolonged unemployment can profoundly impact their health and often lead to social isolation and financial hardship, worsening the already difficult circumstances these individuals face in South Africa (Mkhize, 2021). The broader implication of this finding, set against the backdrop of the sustainable development goals, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), is that by equipping graduates with the necessary tools and skills, barriers to obtaining decent work can be overcome, thus addressing the unemployment crisis.

The importance of self-awareness and strengths recognition

The findings showed that the participants recognised the importance of knowing their strengths and talents. Klynveld (2015) found that by recognising their strengths, graduates can effectively align their abilities with job requirements, enhancing their employability in a highly competitive environment. This is consistent with Buckingham's (2005) view that individuals who choose to focus on their strengths are more likely to be engaged at work, more productive and more successful in their careers. Moreover, self-awareness and self-assessment empower graduates to confidently present themselves to prospective employers, showcasing how their unique attributes make them ideal candidates for specific positions (Majid et al., 2019). Furthermore, this knowledge contributes to career satisfaction, as graduates who work in roles that harness their strengths tend to find their work more fulfilling and rewarding (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

The findings revealed that the training programme led to a sense of improved confidence among the participants. The findings highlighted the insight the participants showed that these strengths influenced their self-confidence, heightened self-awareness and application of the participants' strengths. Literature shows that individuals who recognise their distinctive competencies and how to deploy them effectively tend to feel more proficient and confident (Buckingham, 2005; Clifton & Rath, 2007).

However, while the recognition of strengths is essential, the findings suggest that this alone may not be sufficient. The gap between self-awareness and the practical application of these strengths in the workplace remains a significant barrier. Although graduates may understand their strengths, the challenge lies in effectively transferring skills and demonstrating these strengths to potential employers. The study identified a range of skills that graduates perceive as necessary for entering the workforce, including technical skills (e.g. holding a driver's licence) and soft skills (e.g. communication, critical thinking, teamwork and emotional intelligence). While these findings are consistent with existing literature (Klynveld, 2015; Snyder & Lopez, 2001), a critical examination reveals that the emphasis on certain technical skills may be too narrow. For example, focussing on a driver's licence as a key employability factor may overlook broader, more versatile technical skills that are increasingly important in a digital and globalised economy.

Moreover, while certain skills are undeniably valuable, the findings show that the development and application of these skills are often taken for granted. Graduates may be aware of the importance of soft skills, but without practical, context-specific training, these skills may remain underdeveloped and underutilised. This gap between skill awareness and practical competency suggests that current academic programmes may not be sufficient in preparing graduates for the complexities of the labour market.

Experiences of unemployed graduates of strength-based skills training

As suggested by the SDGs, by empowering graduates to recognise and utilise their strengths, their individual employability could possibly be enhanced and create a more confident workforce. As such, Phase 2 of the study found that a strengths-based skills training programme empowered the participants to be more self-aware and confident about their strengths. The findings showed that they felt more prepared to apply their strengths in professional settings, aligning with the findings from Soria et al. (2019), that strength-based programmes contribute to psychological and social well-being.

Our study's findings indicated a potential gap between conventional academic education and the practical skills often required in professional environments. This aligns with Vlotman and Clayford (2023), who suggest that educational institutions and science councils should act as hubs or incubators to address these challenges. By designing relevant curricula and creating job opportunities (such as internships), they can ensure graduates are more valuable to the labour market (Vlotman & Clayford, 2023). Securing employment for South African unemployed graduates is challenging because of a lack of relevant work experience, limited information on effective job searches and low social capital (Graham et al., 2019). According to a recent World Economic Forum report (2020), collaboration and inclusion

are crucial for developing a more holistic and effective approach to education. This requires active involvement from various stakeholders, including governments, families, businesses and educational institutions (Vlotman & Clayford, 2023). This study highlights the fact that enhancing individual self-awareness and confidence in graduates may not be sufficient in isolation. A more integrated approach is needed combining strength-based training with practical work experience to bridge the gap between education and employability fully.

Practical implications

The findings of this study suggest that while strength-based training has clear benefits, it must be complemented by broader strategies that address the multifaceted nature of graduate unemployment. The findings align with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), emphasising the importance of equipping youth with the skills they need to obtain employment. Furthermore, future research should explore how strength-based training can be integrated with other employability initiatives, such as internships, networking opportunities and mentorship programmes. It is important to ensure that education and training are aligned with realistic labour market needs to ensure that graduates' employability is enhanced, effectively contributing to SDG 4 (Quality education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) The strength-based skills training programme can potentially develop the strengths and skills of graduates through strength-based knowledge. Equipping graduates with much-needed interpersonal skills could reduce the skills gap in the labour market. Thus, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is supported by providing equal opportunities for graduates, regardless of their background. Future research can inform government policies on graduate employability, advocating for funding and support of strength-based training initiatives as part of national workforce development strategies. This would support economic growth and align with the broader objectives of the SDGs by promoting inclusive and equitable opportunities for all.

Limitations and recommendations

Certain limitations were noted in the study. Firstly, the study may have involved a relatively small number of participants, which could limit the applicability of the findings. A larger and more diverse sample might offer a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics graduates find essential. Secondly, the self-awareness and self-reflection noted by participants are subjective in nature. While these insights are valuable, they may not always align with the objective assessments of their skills, behaviours or limitations. Future research might incorporate external evaluations to validate self-perceptions. Also, the authors recognise the possible potential use of leading interview questions, which could guide respondents to specific answers and affect data validity. Our study might have missed more authentic feedback, which is crucial for understanding the real needs and preferences of the participants.

Thirdly, the study provides a snapshot of participants' experiences and self-awareness at a particular point in time. Longitudinal studies that track their development and progress over time would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how they grow and adapt. Fourthly, the study focusses on the perspectives of unemployed graduates but does not include the views of employers, educators or policymakers. A more comprehensive exploration might involve a multi-stakeholder approach to address graduate employability challenges. Educational institutions could explore the integration of strength-based training into their academic programmes. Incorporating such training could help graduates recognise and utilise their inherent strengths in professional environments.

Conclusion

The present study found that a strength-based training programme for unemployed graduates could be beneficial for the improvement of graduates' skills. The study provides insights into the participants' perceptions of the skills they feel they need to gain employment, such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence and specific technical skills. Enhancing these skills through a strength-based approach could effectively help graduates develop the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. A foundational understanding of the barriers to decent work is essential for formulating effective interventions aligned with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Furthermore, addressing the challenges that unemployed graduates face in South Africa requires a more holistic approach to ensure that graduates are more aware of their strengths and equipped to navigate the complex realities of the modern world of work.

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Authors' contributions

M.J.M. conducted this study as part of her master's studies and was responsible for data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing the dissertation. R.L-R. was the main supervisor, responsible for conceptualising the study. L.I.G., a professor and co-supervisor, assisted with data analysis, interpretation and article writing for publication purposes.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, L.I.G.

Disclaimer

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