

INVESTIGATING THE SELF-PERCEIVED ACQUIRED COMPETENCIES OF HUMANITIES GRADUATES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

P. A. Botha*

Business School

e-mail: petrus.botha@nwu.ac.za / <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1353-2201>

A. Botha*

Management Sciences

e-mail: anemarie.botha@nwu.ac.za / <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6567-3757>

*North-West University

Potchefstroom, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the self-perceived competencies acquired by humanities graduates at a South African university. This self-assessment enables graduates to assess their strengths and weaknesses regarding their competencies and estimate their employability. The secondary objective was to measure the employment status of humanities graduates. The study followed a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional survey design. The convenience sampling method was used since the self-administered questionnaire was distributed to graduates at two graduation ceremonies. Independent samples t-tests were done to compare the mean scores on the six dimensions of the competencies scale between gender, schools and degrees. Chi-square tests were done to establish whether there are associations between gender, faculty schools, degrees and employment status. Spearman rank-order correlation was performed to measure the correlations between the six factors of the competencies scale. The six individual competencies that scored the highest means were: “(1) tolerance, appreciation of different points of view, (2) written communication skills, (3) critical thinking, (4) English language proficiency, (5) working in a team, and (6) taking responsibility for decisions”. A follow-up study should be done among employers to determine what competencies they require from humanities graduates.

Keywords: competencies, employability, employers humanities graduates, skills, universities

INTRODUCTION

For graduates entering the job market can be either a frightening experience or an exciting time. Therefore, graduates should have realistic expectations of the needs required by employers. Most graduates, equipped with knowledge and skills, try to find jobs in the field that they have studied. Graduates think they possess “the knowledge and skills employers need to find a job

(Grant, Malloy, and Murphy 2009, 147). However, employers have a different view of the competencies required from students (Boyatzis 2008, 5; Chan and Lin 2016, 284). Various studies have shown that graduates lack hard and soft skills to find a job (Asonitou 2015, 284; Dowling, Rose, and O'Shea 2015, 55; Wang and Tsai 2014). Graduates are self-assured that they have learned the necessary soft and hard skills to get a job in the market (Grant et al. 2009, 147). According to Matsouka and Mihail (2016, 323), employability includes “a set of qualifications, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics that enable the university graduate to seek and find a job and be successful in it”. It is a cause for concern that graduate students seem unaware that they lack specific skills to ensure a job in the current working environment. Graduates “perceive that they have acquired the necessary competencies to find a job” (Grant et al. 2009, 147). However, more and more employers feel that the skills that students have learned in higher education are not relevant to the working environment (Asonitou 2015, 284; Stewart, Wall, and Marciniec 2016, 276; Tsitskari et al. 2017, 2).

Research has revealed that the most significant factors negatively influencing the employment of graduates are the “lack of job market information, lack of job search skills, no professional networks, no formal working experience, a mismatch between qualifications and available jobs, high cost of job search, geographical area one lives in; no political or social connections, low socio-economic status, flawed educational system, curriculum issues, choice of higher education institution (credibility); unrealistically high expectations, uncertain economic conditions, overeducation (mismatching supply/demand), lack of competencies required by employers, and the lack of self-esteem, confidence and self-efficacy” (Harry, Chinyamurindi, and Mjoli 2018; Hwang 2017; Mncayi 2016; Oluwajodu et al. 2015). Kougioumoutzaki and Kalamatianou (2012) state that research reveals “that graduates from technical fields do better in the labour market than those of more general academic fields such as social sciences” According to Harvey and Shahjahan (2013, 5), the workforce challenges specifically facing humanities graduates are that

“graduates are perceived poorly by the community, which leads to a misconception of the value of their skills and contributions to a competitive job market”.

“The breadth and diversity of the Bachelor of Arts are seen as a weakness.”

Furthermore, “Humanities graduates are unable to sell themselves to potential employers (the lack of confidence by graduates to identify the skills they have developed and how to articulate these in the job-seeking process).”

“Lack of specific career direction and advice and a lack of practical work experience within the Bachelor of Arts programme.”

“Misunderstanding or lack of understanding by employers of humanities graduates attributes compared to other degrees and a lack of practical focus within the Arts undergraduate programme.”

According to the 2019 Quarterly Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate for South African graduates is about 2.1 per cent and reflects unemployment across all ages and not those of recent graduates (Statistics South Africa 2019). Humanities graduates have higher unemployment rates since their acquired competencies are not what seems to be required by prospective employers (Louvel 2007; Mncayi and Dunga 2016, 418).

The primary research question for this study is: What are the self-perceived acquired competencies of humanities graduates? The secondary research questions are: Is there a difference in the mean competency scores between gender, schools and degrees? What is the employment status of graduates? Is there an association between gender, faculty schools, degree and employment status? Is there a correlation between the six competency factors?

Most research examines graduates perceived acquired competencies but does not focus on humanities and social sciences graduates. The primary objective was to measure human, and social sciences graduates' self-perceived competencies acquired to fill this gap. The supporting secondary objective was to measure the employment status of humanities graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Universities are responsible for equipping graduates with generic and professional competencies that employers require. Graduates also have a responsibility to ensure that they acquire the competencies needed by employers. Therefore, the literature review focuses on employability, graduates' perceived competencies acquired from their universities and employers' required competencies.

Meaning and theoretical framework of employability

Many existing theories explain what employability means. For this study, the job-matching theory forms the theoretical foundation. Barnard, Veldhuis, and Van Rooij (2001) elaborate on this theory by pointing out that the most significant goal of education is to make sure students develop appropriate skills so that they can be inspired to perform many tasks in the future work environment. The theory further states that a failure to match the required skills and the skills graduates have will negatively influence their productivity, wages and future job applications. For that reason, the competencies required by employers must be like the competencies graduates acquired at higher education institutions. The challenge is to ensure students know the importance of generic competencies and how a lack of them could affect their job opportunities in a competitive job environment (Maher and Graves 2008). Hillage and Pollard (1998, 2) explained that "employability is about work and the potentiality to get a job and keep

it". Fugate and Kinicki (2008) define "employability as a form of particular job adaptability active and proactive in identifying and implementing career opportunities". Knight and Yorke (2004, 23) defined "employability as a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation". Employability implies that graduates should be prepared for any job with essential hard and soft skills. "Soft skills indicate all the competencies that are not directly connected to a specific task; they are necessary for any position as they mainly refer to the relationships with other people involved in the organisation, while hard skills indicate the specific capabilities to perform a particular job" (Cimatti 2016, 98). Universities have to take responsibility to equip graduates with competencies relevant to the critical needs of employers, and graduates should acquire these competencies.

There are different conceptual frameworks of employability competencies. The well-known theory of employability, formally known "as the USEM model" (Knight and Yorke 2004; Yorke and Knight 2006; Yorke 2010), intends to verify different factors that impact employability and how employability impacts the way universities prepare students to enter the job market. The major stakeholders who formed part of their study were the university, employers, and graduates. Their model consisted of "four inter-related dimensions of employability, namely understanding (of disciplinary subject matter and how organisations work), skilful practices (academic, employment, and life in general), efficacy beliefs (reflect the learner's notion of self, their self-belief, and the possibility for self-improvement and development), and metacognition (complements efficacy, embraces self-awareness, how to learn and reflect)". "It encompasses knowledge of strategies for learning, thinking, and problem-solving, and supports and promotes continued learning/lifelong learning)". This model is easy to understand and emphasises the most critical aspects of employability. Graduates should understand and already have mastered all the aspects of the model to be employable. If one aspect of this model is missing, a graduate will lack specific skills to find a job. Cotton (2000) also developed a conceptual framework of employment "skills, focusing on three vital skills categories: basic skills, higher-order thinking skills, and affective skills". Bridgstock (2009) also proposed "a conceptual model of graduates' employability and career management skills attributes". Employability skills comprise "the generic and discipline-specific skills required for performance in a work situation; and career management skills, divided into two categories of competence, namely self-management and career-building". García-Aracil and Van Der Velden (2008) used the CHEERS framework to categorise and measure graduate competencies in Europe. The CHEERS model consists of six factors: "organisational competencies, methodological competencies, participative competencies, specialised

competencies, generic competencies, and socio-emotional competencies”. These competencies are defined by García-Aracil and Van Der Velden (2008, 226–227) as follows:

“organisational competencies are held by those who can work under pressure, work independently and with attention to detail; methodological competencies are defined as being able to react to problems in a manner that is appropriate, using the procedure expected, and being able to apply experience gained to find sensible solutions to other problems; participative competencies are held by those who can contribute towards constructing the working environment in their workplace and beyond, who can plan, assume tasks, take decisions and are willing to assume responsibility; specialised competencies are held by those who can carry out activities and tasks in their field of work responsibly and competently and possess the required knowledge and skills to do so; generic competencies can be defined as those competencies that can be applied across a broad range of contexts. This indicates that generic competencies imply more-than-just-general-knowledge in the strict sense. It also includes critical thinking and oral and written communication skills, and socio-emotional competencies are present in individuals who can work cooperatively with others and show team-oriented behaviour and interpersonal understanding.”

This framework and questionnaire were used in this study to measure the humanities graduates’ self-perceived acquired competencies. In their study, the highest-rated acquired competencies by graduates include “foreign language proficiency, learning abilities, field-specific theoretical knowledge and a broad general knowledge” (García-Aracil and Van der Velden 2008, 223).

Graduates perceived competencies acquired from universities

The question is, do universities equip students with generic and specific professional competencies? Numerous studies have been done to measure the acquired competencies of graduates from universities (Bezuidenhout 2011; Coetzee 2014; García-Aracil and Van der Velden 2008; Gawrycka, Kujawska, and Tomczak 2020; Pop and Khampirat 2019; Teijeiro, Rungo, and Freire 2013; Teng et al. 2019; Vydrová 2018). Bezuidenhout (2011) developed a graduate employability model and scale that was validated within the South African context. The model consists of three factors, namely “career self-management drive, cultural competence and career resilience”. The descriptive statistics showed that “career self-management drive obtained the highest mean ($M=5.44$, $SD=0.68$), followed by career resilience ($M=5.43$, $SD=0.67$) and cultural competence ($M=5.29$, $SD=0.85$)” (Bezuidenhout 2011, 165). Concerning gender, “there was a statistically significant difference at the $p<0.001$ level between the career self-management drive scores for males ($M=5.17$, $SD=0.73$) and females ($M=5.61$, $SD=0.59$) [$F(1.253)=12.96$, $p=0.00$]”. In comparison, there was also “a statistically significant difference at the $p<0.05$ level between the career self-management drive scores for final-year undergraduates ($M=5.51$, $SD=0.67$) obtaining higher mean scores than postgraduates ($M=5.13$, $SD=0.66$)” (Bezuidenhout 2011, 167).

Coetzee (2014) developed a “graduate skills and attributes scale consisting of eight factors: interactive skills, problem-solving/decision-making skills, continuous learning orientation, enterprising skills, presenting and applying information skills, ethical and responsible behaviour and analytical thinking skills in the economic and management sciences field”. According to Coetzee (2014, 888), “graduateness refers to the quality of personal growth and intellectual development of the graduates produced by a higher education institution, and the relevance of the graduateness skills and attributes they bring to the workplace”. The mean scores for the eight factors were “interactive skills (M=5.41; SD=0.13); problem-solving/decision-making skills (M=5.33; SD=0.15); continuous learning orientation (M=5.46; SD=0.07); enterprising skills (M=5.21; SD=0.13); presenting and applying information skills (M=5.28; SD= 0.09); goal-directed behaviour (M=5.25; SD=0.36); ethical and responsible behaviour (M= 5.43; SD= 0.13), and analytical thinking skills (M=5.25; SD=0.10)” (Coetzee 2014, 896). Pop and Khampirat (2019) developed a model to “measure the competencies of Namibian graduates consisting of 20 indicators and five factors”, namely “management and resilience, professional and communication, teamwork and critical thinking, self-control and achievement motive”. Graduates rated themselves high on all indicators, with the highest ratings “in the ability to work independently (M=4.53, SD=0.56) and ability and willingness to learn (M=4.53, SD=0.55), whereas resilience received the lowest rating (M= 4.23; SD=0.65)” (Pop and Khampirat 2019, 134). The results showed “a significant difference between males and females ($t(190) = 1.98, p < 0.05$) that exists only in achievement motive, indicating that female graduates (M=4.52; SD=0.44) had higher achievement motives than male graduates did (M = 4.38; SD=0.53)”. According to Pop and Khampirat (2019, 137), “there was no significant difference between gender groups ($p > 0.05$) for professional and communication, teamwork and critical thinking, self-control and management and resilience”. A study done by Teng et al. (2019) compared Chinese and Malaysian business students’ perceptions of their university experience regarding the development of soft skills at their respective universities. The analysis revealed “that the majority of respondents from both the Malaysian and Chinese universities indicated they developed their self-management, communicational, interpersonal, team-working skills, the ability to work under pressure, imagination/creativity, critical thinking, willingness to learn, attention to detail, taking responsibility, planning and organising skills, insight, maturity, professionalism and emotional intelligence” (Teng et al. 2019, 599). Gawrycka et al. (2020) investigated Polish graduates’ views of desirable competencies for the labour market. Their results revealed that “graduates rated their communication and interpersonal competencies highest, with average ratings of 4.08 and 4.07, respectively, followed by analytical competencies at 3.61 and professional competencies at 3.45”. At the

same time, they assessed their “IT competencies the lowest, with an average score of 3.01” (Gawrycka et al. 2020, 1104). The employability scale of Teijeiro et al. (2013) consists of 19 competencies divided into three dimensions of competencies, namely “instrumental, interpersonal and systematic”. The perceived competencies acquired by graduates that obtained the highest scores were “the ability to learn, ability to work as a team, interpersonal abilities, ability to analyse and synthesise, and the ability to work independently”. In contrast, the most critical competencies required by companies were “responsibility at work, motivation for work and problem-solving skills” (Teijeiro et al. 2013, 289–290). There was “a difference between those items most highly valued by graduates and those required by companies or businesses”. The total score for the competencies items rated by females was higher than males (Teijeiro et al. 2013, 290).

Universities must support graduates to attain jobs by implementing different strategies to increase graduate employability. According to Kinash et al. (2016) and Botha (2012), university employability strategies include “capstone/final semester projects, which are multifaceted assignments that serve as a culminating academic and intellectual experience for students”. “Career advice services such as interviewing skills, preparation of CVs and resumes should be provided, as well as engaging in networking opportunities and self-reflection should be promoted.” “Extracurricular activities combine experiential learning and community service; international exchange programmes; mentoring by industry mentors; networking by providing opportunities for interaction between students and employers; part-time employment; and developing graduates portfolios.” Also, the engagement of professional associations in the education process; equip students with social media skills, volunteering community engagement opportunities for graduates and provide opportunities for graduates to obtain work experience/internships/placements. To increase specifically the employability of humanities graduates, Botha (2012) recommended that the perception that humanities programmes are so-called “soft options” and that they add limited value to society should be changed using comprehensive marketing and communication strategies. Humanities programmes should be relevant to the needs of society, financially viable and sustainable. Emphasis should be placed on differentiation to ensure the uniqueness of programmes. The feasibility of workplace-based training using work-integrated learning for all programmes should also be a strategic priority. Student numbers should be controlled in line with the scarce skills identified by the government. The professionalisation of humanities programmes will enhance credibility, and stakeholders such as professional bodies and industry members should be part of advisory boards to assist academics with developing tailor-made curriculums for the industry’s needs. As discussed in the literature review, curricula should incorporate soft, generic, and discipline-specific skills.

Students, academics, and other stakeholders (Department of Higher Education and Training; South African Qualifications Authority, Sector Education and Training Authorities) should continuously evaluate whether the transfer of these skills in the different programmes had indeed taken place. Internal and external programme evaluations involving all relevant stakeholders should be conducted regularly. Proper support and career counselling services should be provided to prepare humanities graduates for the labour market.

Graduates also have a responsibility to engage in practices to make them more employable and overcome the factors that negatively impact their employability. Graduates should utilise the support services provided by universities as discussed under university support strategies and acquired job search skills. According to various authors (McKeowan and Lindorff 2011; Saito and Pham 2019; Jackson 2016; Albert and Davia 2018), job search strategies available for graduates to use include deploying recruitment agencies, using the mass media and internet, taking part in public examinations, sending a CV to employers, start own business, obtain good academic results, choose a credible university, choose the right field of study, and obtain sufficient work experience. Also, set realistic work expectations and develop a strong graduate identity.

Competencies required by employers

What are the competencies required by employers? Various studies across the world had been done to establish employers' required competencies of graduates (Baird and Parayitma 2019; Chhinzer and Russo 2017; Deaconu et al. 2014; Deepa and Seth 2013; Griffin et al. 2017; Gruzdev et al. 2018; Hart Research Associates 2015; Jones et al. 2017; Lavender 2019; Majid et al. 2019; Mishra 2014; NACE 2016; Patacsil and Tablatin 2017; Sharma 2018; Stewart et al. 2016; Vydrová 2018; Weng 2015; Williams 2015). Research done by Griffin et al. (2017, 305 and 309) revealed that graduates rank the following characteristics most important to employers, namely "strong work ethics, integrity, communication skills, dependability, and commitment/dedication". The top-five qualities employers seek are "content skills, communication skills, computer skills, creative skills, and collaboration skills". These authors also confirmed a difference between what graduates perceived as the required competencies by employers and what employers need. The findings from another study that focussed on employers in the north-eastern part of the United States indicates that the top-six skills required by employers were "interpersonal skills, and to work well with other employees, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, listening skills, oral communication skills, professionalism, and personal motivation" (Baird and Parayitma 2019, 626). The study results by Majid et al. (2019, 21) showed that employers' top three highly sought-after soft skills were

“positive attitude, teamwork, and good ethics”. Graduates identified eight critical competencies for their educational development and increased their employability, namely “communication skills, knowledge of foreign languages, creativity, responsibility, teamwork, flexibility, punctuality and work under stress” (Vydrová 2018, 250). Weng (2015, 419) suggests that students should acquire eight skills to find a job in the future, namely “computational thinking, new media literacy, the skill of sense-making, the ability to own three bits of intelligence (social intelligence, emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence) the skill of design mindset, novel and adaptive thinking skills, management of cognitive load skill and cross-cultural competence”. A study by Deaconu et al. (2014, 864) in Romania revealed that the most critical competencies identified by employers are “accountability in completing tasks, efficient activity planning and organisation, and promptness and efficient time management”. Mishra (2014) found that soft skills such as communication skills, problem-solving, attitude, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work in a team are the primary skills organisations look for in their employees. According to Lavender (2019, 48), employers’ most commonly sought-after soft skills include “teamwork, communication, work ethic, flexibility/adaptability, and time management”. Sharma (2018, 26) emphasised that soft skills are crucial in the workplace, and without soft skills, it is impossible to succeed and grow in your occupation. According to Sharma (2018, 26), hard skills will help graduates get a job but will not take you forward in an organisation. Williams (2015, 4) explained that people with the necessary soft skills have good interpersonal relationships with their colleagues and are positive people who contribute to the working environment. If the above statement is true, it is more important to appoint people with good soft skills to contribute to the business environment’s success and help take the business forward. The challenge is to ensure that graduates know the importance of soft skills to find a future job and take responsibility to empower themselves to become employable (Patacsil and Tablatin 2017, 350). Employers require flexible, creative individuals and have excellent interpersonal skills (Stewart et al. 2016, 276). Deepa and Seth (2013, 2) emphasised that if employers must employ someone and there is a choice between two applicants, the person who will be hired is the one with the soft skills.

Chhinzer and Russo (2017) have identified several factors that employers assess when evaluating graduate student employability, namely “professional maturity, soft skills and problem-solving, continuous learning, academic achievement and general mental ability, generic skills, time management, teamwork, attention to detail, professional attitudes and behaviours, subject-specific knowledge, willingness to work, and responsiveness to feedback” (Chhinzer and Russo 2017, 112–116). A study among 51 recruiters of 37 organisations in the United States revealed a preference to graduate competencies and skills such as

“positive attitude, respectful of others, trustworthy, takes the initiative, takes responsibility, team player, good communicator, ambitious, self-confident, critical thinker, appearance, leadership ability, good sense of humour, good writing skills, knowledge of the major field, computer software skills, work experience, math skills, high grades, active in student professional organisations, and knowledge of the global business” (Jones et al. 2017, 424).

The results of a study by the National Association of College and Educators (NACE) showed that the five most critical soft skills that employers require are “leadership (80.1%), teamwork (78.9%), written communication (70.2%), problem-solving (70.2%), and verbal communication (68.9%)” (NACE 2016, 31). In their study, Hart Research Associates (2015, 4) found that employers believe that the top five most essential skills when hiring college graduates are “verbal communication (85%), teamwork (83%), written communication (82%), ethical judgment and decision-making (81%), and critical/analytical thinking/reasoning (81%)”. On the other side of the world, Gruzdev et al. (2018, 693) postulated that the most vital soft skills Russian employers value are “the ability to carry out social interaction and realise own role in the team, ability to manage time, build and implement a self-development path based on principles of education throughout life, ability to carry out business communication in oral and written forms, ability to carry out a critical analysis of problem situations based on the systematic approach, to develop an action strategy”.

The research approach follows in the next section.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The principal researcher followed a quantitative approach to measure graduates’ self-perceived acquired competencies. The cross-sectional research design was used, and a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data.

Population and sample

The population was all graduates at two graduation ceremonies of a Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at a South African university. The convenience sampling method was used. A total of 331 questionnaires were distributed to graduates during the two graduation ceremonies. Of these, 301 questionnaires were returned, of which 275 were completed and usable.

Measuring instrument

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A contained demographic information such as gender, degree obtained, programme, school, employment

status, type of employment and age. Section B consisted of the competencies acquired. The CHEERS (Career after Higher Education – A European Research Survey) questionnaire was used for this study. The questionnaire consists of 32 items and six factors.

- Organisational competencies – 5 items
- Methodological competencies – 7 items
- Participative competencies – 6 items
- Specialised competencies – 2 items
- Generic competencies – 5 items
- Socio-emotional competencies – 7 items

Graduates were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) their perceived acquired competencies at the time of graduation.

Reliability of the measuring instrument

García-Arcial and Van der Velden (2008) validated the CHEERS measuring instrument used. Their study found a Cronbach's alpha for organisational competencies 0.72; for specialised competencies 0.75; for methodological competencies 0.72; for generic competencies 0.72; for participative competencies 0.77; and for socio-emotional competencies 0.77.

Statistical methods

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the graduates' demographic variables, self-perceived acquired competencies and employment status. Cronbach's alphas were also done to measure the internal consistency and reliability of the measuring instrument for this specific study. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores of the self-perceived competencies between males and females, schools and degrees, while Cohen's d-value was used to determine the effect sizes. Due to the small representation of master's and PhD degrees, they were combined with honours degrees and categorised as postgraduate degrees. The following guideline values for the interpretation of Cohen's d (1988) were used, namely "0.2 small effect or no practically significant difference; 0.5 medium effect or practically visible difference; and 0.8 large effect or practically significant difference". Chi-square tests were performed to establish the association between gender, school, degree and employment status. Phi was used as effect size, and interpretations were based on the guidelines of Cohen (1988): "0.1 small effect or no practically significant association; 0.3 medium effect or practically

visible association and 0.5 large effect or practically significant association". Finally, Spearman rank-order correlation was done to measure the correlations between the six factors of the competencies scale. Cohen's (1988, 79–81) guidelines for the interpretation of the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient, "namely small effect or no practically significant correlation ($r = .10$ to $.29$); medium effect or practically visible correlation ($r = .30$ to $.49$); and large effect or practically significant correlation ($r = .50$ to 1.0) was used to interpret the results". P-values are reported for completeness' sake but will not be interpreted since a non-random sample was used. The results of the study follow in the next section.

RESULTS

The respondent's demographic profile showed that most respondents were female, with 68 per cent, while males were 32 per cent. Of the 275 respondents, 64.7 per cent obtained their undergraduate degrees, followed by honours degrees with 32.7 per cent and master's degrees with only 2.5 per cent. The degrees awarded in the various disciplines or programmes were Communication (13.1%); English (1.1%); Setswana (1.1%); Tourism (4.7%); Theology (2.2%); International Relations (5.1%); Political Science (5.1%); Sport Science (4.0%); Indigenous Knowledge Systems (2.25); Land Reform and Rural Development (2.9%); Development Studies (5.8%); Population and Demography (1.8%); Population and Development Studies (5.5%); Population Studies and Sociology (1.1%); Psychology (12%); Social Work (26.9%) and Sociology (5.5%). The majority of graduates (69.1%) were from the School of Social Sciences, while 30.9% were from the School of Human Sciences. The youngest person among the respondents is 20 years old, and the oldest person is 63 years old, with the average being 26.28 (SD = 6,94).

The six individual competencies that scored the highest means were tolerance, appreciation of different point of view (M=4.41; SD=0.77); written communication skills (M=4.40; SD=0.71); critical thinking (M=4.39; SD=0.77); English language proficiency (M=4.37; SD=0.83); working in a team (M=4.36; SD=0.86) and taking responsibility for decisions (M= 4.36; SD=0.87). The items with the lowest mean scores were analytical competencies (M=4.06; SD=0.754); field-specific knowledge and methods (M=4.08, SD=0.842); leadership (M=4.12; SD=0.989); field-specific theoretical knowledge (M=4.15; SD=0.819); and documenting ideas and information (M=4.16; SD=0.773) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the items in the competencies scale

Scale items	M	SD	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
C1	4.17	1.017	4.00	4.36	7.27	38.91	45.45
C2	4.21	.711	1.09	1.45	5.82	58.18	33.45

Scale items	M	SD	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
C3	4.22	.849	1.82	2.55	8.73	45.45	41.45
C4	4.35	.856	1.82	2.91	5.45	37.82	52.00
C5	4.25	.813	1.45	2.18	8.36	46.18	41.82
C6	4.37	.775	1.1	1.8	6.2	40.4	50.5
C7	4.27	.876	2.18	2.55	7.64	41.45	46.18
C8	4.17	.873	2.90	1.50	5.80	49.80	40.00
C9	4.16	.773	1.45	1.82	8.73	54.91	33.09
C10	4.23	.854	2.90	1.50	5.80	49.80	40.00
C11	4.06	.754	1.82	1.45	10.18	61.82	24.73
C12	4.33	.748	1.09	1.45	5.82	46.18	45.45
C13	4.25	.836	2.18	1.45	8.00	45.82	42.55
C14	4.29	.776	1.45	1.09	7.64	46.18	43.64
C15	4.21	.850	1.82	2.91	8.00	46.91	40.36
C16	4.28	.759	1.09	1.45	7.64	47.64	42.18
C17	4.12	.989	3.27	3.27	13.82	37.09	42.55
C18	4.36	.857	2.55	0.73	7.64	36.73	52.36
C19	4.15	.819	1.09	3.64	9.45	50.55	35.27
C20	4.08	.842	1.45	4.00	10.91	52.36	31.27
C21	4.28	.801	1.82	1.45	6.55	46.91	43.27
C22	4.27	.739	1.09	1.82	5.45	52.73	38.91
C23	4.39	.827	2.91	0.36	3.64	40.73	52.36
C24	4.33	.809	1.82	1.82	5.09	43.64	47.64
C25	4.40	.734	1.09	1.09	5.09	42.55	50.18
C26	4.33	.767	1.09	2.18	5.09	45.45	46.18
C27	4.36	.795	1.45	1.45	6.91	40.36	49.82
C28	4.26	.789	1.09	2.55	7.27	47.64	41.45
C29	4.32	.759	0.73	2.55	5.82	45.82	45.09
C30	4.20	.873	1.45	3.64	10.18	42.55	42.18
C31	4.35	.829	1.45	2.18	7.64	37.82	50.91
C32	4.41	.751	1.09	1.09	6.18	39.27	52.36

A staggering 78.9 per cent of respondents have indicated that they were unemployed, while 9.8 per cent were employed, but not in the discipline and field in which they were trained. Only 11.3 per cent were employed in the discipline or field in which they were trained. The survey was conducted at two graduation ceremonies, one in May and the other in October, at a South African University's Faculty of Human and Social Sciences. The students who graduated in May completed their studies the previous year in November, and those who graduated in October completed their studies at the end of June. Therefore, the high unemployment rate can be ascribed to the fact that graduates had just completed their studies and may not have applied for jobs or decided to join the labour market. The type of employment they indicated was a part-time contract (6.9%); temporary (19.0%); fixed-term contract (13.8%); internship (25.9%); permanent (29.3%); and other (5.2%).

The Cronbach's alpha for organisational competencies was 0.82, methodological competencies 0.89, participative competencies 0.90, specialised competencies 0.85, generic competencies 0.90, and socio-emotional competencies 0.90. Therefore, all of these factors are deemed to be reliable as they adhere to the guideline value of 0.7, as suggested by Field (2018). The mean scores were all above 4, indicating that the respondents on average agreed with the statements: organisational competencies (M=4.24; SD=0.65); methodological competencies (M=4.23; SD=.63); participative competencies (M =4.26; SD=.68); specialised competencies (M=4.12; SD=.78); generic competencies (M= 4.33; SD= .66); and socio-emotional competencies (M=4.32; SD=.63). The Cronbach's alphas and mean scores for the six different factors are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Cronbach's alphas and mean scores for the competency factors

Factors	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items	M	SD
Organisational competencies	0.82	5	4.24	0.65
Methodological competencies	0.89	7	4.23	0.63
Participative competencies	0.90	6	4.26	0.68
Specialised competencies	0.85	2	4.12	0.78
Generic competencies	0.90	5	4.33	0.66
Socio-emotional competencies	0.90	7	4.32	0.63

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to establish differences in the self-perceived mean scores of acquired competencies between gender, schools and degrees. The independent samples t-test in Table 3 showed that the differences between males and females are practically non-significant.

Table 3: Results of Cohen's d effect sizes and descriptive statistics of the mean scores between males and females

Factors		N	M	SD	P-values	Effect size
Organisational	Male	88	4.10	0.70	0.020	0.29
	Female	187	4.31	0.62		
Methodological	Male	88	4.11	0.67	0.045	0.25
	Female	187	4.28	0.60		
Participative	Male	88	4.14	0.77	0.066	0.23
	Female	187	4.31	0.63		
Specialised	Male	88	3.99	0.81	0.069	0.23
	Female	187	4.18	0.75		
Generic	Male	88	4.28	0.65	0.361	0.12
	Female	187	4.36	0.66		
Socio-emotional	Male	88	4.22	0.59	0.063	0.23
	Female	187	4.37	0.65		

The independent samples t-test in Table 4 showed that the differences between the two schools

are practically non-significant.

Table 4: Results of Cohen's d effect sizes and descriptive statistics of the mean scores between schools

Factors		N	M	SD	P-values	Effect size
Organisational	Human Sciences	85	4.16	0.66	0.154	0.19
	Social Sciences	190	4.28	0.65		
Methodological	Human Sciences	85	4.09	0.64	0.019	0.31
	Social Sciences	190	4.29	0.61		
Participative	Human Sciences	85	4.19	0.69	0.293	0.14
	Social Sciences	190	4.28	0.68		
Specialised	Human Sciences	85	3.98	0.80	0.060	0.24
	Social Sciences	190	4.18	0.76		
Generic	Human Sciences	85	4.31	0.59	0.699	0.05
	Social Sciences	190	4.34	0.69		
Socio-emotional	Human Sciences	85	4.23	0.57	0.094	0.20
	Social Sciences	190	4.36	0.66		

The results of the independent samples t-test in Table 5 showed that the differences between the undergraduates and postgraduates are practically non-significant.

Table 5: Results of Cohen's d effect sizes and descriptive statistics of the mean scores between undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

Factors	Groups	N	M	SD	P-values	Effect size
Organisational	Undergraduate	178	4.26	0.61	0.477	0.09
	Postgraduate	97	4.20	0.73		
Methodological	Undergraduate	178	4.25	0.57	0.451	0.09
	Postgraduate	97	4.19	0.72		
Participative	Undergraduate	178	4.29	0.63	0.305	0.12
	Postgraduate	97	4.19	0.78		
Specialised	Undergraduate	178	4.11	0.77	0.844	0.02
	Postgraduate	97	4.13	0.78		
Generic	Undergraduate	178	4.38	0.56	0.209	0.14
	Postgraduate	97	4.26	0.80		
Socio-emotional	Undergraduate	178	4.35	0.55	0.256	0.13
	Postgraduate	97	4.25	0.76		

Pearson's chi-square tests were done to establish whether there is an association between gender, school, degree and employment status. Respondents had to indicate whether they were unemployed, employed but not in the discipline or field of study, or employed in the discipline and field of study. The reported phi values for gender, school, degree (0.054, 0.126 and 0.197), and employment status showed small effects indicating no practically significant associations (see Table 6). Therefore, gender, school and degree do not play a role in employment status.

Table 6: Results of the Chi-square test and frequencies of graduates' employment status

Category	Phi values	Unemployed	Employed, but not in the discipline and field of study	Employed in the discipline and field of study
Gender	<i>Phi = 0.054</i>			
Male		67 (76.1%)	9 (10.2%)	12 (13.6%)
Female		150 (80.2%)	12 (13.6%)	19 (10.2%)
School	<i>Phi = 0.126</i>			
School of Human Sciences		64 (75.3%)	13 (15.3%)	8 (9.4%)
School of Social Sciences		153 (80.5%)	14 (7.4%)	23 (12.1%)
Degree	<i>Phi = 0.197</i>			
Undergraduate		149 (83.7%)	10 (5.6%)	19 (10.7%)
Postgraduate		68 (70.1%)	17 (17.5%)	12 (12.4%)

Spearman rank-order correlation analysis was performed to determine the correlations between the six factors (see Table 7). The Spearman correlation coefficients (r) ranged from 0.387 to 0.737, indicating practically visible to significant correlations.

Table 7: Results of Spearman rank-order correlation between the competencies factors

Factors		1	2	3	4	5	6
Organisational	Correlation coefficient	1.000					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
Methodological	Correlation coefficient	.611**	1.000				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000					
Participative	Correlation coefficient	.550**	.724**	1.000			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000				
Specialised	Correlation coefficient	.387**	.577**	.569**	1.000		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000			
Generic	Correlation coefficient	.526**	.737**	.729**	.554**	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		
Socio-emotional	Correlation coefficient	.474**	.611**	.665**	.525**	.727**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The first research question explored the self-perceived acquired competencies of humanities graduates. The results revealed that graduates assess themselves highly on all the factors indicating that they are satisfied that they have acquired the necessary competencies at the university to obtain employment. This high assessment corresponds with the findings of Pop and Khampirat (2019), Coetzee (2014), and Bezuidenhout (2011). The highest-rated competencies were tolerance, appreciating a different point of view, written communication skills, critical thinking, English language proficiency, working in a team, and taking

responsibility for decisions. The abilities for teamwork and communication were also highly rated by graduates in similar studies (Gawrycka et al. 2020; Griffin et al. 2017; Teijeiro et al. 2013; Vydrová 2018). Written communication skills, critical thinking and teamwork are also rated as highly relevant by employers (Baird and Parayitma 2019; Chhinzer and Russo 2017; Griffin et al. 2017; Hart Research Associates 2015; Jones et al. 2017; Lavender 2019; Majid et al. 2019; Mishra 2014; NACE 2016).

The second research question investigated the employment status of graduates. The unemployment rate for graduates of 78.9 per cent is much higher than for South African graduates of 2.1 per cent (Statistic South Africa 2019) and Mncayi and Dungu (2016) unemployment rate of 46.2 per cent among humanities graduates. This high unemployment rate can be ascribed to the survey being conducted during two graduation ceremonies, and graduates may not have applied for jobs or decided to join the labour market. However, the results cannot be generalised as the study only focused on Human and Social Sciences graduates from a South African rural university.

The third research question explored the difference in the mean competency scores between gender, schools, and degrees. The independent samples t-tests and effect sizes revealed no practically significant differences in the mean scores of the six factors between males and females, schools of human and social sciences and undergraduate and postgraduate students. Therefore, gender, school and degree had no impact on the mean scores of the six factors. However, the results of this study do not correlate with similar studies. For example, regarding gender, Teijeiro et al. (2013, 290) found that females rated their competencies higher than males.

Similarly, Bezuidenhout (2011, 167) found that females scored higher on career self-management drive compared to males. Pop and Khampirat (2019, 137) revealed that female graduates had higher achievement motive scores than males. Bezuidenhout (2011, 167) found that undergraduate students had higher means scores on career self-management drive than postgraduate students.

Research question four investigated the association between gender, schools, degree and employment status. The small reported phi values for gender, school, degree, and employment status indicates no significant practical associations. The last research question explored the correlation between the six competency factors. The Spearman rank correlation coefficients between the six factors showed large, statistically significant positive relationships.

Universities have a responsibility to produce employable graduates and equip students with the competencies required by employers. They should also devise and implement strategies such as career advice services, experimental learning and work placing to assist

graduates in attaining jobs. The university can use the results of this study for curriculum development in the different Human and Social Sciences programmes. Graduates also have the responsibility to enrol for degrees relevant to the labour market and enhance their employability. Graduates must familiarise themselves with the competencies that employers require. They should also acquire job search competencies and methods to attain jobs.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the self-perceived competencies acquired by humanities graduates at a rural South African university. The results revealed a high unemployment rate of 78.9 per cent among graduates. The mean scores on the competencies factors were high, indicating that respondents perceived that they had acquired employability competencies at university. Gender, schools, and degrees had no impact on the self-perceived acquired competencies of graduates. The study has made a significant contribution to the employability of graduates by providing a theoretical framework and reliable instrument to measure the acquired competencies of graduates. To ensure the employability of humanities graduates is the collective responsibility of universities, employers, students, and relevant stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is critical to ensure humanities programmes' relevance, viability, and sustainability.

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