



An employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: Exploring HRM professionals' perspectives

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Thesis submitted for the degree *Master of Administration* in
Human Resource Management at the North-West University

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DECLARATION

I, Tshiamo Jane Molamu, hereby declare that this dissertation for the degree of Master of Administration in Human Resource Management, submitted at the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus) has not been submitted previously by me for a degree at any university, and that this is my work and all materials herein used are acknowledged properly.

.....

...23.....day of.....11.....2022

T.J MOLAMU

DATE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- O Modimo Oa Tshiamo, ga se ka botlhale jwa me.
- Badimo bo rra Molamu le bo rra Kgomanyane – Kea leboga!
- Kelebogile (my mother) Tshiamo (myself) le Kokeletso (my little brother) on things I pray for. God is gracious.
- To my supervisor, Dr Kelebogile Paadi, thank you for your teachings and guidance. Thank you for always trusting me and allowing me to surf in the deep end.
- To the SABPP, thank you for assisting me in finding my participants.
- To my participants, thank you for contributing to my study. May we continue to shed the light and knowledge in order to develop young minds and shape graduates' dreams.
- To my family (including friends who became family), let us continue to work on ourselves and each other. Our dreams are valid!
- To NWU, thank you for the financial support, including all staff members who ensure the smooth running of the institution and ensure that students have access and resources.
- To my language editor, Helen Thomas, thank you for your assistance.
- This is all for human beings who are striving to do their best irrespective of their circumstances. Re tlile go FENYA!

ABSTRACT

Orientation – The world of work is changing dramatically due to technological changes, digitalization, robotics, automation etc. Organisations need employees who will be competent to deal with these labour market changes, meet the organisations' set standards, and perform tasks competently by contributing to their success, growth and sustainability.

Research Purpose – The study aims to determine which competencies will enhance the employability of human resource management (HRM) graduates.

Motivation for the study – The study is motivated by the researcher's personal experience and her observation on how HRM graduates usually take longer or struggle to find employment, compared to graduates from other disciplines.

Research Design – A qualitative descriptive strategy was adopted to give a rich description of which competencies are required for sustainable employability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with HRM professionals who have been in the industry for more than five years.

Main Findings – The findings reveal that HRM graduates struggle to find employment due to a variety of factors such as lack of skills or work experience, their own job preferences or lack of preparation, and employers' perceptions, among others. HRM professionals define graduate employability in different ways, and this informs the competencies they require from graduates seeking employment in their organisations. Generic skills are not universal, as different industries require different skills for competence.

Practical/Managerial implications – HRM graduates can identify which competencies that they need to enter the labour market, how they can acquire and how they can enhance them for current and future employment. South African organisations can use competency models to carry out HRM functions and identify measures they can use to develop graduates, prospective, and existing employees. Higher education institutions can incorporate the competency model into their curriculum and use it to develop employable graduates.

Contribution/value add – The study contributes to the HRM graduates, organisations, higher education institutions, graduate employability, and HRM literature.

Keywords - Competencies, competency model, employability, graduate competencies, graduate employability, human resource management, HR competencies

COMMENTS

The reader is reminded of the following:

- The editorial style of the research project follows the format prescribed by the Programme in Human Resource Management of the North-West University.
- The reference list appears at the end of the document using the American Psychological Association (APA) technique.
- The researcher presented a paper titled "*Exploring futuristic skills for sustainable graduate employability*" at the South African Developmental Studies Association (SADSA) conference in Gaborone Botswana on the 18th of October 2022.

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CHAPTER 1 ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The success and growth of most organisations has been largely attributed or dependant on the effectiveness of its employees, and for the employees to meet the set standards of the organisation and perform their tasks competently they need to possess relevant competencies that match the job's requirements (Warnich et al., 2018). SHRM defines competencies as a combination of interrelated characteristics that are required for effective performance in any job (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 02 February 2022). Competencies are defined as capabilities that help an organisation in attaining both its business and strategic objectives (Albino, 2018) and these include knowledge (information about a specific discipline that can be acquired through formal education and training), skills (the aptitude to perform the job at a certain level), abilities (capacity to engage in a specific behaviour) and other characteristics (these include different personalities, interests and experience), which together are known as KSAOs (Roythorne & Coetzee, 2021).

Employers require employees to have both soft, or non-technical skills, and technical skills (El Mansour & Dean, 2016). Industries may have different soft skills but common ones include knowing how to learn, communication skills, creativity, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, leadership (El Mansour & Dean, 2016), self-management, teamwork skills, ability to work under pressure, critical thinking, attention to detail, taking responsibility, planning and organising skills, insight, maturity, professionalism, and emotional intelligence (Teng et al., 2019). Additionally, a study that was conducted with bank officers in Pakistan identified self-management, adaptability and critical thinking skills as common skills required in different industries (Abbasi et al., 2018). Managers also consider the following soft skills of strategic planning, customer management, and change management as essential, and in addition to information technology and information management skills (El Mansour & Dean, 2016).

Competing in the modern global economy challenges the HRM function to create an environment where one must create and sustain competitive advantages (Long & Ismail, 2011). Human Resource Management (HRM) traditionally (in the past) was more of an administrative function; however, due to recent technological advancements, concern for people, community impact, ethical behaviour, and customer service, the HRM function should

add value to the organisation and its employees by making a visible contribution and purposefully carrying out the HRM functions towards realising the objectives of the organisation (Werner, 2017).

HRM as an essential function within an organisation contributes towards its sustainability (Dwivedi et al., 2021). HRM enables organisations to identify current and future Human Resources needs, by retaining staff and attracting more talented potential employees who can contribute to the bottom line of the organisation. An organisation can also lose or gain talented employees to other industries or competitors, based on the way HRM manages its function (Jawah & Beretu, 2019). Furthermore, Armstrong and Taylor (2020) mention that HRM departments do not operate in silos, and as business partners, they need to have the ability to analyse external trends and analyse the impact they can have in an organisation, and then develop appropriate interventions to deal with them. The Human Resource Management (HRM) profession is not entirely regarded as a scarce skill but rather as a critical skill.

According to Boxall and Purcell (2003), as cited by Paka et al. (2019), HRM is all the activities that are associated with managing people. HRM includes the following tasks: HRM preparation, managing human resources, recruiting strategically, training, employee growth, compensation management, efficiency, employee relations, health care, employee satisfaction, and provision of employee services (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021). These activities include introducing policies and practices that are set to improve efficiency in the organisation, employee engagement, and the quality of work (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021).

Technical and behavioural competencies, or social competencies (Gawrycka et al., 2020), are expected to make employees successful in any organisation (Albino, 2018). Technical competencies are concerned with the know-how (Albino, 2018), that is; knowledge of the employee's skills or abilities required to perform a specific task (Dhanpat et al., 2020). Technical competencies are therefore job-specific (Gawrycka et al., 2020). For example; knowledge that HRM professionals, accountants, educators, or lawyers should have. Behavioural competencies, such as communication or problem-solving skills, describe social and psychological abilities that influence how employees behave in the workplace or how they apply the technical knowledge they possess (Gawrycka et al., 2020). Competency models will

then go further to describe the specific and relevant competencies that are required for effective performance in that job (van der Westhuizen, 2018).

A competency model is seen as an effective measurement tool that enables managers to agree on a common language in translating the organisation's strategies, goals, and values into a specific context. HRM competency models contribute to improving the performance of HRM practitioners by specifying the significant competencies (Bin Abdullah, 2014). Using competency models to improve the skill sets of HRM practitioners is common in the USA, but is not common in the context of South Africa (Schutte et al., 2016). A national survey has shown that only 20% of companies in South Africa have an HRM competence model in place. Competence models developed in the USA may not be applicable to other countries because of cultural diversity aspects. Thus, studies are needed on HRM competencies in countries that are developing or emerging, such as South Africa (Schutte et al., 2016).

HRM competencies are vital for successful performance and should therefore add value and help the organisation's success. A HRM professional should be a credible activist, steward of culture and change, talent manager or organisational designer, strategy architect, operational executor, and business ally. HRM professionals should have personal skills to give management, employees and other stakeholder expert advice and excellent service (Dessler et al., 2011). The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) conducted an HRM survey and identified the following key skills a practitioner should have; be innovative, integrity, negotiating skills, business knowledge, ability to deliver targets, strategic thinking, leadership ability, empathy/ communication/ listening skills, understanding HRM practices and influencing/ political skills (Dessler et al., 2011).

The South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) was set up as a self-governing body of standards and professional registration for the HR profession. The world's first national HRM standards were developed by this professional body in 2013. In 2014, SABPP developed the HRM Competency Model, which provides a clear description of the competencies HRM professionals need. The following core competencies were identified; leadership & personal credibility, organisational capability, solution creation and implementation, interpersonal & communication, and citizenship for future innovation, technology, and sustainability. This competency model is linked to the Standard, and describes the knowledge, skills and

behaviour HRM professionals need to possess in order to implement the Standard (South African Board for People Practices, 2021). There is a need to explore HRM competencies that are key for HRM graduates, specifically because Gawrycka et al. (2020) mention that it is impossible to define a single and final set of generic competencies as they are applied differently in various professional contexts and beyond the field of study.

The following six competency domains were identified – strategic positioner, capability builder, change champion, HR innovator and integrator, technology proponent, and credible activist (Ulrich et al., 2012; Grobler et al., 2012):

- The *strategic positioner*, as HRM professionals are acting and thinking outside in, and they should be able to translate external business trends into internal decisions and actions.
- HRM professionals as *capability builders* should be able to enhance individual abilities into an effective and strong organisation by building capabilities of the organisation. Consistent audit and investment in creating organisational capabilities can enable this process.
- HRM professionals as *change champions* should be able to initiate the need for change and sustain that change through organisational resources.
- HRM professionals as *HR innovators and integrators* should know historical HRM research that enables them to innovate and integrate HRM practices that help them solve future business problems. HRM professionals should keep abreast of HRM trends in various HRM activities.
- *Technology proponent* means that HRM professionals need to be able to use technology efficiently to deliver various HRM administrative systems. The HRM professional must also be able to connect with people better, through technology, both within the organisation, and outside with customers.
- *Credible activist* means that HRM professionals must build their personal trust through the business's judgement. This can be achieved through communicating clear and consistent messages with integrity. They should also be able to influence others positively.

Most organisations in South Africa are concerned about the global economic situation, attraction and retention of scarce and critical skills, poverty, ethics, crime, corruption, and

growing rates of unemployment (Werner, 2017). There is great concern about the rising number of unemployed youths in the world; in this, South Africa is no exception, as most of its youth are facing high unemployment rates. The inability to reduce the unemployment rate over the past years has been a great concern to the country (Omarjee, 2021). 10.3 million young people in South Africa are unemployed and as a result, the country is faced with high levels of unemployment. The current unemployment rate is the highest since the start of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) in 2008. Some young people have been discouraged and they are not building their skills base. This means that these young people are not in employment, education or training (NEET), with the unemployment rate of graduates recorded as 2.4% (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2021).

Most research studies have cited lack of relevant competencies as the main reason, among many others, why graduates take too long to get employment after completing their studies (Jawah & Beretu, 2019). Employers' dissatisfaction with the skills and competencies of graduates they engage with is a global phenomenon (Winterton & Turner, 2019). There is a serious disjuncture between what the industry requires and what students spend time studying. The absence of this correspondence explains employers' adamancy as they demand experience from new entrants. Graduates are not ready for the environment of work, as they do not possess the necessary level of adequate competencies (Abbasi et al., 2018). Additionally, the industry is saying that universities do not supply relevant industry-ready graduates because they take time learning how to apply theoretical concepts and incorporate them into the tasks and requirements of real work-life (Jawah & Beretu, 2019). Equally, a study conducted by Neale-Shutte and Nel (2013) in South Africa suggests that graduates believe that they need more practical experience and being prepared for work before they graduate, as they believe that this would significantly improve their employability (Dwesini, 2017).

The objective of HRM is to increase an individual's well-being, productivity and the overall performance of an organisation (Veth et al., 2019). In addition, Ulrich et al. (2012) state that HRM professionals have the responsibility to enhance the performance of an organisation's talent, and to do this effectively they need certain competencies. Five global studies have been conducted since 1987 looking into HRM competencies. The sixth global study was conducted in 2012, and South Africa was part of it through the Institute for People Management representatives.

This research study focuses on Human Resource Management (HRM) graduates from the perspective of HR practitioners. HRM professionals say that academic preparation is still at the top of the list, as future HRM professionals will be expected to have a university degree or diploma, acquiring knowledge (mainly technical competencies) in HRM through higher education institutions, and some of the behavioural competencies can be acquired outside formal training (Warnich et al., 2018). On the other hand, HRM students and graduates often ask about effective strategies they can use to access or enter the HRM profession, whether someone with no work experience can enter the HRM profession and lastly, what are the most sought-after competencies for success? (Warnich et al., 2018). There is a need to explore specific HRM competencies that HRM graduates need to possess.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

South Africa's youth unemployment is caused by several factors, but one of the major causes is skills mismatch (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020). Employers still seem to have difficulties filling several of their existing vacancies despite the labour market's demand for competent graduates. There are claims that a majority of the graduates in the developing world are not employable and are often seen to be lacking the major skills that employers require (Okolie et al., 2019). South Africa's youth is the most vulnerable to unemployment because they lack the relevant experience employers need (Mseleku, 2021), and many industries and business firms have also openly complained that a majority of the graduates are not employable (Okolie et al., 2019). For example, South Africa had the largest share of mismatched workers in 2019, with more than 50% of skills mismatches, and the lowest levels of productivity in the labour market compared with other 30 countries, including India and Russia (Mncayi, 2021).

There is a need for skills to evolve more rapidly than previously, and this is because of globalisation, climate change mitigation, and digital transformation. These rapid economic changes often create both skills shortages and mismatch in the labour market (DNA Economics, 2020). There is a critical shortage of skill sets such as customer service or awareness, ethical conduct at work, verbal communication, acceptance of responsibility, attention to detail, ability to work under pressure, time management skills and motivation skills. These are regarded as imperative skills in the labour market. The labour market also consists of job seekers who lack relevant skills because of the poor education system in the country (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020). Graham et al. (2019) argue that the education system does

not adequately prepare graduates for future employment and the demands of the market. Hence, many graduates lack appropriate skills (Forster & Robson, 2019) that employers require (Damoah et al., 2021). Graduates often remain underused in jobs when they do become employed, or are employed in jobs for which they are not specifically qualified (Mncayi & Dunga, 2016).

According to Werner (2017), HRM graduates are not prioritised, and this bold statement can be supported by Mncayi and Dunga (2016), who conducted a study sampling graduates under the age of 35. The study indicated that most unemployed graduates are in the human resources, industrial psychology, and labour relations career category. The study also found that graduates in that career category had to wait 10.5 months before finding a job. This can be supported by Jowah and Beretu (2019), whose study indicated that HRM graduates struggle to get employment after they graduate, and if they find employment, they are employed in fields that do not use their expertise. The findings further indicated that only 38% of employed HRM graduates work in a HRM-related environment, while 62% work in other fields. Again, Jowah and Beretu (2019) suggest that HRM graduates are not often given priority, or are sometimes not included in development and scholarship opportunities because their curriculum is mostly theory-based. This however depends on the institution's curriculum, as it may not include work-integrated learning (WIL) components. WIL gives graduates a certain degree of exposure to the real workplace so that they can acquire practical skills and experience desired by employers (Jones et al., 2017).

Many studies on the employability of graduates and the skills they require to sustain themselves in the labour market have been conducted by academics, graduates, and employers alike. The focus has been on graduates in general. Table 1.1 below shows some of the many studies that have been conducted; most are quantitative studies with university graduates, final year students, employers, and academics as samples. The focus of this study is specifically on exploring a competency model for human resource management graduates.

Table 1.1 Previous studies related to graduate employability.

Author	Study Title	Method	Sample	Findings
Damoah et al. (2021)	Does higher education equip graduate students with the employability skills employers require? The perceptions of employers in Ghana.	Quantitative	Employers	Findings reveal there are still gaps between what higher education is offering its students and what industry requires from graduates at the entry-level.
Elrayah (2021)	Can business ethics-based education improve HR graduates' employability, knowledge, skills, and competence?	Quantitative	HR Graduates	Graduates have positively perceived the importance of ethical skills for the job market competition. Ethical skills might improve graduates' employability.
Hack-Polay (2020)	Are graduates as good as they think? A discussion of overconfidence among graduates and its impact on employability.	Literature Review		Overconfidence in basic skills can hinder the development of the graduate both within the university context and in the workplace. It can impair the graduate's ability and responsiveness towards learning and continuous professional development.
Paadi (2014)	Perceptions on employability skills necessary to enhance human resource management graduates prospects of securing a relevant place in the labour market.	Qualitative	Academics	Generic skills are the most sought after in the workplace; there are different levels to HRM employability and different knowledge, competencies and skills for each level.
Pitan and Muller (2021)	Student perspectives on employability development in higher education in South Africa.	Quantitative	Final year students	Universities must provide support structures that enable students to establish an appropriate connection between theory and practice.
Roos (2018)	Development and evaluation of a competence-based curriculum vitae-writing programme for new graduates.	Qualitative	Career consultants Graduate recruiters Graduate students	Graduates generally need guidance and clarity in CV-writing. They should anticipate and respond appropriately to graduate recruiters. CV presentation and layout is important.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.3.1 General research question

Which competencies will enhance human resource management graduates' employability?

1.3.2 Specific research questions

- How are human resource management, graduate employability, and HRM competencies conceptualised in literature?
- What are the causes of HRM graduates' delay in gaining employment after graduation?
- Which competencies are key for a HRM graduate employability competency model?
- What recommendations can be made for future research and practice?

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 General objective

To determine which competencies will enhance human resource management graduates' employability.

1.4.2 Specific objectives

- To explore how human resource management, graduate employability, and HRM competencies are conceptualised in literature.
- To understand what are the causes of HRM graduates' delay in gaining employment after graduation.
- To explore the key competencies for an HRM graduate employability competency model.
- To make possible recommendations for future research and practice.

1.5 EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

1.5.1 Individual Contribution

The study will inform HRM graduates on competencies that they need to have in order to successfully break entry into the labour market. HRM graduates will have the knowledge of how they can be attractive to employers so that they can be recruited and retained in organisations. HRM graduates will be advised on how they can acquire competencies that are relevant for them to compete in the labour market and how they can keep improving or updating those competencies so that they can still remain relevant, even when the labour market changes because of trends and technological advancement.

1.5.2 Organisational Contribution

The study will enable South African organisations to incorporate competency models in their organisations. Organisations will be enlightened about the measures they can employ so that they can develop and sustain the employability of HRM graduates. Organisations will be able to attract and retain HRM graduates who have the right competencies, are able to fit into the organisation, execute their duties well, and contribute to the success of the organisation. An HRM graduate competency model would be mutually beneficial to higher education institutions, as they will have a model to incorporate into their curriculum and assist in developing employable HRM graduates.

1.5.3 Literature Contribution

The study will contribute knowledge in the role that HRM professionals play in the employability of HRM graduates, both in higher education and in the labour market. It will also contribute knowledge of using competency models within the South African context – not only in the workplace but also in higher education. To our knowledge, no known study has investigated the role that HRM professionals can play to increase the employability of HRM graduates using a competency model in the South African context. Most studies have focused on graduates in general and on HRM professionals and managers.

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

1.6.1 Research approach

Qualitative research will be used for this study. Qualitative research is characterised by inductive approaches to building knowledge and creating meaning. This approach is best suited for this study because it is used to explore, investigate, and learn about social phenomena, and to unpack meanings people attribute to activities, situations, events, or objects; or to build a depth of understanding about some dimension of social life (Leavy, 2017). HRM professionals' subjective experiences will be explored to generate meaning and obtain an in-depth understanding of their attitudes, opinions, perspectives, and concerns in actively playing a role in outlining the competencies that HRM graduates should possess in order to enter the labour market.

Interpretivism will be used for this study. This ontology requires that a different logic of enquiry should be used (Blaike, 2010). Interpretivists believe that social or cultural phenomena develop from the ways in which actors in a setting construct meaning. This research paradigm enables the researcher to understand behaviours and the meanings associated with them by being in the setting and interacting with the study's participants (Lapan et al., 2012). Participants are able to describe their experiences in detail, and that provides a rich description of the obtained data (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

1.6.1.1 Research strategy

This study follows a qualitative descriptive research strategy. Qualitative descriptive research strategy describes a phenomenon as well as its characteristics (Nassaji, 2015). Qualitative descriptive research strategy produces a straightforward description of a phenomenon. It allows the researcher to understand who is involved, what was involved, and where the events in relation to the phenomenon of interest took place (Hunter et al., 2019). Roudsari (2019) simplifies it as qualitative descriptions focus on the *Who* – HRM professionals, *What* – Study at hand, and *Where* of the experiences – HRM industry/ field or HRM in the workplace. Using this research strategy will give the researcher rich and detailed information that will enable the researcher to answer the research question(s) and thus attain the objective(s) of the study. Furthermore, Bradshaw et al. (2017) mention that a qualitative descriptive strategy is relevant

for this study because information is required directly from those experiencing the phenomenon under study, as HRM professionals work with HRM graduates directly.

1.6.2 Research method

1.6.2.1 Literature review

A literature review is a written document that presents a logical and argued case based on a comprehensive understanding of preceding studies that have been carried out on the study at hand (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). The literature review will be relevant to the study using the key words mentioned. Multiple sources such as scientific journals and databases, academic and scientific books, newspaper articles, reports, research articles, conference papers, and scientific and educational websites will be consulted. The following databases – Emerald Insight Journals, Google Scholar, NWU IR, Sabinet, SAGE Journals, OATD (Open Access Thesis and Dissertations) etc. – will be used to source information. Using multiple sources of information will ensure that the study being explored is valid and reliable. A complete list of all sources used will be acknowledged at the end of the document using the APA referencing style version 7.

1.6.2.2 Research setting

A group of potential participants to whom the researcher wants to generalise the study's results is known as a population, and a subgroup of that population is known as a sample (Van Zyl, 2014). The data will be collected through one-on-one interviews, where the researcher/ interviewer will pose pre-determined interview questions to HRM professionals who have extensive experience in the HRM field.

In 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the South African government stipulated health and safety measures to moderate the spread of the corona virus by limiting physical contact amongst individuals. Therefore, semi-structured interviews will be conducted online or remotely using different telecommunication platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. The researcher will first establish which platform the participant is comfortable with and adhere to their choice. Participants will be advised about the estimated duration of the interview so they can prepare their time well

and ensure they have enough data and stable internet connectivity to complete the interview. As the process of data collection unfolds, the researcher will make careful observations to determine if an email interview can be used as well. Email interviews might be convenient for both parties; they make financial sense where travel, time, and data costs are concerned and the participants will complete the interview schedule at their own convenience (Hawkins, 2018).

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researcher is responsible for writing up the proposal with the guidance of her supervisor, who will then submit it to the school's scientific committee for approval before being sent to the Economic and Management Sciences Ethics Research Committee (EMS-REC) for ethics application and to obtain an ethical clearance number and certificate. Once this process is complete and ethical clearance is granted, a request letter will be sent to the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP), asking for their assistance in distributing our request to various HRM Professionals in their database. The researcher will not be contravening the POPIA, because the researcher will not be contacting HRM professionals directly. The distribution of the request letter will also be adjusted as per the SABPP template or advice. Once the SABPP grants the researcher permission, a web link will be generated for participants who are willing to participate to follow, and answer a few questions that indicate that participants are giving their consent. This web link will redirect these consents to the researcher in order for the researcher to contact the participants.

The researcher will then be responsible for making contact with the identified participants (HRM professionals) to check availability, and to set up appointments to conduct the interviews. It is the responsibility of the researcher to keep the identities of the professionals confidential. The purpose of the study will be explained to the participants and they will also be informed of their role in the study and of all ethics protocols before commencing with the interviews. Should any of the participants not feel comfortable in continuing with the interview, they are free to withdraw at any time. The researcher will analyse the data collected and discuss the findings in the final write-up of the research document.

1.6.2.3 Sampling

HRM professionals in the labour market from different sectors will be selected using purposive sampling. Participants will be selected based on the purpose of the contribution they will make to the study (Guest et al., 2013). HRM professionals are suitable respondents in exploring their perspective on an employability competency model for HRM graduates. HRM professionals are a representative sample as a whole, because their main characteristics are similar or identical to those of the population (Gray, 2017). Twenty (20) HRM Professionals are targeted to participate in the study.

In purposive sampling, the researcher cannot generalise to a population. The aim is to sample participants in a strategic manner and make sure there is variety so that participants drawn are different from each other in terms of key characteristics (Bryman et al., 2014). This helps the researcher to generate rich and detailed information that can help in answering the research questions (Lodico et al., 2010). The study will include only HRM professionals who have been in the HRM industry for more than 5years. These HRM professionals are best suited for the study because they have extensive experience in the HRM field and have seen different trends and changes in the labour market. This enables the HRM professionals to indicate which HRM competencies graduates need to possess to enter and remain in the labour market. HRM professionals who have been in the HRM industry for less than 5years will be excluded from the study.

1.6.2.4 Data collection procedure

Qualitative interviews will be the core research method adopted for this study. Qualitative data can be collected through various methods, and these methods can also be used as analysis methods. Using qualitative interviews will enable the interviewer to examine and explore topics in depth, and the research subjects can answer freely during interviews (Bryman et al., 2014). Research questions and research objectives the researcher hopes to achieve are met through the use of interview questions that reflect the aim of the study directly.

The data will be collected through semi-structured interviews. Using semi-structured interviews results in high reliability, and difficult issues are addressed and clarified (Klenke, 2016). Participants will be emailed a consent and confidentiality form which they will need to

complete prior to the scheduled interview session. Notes will be taken during the interviews and these interviews will be recorded via audio so that data can be retrieved at a later stage for detailed analysis. Audio recordings will only be accessible to the researcher and the supervisor so that data does not get compromised. The recordings will be transcribed and stored digitally with a password set-up for access. All data will be safely stored for five years. The data obtained from all the participants is only for academic and research purposes. The results of the study will also only be used for academic purposes and may be published in an academic journal. Participants will also be provided with a summary of the findings only after the dissertation has been examined, on request.

Interview Questions – *they will not be limited to these as some responses from the participants can lead to additional questions where more clarity is required.*

- 1) What is your definition of graduate employability?
- 2) In your view, why do you think HRM graduates take longer to find employment after graduation? (The researcher will explain that this question is based on a study that was conducted).
- 3) Which competencies should HRM graduates possess in order to enhance their employability and enter the labour market successfully?
- 4) What methods does your organisation use to train HRM graduates practically?
- 5) What advice can you give to HRM graduates so that they can enhance their employability status?

1.6.2.5 Data analysis

Data cannot speak for themselves. Qualitative data analysis is the intentional, systematic inquiry of data at different stages and moments throughout the research process. This inquiry involves specific methods of organising and managing data, immerse engagement with data, and writing and representing data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the collected data. Patterns (themes) will be identified and analysed within the qualitative data. Thematic analysis can either be inductive or theoretical. An inductive approach denotes that themes are data driven, because themes develop from the data themselves. A theoretical approach develops from the theoretical point of the researcher and it may offer a detailed analysis of some part of the data (Gray, 2017).

Phases in the Thematic Analysis of the study:

According to Bryman et al. (2014), the six phases of a thematic analysis are:

- 1) *Familiarise yourself with the data*: After completion of the interviews, data acquired from the participants will be reviewed thoroughly. Notes taken will be read and recorded, or audio data will be transcribed in Word format in the sequence of the interview questions.
- 2) *Generate initial codes*: Interesting features of the data will be coded in an organised manner across the data set, and data relevant to each code will be marked.
- 3) *Search for themes*: This involves organising codes into potential themes. All data relevant to each potential theme will be gathered. This is done to identify common patterns of responses from the sample of participants.
- 4) *Review themes*: This involves checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2). It is generally a thematic “map” of the analysis.
- 5) *Define and name themes*: An ongoing analysis will be used to refine the elements of each theme and the general story the analysis tells, and then create clear descriptions and names of each theme.
- 6) *Produce Report*: Intense and persuasive extract examples will be chosen to produce a report of the analysis. Chosen extracts will be finalised and related back to the research question and literature.

Ensuring Quality and Rigour

Validity means the truth. It is the degree which an account signifies accurately the social phenomenon to which it refers. This refers to the credibility of one’s interpretations. Reliability refers to the extent of consistency whereby different observers, or the same observer, assigns instances to the same category on different occasions (Silverman, 2013).

The following approaches can be used to investigate quality in qualitative research (Trebarne & Riggs, 2015; Lapan et al., 2012):

- *Credibility*: Credibility is the quantitative equivalent of internal validity. The credibility of the study will be maintained by ensuring that the study’s objective is meaningful and

relevant. In so doing, attention will be paid to the interview questions in order to ensure that they truly reflect the aim and objective of the study.

- *Transferability:* This study may be transferred to other samples from the same population, and also be applied to various aspects of our society today. The research study may be useful in the academic and organisational domains because of the nature of its scope. The researcher will provide enough details about the research's setting, and responses of the participants so that transferability may be established. This will enable the readers to make informed decisions for application in their own area.
- *Dependability:* Dependability is equivalent to reliability. This study aims to ensure that the process and findings of the study are dependable and consistent. If there are changes in the process of the research, the researcher needs to show those changes and understandings related to those processes. Dependability means that if the present study is conducted by another researcher with different participants and methods, then the same results or findings will be produced.
- *Confirmability:* The researcher will not play a biased role in the study. The researcher will ensure that the findings reported are not the researcher's biases, interests or perspectives. The researcher will ensure that the findings reported are a true reflection of the participants' responses. The report of the findings will be transparent; this means that the researcher will provide a detailed explanation of how the findings and interpretations were reached; and this will demonstrate that the findings are from the collected data.
- *Authenticity:* The researcher will ensure that the research presents a fair range of differing viewpoints on the topic. This will be done through collecting data from different participants, and supporting the findings and interpretations with literature from various authors. The findings should answer the research question and serve its objective. This will allow the findings to have transformative potential and thus enable the study

to contribute to and be useful to the individuals in question (HRM graduates), organisations, and literature.

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance will be obtained from the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) before conducting the study. Permission to conduct the study will also be sought from the SABPP professional body.

According to Scott and Deirdre (2009), research ethics are concerned with how people who participate in the study are treated and how the collected data is handled. The following ethical issues will be adhered to:

- *Respect for persons*: Research participants will be recognised as independent agents and, in the case where any of the participants is living with a disability, the participant(s) will be protected.
- *Beneficence*: Participants will not be harmed; the participants' well-being will be ensured. Possible benefits will be maximised and the risks will be minimised.
- *Justice*: The distribution of benefits and possible risks will be fair across all participants.

Van Zyl (2014) adds that the following basic principles of ethical research will also be considered:

- *Maintenance of privacy*: Maintaining privacy deals with two factors. The anonymity of participants will be ensured and participants' private spaces will not be invaded when collecting data.
- *Coercion*: Participants will not be bullied or threatened into taking part in the study.
- *Informed consent*: There should be a consent form that participants will read and sign prior to the scheduled interviews.
- *Confidentiality*: Anything learned about the participants will be held in the strictest of confidence. This means that, when necessary, information is disguised but more importantly, the data is kept in a situation that is controlled.

The researcher will be following the prescripts of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), which aims to protect subjects from harm by protecting their personal information. POPIA sets out conditions over (i) how people should give consent to share their information; (ii) information collected should be for valid reasons; (iii) there should be accountability and transparency from the researcher should the information be compromised; (iv) participants may withdraw from the study if they wish to; and (v) control measures should be in place to control and protect the information. Information will only be accessible to the researcher and supervisor. It will only be used for academic purposes (this study and publishing in academic journals). Information will also be password protected (see South Africa).

1.8 CHAPTER DIVISION

The chapters in this study are presented as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter entails the background of the study, problem statement, research questions, the objectives of the study, contribution of the study, research methodology, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter outlines the topic under study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter gives an overview of the research design, approach, and methods that will be used to collect data.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the results obtained.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the results

This chapter analyses and interprets the findings of the study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

A conclusion to the whole study is drawn, limitations of the study are outlined, and recommendations are made in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlined the main concepts of the study's theoretical literature. The literature review of the study was collected based on the relevance of the topic under study and other similar studies. The discussion of the study aimed to determine its uniqueness from existing studies.

2.2 THEORETICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

The world of work is becoming unstable (Alexandra & Glukhov, 2021) due to rapid technological developments – digitization and automation have had an impact on how the future of the world of work is shaped (Stark, 2022). Enkhjav et al. (2021) mention that digitalization, robotics, machine learning, automation, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), etc. all form part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or 4IR. The Industry 4.0 (I4.0) has also influenced organisations' hard and soft resources (Sharma et al., 2022). Job demands are fluctuating at an accelerated pace (Talerico, 2021), people's careers are dynamically changing in terms of their work, jobs, skills, and future processes (Duan et al., 2019). As a result, people will no longer work all their lives in the same organisation as before (Alexandra & Glukhov, 2021) due to job loss, job creation, and changes in current jobs (Stark, 2022).

The development of technology has magnified the role of innovation in organisations, competition reinforcement and co-operation as parallel needs (Vera et al., 2022). As a result, modern reality requires that both employees and employers prepare for the fact that it will be necessary to constantly think about acquiring new knowledge, competencies, and skills (Alexandra & Glukhov, 2021; Goulart et al., 2022), as well as constant upskilling (Talerico, 2021). Indeed, companies need employees who are suitable for future tasks and who are confidently willing and eager, competent, and allowed to develop for the future (Stark, 2022). Therefore, organisations need to develop their human resources (Sharma et al., 2022).

There is a growing labour force due to an increase in access to higher education, and the system is failing to create employment opportunities to absorb all the graduates. This results in the demand for employment exceeding the supply. Most unemployed youths have limited

access to quality education and labour market opportunities (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020), they lack work experience and have the challenge of limited employability skills (Mayombe, 2022). Furthermore, companies assert that they cannot find graduates with skills that they need; they suggest that there is a mismatch between the skills offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) and those demanded by the labour market (Olo et al., 2022; Segbenya et al., 2021). Because of this, there is an increased shortage of skilled labour in organisational environments (Bussin et al., 2019). Also, some graduates struggle to find employment (Olo et al., 2022), or they become employed in low-skilled jobs (Tran, Tan et al., 2022).

The high rate of graduate unemployment in many countries is caused by job scarcity (Otache & Edopkolor, 2022). Young people in South Africa are affected by the country's significant rise of unemployment. Statistics South Africa has reported that the unemployment rate of young graduates is increasing (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020). Additionally, South African graduate unemployment is linked to the country's weak education system, wrong choice of study field, the lack of quality in both secondary and tertiary education, lack of experience and soft skills, as well as high expectations. Students are rapidly enrolling in universities in high numbers and in a short period, but the labour market is not expanding at the same pace (Mavunda, 2022). This has resulted in the youth being discouraged by the labour market, and so not developing their skills through education and training (Mayombe, 2022).

Researchers and human resource experts concede that the higher education system is a central structure for people to acquire skills that the labour market needs (Olo et al., 2022). Yet, tertiary institutions have been criticised about the relationship between the role of educational experiences and needs of the economy worldwide (Sarpong-Nyantakyi et al., 2022). For several years now, employers have claimed that most graduates lack employability skills, as they fail to adequately meet the needs of the world market where various industries absorb graduates (Tandika & Ndijuye, 2022). The current workplace requires workers who are highly skilled to face more complex and interactive tasks. Employers demand a competent workforce. Graduates or prospective employees should therefore be equipped with excellent technical preparation and soft skills (Tajuddin et al., 2022).

The ability to respond promptly to changes in the market is becoming important, as the market and organisations are becoming more multifaceted. This suggests that there is no longer a

single solution to a system. The rapid changes in the market call for HR to deliver employees who have the skills required for specific work tasks (Högfeldt & Lindwall, 2018). Enkhjav et al. (2021) mention that today, HR professionals and employees in all sectors are required to learn and possess specific technical skills and general soft skills.

The chapter conceptualises Human Resource Management (HRM), graduate employability and HRM competencies. It also covers what the HR competency is, what it is used for and how, benefits of using the model and identifies various HRM competencies. Furthermore, this chapter looks at the SABPP HR competency model, challenges graduates encounter, competencies employers require as well as the role that different stakeholders can play in graduate employability.

2.2.1 Conceptualising human resource management

Human Resource Management (HRM) in the past was viewed as the basic functions, where its tasks were seen as organisational, and Human Resources (HR) were considered a commodity (Ahmad et al., 2019). The term HRM has replaced terms such as personnel management (Marchington et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2022). Personnel management focused on accomplishing administrative tasks such as record-keeping, administration of wages, salaries and benefits, taking care of labour relations, complications with trade unions, or emerging problems in employer-employee relationships (Mishra et al., 2022). Intense competition in the global economy motivated the appearance of HRM in the 1960s and 1970s, and its theoretical base developed between 1980 and 2000 (Uysal, 2019). HRM developed due to the changes within the traditional HR, and it focuses specifically on integrating employees and the organisation's overarching strategic and operative vision (Högfeldt & Lindwall, 2018).

According to Högfeldt and Lindwall (2018), HRM in the 1980s focused on connecting the following three building blocks: (i) human - focusing on identifying ways to enhance the contribution of individuals, (ii) management - managing this asset (human) in a professional setting, and (iii) resource – focusing on the employee as a “resource” bringing value to drive business and being a central aspect for HRM. Uysal (2019) mentions that HRM departments were introduced in the 2000s.

HRM is a function that involves staffing or managing personnel. It involves identifying (Karimi et al., 2019) and/ or determining the type of people who should be hired; recruitment of prospective employees; selection of employees; setting performance standards; employee compensation; performance evaluation; employee counselling; training and development of employees (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Dessler, 2020); efficiency; worker relations; health care; employee satisfaction (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021); workforce planning; diversity and inclusion; and managing risk and managing change (Carasco & Rothwell, 2020). HRM also includes policies and practices that have been set to improve the efficiency of the organisation, employee engagement, and quality of work (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021; Beardwell, 2017).

HRM includes making all decisions and implementing management that directly affects employees (Indiyati et al., 2021). It involves identifying current and future human resource (HR) needs, retaining staff, and attracting more potential employees to work (Jowah & Beretu, 2019). HR is people – the actual staff – who work in an organisation (Carasco & Rothwell, 2020) and are used productively to attain the organisation's strategic business objectives (Felgate, 2020). Therefore, HR is an essential function in an organisation because it determines its survival or downfall. A company can also lose or gain talented employees to other industries or competitors, based on the way HR runs the organisation (Jowah & Beretu, 2019). Indeed, for Karimi et al. (2019), HR are considered organisations' capital, and humans are the key factor in an organisation surviving in competition with others.

The role of HR has changed gradually (Enkhjav et al., 2021) with the complexities of environment, cultural diversity, and occupations in organisations (Karimi et al., 2019). Employers are faced with new trends and challenges; for example, trends in technology means employers must manage the knowledge, skills and expertise of their employees, so that they can use new digital and social media tools (Dessler, 2020). Furthermore, over the past 40 years, HR has transformed (McCartney et al., 2021) and become increasingly more complicated, with heavy roles and responsibilities (Suarsa & Iqbal, 2022), because HR is developing as a value-adding strategic partner (McCartney et al., 2021). This creates a demand for HR professionals with strong interpersonal dynamics (Talukdar & Ganguly, 2022). Therefore, each member of the HR division must possess certain skill sets and unique competencies so that the HR division can work together with other divisions and competitors in the industry (Suarsa & Iqbal, 2022).

2.2.2 Conceptualising graduate employability

Conceptualisations of employability highlight key dimensions of professional socialisation, networks, confidence in capabilities, and perceived employability (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). Employability is a capability, and it depends on an individual's personal assets and characteristics such as achievements (skills, understandings, and personal attributes), and willingness (Cheng et al., 2022; Padgett & Donald, 2022). Over decades of academic discourse, employability has demonstrated itself to be something of a chameleon concept, outlined in diverse ways and from vast perspectives. The debate has taken a more individualist perspective because of the development of more self-driven and boundary-less career paths, defining employability as the level to which an individual worker is able to obtain a job that is attractive (Krouwel et al., 2020).

Employability is defined as competencies that are portable, and qualifications that enhance one's capacity to use available education and training opportunities in order to secure and retain decent work, to progress within the organisation and between jobs, and to cope with growing technology and labour market conditions (Pouratashi & Zamani, 2019). On the other hand, Varga and Szira (2020) define it as creating a work environment that will offer incentives for personal and career development of employees, generate values, and create jobs. Employability is the ability of an individual to attain and retain initial employment, both inside and outside the current organisation one is in, move between roles within the same organisation, acquire new employment if required, and/ or secure work that is suitable and adequately fulfilling regarding prospects for the future (Belderbos, 2020; Pheko & Molefhe, 2017; Veth et al., 2019).

Employability can be external and/ or internal. External employability is the ability and willingness to change jobs between organisations, and internal employability is one's ability or willingness to continue to work with the current employer (Al-Shehab et al., 2021). There are other external factors that determine perceived employability, i.e. social, institutional, and economic factors (Álvarez-González et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2022). These contextual factors surround the individual, and they refer to the situation of the labour market in the area the student graduate has studied; actions taken by the student's university faculty to connect them with the world of work via practical work experience, internships or job board; or factors such as the effectiveness of teachers in imparting knowledge and generating attitudes (Álvarez-

González et al., 2017). Baruch et al. (2019) mention that perceived and actual employability are dissimilar. Perceived employability is what individuals consider to be their employability, and actual employability is being employed in reality when seeking new employment.

Graduate employability (GE) has become one of the most imperative factors in university rankings worldwide, and a strategy used to attract students (Bui & Nguyen, 2019). GE is the ability to secure a job, perform effectively within the job, move between jobs or roles, and having the required experience and attributes to do a task (Sarpong-Nyantakyi et al., 2022). Hosain et al. (2021) define GE as a sequence of skills and abilities a graduate can obtain to achieve a job they desire, and for career success. Having skills such as leadership skills, communication skills, teamwork skills and capabilities allows job candidates (graduates) to meet the requirements employers desire, and to adapt to the labour market's changes.

Succi and Canovi (2022) mention graduates cannot rely only on their higher education qualification. They should be flexible and adapt to labour market changes by developing and achieving a positional advantage against graduates with similar and class-cultural profiles. GE is about graduates becoming competent (Sharma et al., 2022), as well as engaging in and contributing to the economy's knowledge by using what they learned in higher education, while improving their social status and the nation's economy (Asefer & Abidin, 2021).

GE is imperative for graduates and organisations (Steurer et al., 2022); it is a process that is experienced rather than possessed, and it embodies the school-to-work transition (Mullen et al., 2019). This school-work transition is seen as a turning point in many graduates' lives (van der Baan et al., 2022) and it is a two-way interaction between graduates and employers; hence the employers' experiences during this process require investigation (Mullen et al., 2019). What constitutes GE is debatable, as it differs across various contexts (Tran et al., 2022), and is not clearly defined (Succi & Canovi, 2020). This creates a need to distinguish between "graduate employability" and "graduate employment", which means holding a job (Tran et al., 2022).

2.2.3 Conceptualising HRM competencies

Competencies are elements that can be observed such as knowledge and skills, and foundational characteristics. Knowledge and skills refer to what people know and what they are able to do, whereas foundational characteristics refer to attitudes or dispositions (Steurer et al., 2022). Bordbar et al. (2021) define Human Resource Competencies (HRCs) as imperative characteristics an individual possesses to anticipate effective performance, referring to knowledge, behaviours and skills used by an individual in his/ her job. Moreover, Carasco and Rothwell (2020) mention that competencies can be described by level, functional, or technical areas on the chart of the organisation. Human resources require gaining new competencies to fulfil their new roles and strategies in an effective manner. This can be done by gaining knowledge through learning concepts, language, logic, and human resources actions (Bordbar et al., 2021).

The management of human resources can play an imperative role in the organisation's life and effectiveness by designing plans and systems to use resources effectively. Competencies can therefore be utilized for diverse human resources functions such as recruitment, managing performance, organisational strategic planning, and designing structure and organisational culture (Bordbar et al., 2021). The HR role is evolving in nature and HR professionals' competencies must be amended simultaneously (Pandya, 2019). In addition desired skill sets have altered and new needs are emerging (Talerico, 2021).

HRCs are therefore Human Resource professionals' (HRP) personal characteristics and measurable abilities that enable individuals to perform well in their role, and achieve high performance (Mazurchenko & Maršíková, 2019; Prikshat et al., 2018). Also, HRCs support the organisation in attaining its objectives (Indiyati et al., 2021); this indicates that competencies correlate with performance (Pandya, 2019). Therefore, HRCs demand that both organisations and employees succeed simultaneously (Masiko et al., 2022).

The literature of HRCs has expanded rapidly in the last two decades (Ahmad et al., 2019). Furthermore, Pandya (2019) mentions that the development of competencies has remained the role of HR from the era of Scientific Management, where performance was paid with rewards. HR remained a driving factor for the attainment of sustainable business success

through the following roles: operational, relational, and transformational. Figure 2.1 indicates how HRM competencies have expanded from focusing on rewarding people for performance, to coaching, advising, analysing, and becoming strategic.

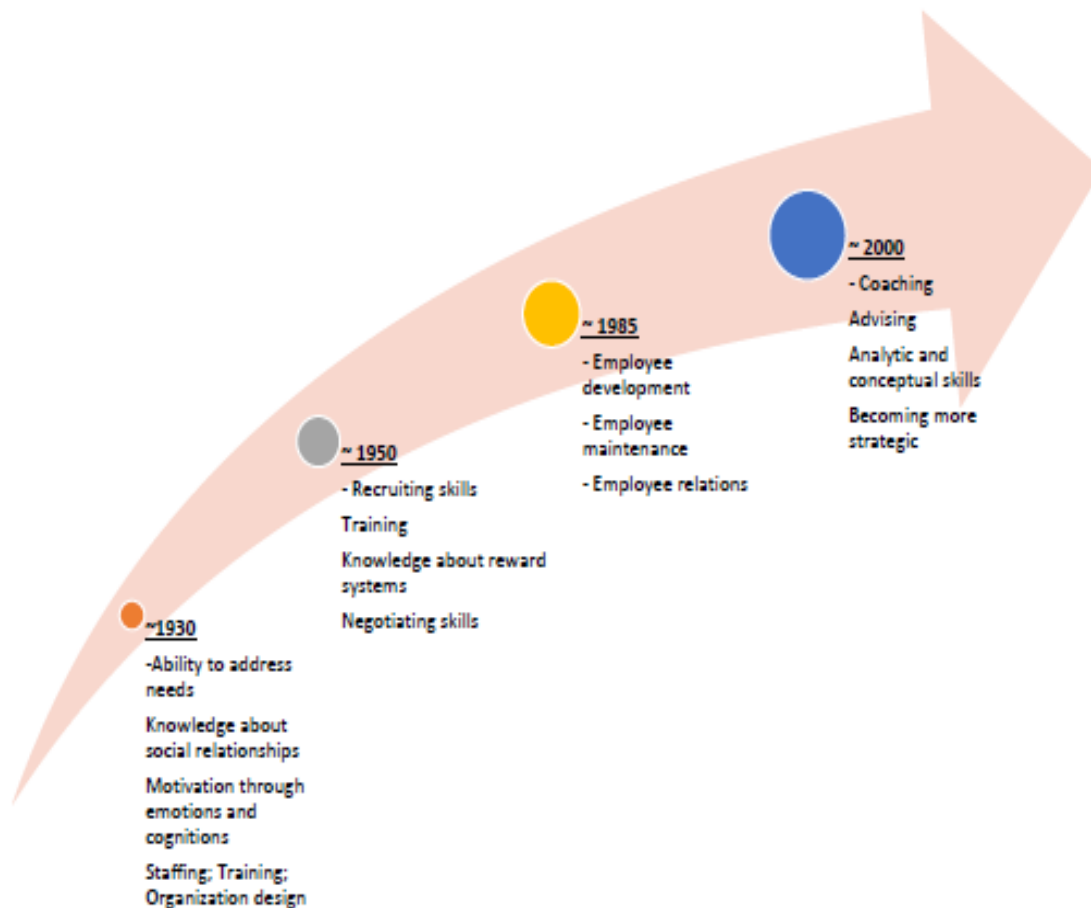


Figure 2-1: HRM Competencies Evolution. Adapted from Pandya (2019).

McCartney et al. (2021) are of the view that HR professional competencies have focused primarily on a universalist approach, and still focus on this approach even today. The universalist approach applies a set of overarching and generic competencies that can relate to the HR profession in totality (McCartney et al., 2021; Vu, 2017). This approach is beneficial to organisations, because core competencies can be adaptable and apply to multiple jobs, in an efficient and cost-effective manner (Getha-Taylor et al., 2016).

On the other hand, McCartney et al. (2021) criticise this approach as it does not consider attributes of the organization, i.e. its size, culture, role, or function. Similarly, Joseph et al.

(2021) assert that the roles HR professionals play in their organisations vary and they depend on the size of the organisation, their seniority, and other factors. Furthermore, McCartney et al. (2021) mention that the situational perspective has been given intensification. This perspective views competencies as context-specific, where competencies are influenced by the social context where they are performed and how employees make sense of their jobs.

Every job has specific demands or required KSAOs, which have to be identified to define a level of competency needed to perform the job effectively (Ali et al., 2020). Laine et al. (2017) have identified the following competencies for HR professionals: strategic positioner, credible activist, capability builder, change champion, HR innovator and integrator, and technology proponent. For HR professionals to meet challenges facing organisations today, they need to develop a broader skill set. Emphasis on imperative behavioural competencies (Beardwell, 2017), such as communication, decision making, leadership, and team-working, for example (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020), and the rise of the 'HR business partner' has led to HR Competency Models growing enormously (Beardwell, 2017).

2.3 COMPETENCY MODEL

In 1973, McClelland introduced the word 'competency' by recognising a human trait called competence – responsible for good performance or a professional ability to perform a job (Botha et al., 2018; Chun & Cheng, 2021; Megahed, 2018; Ratnawat, 2018). Competency has five characteristics, namely: (i) motives – things in a person who thinks constantly about desires and what causes actions, (ii) traits – physical characteristics and responding to situations or information consistently, (iii) self-image – the attitude towards value, (iv) knowledge – the information one has in a certain field, and (v) skill – the ability do certain tasks physically or mentally (Salmina et al., 2021; Sedyastuti et al., 2021).

Competency is applicable to humans and organisations, as having the ability to function to attain certain objectives (Ali et al., 2020). Thus, Brightson (2020) mentions that competency models are a collection of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) the employees need to advance the objectives of an organisation. Moreover, Ratnawat (2018) mentions that competency as a concept is linked closely to HRM. It is related to HRMs' key strategic role.

2.3.1 The HR Competency Model

According to Vu (2017), various aspects of HRM practices have recently used competency models. Bordbar et al. (2021) add that human resource managers, academic programmes and educators identify and develop the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and abilities the future industry leaders and workforce need, by using competency models. Moreover, organisations can influence behaviour through competency models, and expect such behaviour to be linked with maximum performance (Talerico, 2021).

HR academics and practitioners have different views regarding which competencies are needed for HR Competency (HRC) models. Since the 1980s to date, fourteen (14) empirically derived HR models have been developed (Brightson, 2022). These models are based on identifying and defining specific competencies that can assist HR professionals in supporting their organisations to achieve success and sustainability (Priksat et al., 2018)

HR models list several HR domains that serve as a cluster grouping for competencies, which follow a similar format. The following domain areas and focus of competencies have been listed by Brightson (2022):

- *Business-related* – the core business knowledge HR roles need.
- *HR tools, practices, and processes* – strategic competencies concerning policies, regulations, and laws.
- *HR information systems analytics and architecture* – emphasis is on HR systems and analytics of human capital.
- *Change* – emphasis is on the need for HR professionals to be aware of the changes in the environment that have an impact on organisations, and the change theory needed to manage change initiatives appropriately.
- *Organisation and culture* – areas that entail the need for a global perspective towards the designing, organisational restructuring, culture management, and creating innovative organisation culture.
- *Personal* – Interpersonal skills i.e. ethics, credibility, and leadership.

Despite various academics and associations proposing competencies and competency models (Beatty, 2019), Ulrich and Associates' model for HRCs has been widely used by many others, as it includes almost all competencies well, and has described business knowledge, functional expertise, and managing change clearly and precisely as human resources characteristics (Pandya, 2019). Moreover, the strength of Ulrich's HR Competency model (see Figure 2.2) is that it surveyed supervisors, peers and HR practitioners. It has been influential throughout the realms of academia and the industry. Various HR departments and educational institutions have grounded their courses on the model (Beatty, 2019).

	Round 1 1987	Round 2 1992	Round 3 1997	Round 4 2002	Round 5 2007	Round 6 2012	Round 7 2016
Business	Business Knowledge	Business Knowledge	Business Knowledge	Business Knowledge	Business Ally	Strategic Positioner	Strategic Positioner
				Strategic Contribution	Strategic Architect		
Human Resources (HR)	HR Delivery	HR Delivery	HR Delivery	HR Delivery	Talent Manager & Organization Designer	HR Innovator & Integrator	Human Capital Curator
				HR Technology	Operational Executor		Technology Proponent
						Analytics Designer and Interpreter	
						Compliance Manager	
				Technology & Media Integrator			
Paradox Navigator							
Change	Change	Change	Change	Strategic Contribution	Culture And Change Steward	Change Champion	Culture and Change Champion
Culture			Culture				
Personal		Personal Credibility	Personal Credibility	Personal Credibility	Credible Activist	Credible Activist	Credible Activist

Figure 2-2: HR Competency Model (1988-2016) adapted from Pandya (2019).

2.3.2 Background of the HR Competency Model (SABPP)

The South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) is a professional body for HR practitioners in South Africa, as well as a quality assurance body for the provision of HR learning. Academic programmes of universities are also accredited by the SABPP. This board is accredited as an Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) Body under the National Qualification Qualifications (NQF) Act, and the Skills Development Act. HR standards were launched after a collaborative co-creation within the HR profession. This project was led by the late Dr Marius Meyer, who was the Board Chairman of the SABPP at the time, and was

supported by Dr Michael Robbins, who is a leading United Kingdom expert in business standards. The Board has also developed an HR Audit framework in 2014 (South African Board for People Practices, 2021).

The HR Competency model (see Figure 2.3), consists of three broad competence areas (South African Board for People Practices, 2021):

- *Four pillars of professionalism:* The four pillars of professionalism are: – (i) HR & business knowledge; (ii) ethics; (iii) professionalism; and (iv) duty to society. The four pillars of HR professionalism form the square shape of the “house” as the foundation for professional HR practice, and are the foundation of the HR Competency Model.
- *Five core competencies:* HR professionals need the following five core competencies: – (i) leadership & personal credibility; (ii) organisational capacity; (iii) solution creation & implementation; (iv) interpersonal & communication; and (v) citizenship for future: innovation, technology, and sustainability. The five core competencies constitute the different building blocks of the house, and HR professionals need them in order to do high quality HR work.
- *Five HR capabilities:* (i) strategy; (ii) talent management; (iii) HR governance, risk compliance; (iv) analytics & measurement; and (v) HR service delivery. These five HR capabilities are required to ensure strategic HR impact, and form the roof. Applying five strategic capabilities in driving business excellence enables HR to do high level strategic HR work.



Figure 2-3: The HR Competency Model adapted from the South African Board for People Practices (2021).

2.3.3 Benefits of using a competency model

Throughout the years, competency models have proven to be a critical instrument in many functions of an organisation, such as workforce selection, succession planning, and performance appraisal (Megahed, 2018). Standards of competency models can also be utilized as a foundation to carry out any development in the organisation, such as preparing modules and curriculum for HR training and development, to determine incentives, bonuses, allowances, salary increases, or strategies for retention (Suarsa & Iqbal, 2022). Hill (2019) highlights that competency models are only valuable if they are updated, linked to initiatives, training and development, and regularly referred to.

According to Megahed (2018), reasons for successful competency models include (i) providing the identification of the skills, knowledge, behaviours and capabilities required to meet the requirements of current and future personnel selection needs, as well as (ii) focusing individual and group development plans to eliminate the gap between required competencies

for a job and those available. Additionally, Suarsa and Iqbal (2022) mention that all HR management systems can be supported by competency models.

2.4 HRM COMPETENCIES

Human Resource (HR) professionals that work in today's current organisations essentially deal with rapid change and complexity that require them to adapt to various stakeholders, implement the agendas of the business, and succeed under uncertainty in order to be effective (Srikanth, 2020).

According to Armstrong and Taylor (2020), HR professionals' roles vary according to the following: *(i)* extent to which they are generalists (HR director, HR manager, HR business partner, or HR officer) or specialist (head of learning and development, head of talent management, head of reward), *(ii)* level at which they work (strategic, executive, or administrative), *(iii)* organisation needs, *(iv)* how senior management views their contribution, *(v)* context they work in, and *(vi)* their own capabilities.

HR Professionals can therefore act as strategists, business partners, innovators, internal consultants, facilitators, coaches, or service providers (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). 'HR going beyond the service delivery efficacy' must undertake the strategic partner role, which demands HR professionals' strong interpersonal dynamics (Talukdar & Ganguly, 2022).

2.4.1 Strategic positioner

HR professionals as strategic positioners need awareness of and the ability to translate external business trends into internal actions in the organisation. They should have an understanding of social, technological, economic, political, environmental, and demographic trends – the general business conditions that affect their industry and geography (Caldwell, 2020). Moreover, the role of strategic positioners entails understanding the industry's competitive dynamics as well as trends of customers, competitors, and suppliers. They understand anticipated success factors and visions, and take part in the development of business strategies that are customer-focused (Laine et al., 2017).

2.4.2 Capability builder

A strong organisation is created by HR professionals identifying and developing the capabilities of the organisation (Caldwell, 2020; Laine et al., 2017). Capabilities are part of the culture of the organisation, and entail innovation, speed, customer focus, efficiency, and the development of meaning and purpose in the work. HR professionals can assist line managers to create meaning, so that the organisation's capability reflects employees' deeper values (Laine et al., 2017). Additionally, an effective HR professional creates audits and orchestrates an organisation that is effective and strong (Caldwell, 2020).

2.4.3 Change champion

HR professionals as change champions ensure that organisational actions that are isolated and independent are integrated and sustained, through change processes that are disciplined. (Caldwell, 2020). They can develop the capacity of the organisation for change (Laine, 2017), and act as change agents who conduct employees in a positive direction (Chygryn et al., 2019) by using their leadership skills to influence the organisational changes (Mishra et al., 2022). Additionally, Ahmad et al. (2017) mentions that HR professionals "champion" for culture. In order to make change happen, they need to recognise, influence and aid in shaping the culture of the organisation. This is important because change and culture have been recognised as elements of analysing how organisations work (Ahmed et al., 2017).

HR professionals as change champions also advocate for change in the reality of the market and business. They are also able to overcome resistance to change through engagements with key stakeholders. HR professionals sustain change by making sure that the necessary resources, time, people, capital, and information are available; they capture the lessons of success and learn from failure (Laine et al., 2017). Moreover, HR professionals also shape a new culture that drives facilitation of the success of the organisation in terms of making it competitive (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Armstrong and Taylor (2020) have categorised the role of HR change agents into the following four dimensions: *(i)* transformational change – a major change that has an effect on the HR policy and practices across the entire organisation, *(ii)* incremental change – gradual adjustments of HR policy and practices affecting single activities or multiple functions, *(iii)* HR

vision – a set of values and beliefs that support the HR function’s legitimacy as a strategic partner, and (iv) HR expertise – the knowledge and skills that outline HR professionals’ unique contribution in making people management effective.

2.4.4 HR innovator and integrator

HR as an Innovator creates a Digital Workforce, recruits people who have digital capabilities, and trains and rewards a labour force for rationalization (Chygryn et al., 2019). An HR innovator needs to introduce new processes and procedures that they believe will increase the effectiveness of the organisation (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

HR professionals as integrators, “integrate HR practices around a few, but critical, business issues”. They form an integrated “whole,” pulling in the same direction, by unifying different sub-processes within the HR departments. They make sure that the business’ desired results are given priority clearly and precisely. HR professionals also ensure that the necessary capabilities of the organisation and HR practices are conceptualised and operationalised powerfully, and so assist the shared HR practices in reaching the “tipping point” of impact on the results of the business (Laine et al., 2017).

2.4.5 Technology proponent

Modern organisations are impacted by technology because it plays a vital role in determining the entire work structure (Mishra et al., 2022). As a result, the HR profession is impacted (Laine et al., 2017), and the way HR professionals address their functions has altered (Joseph et al., 2021). It has been altered through the reduction of transactional costs, increasing the capacity and flexibility of HR information, and the improvement of the information’s reach or range and richness (Joseph et al., 2021). As a result, HR professionals are seen playing an increasingly important role of managing information, by ‘levering the information and knowledge into key decisions,’ and ensuring that the communication of decisions is clear. This evolving new competency will contribute to the strategic position of HR (Laine et al., 2017).

Enkhjav et al. (2021) mention that human resource management as a concept is gradually changing its form to digital HR. HR professionals therefore need to understand technology (Joseph et al., 2021). HR professionals need to utilize technology efficiently at a basic level, to deliver HR administrative systems such as benefits, processing payroll, etc. (Caldwell, 2020). Furthermore, Laine et al. (2017) mention that HR professionals are utilising social networking technology to assist people in organisations to stay connected with each other, and with other people and stakeholders, particularly customers outside the organisation.

Traditionally, HR professionals chose HRM as a career because it emphasises “people skills” (Joseph et al., 2021). However, since technology is considered as one of the imperative dimensions of HRCs, people are encouraged to work and live online more than ever before in the history of humans (Enkhjav et al., 2021).

2.4.6 Credible activist

Credible HR professionals establish trust and demonstrate role model behaviour (Mishra et al., 2022). This role of a credible activist means HR professionals stick to their word by doing what they say they will do. They have the capability to build personal trust and positive interactions with various stakeholders, and can communicate clear and confidently. They can see the significance of HR as a driver of business results (Laine et al., 2017). Moreover, Caldwell (2020) mentions that speaking the language of the department managers that an HR professional support is part of a credible activist’s role, i.e. basic concepts of inventory controls, schedules of production, accounts receivable, and basic balance sheet and income statement calculations.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2018), as cited by Hook and Jenkins (2019), mentions that HR professionals as ‘personally credible’, can deal with ambiguity, think things through in a logical manner, and apply judgement and emotional intelligence (EI) in situations that do not have one right answer. An HR person may sometimes have to challenge other people’s points of view, for example, by challenging a senior manager who is about to act illegally or discriminate unfairly. An HR person will need to display courage to challenge those viewpoints.

2.5 THE “VOICE” OF THE INDUSTRY

2.5.1 Graduates are grappling to find jobs

The transition from being a student to being a jobseeker tends to be grim for new graduates. One of the reasons why joblessness is extremely high amongst the youth is because they struggle to gain work experience, which potential employers view as a vital signal of ability (Kgosiemang, 2018). The school-work transition can sometimes be unsuccessful and have long-term consequences for individuals starting their careers, such as unemployment, lower job satisfaction, accepting low-skilled jobs (van der Baan et al., 2022; Kgosiemang, 2018; Mavunda, 2022), skill shortages, and qualification mismatch (Segbenya et al., 2021).

Alawamleh and Mahadin (2022) highlight that youth’s participation in the labour market is lowered, since they are competing with older workers, who remain in the job market longer as some cannot afford to stop working. Furthermore, graduates encounter the challenge of an employer recruiting staff with strict employment criteria, where they undergo a difficult selection process that tests their experience for the workplace. Graduates who have the required experience and competencies are more likely to be employed (Mavunda, 2022). Equally, Hook and Jenkins (2019) mention that relevant work experience is increasingly important, since more graduates are competing for jobs.

Today’s graduates lack the required proficiency (work-readiness) for work placement (Sarpong-Nyantakyi et al., 2022). Graduate jobs have been indifferent to the applicants’ subjects of study (Pitan, 2017). Various stakeholders, especially employers, claim that university graduates do not often possess the types of graduate employability characteristics crucial for the workplace (Shivoro et al., 2018). They suggest that universities have not prepared graduates well to enter the labour market (Knox & Stone, 2019). Equally, van der Baan et al. (2022) mention that graduates usually find it difficult to adapt to the new context, as they feel unprepared to cope with workplace demands. Employers have observed that there is a gap between the skills graduates possess and skills the industry needs (Aloysius et al., 2018; Osmani et al., 2019). As a result, both undergraduates and postgraduates struggle to secure employment after graduation (Otache & Edopkolor, 2022).

Essentially, universities are expected to transmit all kinds of knowledge to students (Alexandra & Glukhov, 2021; Tandika & Ndiujye, 2022). Moreover, higher education institutions (HEIs) play a vital role of influencing the development of required professional skills (Goulart et al., 2022). This is supported by the Human Capital theory of Becker (1964), who asserts that attending higher education is an investment whereby students obtain skills that enhance their productivity directly for the jobs they will be performing. Human capital refers to the productive skills and knowledge an individual embodies, and sums up their lifelong experiences and learning (Belderbos, 2020). Interestingly, one of the challenges graduates encounter is employers who are not willing to invest money and time in developing and improving them (Mavunda, 2022).

The knowledge and skills acquired at HEIs do not seem to be adequate to meet the requirements of today's jobs (Otache & Edopkolor, 2022), and to be integrated into the labour market (Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2019). However, Bui and Nguyen (2019) state that it is unfair to blame HEIs alone for the gaps in graduates' skills formation. A body of research shows there is no connection between institutions and industry. Noah and Abdul (2020) support this by mentioning that the disparity of skills acquired by students and the actual skills demanded by the labour market can be due to universities that are not catering to the issue well. There is no alignment between education and employers (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019). Employers are dissatisfied with young job applicants because they lack employability skills, not necessarily inadequate technical knowledge or skill (Kirui, 2019).

2.5.2 Competencies employers require

According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2018), as cited by Hook and Jenkins (2019), the following are needed for one to be successful in HR; qualification attainment, gaining work experience and significant behaviours, and having skills such as: (i) curiosity – being curious and learning continuously, (ii) decisive thinker – being analytical and having the ability to act decisively once relevant data and other information has been analysed in order to reach practical solutions, (iii) skilled influencer – being a strong communicator that has the capability to influence others, (iv) driven to deliver, (v) collaborative – an ability to collaborate and work in a team, as well as having awareness and interest in the new ways businesses work, (vi) courage to change, and (vii) role model – setting a good example, acting with integrity, impartiality and demonstrating sound judgment. Moreover,

Mishra et al. (2020) mention that influential skills are categorised in two broad categories; credibility of HR agents and change agents.

Gupta (2020) mentions the following competencies as the competencies HR corporate employees should possess: (i) skills – good communication and implementation skills, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, network skills, (ii) attitude – role model and leader, and (iii) behaviour – sensitivity to feelings of humans, trust and care, empathy. Hook and Jenkins (2019) add that communication should be clear and in different forms, both written (i.e. business reports) and verbal (i.e. making presentations).

The following generic skills (Pitan, 2017) of communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, interpersonal relations, and the ability to use information technology, are high-order, transferable and can be applied to various contexts across all specific fields. Additionally, The World Forum identified the following key skills: – complex problem-solving, people management, coordinating with others, judgement and decision-making, service orientation, and negotiation, as well as cognitive flexibility. These skills are soft, transferable and entrepreneurial (Igwe et al., 2022). Contrary to that, Brits (2018) emphasises:

“[t]hat not all attributes are transferable,” for example, “an ability that is specific to a particular subject” is not transferable, while an item that is learned and that can be transferred outside the specific subject matter may be regarded as generic. (p.41)

Employability attributes should be seen as knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) and not as job specific. The KSAs should cut horizontally across industries and across jobs, vertically. This means that employability attributes should be transferable and should be valued beyond the borders of organisations and industries. The Deloitte Insights Report (2019) encourages business leaders to focus on universal human capabilities that go above specific skills sets and domains (Steurer et al., 2022).

2.6 EQUIPPING GRADUATES WITH COMPETENCIES

Employability and competence are integral and cannot be discussed in isolation. A graduate's employability is measured by the competency level of the graduate which the world of work demands, and is an outcome of the link between higher education and the industry (Sarpong-Nyantakyi et al., 2022). Moreover, the success of the school-to-work transition depends on the relationship of the inter-dependent tripartite stakeholders (students, universities, and industries) meeting shared goals and expectations (Alawamleh & Mahadin, 2022).

2.6.1 The role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Educational institutions have been pressurized by most governments to "increase human capital by increasing graduate employability" (Ndebele & Ndlovu 2019). Universities need to make sure that their role as education providers is substantial, and that their graduates would be equipped with relevant skill sets ready for the demands of the market. Graduates should also be prepared for the workforce. Universities should align their curriculums to match both current and future demands of the labour market (Noah & Abdul, 2020). A study titled "*The emerging work system and strategy for skills transition in South Africa*", conducted by Samuel and Moagi (2021), found that universities are progressively redesigning the courses they are offering, and in some instances, introducing new programmes, in discussion with, and inputs from the industry. The study further indicated that various academic reforms introduced to the development of curricula, teaching, and research, are a response to the emerging labour market's skills requirements.

2.6.2 The role of the industry

Graduate training initiatives have been established to bridge how graduates access the workplace and allow them to obtain employability skills through on-the-job training (Mavunda, 2022). The findings of Kgosiemang (2018) indicate that graduates' practical work experience during their course of study is through capacity building, internships, mentoring, and government. Government internships and learnerships are used for promoting graduate employability skills. Other graduate initiative programmes include temporary work, internships, work experience, and placement internships. They are proposed to provide graduates with formal training to become employable (Mavunda. 2022)

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), or work-based learning and experiential learning, is another initiative aimed at enhancing employability and improving employment outcomes. WIL allows for academic and workplace learning to interact. Students connect with the industry, as a formal component of their programme (Jackson & Collings, 2018). WIL has proven its benefits of career development learning, perceived employability, and building networks. Service-learning is also important because it enhances professional capability and social responsibility (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

2.6.3 The role of student graduates

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the National Union of Students (NUS) (2011), as cited by Watson and Stewart (2017), mention that students need to be proactive when using their time in university or college by volunteering to gain work experience, or joining clubs and societies in their chosen fields. Students should also have a positive attitude and be willing to participate in new things or try out new ideas. This is important because it shows a desire to get things done. HRM knowledge gained through the course or module content is also important.

Moreover, Watson and Stewart (2017) add the following:

- Individuals investing in their human capital skills and reputation enables them to achieve employability. They should do so by engaging in continuous learning and development, updating their skills, and acquiring others that may be needed by their current or prospective employer in future.
- Individuals need analytical thinking irrespective of whether they are employed or not; they need to be able to challenge traditional ways of thinking and working, and be able to think outside the box.
- They need to be able to work without prior experience, have flexibility and prepare for change, take on new tasks, transit to other organisations, and recognize opportunities for self-employment.

In sum, adverse changes in the world require highly skilled and competent employees. These employees should have adequate HRM competencies such as technological skills, strategic thinking, negotiating skills etc. that enable them to execute their HRM functions effectively. These competencies should enable these HR professionals to contribute to the success and survival of the organization. Priority to close the gap between education and labour market demands should be played all stakeholders (industry, higher education institutions and graduates). HR competency models should be adopted in organisations and educational institutions for the purpose of identifying competencies required in the labour market and competencies that student graduates should be equipped with in higher education institutions.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology that this study follows. It will include the research approach and data collection process followed in the study. The research method used to collect the data from the targeted population and sample will be identified and described. This chapter will also give an overview of the data analysis method that was applied, as well as the ethical aspects that were considered when collecting the data.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

Qualitative research approach was used in this study. Taylor et al. (2015) define qualitative research as a type of research that aims to acquire a type of data that consists of first hand-written or spoken words and observations, including trying to understand things from people's own perspective. Qualitative research was best suited for this study because it gives an emic understanding of the scene, meaning that behaviour is described from the point of view of the participants and is context-specific (Tracy, 2013). This research approach is characterised by in-depth inquiry and gives a comprehensive description of the topic of the study (Daniel, 2012). Participants were able to richly describe an employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates. Furthermore, qualitative research is open-ended; meaning that it is investigative and exploratory in nature (Gibbs, 2018) and this enabled the researcher to explore the perspective of the participants (HRM professionals).

3.2.1 Research paradigm

Interpretivism was followed in this study. The researcher interacted with the participants (Thomas, 2013). According to Tracy (2013), reality is not something that is 'out there,' that a researcher can explain clearly, describe, or be able to translate into a research report. Interpretivists believe that social or cultural phenomena develop from the ways in which actors in a setting construct meaning. The researcher understands behaviours and the meanings associated with them by being in the setting and interacting with participants of the study (Lapan et al., 2012). Using interpretivism allowed the researcher to construct and reproduce both reality and knowledge through practice, by communicating and interacting with HRM

professionals (Tracy, 2013). The researcher focused on understanding social actions and the participants' social world based on their interpretations (Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

3.2.2 Research Strategy

This study followed a qualitative descriptive research strategy. According to Gibbs (2018), qualitative descriptive research strategy provides for a comprehensive description of a phenomenon by allowing participants to implicitly describe their perceptions and experiences (Gibbs, 2018). Qualitative descriptive research was suited for this study because the subjective nature of the problem is recognised – HRM graduates struggle to find employment immediately after graduating. HRM professionals' different experiences are also recognised (Doyle et al., 2020).

Doyle et al. (2020) also mention that using qualitative descriptive strategy provides straightforward descriptions of experiences and observations, mostly in areas where little is known about the topic being explored or under study. Using qualitative descriptive as a research strategy allows for a clear description about a phenomenon (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009) because careful observations and detailed documentation are made about it. This means that the following is being studied about a phenomenon (Seeram, 2021; Kim et al., 2016; Doyle et al., 2020):

- *What* – Study at hand: “An employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: Exploring HRM professionals' perspectives”.
- *Where* – HRM industry/ field or HRM in the workplace.
- *When* – In the year of study (2022), with the data not being used for more than 5years and being used for academic purposes only.
- *Who* – HRM professionals.
- *Why* – To answer the main and specific research questions, achieve the main and specific objectives of the study, to achieve the purpose of the study, and contribute significantly to knowledge and practice.

3.3 RESEARCH PROCESS

3.3.1 Population

The targeted population comprises institutes, people, problems, and systems to which or to whom the findings of a study are applied or generalised to (Fink, 2014). The population study was selected in relation to the topic of the study, and the reasons why HRM professionals from both the public and private sector in South Africa were selected and the contribution they were expected to make (Lapan et al., 2012).

3.3.2 Sampling

A sample is a portion or subset of a population or a large group (Fink, 2014) that will be observed so that something may be determined about the entire population (Thompson, 2012). The sample of the study was drawn from HRM professionals who have been in the HRM industry for more than 5 years.

3.3.2.1 Sampling technique and size

This study followed a non-probability sampling technique. Non-probability sampling techniques consists of a variety of techniques that researchers use to select specific units from a population of their interest. Non-probability samples are chosen subjectively and are therefore purposefully chosen by the researcher. These samples are chosen because they possess characteristics which enable a detailed understanding of the research problem from the perspective of the participants (Ritchie et al., 2013). Non-probability sampling does not involve random sampling (Guest et al., 2013); this means that non-random samples are not chosen by coincidence (Lim & Ting, 2012). HRM professionals were selected because they have the capacity to provide their perspective on the employability competency model for HRM graduates, thereby answering the research question of the study and achieving its objective.

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that was used in this study (Hall & Roussel, 2017). Purposive sampling was best suited for this study because HRM professionals were chosen purposefully because they fit the parameters of the study's research questions and research objectives (Tracy, 2013). Participants of the study were

selected based on the purpose of the contribution they made in the study (Guest et al., 2013). The sample size was sixteen (16) HRM professionals. Using purposeful sampling as a method ensured transferability (Gibbs, 2018).

The researcher adopted the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling occurs when the researcher requires the knowledge of insiders to locate respondents for the study (Gary, 2017). The researcher contacted HRM professionals s/he knows, who met the inclusion criteria, and asked for their participation. The researcher also requested the HRM professionals who participated in the study to ask their colleagues who met the inclusion criteria to participate. Although snowball sampling is convenient it does not go without criticism based on, the fact that there might be bias that can compromise the quality of the study as participants can recommend their other counterparts who may not necessarily meet the criteria for inclusion in the study (Parker et al., 2019).

3.3.2.2 Sampling rationale

HRM professionals who have been in the HR industry for more than 5years were best suited for this study because of the extensive experience they have acquired in the HR field. These HRM professionals have seen different trends and changes in the labour market, thus enabling them to indicate HRM competencies required from HRM graduates when they enter the labour market, as well as to remain relevant in the labour market. The study excluded HRM professionals who have been in the HRM industry for less than 5years.

3.3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Qualitative research interviews were used for the study. Qualitative interviews enable the interviewer to examine and explore topics in depth, and research participants can answer freely using semi-structured or unstructured interviews (Bryman et al., 2014). The focus was on the actual experiences of HRM professionals more than on general beliefs and opinions (King et al., 2019). Qualitative research interviews were best suited for this study because of the following (Marshall & Rossman, 2016); *(i)* interviews produce data in quantity, fast; *(ii)* it is possible to have a follow-up and clarity immediately; and *(iii)* interviews let the researcher understand the meanings that daily activities have for individuals, when combined with observation (looking, hearing, smelling, or touching).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data because they provided the best of both worlds, by combining the structure of a list of issues to be covered as well as allowing the freedom to follow up on necessary points (Thomas, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth interpretations, and data is interpreted in a more straightforward manner; readers will also understand the interpreted data easily (Thorne, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are suitable for discovering, exploring and developing new or alternative social reality explanations and perceptions (Chandra & Shang, 2019). Using semi-structured interviews is beneficial because, according to Klenke (2016) (i) they allow for greater flexibility; (ii) the understanding between the interviewer and interviewee is positive; (iii) they result in high reliability; (iv) difficult issues are addressed and clarified because the researcher may make follow-up questions; and (v) prejudice on the interviewer's part is reduced. The researcher did not predetermine what was or was not to be discussed, because pre-set questions existed. See interview questions in Annexure D.

As per the health and safety measures outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the South African Government, as a way of curbing the spread of corona virus, interviews were conducted online or remotely using Zoom, Ms Teams, email interviews and telephonic interviews. Remote interviews seemed suitable for this study because participants who are geographically distant from the interviewer can be included in the study, without the need for time-consuming and expensive travel (King et al., 2019). HRM professionals across the country can be included. Moreover, according to King et al. (2019), remote interviews allow the researcher to schedule interviews based on the participants' availability, or for them to respond to e-mail questions at a time convenient for them.

3.3.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data collected. Thematic analysis is a process of reducing data (Grbich, 2013) by developing and interpreting themes or meaningful patterns from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process also includes analysing and presenting those themes (Wæraas, 2020). Thematic analysis enables the researcher to examine data to extract core themes that were distinguished both between and within transcriptions (Bryman, 2016).

The study followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework of thematic analysis:

- 1) *Familiarization* – Familiarization involves being engrossed by the data and connecting with it through engagement, making casual notes and looking at what may be interesting about the data, possible connections between HRM professionals, data and existing literature. The researcher also listened to the recorded interviews, read and reread notes taken during the interviews so that they could note interesting features about individual data items and the whole data (Braun et al., 2019).
- 2) *Generating codes* – The researcher engaged more with data, thoroughly and systematically, and made sense out of it. The researcher scrutinised and systematically identified meaning through the whole dataset (Braun et al., 2019). Coding is one of the main elements of identifying themes. The researcher broke down data into its component parts and labelled those parts (Bryman, 2016).
- 3) *Searching for themes* – A theme is a pattern that captures what is vital and fascinating about the data and/ or research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Coded and collated data extracts are examined to look for potential themes of broader significance. The researcher will actively identify, interpret and construct themes by analysing, combining, comparing, and graphically mapping how codes relate to each other. As the researcher created and organised themes, the researcher used thematic maps to visually demonstrate cross-connections between concepts and among main themes and sub-themes. Themes should be meaningful independently but also work together to form an analytic story that is coherent and whole (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).
- 4) *Reviewing themes* – The process of checking themes works in relation to extracted codes, and the whole data set is known as reviewing themes (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The researcher built and moulded data as connected and experienced by participants. The researcher also gave the data meaning (Braun et al., 2019).
- 5) *Defining and naming themes* – Themes were refined, and the researcher identified exactly what that theme is. In a case where there were sub-themes, the researcher

identified their relation and interaction with the main theme (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher reviewed and defined themes by compiling all coded data for each candidate themes, and reviewed them to ensure that the data relates to a central organising concept. The researcher also checked the themes against the entire dataset. It is also vital to develop a clear sense of how each theme relates to others. Thematic maps can be used to visualise how themes fit together and tell the overall story of the data, and to check that themes do not overlap. The researcher used tables to clearly identify boundaries and structures of themes, according to main themes, sub-themes and the overall theme story. Final theme names should cue the reader into what can be expected about these and make them interested in reading the analysis (Braun et al., 2019).

- 6) *Producing the report* – This is the final test of how the themes work well – individually in relation to the dataset, and overall. The researcher revisited the research question, notes made in earlier phases of familiarization and coding, lists of codes, and definitions of themes. Definitions will ensure that the final themes remain close to the data and answer the research question well. Final moments of inspiration and a deeper insight into the analysis may be offered by making connections into existing research and literature on the topic under study, and have this woven into written results and discussions. This stage should be viewed as the final stage of analysis, and be open to making further revisions to the content, structure, and names of themes (Braun et al., 2019).

3.4 ASSESSING AND DEMONSTRATING THE QUALITY AND RIGOUR OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

It is imperative for the researcher to ensure the rigour or trustworthiness of the study's findings. As mentioned above, the researcher is clear about the methodological decisions in the study. These four key criteria of dependability, confirmability, credibility and transferability (Doyle et al., 2020) will be used.

- *Dependability*: Dependability (reliability or auditability) is fostered by using semi-structured interviews as a method for collecting data (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Reliability is the extent to which a research instrument such as a test will yield the same result on different occasions (Thomas, 2013). Reliability is concerned with whether the result of a research can be the same if it is repeated over multiple times. This means

that the consistency of the research will determine the study's reliability (Leung, 2015). Sahu (2013) adds that reliability also means authenticity in the responses. Authentic information is obtained from a respondent who has the authority and credentials to report about the problem. HRM professionals reported why HRM graduates struggle to find employment immediately after graduating (Sahu, 2013). The researcher was stable and consistent throughout, and ensured that the research method used was also stable and consistent over time. This study can be replicated the same way, irrespective of who is conducting the study (Tracy, 2013).

- *Confirmability*: The researcher detailed the notes systematically so that they demonstrate connection(s) between the data and findings (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). An audit trail will take place, and the processes of data collection and analyses will be examined and interpretations will be made. The researcher, as a sole instrument in the study, maintained self-awareness (Cypress, 2017) and remained objective (Colorafi & Evans). The researcher guarded against his or her biases, assumptions, beliefs, and presumptions (Cypress, 2017)

Credibility is concerned with internal validity, whereas transferability is concerned with external validity (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Validity is often concerned with how accurate a research item measures what it was designed to measure. For research to be valid, it must be able to accurately obtain, analyse and interpret accurate results from the research study successfully (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Validity looks at the following (Leung, 2015): (i) whether the research question is valid for the desired outcome; (ii) the chosen methodology is appropriate to answer the research question; (iii) the design is valid for the methodology; (iv) the sampling and data analysis is suitable; and (v) the results and conclusions are valid for the sample and context.

- *Credibility*: The actual or true value of data is known as credibility (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). This was indicated by describing HRM professionals' accurate and truthful descriptions of their lived experiences, and it was achieved through engaging with them in order to learn and understand their experiences (Cypress, 2017), and providing context-rich descriptions to interpret the data (Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

- *Transferability*: Transferability refers to two contexts' similarities and can only be determined when a context is described in immense detail (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The researcher selected a purposive sampling method because HRM professionals have the capacity to provide thick and accurate descriptions, and possibly a wide range of information about the study at hand. This in turn enhanced transferability (Cypress, 2017).

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The following ethical considerations will be adhered to:

- The researcher was granted permission by the North-West University to conduct the research.
- The Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) granted the researcher an ethical clearance certificate (ethical clearance number – NWU-00636-22-A4) before conducting the study. See Annexure A for ethical clearance certificate
- As per the regulations of POPIA, the researcher did not contact HRM professionals directly. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the SABPP professional body, seeking assistance in distributing the request to various HRM professionals. See Annexure C for request letter and Annexure D for permission.
- The SABPP advised the researcher to write a “request or communique” to call for participants' participation. It was then published on SABPP's different media platforms (e.g. Twitter) and participants who were willing to participate in the study contacted the researcher to show their interest. See Annexure E
- The researcher then checked the availability of the participants (HRM professionals) to set up appointments to conduct the interviews. The identities of the participants will be kept confidential.
- The following was explained to the participants; the purpose of the study, and their role in the study, and all ethical protocols were followed before commencing with the interviews.

- The following was communicated to participants (Silverman, 2017): participation is voluntary, they have a right to withdraw, consent should be obtained, and they will be protected and respected. Data collected is only for academic purposes and will be secured safely and accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Data will not be stored for more than five years. The findings of the interpreted data may be made available to participants if requested.

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is on analysing and presenting data collected through interviews, as well as interpreting the findings of the study. The findings are based on the responses the participants gave during semi-structured interviews, in response to the research questions. The data is analysed and identified through themes, for interpretation and discussion purposes.



4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The sample consisted of sixteen (16) HRM professionals that the researcher interacted with. Participants were requested to supply their biographical information, which was displayed in table 4.1, calculated, and presented in charts.

4.2.1 Background of the respondents

During the data collection procedure, the data was collected using different media platforms to conduct interviews with HRM professionals in different geographic areas in South Africa. These HRM professionals have been in the HRM industry or field for more than Five (5) years and come from different sectors.

Table 4.1 Demographic information of HRM professionals

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Highest Level of Education	Current Employment Information			Duration in the HR Field (Years/ Months)			Professional Affiliation or Membership	
					Position Held	Sector	Years of service	Public	Private	Parastatal		
1	Female	Black	34 – 36 and above	Diploma	HR Officer	Public	8 years	8 years			Yes	SABPP
2	Female	Black	28 – 30	Honours	HR Officer	NGO	5 years	5 years			No	
3	Female	Black	28 – 30	Honours	Operations Consultant	IT	1 year 5 months		8 years		No	
4	Female	Black	34 – 36 and above	Honours	Chief Personnel – OD and Talent Management	Public	13 years	13 years			No	
5	Female	White	34 – 36 and above	Master's	Resource Manager	Engineering	13 years		13 years		Yes	SABPP
6	Male	Black	28 – 30	Honours	HR Practitioner	Housing	4 years 11 months		2 months	4 years 11 months	Yes	SABPP
7	Male	Black	31 – 33	Master's	Assistant Manager	Public	2 months	7 years		2 months	Yes	SABPP
8	Male	Coloured	34 – 36 and above	Honours	HR Manager	S.O.E Building + Property	8 months	11 years			Yes	SABPP
9	Female	Black	31 – 33	Bachelor's	HRD Practitioner	Health	4 years	6 years			No	
10	Female	Black	28 – 30	Honours	HR Practitioner	FMCG	2 years		7 years		No	
11	Male	Black	28 – 30	Diploma	Employee Relations	Automotive Industry	7 years		7 years		No	

					Business Partner							
12	Male	Black	34 – 36 and above	Bachelor's	Employee Relations Coordinator	Mining	21 years		21 years		No	
13	Male	Black	25 – 27	Master's	HR Officer Systems	Mining	5 years 4 months		5 years 4 months		No	
14	Female	Indian	34 – 36 and above	Master's	Director	Human Resources	2 years		20 years		No	
15	Female	Black	28 – 30	Bachelor's	Training Manager	Marketing	1 year		5 years		No	
16	Male	Black	31 – 33	Master's	Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering	Energy	1 year		3 years	8 years	Yes	SARA and SABPP

Note: Participants were not required to reveal the names of their qualifications and organisations or departments.

4.2.2 Gender of HRM professionals

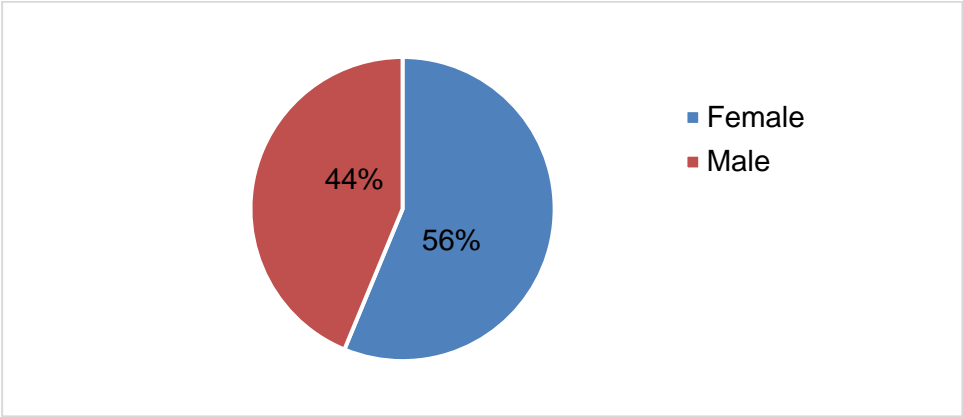


Figure 4-1: HRM professional's gender

The number of respondents in this study were not evenly represented, as females were more than males. 56% (9 respondents) were female whereas 44% (7 respondents) were male.

4.2.3 Race of HRM professionals

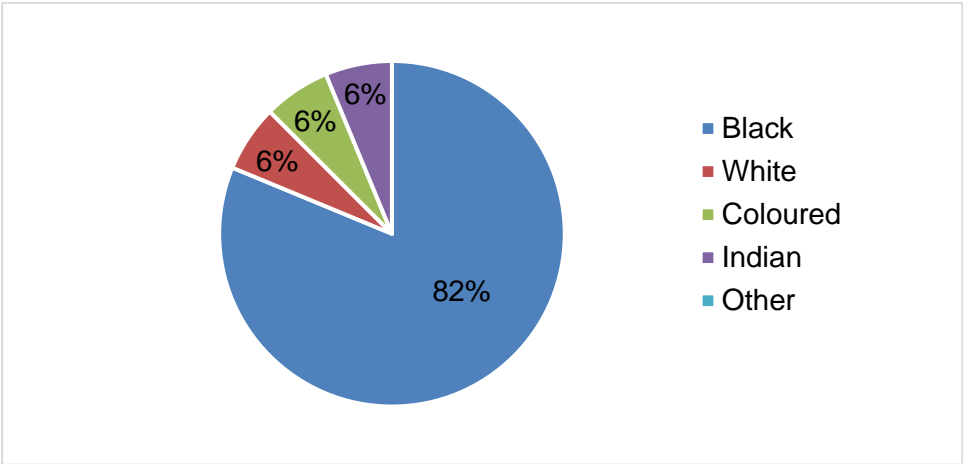


Figure 4-2: HRM Professionals' race

A majority of the respondents were Black, at 82% (13 respondents), while the remaining 18% were distributed evenly between the following racial groups; White 6% (1 respondent), Coloured 6% (1 respondent) and Indian 6% (1 respondent). The data indicates that Blacks were the majority, whereas Whites, Colureds and Indians were a minority. No other racial groups responded.

4.2.4 Age of HRM professionals

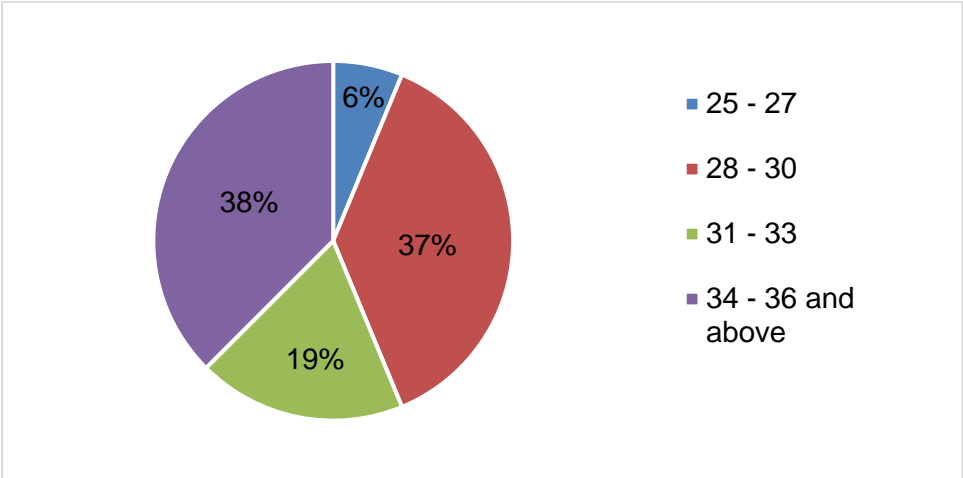


Figure 4-3: HRM professionals' age

The age of the respondents varied, with 38% (6 respondents) aged 34 – 36 years and above, followed by 37% (6 respondents) aged 28 – 30 years, and 19% (3 respondents) aged 31 – 33 years, and lastly 6% (1 respondent) aged 25 -27 years.

4.2.5 Highest Level of Education of HRM professionals

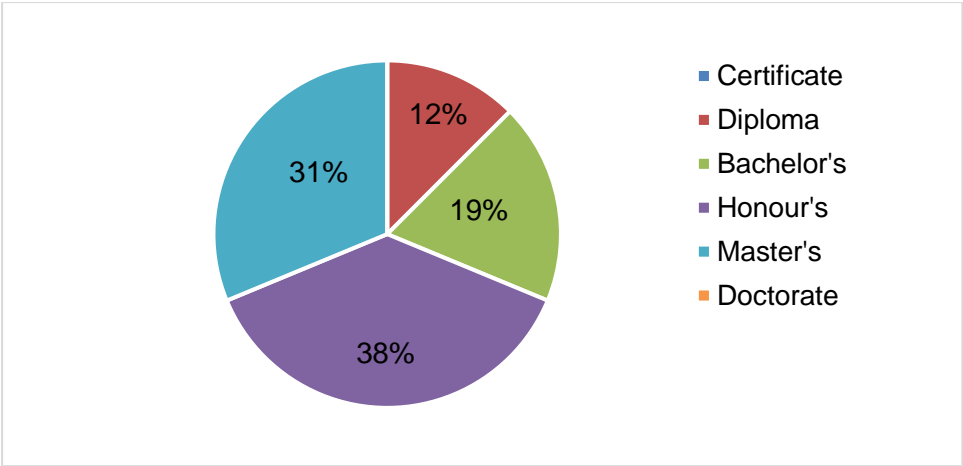


Figure 4-4: HRM professionals' highest level of education

38% (6 respondents) of the HRM professionals hold an Honours degree, followed by a Master's degree with 31% (5 respondents), Bachelor's with 19% (3 respondents), and lastly Diploma with

5% (2 respondents). From the data on the chart, the number of those with diplomas is quite low. None of the respondents hold a Certificate or Doctorate.

Table 4.2 Current employment information of HRM professionals

The following table illustrates the current employment information of the HRM professionals, detailing their current position, the industry they currently belong to, and their years of service in that industry.

Participant	Position Held	Sector	Years of service
1	HR Officer	Public	8 years
2	HR Officer	NGO	5 years
3	Operations Consultant	IT	1 year 5 months
4	Chief Personnel – OD and Talent Management	Public	13 years
5	Resource Manager	Engineering	13 years
6	HR Practitioner	Housing	4 years 11 months
7	Assistant Manager	Public	2 months
8	HR Manager	S.O.E Building and Property	8 months
9	HRD Practitioner	Health	4 years
10	HR Practitioner	FMCG	2 years
11	Employee Relations Business Partner	Automotive Industry	7 years
12	Employee Relations Coordinator	Mining	21 years
13	HR Officer Systems	Mining	5 years 4 months
14	Director	Human Resources	2 years
15	Training Manager	Marketing	1 year
16	Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering	Energy	1 year

Table 4.3 Work Experience of HRM professionals in the HR field

The following table illustrates the number of years and/ months that HR Professionals have been in the HR field, first by sector (public, private and parastatal) and then the total of all sectors.

Participant	Duration in the HR Field (Years/ Months)			
	Public	Private	Parastatal	Total of all sectors
1	8 years			8 years
2	5 years			5 years
3		8 years		8 years
4	13 years			13 years
5		13 years		13 years
6	2 months		4 years 11 months	5 years
7	7 years		2 months	7 years
8	11 years		8 months	11 years
9	6 years			6 years
10		7 years		7 years
11		7 years		7 years
12		21 years		21 years
13		5 years 4 months		5 years
14		20 years		20 years
15		5 years		5 years
16		3 years	8 years	11 years

Note: The researcher only used the whole number of years when presenting the total number of years in all sectors. Months were not included.

4.2.6 Work Experience (Years) of HRM professionals

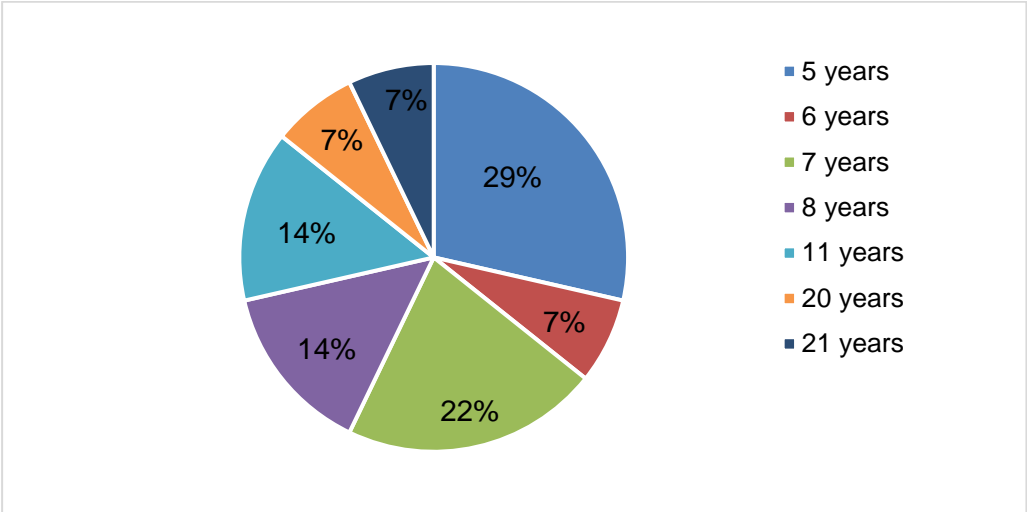


Figure 4-5: HRM professionals’ Years of Work Experience

Most of the HRM professionals have 5 years of work experience in the HR field (29% - 4 respondents), followed by 7 years (22% - 3 respondents). 14% (2 respondents) have 11 years of work experience, which is the same for those who have 8 years of work experience. The minority stands at 7% each, with the following years of work experience; 21 years (1 respondent), 20 years (1 respondent) as well as 6 years (1 respondent). The work experience of HR professionals varies. This is demonstrated below for each respondent.

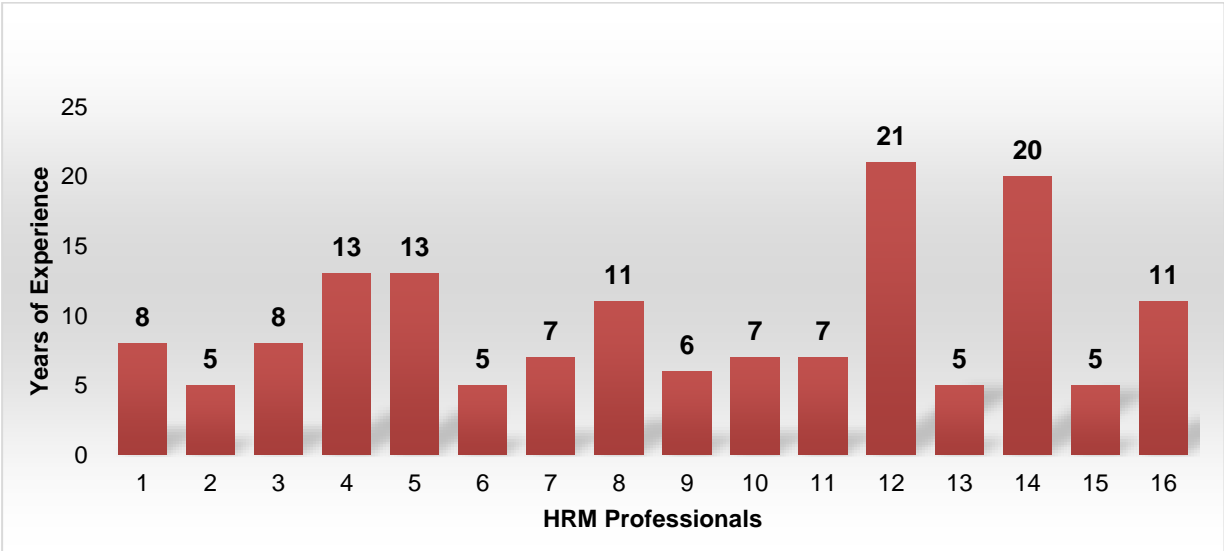


Figure 4-5-1: HRM professionals’ Years of Work Experience

4.2.7 Work Experience (Sector) of HRM professionals

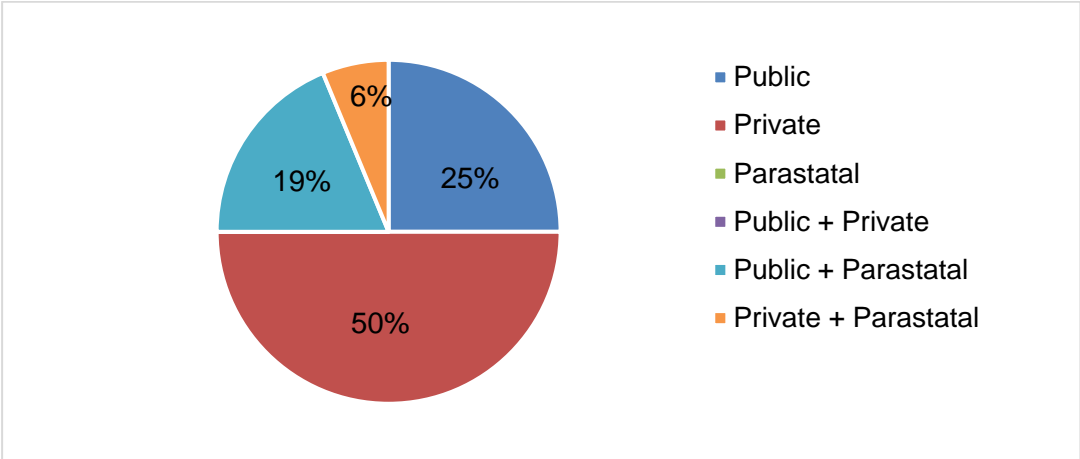


Figure 4.6: HRM professionals' Work Experience by Sector

Half, i.e. 50% of the HRM professionals (8 respondents) have worked in the private sector only and 25% (4 respondents) in the public sector only. 19% (3 respondents) have worked both in the public and parastatal sector. 6% (1 respondent) has worked both in the private and parastatal sector. The data indicates that most of the HRM professionals have worked in the private sector. No respondent has worked in a parastatal only.

4.2.8 Professional Affiliation of HRM Professionals

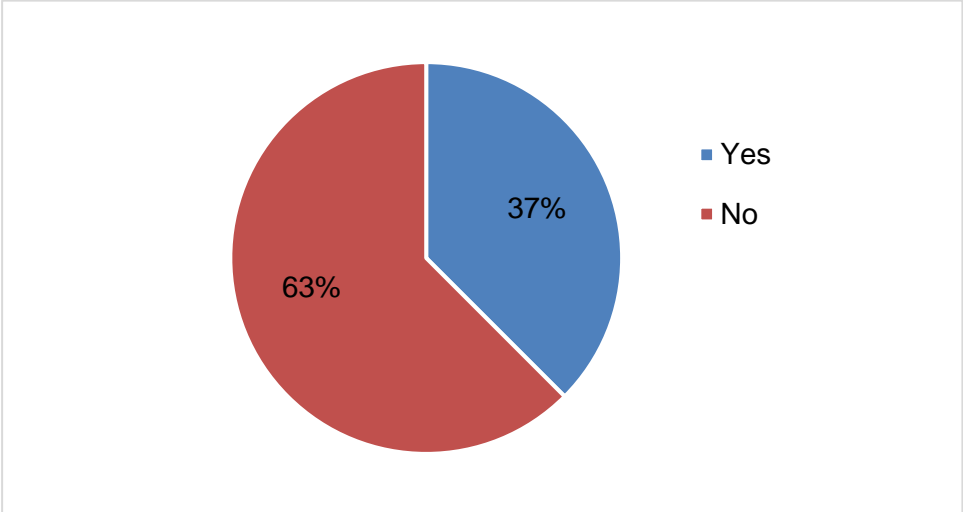


Figure 4.7: Professional Affiliation

Most of the respondents, 63% (10 respondents), are not affiliated to any professional body and 37% (7) are affiliated to the SABPP – South African Board for People Practices. One is affiliated to SARA – South African Reward Association – as well.

4.3 DATA FINDINGS

Five themes have been developed based on exploring an employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates from HRM professionals' perspective. The themes are as follows; graduate employability, HRM graduates' difficulties, competencies HRM professionals view as important, compatibility of prospective HRM professional graduates, and employability in the workplace. These themes reflect employers' perspectives on which competencies can be considered key for HRM graduates. The main themes and sub-themes were identified from the research questions of the interviews. Moreover, the respondents' direct quotes which were acquired through interview records are presented in italics. The participants have been described according to, Participant number, current position or post held, and years of experience in the HR field.

Theme 1: Graduate Employability

a. The relevance of education in the employability of graduates

HR professionals had different ways of defining graduate employability, with education or qualifications being the most dominant in their definitions. Furthermore, HRM professionals mention that graduates' qualifications should be an enabler for them to find employment. Some of the responses are:

“Highest level of education.... The level of education should make it easier to obtain employment or to create employment themselves.” (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

“Having the necessary academical inputs that are your first basis to work employment.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“How does the qualification (modules) relate and is relevant to what the market wants or employer would require. It is one's ability to be able to enter the job market, having done a course or modules that are not outdated but in demand in your chosen industry.” (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

“It will be someone having a specific qualification in line with the job that I’ll be interviewing for.” (P13 HR Officer Systems, 5years).

“Employers employing university graduate. In order to get a job, you need to have a qualification. The first part that we would look at is the qualification part of it.” (P9 HRD Practitioner, 6years).

b. Recruitment criterion

The results also indicated that education alone is not enough, or it is not the only thing that employers look at when employing graduates. This is supported by the following response:

“I think time has evolved where before, the standards have evolved with time. Initially if you had just finished your qualification, you are employable because people are willing to teach. But with time it has come with so many complexities and it’s layered with a sense of gatekeeping, where now graduate employability comes with so many unattainable expectations which makes the playground unfair.” (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

Furthermore, other participants’ definition of graduate employability included how employers would recruit and measure graduates’ competencies. This looks at the criteria they would use and the competencies and/ or skills they would require. Some of the participants responses are:

“There are number of things that you need to consider as an employer, to say does this person actually possess the correct and the right competency to be competent in the position that I like to appoint this graduate, because look, as a graduate, we don’t actually go and look for your experience because you don’t have a working experience. What mostly matters is your theoretical experience to say in the interviews. What are you going to tell us? What more do you know?” (P12 Employee Relations Coordinator, 21years).

“Some technical knowledge of the subject field. Willingness to learn. The application of the theory in the workplace.” (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

“An employable graduate is someone who comes across as loyal, self-motivated, committed, a problem solver who is analytical. If you gonna get technical, it is someone who is organized with strong administrative skills; I think the profession comes with a chunk of administrative tasks. And someone pays attention to detail and has good time management skills.” (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

“Skills that a graduate should acquire to render them employable for the work environment. Skills like initiative; communication; leadership; teamwork; reliability; problem-solving; organisation and planning; self-management; learning; technical.” (P14 Director, 20years).

““My definition of graduate employability is a learning process. As well as the measure or standard used to assess the skills and experience required from a graduate for a particular role.” (P15 Training Manager, 5years)

On the other hand, other participants emphasize that because graduates do not have the necessary or required work experience and skills to meet employers' requirements, their employability should only be based on education, their suitability, characteristics, knowledge, competencies and needs of the organization being aligned to the graduates' qualifications. Some of the responses are:

“... graduates don't necessarily have the experience that meets the requirements of most employers. Their employability should be based on their qualification.” (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

“It is not about being skilled because when you come out of university, you are not yet skilled.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“The suitability of applicants in the working environment or the adjustment of graduates in the working environment. Or the match of the need in the organization with the skills or the requirement and qualification as per the university.” (P7 Assistant Manager, 7years).

“The characteristics as well as the knowledge and competencies that would be required from certain graduates in a particular field of study or in order for them to be considered the best candidate for the job or to be considered for shortlisting for that particular position.” (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

c. Employers vs. Graduates

Some of the participants' definitions of graduate employability implies that organisations and higher education institutions have the responsibility to equip graduates with work experience and relate it to what graduates have learned or attained in higher education. Other participants' definitions suggest that graduate employability is dependent on the graduate. Some of their responses are:

“...rendering experience or empowering the people that have just graduated and ensuring that they get a space in terms of the work environment to gather experience in terms of what they have learnt from different institutions.” (P6 HR Practitioner, 5years).

“An approach that makes it easier for graduates to get employment and to be competitive with others. This approach entails talent, how you are going to retain the talent and the competencies needed.” (P4 Chief Personnel – OD and Talent Management, 13years).

“The ability of a graduate to actually find employment in the field that they have studied, and not only graduate programmes that are 12months but the long-term employability of the actual graduate, moving from studying into an internship, and from that internship into becoming a permanent employee.” (P10 HR Practitioner, 7years).

“It depends with the competency of the individual, it depends with the capability of the individual and I wouldn't say the experience.” (P12 Employee Relations Coordinator, 21years)

Additionally, one participant suggests that a graduate's employability is determined by the performance of the labour market and other factors, such as employers recognizing graduates' willingness and learning, graduates' willingness to learn, adapt and adjust in the workplace: -

“How the market is performing in terms of employment, if the market is expanding in terms of creating employment opportunities for graduates. And also the appetite of the different organizations to provide opportunities to graduates.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

“Recognising learning.” (P1 HR Officer, 8years)

“Looking at the willingness and eagerness of the individual we will be employing.” (P9 HRD Practitioner, 6years).

“Getting good graduates who are able to adapt to the working environment quite fast and knowing how to pick-up skills very fast.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

‘...the exposure and what the willingness of that person.’ (P12 Employee Relations Coordinator, 21years).

“Some of the things that I would consider, it's the individual's personality. See if the person is good at problem solving and whether he has an initiative. Is a go-getter as an individual at a graduate level.” (P13 HR Officer Systems, 5years).

Discussion of the results

The results indicate that employability and/ or graduate employability has different meanings to different people. Interestingly, the way some participants defined graduate employability was contradictory to that of other participants. The results further indicated that graduate employability includes qualifications or the highest level of education, and competencies (Poutrashi & Zamani, 2019), required skills and knowledge (Hosain et al., 2021) as well as the willingness to learn (Cheng et al., 2022; Padgett & Donald, 2022). Poutrashi and Zamani (2019) included competencies and qualifications in their definition of employability, and stated that that they enhance one's capacity to use education, to attain and retain initial employment (Pheko & Molefhe, 2017; Veth et al., 2019). Moreover, the results indicate that graduate employability is about obtaining long-term employment (from studying, to internships, to gaining permanent employment and growing in their career) in the field that graduates have studied for.

Again, the results indicated that graduate employability is about one's ability to obtain employment and enter the labour market. It is about how graduates transit from school to work, and how employers equip them with work experience, and thus Mullen et al. (2019) support that graduate employability is a two-way interaction between graduates and employers. Furthermore, results indicate that graduate employability is about how graduates are employed and equipped with work experience and skills. This suggests that graduate employability is also a responsibility of employers and the industry (Sarpong-Nyantakyi et al., 2022). The results also revealed that graduate employability is how graduates are suitable for jobs, match the organisations' needs and graduates' qualifications, as well as how graduates would be considered for shortlisting in particular positions.

The results indicated that, because times have changed and that having a qualification does not make graduates employable, because employers are not willing to teach (Mavunda, 2022), so over time, graduate employability has come with many complexities and unattainable expectations. This is supported by Tran et al. (2022) and Succi and Canovi (2020), who mention that what defines graduate employability varies in different contexts and it is not clear. Graduate employability is also defined by the performance of the market, how it is expanding, and its appetite to provide graduates with opportunities. Similarly, Álvarez-González et al. (2017) mention that other external factors, such as the situation of the labour market, determines graduates' perceived employability.

Furthermore, graduate employability is conceptualised as employers' requirements or desired criteria. This means an employable graduate will be someone having skills such as analytical skills, initiative skills, leadership skills, problem-solving skills, being self-motivated etc. (Hosain et al., 2022; Pitan, 2017), and the eagerness and willingness of graduates (Sharma et al., 2022; Watson & Stewart, 2017). Other participants had a different perspective by mentioning that the employability of graduates cannot include skills, mentioning that they do not have them as they are new graduates and are not yet skilled and cannot be expected to have any work experience. Graduates therefore do not meet the requirements of most employers (Tandika & Ndijuye, 2022). Furthermore, results indicate that what would be important is the theoretical knowledge or experience that graduates have, or the subject knowledge of the field and how it is applied in the workplace. This will indicate to employers or recruiters that the graduate knowledge.

Theme 2: HRM Graduates' Difficulties

a. Cons of the HRM profession

Participants have mentioned that the HRM profession is clustered because so many people are already in the labour market, especially older people who are still in the labour force. With people not leaving, then jobs cannot be created for graduates. Moreover, the profession is stagnant. Some of their responses are:

"The space is already clustered. So that makes it very difficult for them to enter into the job market. There is really no room because a lot of us are there." (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

"They take longer because HR in itself is a stagnant position. In a sense that you would find an individual who has been employed for over 20 years and still waiting for retirement. So there's no space to accommodate the upcoming graduates into the field of HR, hence we are saying it's stagnant. There are no jobs in HR. You have to wait first for a person to either retire or to die so that there's space. From there, unfortunately you'll have to wait for everyone else in the line." (P9 HRD Practitioner, 6years).

"Because people are not leaving their jobs. Everyone wants to die in it." (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

Furthermore, HRM professionals add that there are no opportunities in the HRM profession. Some of their responses are:

“There are more in-service and workplace programmes for other disciplines like engineering; finance; artisans etc. Not enough attention and support is given to HRM graduates.” (P14 Director, 20years).

“...not a lot of opportunities within this specific field.” (P15 Training Manager, 5years).

“The challenge is that you have one department with a limited resources. When I'm saying resources, I'm referring to the employees themselves. Like, as I've already indicated to you to say. As the coal mining as we are, it definitely we have the human resource department which their main job is actually to recruit. To recruit, select and place. So and how often do you do that? You don't do it more often, and once you have got those right skills in place, what you want to do is that to ensure is just to oil the machine to ensure that the machine runs smoothly.” (P12 Employee Relations Coordinator, 21years).

On the other hand, other participants are of the view that HRM graduates do not really struggle to find employment after graduation, because HRM as a function exists in every organization. However, the participants indicated that other factors, such as organisations taking longer to advertise vacancies and employment equity issues, play a role in the delay of graduates' employment. Additionally, graduates struggle because they do not apply for jobs, they are not prepared, and they too have their own preferences in terms what they want, i.e. type of job, industry, organisation, sector etc. Some of their responses are:

“I think that's an excuse because there's just a high unemployment rate in South Africa and most institutions are not hiring. So as HR is the engine of each and every organisation – so it shouldn't be difficult to employ or appoint HR students. But it is just taking long because it takes time to advertise positions and when they advertise its only few positions – so hence it takes long.” (P6 HR Practitioner, 5years).

“I don't think it takes longer for the one who applies, because HRM is the cornerstone of every organisation, because the existence of any organisation starts with HRM, because to recruit the best for the organisation – it has to start with HRM identifying and defining the job description of the organisation. The only person who can make sure that the company applies go the legislation is HRM. And the success of the organisation depends with the HRM. I don't think it takes longer for HRM graduates to be employed. It's just that some don't apply or they have this specification, I want to work for private or I want to work for government.” (P7 Assistant Manager, 7years).

“We are fortunate that we still have country whereby there is a great need for human resources and not robotics. So obviously where there is human resources needed in abundance, there would be a need for an HR person. It can either be a case of sometimes the graduates are not well prepared for the interviews and hence perhaps they are struggling to get hired. The issue is not the qualification. It's other factors like the graduates are not fully prepared in terms of interviews and hence they are not able to sell themselves or in terms of equity – they might belong to a race grouping or gender grouping that is over-represented.” (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

b. The relevance of qualifications, considering labour market demands

Results from the respondents indicate similarities in terms of how a qualification alone is not enough to get graduates into the labour market. Furthermore, they mention that the output of HRM graduates from higher education is a lot, and that employers' perceptions in terms of the type of qualifications that graduates (university graduates vs. TVET graduates) have also plays a role. Some of their responses are:

“I mean by default we know or we have come to the reality that once you earn your university degree or diploma – it doesn't automatically mean you can secure an interview for your dream job. Many of the job postings or jobs that are available require some level of experience.” (P13 HR Officer System, 5years).

“The model or course is structured in a way that is obviously focused on administrative, but when you go in the market, they looking for people with a different type of solving approach. So you find that people who pivot from other fields that are more technical, it could be engineering, it could be your accountants, it could be a bit more logical type of step-by-step plan, attention to detail type of work who are trained in that way, their grooming in a varsity stand out – stand a better chance than someone who's a recent HR graduate because they don't think a certain type of way.” (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

“The output of HR graduates is quite a lot. It's a lot. Hence, why the ones from university would always be struggling, but the ones from the TVET colleges – because the person had to get the 18months experiential learning, in most cases the company that gave them that 18months experiential learning, they end up co-opting them into the organisation. Now this is already someone who has close to almost 2 years' experience, I'd rather keep that person than having a fresh intern who doesn't know anything.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“With the HRM qualification there is always a worry and question what kind of qualification was it. Was it a 3 year degree, 3 year diploma, or there's 6 months short courses within the HR field, and all of that bringing everything into question. This then poses what is it that we need within the candidate, because if you look at the vast scope of HR and the operations within HR or the aspects of it, it's dependant on what that particular company wants and needs.” (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

c. Employers' preferences

The results indicate that employers' preferences also act as a barrier to HRM graduates entering the labour market. This suggests that even though graduates do their part, such as having good academic records, and attaining some skills or getting work experience during their time in universities, they may not be considered competent by employers. Moreover, employers may prefer people from other industries. Some of the participants' responses are as follows:

“...some industries would require people with more experience, then it becomes, harder for an individual or graduates to stand out. Even if those particular individuals have excellent grades – it can take more time than what is expected to actually find a job.” (P13 HR Officer System, 5years).

“I am gonna refer to my recent experience because I am actually currently recruiting for some vacancies in my HR department, and I've interviewed a couple of students ranging from those with a diploma to even someone who recently graduated with a Master's degree in HRM. And what I find with those with a diploma and 1 or 2 with Master's, it's the ability to formulate a message, it's really lacking. I am struggling to find someone who I have confidence in engaging and communicating with in the organisation.” (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

“When I look at the industry, at the bigger companies, the who's who of corporate South Africa.... people who occupy HR positions are not people with HR qualifications. So I find that the preparation is very difficult to compete with. When I was at the big 4, my division's business partner was with someone CIMA and SAICA. I think the dynamics of growth within organisations is based on loyalty sometimes, and not necessarily based on talent, which is unfair on HR graduates.” (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

“Organizations currently are moving into the industrial psychology route. Even most of the graduate opportunities that I've seen, most of them will require industrial psychology and because

HR currently lagging behind.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

d. Employers’ desired criteria not met

HRM professionals generally agree that HRM graduates struggle because they do not have any work experience, ability, etc. and they do not meet employers’ desired criteria and/ or selection aspects. Some of their responses are:

“The reason is commonly lack of experience.” (P14 Director, 20years).

“I would say HRM graduates take longer to find employment after graduation due to lack of working experiences.” (P15 Training Manager, 5years).

“New graduates lack or have little experience. They don’t normally meet all the desired criteria because as a graduate, companies have different requirement. And I also believe they have different models for selecting their candidates and individuals who they would employ.” (P13 HR Officer System, 5years).

“The other thing that hinders employment is the issue of ability.” (P10 HR Practitioner, 7years).

“...a disqualifying criteria – if I can’t employ someone who has that ability to communicate effectively in writing. That is main challenge in terms of why it may take so long to find employability, because of that skill that might be lacking.” (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

Discussion of the results

The findings of the study indicated that graduates struggle to find employment because the HRM profession or occupation is clustered, stagnant, and has no opportunities, with one participant mentioning that HRM is lagging, and more job posts want Industrial Psychologists. Furthermore, participants mentioned that the HRM profession has no space because people don't want to leave their jobs; they only wait for retirement or for death. Similarly, Alawamleh and Mahadin (2022) mention that the participation of the youth in the labour market is decreased by competing with older workers not leaving the job market.

The findings also indicated that another reason why HRM graduates struggle to find employment opportunities is because other disciplines have more in-service and work placement programmes than HRM. HRM programmes are limited. In the same breath, Jowah and Beretu (2019), as well as Werner (2017), agree that priority is not given to HRM graduates in terms of opportunities that give them work experience. Additionally, one participant mentioned that the way the HRM course is structured disadvantages HRM graduates in finding employment opportunities, because the

course is more administrative, and other disciplines courses are technical and their grooming in university makes them stand out.

On the other hand, the results indicate different views, with participants mentioning that HRM is in every organisation, therefore employing HRM graduates should not be a problem. One participant emphasized that South Africa still needs human resources in abundance and has not been affected by robotics (14.0), so there is still a need for HRM professionals. This is supported by Karimi et al. (2019), who mention that humans are key factors in organisations surviving in competition.

The results indicate that graduates struggle to find employment because graduates are not applying and do not prepare well when going for interviews. Other factors that affect graduates' employability are things like equity issues, organisations taking long to advertise vacancies, lack of preparation from graduates, and graduates having preferences in terms of job type, industry, and sector. Furthermore, the results of the study indicated that a qualification alone is not enough (Succi & Canovi, 2022) for graduates to get a job or enter the labour market, as job vacancies require some sort of work experience. The results indicate that graduates struggle to find employment (Olo et al., 2022) because they lack work experience (Mayombe, 2022), lack ability, and don't meet the employers' or organisations' desired criteria.

The output of graduates from higher education institutions is a lot and as a result there is high competition in the labour market (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020). Additionally, a factor that plays a role is the WIL component, where TVET college graduates have the component in their curriculum and university graduates do not (Jones et al., 2017). Employers then prefer TVET graduates with diplomas over university graduates with degrees, because TVET graduates have the work experience and skills employers want, and university students don't (Shivoro et al., 2018). Conversely, another participant mentioned that most graduates who have a diploma lack the ability to formulate messages or communicate compared to those with degrees, emphasizing that not having the ability to communicate effectively is rather disqualifying.

Theme 3: Competencies that HRM professionals view as important

The results indicate that the participants had similarities in terms of their responses. Various competencies were identified. These competencies include both soft and hard skills. The data findings also indicate how the competencies are important, aligned, and relate to each other and this is reflected in responses of HRM professionals.

a. Soft skills

The researcher compiled the soft skills into different groups: - (i) communication skills, (ii) interpersonal skills, (iii) negotiation skills, (iv) critical and analytical skills, (v) confidentiality, and (vi) empathy. Each group includes skills that are similar to the said groups. Some of the responses are:

i) Communication skills

“Be somebody who’s a good communicator.” (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

“Communication.” (P14 Director, 20years).

Furthermore, one participant put emphasis on the need to have effective communication and its importance, and highlighted that education on its own is not enough.

“The competency and ability to communicate effectively. You can really graduate with the highest of honours, but if you cannot communicate your knowledge and communicate effectively, and clearly and precisely in the workplace, then you are going to struggle as an HR graduate. The ability to translate your thoughts and ideas and your knowledge into a language that your colleagues will understand because they don't speak HR. They speak engineering, they speak finance, or other languages. They don't speak HR. You need to be able to translate your knowledge in an accessible way to other colleagues in the workplace.” (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

ii) Interpersonal skills

“Have interpersonal skills – you need to be properly empowered in that regard because you will be engaging with a variety of internal and external stakeholders. And you need to be able to properly be able to communicate, for example the HRM functions, especially policies and so forth, so that people are aware of what HR brings to the table.” (P8 HR Manager, 11years)

"I'd also say relationship management or being an open person where everyone can approach you, because as HR you are viewed as the entry point to the organisation 'cause with every candidate that enters the organisation, their first interaction is with HR." (P10 HR Practitioner, 7years).

iii) Negotiation skills

"Influencing, negotiations – you should have that competency, that skills because you will be engaged in proceedings whereby your ability to influence will be tested in order to sway parties to agree. At times HR practitioners are used to mediate proceedings, so hence the importance of influencing and negotiating abilities." (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

"As an HRM graduate you need to be able to build relationships within the workplace because your role will require you to interact with a lot of employees, internally, and probably external service providers, depending on which division within HR you'll be looking under, e.g., if it's within the training department, you'd need to build relationships with external training providers to develop and implement a successful training strategy." (P15 Training Manager, 5years).

iv) Critical and Analytical skills

"Be a critical thinker, be able to evaluate situations." (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

"HR practitioners should possess basic skills such as analytical skills and planning skills that HR people should have, because that would enhance your abilities to properly execute your responsibilities." (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

"...critical thinking." (P14 Director, 20years).

v) Confidentiality

"You need first the demeanour and the observation of the person to say as a person you need to be in a space like this. so, the first thing is your credibility. You need to be possessed, and as the person who is honest. Your integrity as well is quite important because as an HR person you'll be dealing with confidential, more confidential stuff." (P12 Employee Relations Coordinator, 21years).

“Confidentiality is a big thing – you can sit with somebody during lunch, knowing very well that after lunch you are going to give them a final written warning. And it could be your friend, you have to know how to separate work from your personal life.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

vi) Empathy

“You need to be empathetic. You need the heart to actually deal with people if you cannot be able to tolerate people in your space, then you're gonna have problem because human resource is all about human. So if you yourself you possess an inhuman skills and unfortunately you're not going to be able to work with people, because you need to create that environment whereby people have to have trust in you and they must be open when they come to you to say, OK, I can be able to be open with you. Can I be able to tell you what actually bothers me, in order to get an assistance. And knowing that I'm not going to hear the next person talking about my issues and my problem. That's where confidentiality comes in. As an HR that you need to process.” (P12 Employee Relations Coordinator, 21years).

“And the greatest Competency that they would have as an HR graduate i.e., a high level of emotional intelligence because that goes a long way when you are in that industry.” (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

“Empathy.” (P14 Director, 20years).

“Be empathetic but don't seem soft. So you need to be able to be assertive.” (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

Additionally, one participant mentioned that it is important that graduates hold their place in the organisation and be able to make decisions irrespective of the decisions not being supported by others. The response is indicated below:

“You need to learn how to hold your place in the workplace and have a backbone. Even if it's not a favoured decision, but as long as you know what you are doing is right.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

Other skills that participants mentioned are adaptability, leadership skills, ethics, creativity, technology skills, active listening, business acumen, decisiveness, computer proficiency, and so forth. Being ethical means doing the right thing. This is emphasised by this response:

“HR is about doing what's right and making sure that policies are followed from both parties. People expect you tell them what they want to hear.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

Another participant is of the view that graduates can possess all the required skills, but these skills are not universal and cannot be interpreted the same way, because jobs and/ industries are different. Therefore, required skills would depend on the specifications of that job and the industry in which it operates. The response is outlined as:

“Critical thinking, problem solver, continue to learn and be adaptable because the way a business do things or operates evolves so much, so you need to be kept abreast so you need to love learning. Pay attention to detail. These things are hard to translate because they are extremely bias. What is adaptable? It is completely different in a mining space; in a banking space it is different. So, it is subjective. It's a bit of an unfair question because the market is so tainted, people can't even agree on a CV template in their own market.” (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

Furthermore, the participant further explained how some competencies are biased in terms of the industries within the market if you are not contributing anything to that organisation. Other participants had similar responses with one mentioning that graduates also need to look at what value will they be adding to that organisation. Some of the responses are:

“So you could be in a space where they are looking for someone who's analytical, someone who can synthesis data – not to say that an HR people are not competent in those things but that's close to being a data analytics person where I'm supposed to now do a job of 500 to prove value, especially when you are not fee-generating. If you going into a space that's predominantly fee-generating, as in client-facing and you're competing with other professionals like myself when I was working for one of the big 4, we were always reminded of the fact that we are not fee-generating. So any remuneration tracts or wanting more, that's always pointed in your face that you are not bringing in any money, you are an expense. So I think it's understanding what do you need in terms of competencies to stand out in a space that you are not fee-generating. Then it's completely different for someone who's in a space where they for a recruitment company and they actually fee-generating. They making placements. So the competencies vary according to sector and also according to job profile and also which industry are you in and which element of HR are you contributing towards.” (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

“The other thing is “what can you bring to the table and what are you willing to learn?” Hence why last year I did the Advanced Labour Law course because that was my weakness. I didn't have that skill from university. And because we've had so many disciplinary hearings in the past, I had to do this so that going forward I'd minimize us outsourcing that skill for whenever a case arise.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

One participant had a different view, stating that graduates cannot come bearing skills or have existing skills. They should be given a chance to prove themselves regardless of not being in possession of any skill(s). The professional's response is:

“Because we are speaking about graduates, they are fresh from university. You can't say that you need them to enhance certain skills. They are fresh. You have to come and sharpen the raw talent that they have. They can't prepare to come and work in government or in private sector. They are there and they are available, we just have to take them in and smooth out their rough edges.” (P9 HRD Practitioner, 6years).

b. Non-technical-hard skills

i) Theoretical knowledge and application

“I think they need to understand how the course links to the actual work in terms of application. We need to be able to link the course contents to the application in everyday work life. They need to have a desire to grow, a desire to learn, and the eagerness to be willing to be exposed to the different facets within the whole HR value chain, because I think specializing is quite limiting within the HR space. So I would advise that they should be eager to learn and to rotate within the whole HR value chain.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

“So it will only be based on their domain knowledge, or rather quality or theoretical knowledge. So somebody with that eager and willingness, I mean for me when I set interview questions, I also make them broad just to also find an understanding of what the interviewee that I'm interviewing actually know, so that I can also align it with what I actually need.” (P13 HR Officer Systems, 5years).

“In interviews, what HR people always ask is “tell us about the latest labour laws”. It's pointless if you are going to an interview if you come with your beautiful honours degree and you

have distinctions on your transcript. But I ask you about the latest labour laws or rulings and you don't know any of that. And with HR you always need to research what has been happening lately.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“The reality of the situation is that what we actually learn in your varsity and colleges or wherever you get your qualification, and the work experience or the actual work that gets done – there's a bit of disparity between the two. So I think the competencies that they should be able to possess is the understanding of what the work or the industry would actually require of an HR personnel. Because more often than not (which is not a fault of any graduate), they come out with this textbook understanding of what HR is, and in interviews it doesn't come across as them knowing what exactly needs to be done. So that work-integrated learning programme helps a long way in terms of giving that understanding.” (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

ii) Performance enablers

“When you work in HR, Excel comes in handy quite a lot. Have Excel skills, report writing etc.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“For HRM graduates to be competent enough, you have to be up-to-date with recent information within the market, and the only way to is through reading. Continuous reading is the best option now, formally and informally.” (P7 Assistant Manager, 7years).

Discussion of the results

According to El Mansour and Dean (2016), employers demand that employees should have soft and technical skills. The results indicated the following common skills as required skills in different industries; adaptability and critical thinking skills (Abbasi et al., 2018), communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership (El Mansour & Dean, 2016; South African Board for People Practices [SABPP]), attention to detail, planning and organising skills (Teng et al., 2019), complex problem-solving, people skills, decision-making, negotiation skills (Igwe et al., 2022) and ethics (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020). Brightson (2022) supports that interpersonal skills such as ethics, credibility, and leadership are important for HR professionals.

Furthermore, communication skills are imperative. HR professionals as credible activists should be able to communicate clearly, effectively, and confidently (Laine et al., 2017). Additionally, one

participant mentioned that if a graduate cannot communicate their knowledge, then they will struggle in the workplace. The results further indicated that HRM graduates need to have communication skills so that they communicate HRM functions to other colleagues. Gawrycka et al. (2020) support this by mentioning that communication skills influence how graduates apply the technical knowledge they possess. Moreover, the results indicate that graduates should understand the world of work. They should do so by investing in continuous reading, being up-to-date with trends in the labour market and their field, and equipping themselves with competencies that will enable performance in the workplace. For example, one participant put emphasis on graduates having Microsoft Excel skills. Caldwell (2020) mentions that HRM professionals as technology proponents need to be able to use technology to deliver administrative systems such as payroll, so Microsoft Excel comes in handy in this regard, as one may need to use tips calculation functions. Furthermore, the results indicate that graduates need to think of the contribution that they too will be making in the organisation, what will they be bringing to the table.

The results also indicated that being able to communicate in a language that other colleagues from other departments or units speak, is very important for an HR professional, as they will be able to play their role as a credible activist that supports that department and its managers (Caldwell, 2020). The results also indicated that HRM graduates should have influencing and negotiation skills, that enable them to influence and negotiate with different stakeholders within and outside the organisation (Hook & Jenkins, 2019; Laine et al., 2017) and play their credibility role of HR agents and change agents (Mishra et al., 2020; Laine et al., 2017). Moreover, one participant mentioned that HRM graduates should have credibility, integrity, and be honest and trustworthy (Dessler et al., 2019; Hook & Jenkins, 2019; Mishra et al., 2022).

The results also indicated that HRM graduates need to have interpersonal skills and people skills that enable them to manage working relationships in the organisation, force relationships between supervisors or line managers and their subordinates as well as be open and approachable as the first entry in the organisation or the heart of the organisation. Furthermore, the results indicate that HRM graduates should be empathetic but be assertive at the same time and be able to hold their place in the organisation and be decisive when making decisions, as long as it is the right decision. Similarly, Hook and Jenkins (2019) mention that HRM professionals, as credible activists, would sometimes need to challenge other points of view, such as managers doing illegal things or discriminating against others.

The results also revealed that HRM professionals should also have confidentiality skills because they will be dealing with sensitive documents and private information pertaining to both the organisation and employees, including information (such as personal problems) employees may share with the HR professional in confidence. HRM graduates should also have emotional intelligence, as this is very important in the industry, with one participant mentioning that it is important to separate one's personal life from that of the workplace, giving an example of a situation where a friend can confide in you during lunch about their workplace situation and you on the other hand as an HR professional would need to give them a written warning shortly after.

The results also indicated that industries may have different soft skills they require (El Mansour & Dean, 2016), thus one participant mentions that skills are hard to translate because they are extremely biased and completely different in different sectors and/ or industries (Gawrycka et al., 2020) Moreover, Paadi (2014) found that generic skills are usually required in the workplace; however, there are different levels to HRM employability and the levels have different competencies for each level. Similarly, Ali et al. (2020) mention that job demands are different and therefore require different KSAOs. On the other hand, the results also indicated that graduates cannot be required to possess skills because they are recently from university and seeking employment.

Theme 4: Compatibility of prospective HRM Graduates

a. The significance of gaining work experience

Most participants advised that graduates should volunteer in organisations so that they can acquire the right work experience, because without experience it is hard to get into the labour market. Moreover, one of those participants mentioned that volunteering shows that one is eager to do something. Some of the responses are:

“Volunteer with NPOs. Volunteering shows that you are eager to do something and remember that when you are volunteering you are also gaining work experience.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“I would say they can try things like VAC work and volunteering.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

“What’s important for graduates is that they should not sit at home and just apply. They need to engage with government departments and any other organisation for them to access the job market through your internships. So that, that way they can acquire some practical experience

and skills in a professional, organised work setting. Over and above that, they should also volunteer, whether it's at recruitment companies or any other organisation that would make use of HR graduates. And obviously in that process, those graduates will be able to grow, will be able to learn new things – perhaps more on the practical side, compared to the theoretical side and obviously that's how they would increase their employability.” (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

One participant however highlighted that acquiring experience through volunteering is not possible in some organisations because the law prohibits it. The response is:

“One of the new labour regulations is that we cannot get people to do voluntary work.....as it is seen as exploiting people. Where possible, if any organisation can give you experiential learning, go for experiential learning.” (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

Again, one participant emphasised that HRM learners should start building their profile from university and build it further after graduation while they are seeking employment opportunities. The respondent stated the following:

“Do as much as you can when you are in school, be it promotions, tutoring/ find a job that will look good on your CV. When looking for a job, don't just focus on HR roles because sometimes you might take longer to find a job and with that being said, time flies and when you find that specific employer that's willing to give a chance to you, they might wonder why it took so long for you to find a job and what exactly it is you've been doing in your spare time. E.g. if you have been unemployed for two years and job hunting, there's a gap in your CV for two years.” (P15 Training Manager, 5years).

b. The role HRM graduates should play to seek/ obtain employment and opportunities

Participants also stressed that graduates should not sit and wait for opportunities. They should actively be looking out for opportunities, and enhancing their skills, and not limit themselves by applying in one sector, particularly government/ the public sector. Some of the responses are:

“Be proactive and enthusiastic. Don't limit yourself to HR skills only, understand finance, commercial, and other activities in the business.” (P14 Director, 20years).

“Don't look only at government for work. Try private sector. They are not strict with experience. They believe in training people and teaching so that ones can be developed and enter the job market” (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

“Don't choose whether you want private or public sector because we all operate under the same legislation. Always be on the look.” (P7 Assistant Manager, 7years).

“Don’t sit at home and wait for an opportunity. You must continuously enhance your skills.”
(P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

“They must try not to look at submitting CVs at government only. They must source around. They must look at retail as well.” (P9 HRD Practitioner, 6years).

Furthermore, graduates are advised to explore recruitment portals that organisations use to advertise their vacancies and source potential employees. Some of the participants’ responses are:

“They must lookout or familiarize themselves with the different portals where employment is being advertised – your LinkedIn, your DPSA, all these legs that jobs or employment are being advertised in.” (P6 HR Practitioner, 5years).

“They need to ensure that they’re also all on social media applications like LinkedIn, so that they’re able to engage with and ensure that they connect with HR professionals. Because usually people share their internship opportunities there, you might also meet entrepreneurs who are looking for HRM graduates who they can assist within their organizations or maybe shadow or mentor. So, such social media applications also assist you to network as a graduate, to have a more advantageous opportunity as compared to other graduates who are not on those social media apps.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

One of the participants suggested a method graduates can follow to actively look for job opportunities and apply for jobs. The response is as follows:

“For one, the number of application I always say to them, do 3 applications a day. 21 applications a week, 84 applications a month. So it’s one of the best methods that you could actually go with, because, you know, normally in an entire window, you would have done over 1000 applications or so. Or even, but 3 should be a minimum for you as a graduate when you’re looking for jobs. Because like I mentioned, it’s not based on the merit of your results, but there is a lot of intensity and competition during that period. So they should also stay positive. I mean, they’ve played the bigger part already in getting their qualifications. They’ve proven and shown that they are competent and they are eager.” (P13 HR Officer Systems, 5years).

c. How HRM graduates should proactively enhance their competencies

A majority of the participants mentioned that graduates should enrol for short courses. They should not just rely on their qualifications to seek employment. A qualification alone cannot enhance one's employability and make them competitive in the labour market.

"The more questions you ask, the quicker you learn. Ask questions when you don't understand what part you play and I think that in itself informs the experience. Keep learning. Expose yourself to different ways of working." (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

"You must always, constantly, so as an individual empower yourself."

"Try to further your studies, better your qualification..... do more. Register for short courses." (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

"Study as far as possible. At least get to an honours level before you get into the workplace because it is at honours level where you actually get to find out which aspect of HR it is that you want to focus on." (P10 HR Practitioner, 7years).

"Stay updated with labour law, technology, business activities and other trends in HR. Learn about the dynamics of business. Stay informed and be smart." (P14 Director, 20years).

"Do some online courses related to your programs." (P4 Chief Personnel – OD and Talent Management, 13years).

Additionally, respondents suggested online platforms that graduates can subscribe to and use to equip themselves with skills. Some of the responses are:

"Check an organisation or institution called uDemi, they offer online courses – so if there is a skill that you don't have from university, you can do online courses there just to add onto your knowledge. Do payroll because whenever I see adverts of potential employers, they want payroll. Know Microsoft excel. It is very important in the workplace. Keep up to standard with the latest labour laws. There's a CCMA App that you can download. There's a Facebook pages that they like uploading the latest court rulings, especially with regards to employment and things like that." (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

"There's a lot of courses available on LinkedIn; you can practise your soft skills. Keep building your skills sets and competencies even if you are not formally employed."

"If possible, look at short courses" (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

“Look at short courses like conflict management, conflict resolution etc. So over and above having your undergraduate or primary qualification, you need to also empower yourself with related short courses that can enhance your employability.” (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

Graduates have also been advised to continue reading, sell themselves through their CVs, to network and to also upskill themselves while they are still at university in their undergraduate qualifications (as final years), and in their postgraduate qualifications as well. Some of the responses are:

“When you are going to send your CV to companies, try to go into company websites and try to make sure that you align yourself to their beliefs. Tailor your CV according to the job description and the company.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“Their CVs must be attractive in a way that potential employers would identify that this person is knowledgeable and give them a chance.” (P6 HR Practitioner, 5years).

“During your final year or if you are doing honours degree, get opportunities to practice report writing because if you practice report writing, you learn the skills to communicate professionally.” (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

Moreover, respondents have advised graduates to join professional societies or bodies so that they can have an opportunity to network with other people. Some of their responses are:

“Be affiliated with professional bodies. Network more with similar professionals.” (P4 Chief Personnel – OD and Talent Management, 13years).

“They need to ensure that they register with the SABPP – attend certain sessions or seminars, it gives them an opportunity to network with people within the HR field in order to market themselves. Even offline networking also, like maybe in restaurants, in informal settings, because you just never know when you will find or meet someone who will open that door for you.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

One participant outlined the benefit of professional registration and exposure. The respondent mention that:

“To get to attend such seminars or webinars because that increases their knowledge on a practical perspective of what the world of work is about. And increases their knowledge on issues, whether it be labour issues or any workplace issues. This would then help them to be inclined with what is happening in the working environment.”

“So when going into an interview having such knowledge, it could also be an advantage to you because it would assist in terms of how you present yourself when you speak. It gives you that knowledge that enables you, to sort of sell yourself because you are able to touch on a few or add any labour terminology or HR terminology or any knowledge of that particular industry.” (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

Discussion of the results

The results indicate that HRM graduates need to play their role in graduate employability, and not just sit at home and apply or wait for opportunities. Similarly, Alawamleh and Mahadin (2022) mention that graduate employability is a relationship that involves graduates, employers and higher education institutions; therefore, graduates should be proactive in seeking training, development, and employment opportunities. Furthermore, HRM graduates should enrol for short courses to add to their existing qualifications and look out for training opportunities to enhance their employability status (Pouratashi & Zamani, 2019).

The findings also indicated that graduates should be able to sell themselves in such a way that employers can identify that they have knowledge about the field they are in, or job they are applying for. HRM graduates should lay out their CVs in a manner that is attractive, tailored to the job and/ or organisation they are applying for, and in a manner that shows their knowledge. The layout and presentation of the CV is important (Roos, 2018).

The results of the study also indicate that affiliating with professional bodies, associations and/ or societies (membership) is crucial, because it connects HRM graduates with other HRM professionals through networking and professional socialisation (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). As a result, graduates will be closer to the labour market, gain access, increase their knowledge and become aware of opportunities, and polish their network skills, which are considered key competencies for HRM professionals (Gupta, 2020). Moreover, the findings also indicate that HRM graduates should seek for opportunities in different sectors, with one participant highlighting that the private sector grants graduates training and development opportunities. Other participants mentioned that graduates should not limit themselves or have preferences in terms of the sector, type of job, and industry they want to work in.

The results also indicated that graduates should get opportunities where they can practise report writing so that they can learn how to communicate professionally. This can be obtained through

experiential learning, or getting experience in their final year, or during their postgraduate studies. This is supported by Jackson and Tomlinson (2022), who highlight that WIL is beneficial for career development learning, and service learning enhances professional capability. Moreover, Dwesini (2017) indicates that graduates believe they need more practical experience and being prepared for work before they graduate. This will improve their employability significantly.

Theme 5: Employability in the workplace

a. Programmes/ methods developed to train HR graduates

The results indicate that most of the participants have work-integrated learning programmes such as internships in their organisations, orientation and/ induction, job-shadowing, mentoring, on-the-job-training, and job rotation. These programmes serve the purpose of equipping graduates with competencies that they need to thrive in their current workplace and future employment. Some of the responses from the participants are:

“We partner a graduate with a certain manager or leader within the HR where they get the work experience, and they are able to shadow that person.” (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

“The first 2 - 3 days it's induction with all the departments in the unit. So you get to know everybody – finance, monitoring and evaluation, data ecosystems, research team etc. And the last session is between you and your line manager. So I'd go through your contract with you, your job description as well and key performance areas to say this is what we expect of you.” (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

“We do have an HR internship programme; it runs for 24months of which in those 24months the intern is assigned to a HR practitioner. So we don't do the whole rotating between different managers for 6months, instead you are with the HR practitioner, because with the HR practitioner it is a generalist role, so you do get the exposure to the different functions within HR.” (P10 HR Practitioner, 7years).

“We've got on-the-job-training. We've got a formal training and coaching.” (P7Assistant Manager, 7years).

“Our organisation use mentorship programmes to train our graduates. With the mentorship programme, we assign a specific supervisor to be able to mentor our graduates throughout their graduate programme.” (P15 Training Manager, 5years).

Other participants mentioned the following: – they don't have any WIL programmes in their organisations, they don't work with graduates directly because they are in a senior level in the organisations, or because the size of their organisations is small, some trainings or courses are given to permanent employees and not graduate interns. Permanent employees are preferred over these graduate interns. Some of the participants' responses are as follows:

"I have not trained any HR interns directly." (P5 Resource Manager, 13years).

"None currently. There is no programme for HR graduates, my company is a start-up company." (P14 Director, 20years).

"I work for a very small business right now, our head count is 9/ 8 – so none." (P3 Operations Consultant, 8years).

"With government, we use PERSAL system for appointment, so we take them for PERSAL training. Sometimes it's just that with Treasury, they don't have enough room. They give preference to people who are already working and not interns. So sometimes it makes it difficult for them to get PERSAL training." (P1 HR Officer, 8years).

b. How organisations train HRM graduates practically

The results indicate that most of the HRM professionals are actively involved with training graduates practically. Some of their responses are as follows:

"I'll use myself as an example, I usually go out on CCMA or DR cases, so I'd take that particular graduate or learner to be part of the negotiations so that they get that experience and it's more practical for them." (P11 Employee Relations Business Partner, 7years).

"With interviews, what I did is that the first couple of interviews that I had when he started, I sat with him to say that this is how I do a recruitment form. So firstly with a recruitment form, we'd put a job advert – we are recruiting for an HR intern, this is the skills that we are looking for, this is a job description and we try to capture information that we would be looking at on a CV. Like demographical information, key skills that we are looking for this position, so we gonna ask how many years of experience do you have, what is your qualification, qualification specialization. So I do those processes 2 - 3 times. And the 4th time and I'd say do it, and I'd check if he made mistakes." (P2 HR Officer, 5years).

"Other methods are where graduates are assigned to particular projects, HR-related projects and obviously in assigning those projects you allocate certain responsibilities. So that way you

would expose graduates to HR related projects for them to broaden their knowledge base and skills levels to increase that so that they can also participate in various HR-related projects in their future work life. So it can be practical things like you give them an opportunity to make presentations on HR policies. Whether to compile presentations, whether to do advocacy.” (P8 HR Manager, 11years).

c. How organisations evaluate training programmes

The results indicate that organisations have evaluation and monitoring tools such as competency level check book, continuous assessment programmes, meetings etc. that they use to evaluate if graduates are acquiring skills or getting work experience from permanent employees. Some of the responses are:

“We do have training programmes like work-readiness programmes for our interns to attend. So in the work-readiness programmes it's basically continuous assessing of how the relationship between the intern and their manager is, between the intern and their job is. And there is also that openness if they want to maybe move to a different manager who's focused on different aspects or to a different region because we are operating nationwide as well.” (P10 HR Practitioner, 7years).

“So there's also a tracker or a competency level check book, which they normally use. Which comes from the departments that they will be going to. To see if the particular individual's performance is satisfactory in that particular duration. So with that, they're able to also conclude whether the employee should be hired as a permanent or not.” (P13 HR Officer Systems, 5years).

“We ensure that there's performance management meetings whereby we are able to inform the intern that this is the area that you have performed well. This is the area that you are still lacking and these are the interventions that we are going to apply to develop you in those specific areas that we feel you are still lacking on.” (P16 Senior Manager: Human Resources Business Partnering, 11years).

“There's a quarterly meeting that the interns normally have whereby interns are called aside by the provincial office and they are experiencing, you'd find that we have wrongly placed a person in salary – whereby we were supposed to place them in labour relations. So after such engagements, the provincial officials will come back to us and alert us that this person is wrongly placed and say we should place them in the correct place in orientation.” (P9 HRD Practitioner, 6years).

Discussion of the results

The findings show that a majority of the participants have work-integrated learning programmes in their organisations. They have internships that run for 24 months, and they use methods such as induction, orientation, job rotation, job shadowing, on-the-job training and mentoring to train graduates practically (Kgosiemang, 2018; Mavunda, 2022). Furthermore, the results indicate that these programmes are meant to teach graduates about the job, as graduates are partnered with existing employees, who then transfer their knowledge and skills to them. Indeed, employability attributes should be transferable (Steurer et al., 2022). One participant mentioned that graduates are partnered with HR generalists so that graduates can be exposed to all components or spheres of HRM; this was common in all participants' responses.

The findings also indicated that HRM professionals equip graduates with technical competencies, as the majority of them explained how they involve graduates in the workplace. They involve graduates in recruitment processes such as conducting interviews, take them to CCMA cases, attend meetings with them, give them projects etc. On the other hand, the results indicated that some organisations do not have any graduate programmes because of the size of the organisation. This indicates that, indeed, there are limited opportunities for HRM graduates, as there are no jobs in some organisations. Moreover, graduate interns tend to be disadvantaged in the workplace by employers preferring to train permanent employees and not allow graduate interns to have access to some training opportunities.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that HRM professionals have evaluation and monitoring tools that they use to check if indeed graduates are acquiring the right skills and gaining the technical knowledge that they need for the current job, and for future employment (Belderbos, 2020; Pheko & Molefhe, 2017; Veth et al., 2019). They have performance management meetings, competency level check books, and work-readiness programmes (used for continuous assessment).

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter of the study is a synopsis or summary of the study, and the conclusions that are drawn from the literature review and the objectives of the research. The study's limitations are also addressed, and recommendations are made.

5.2 CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE STUDY

The following conclusions are drawn from both the literature review and the study's research objectives.

5.2.1 Conclusions drawn from the literature review

The following deductions are drawn from the literature:

Rapid technological developments are changing the world of work, making it unstable and accelerating job demands. This will result in people's careers changing, and organisations requiring that people have competencies that help the organisations to adapt and adjust to the changes that will be imposed on them and help them to survive. Furthermore, changes in the labour market calls for employees to be upskilled and equipped with competencies that will enable them to be highly competent and be able to perform in organisations, and thus contribute to attaining the organisation's objectives and its sustainability.

The HRM department as a unit will need to help organisations as well. It will need to help organisations in identifying the trends of the current and future environment, as well perform HRM functions such training and developing employees, recruiting and retaining the best talent, designing attractive compensation packages or incentives that make existing and prospective competent employees stay in the organisation, etc. This means that HR professionals would also need certain competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics – KSAOs) to execute the above-mentioned duties and all other HRM functions.

Graduate employability is important to students, higher education institutions, and employers. It is therefore important that all stakeholders partake in the employability of graduates by ensuring that graduates acquire the right skills and work experience. Higher education institutions are working on integrating work-integrated learning into their programmes, because the industry has stressed that they do not produce graduates who are prepared for the industry, and some graduates possess inadequate skills that are not demanded by the labour market, thus causing a mismatch of skills, graduate unemployment, and graduates being employed in low-skilled jobs.

HRM graduates need to possess the following HRM competencies: technology proponent, credible activist, capable builder, change champion/ agent, HR innovator and implementer, as well as strategic positioner. Technology proponent is imperative in the current world of technology, as they will need to adapt and be savvy with using HRM systems and connecting people. As a credible activist, they need to be trustworthy and be role models to other employees. As capable builders, they need to identify capabilities that the organisation needs, building culture and values that create meaning and customer focus. Change champions advocate for change and are able to assist organisations in adapting to the changes the external environment imposes on organisations. HRM innovators need to come up with new ways of doing things, implementers need to implement policies, and strategists need to translate external business trends into internal decisions and actions in the organisation.

Other generic skills that graduates should possess is the knowledge of the field they are operating in, and skills, the soft skills that inform how they behave in the workplace, how they communicate professionally both in written and verbal format, and how they influence various stakeholders internally and externally. It is also important that HRM graduates, as prospective employees, have interpersonal skills that enable them to build relationships with others, help them interact with others, and build relationships with others. A qualification alone is not enough for graduates to enter the labour market; employers require graduates with problem-solving skills, initiative skills, teamwork skills, analytical skills, critical thinking skills, etc., and graduates who can adapt to the changes the labour market imposes on organisations, such as technological advancements, digitization, etc.

Organisations and higher education institutions need to incorporate Human Resource Management Competency Models, as these will aid them in identifying competencies that are required for performance. That will enable both existing and prospective employees to be competent in their jobs, so that they can contribute to achieving the strategic goals of the organisation, thus contributing the success of the organisation. HRM competency models are also important in helping employees identify where they are lacking, where they need to improve, and which skills they need to equip themselves with. They help organisations in executing HRM functions such as recruitment and selection, succession planning, retention strategies, and so forth. In the same breath, higher education institutions will be able to assess if graduates are prepared for the workplace, identify if the graduates have acquired competencies that make them employable, and if they are able to demonstrate their theoretical knowledge.

5.2.2 Conclusions drawn from the research objectives

The following deductions are drawn from the research objectives:

Research objective 1: To explore how human resource management, graduate employability, and HRM Competencies is conceptualised in literature.

Human resource management is a function that is concerned with managing people within the organisation. It is concerned with different functions such as recruitment and selection, learning and development, compensation, managing talent, career planning, employee advocacy, strategic planning, and so forth. It is concerned with ensuring that organisations have the best talented and competent employees who get work done and achieve the goals of the organisation.

Graduate employability is about graduates being equipped with the skills and knowledge that they need to be employable and be able to perform within organisations. It is about graduates possessing qualifications and skills that helps them to secure employment in various industries, adapt and adjust to the changing markets and their demands, and also being equipped with skills that are needed for future development.

HRM competencies are skills (both soft and hard), knowledge, attitudes, attributes, abilities and other characteristics that are demonstrable, measurable and quantifiable. These competencies

enable performance, they help HRM professionals to execute their duties within organisations and thus contribute to attaining the strategic goals of the organisation and its success.

Research objective 2: To understand what are the causes of HRM graduates' delay in gaining employment after graduation

The results of the study indicate that graduates struggle to enter the labour market due to various factors such as challenges in the profession or occupation, performance of the labour market and graduates not being prepared for the world of work. Furthermore, HRM graduates are not prioritised in terms of access to job opportunities and work placement programmes. In addition, graduates do not have adequate work experience and skills needed in the labour market.

Furthermore, the results indicated that the lack of WIL programmes in higher education institutions (particularly in universities) contributes to HRM graduates struggling to enter the labour market, and employers preferring TVET college graduates instead of university graduates. Other factors contributing to graduates struggling to enter the labour market are organisations taking longer to advertise open vacancies, equity issues in the workplace, graduates not applying when vacancies are available, high competition among graduates, as well as competition between graduates and the existing workforce (older and skilled workers who are not retiring), graduates' preferences and lack of preparation.

Research objective 3: To explore the key competencies for an HRM graduate employability competency model

The findings of the study have indicated various competencies (SKAOs) that HRM graduates need to possess in order to be successful in their field. The results further indicated that HRM graduates need to demonstrate their capability in the workplace by demonstrating that they can communicate their theoretical knowledge to employers and their colleagues, as well as translate that knowledge and apply it practically in organisations.

The findings of the study reveal that HRM graduates need to possess soft skills such as communication skills, analytical skills, problem-solving skills, negotiation skills, interpersonal

skills, willingness, eagerness, confidentiality, technological skills etc. that will enable performance in the workplace. As much as these skills may be generic, the findings indicate that they are not universal in terms of industries the HRM graduate may be employed in. It is therefore important to understand these skills in terms of the industry the graduates may be employed in.

5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study cannot be generalised because the sample size of the qualitative research that was used is limited. The researcher struggled to obtain and gather information for the literature review regarding the use of competency models from the South African context, as much of the information is in the United States' domain. This study mainly focused on HR graduates, but the study can be expanded to graduates from other disciplines, because graduate employability is a global crisis.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been made:

- Graduates should know more about their field or industry by researching on issues and trends that emerge, so that they can get a broader understanding of it. This will put them in the right position and aid them to head into the right direction in terms of identifying occupations that are relevant to their qualification, and identifying the career opportunities out there. This is imperative, especially because HRM has different areas of focus (e.g. recruitment, industrial psychology, talent, labour law, etc.) that graduates can go into.
- Graduates should invest in continuous learning and research. For example, they should access company websites or databases, and read policies that are applicable to their qualifications, and look at both current and previous job adverts and familiarise themselves with job posts in their field by reading those jobs descriptions (duties) and specifications (requirements).
- Graduates should research skills required by the labour market; which ones are regarded as scarce skills and which ones make them employable or competent. This will encourage

them to constantly equip themselves with new skills, upskill and/ or modify their existing skills.

- In a case where a graduate gets an opportunity to attend a job interview, but s/he was unsuccessful, the graduate should ask for feedback about it. This will help them identify why was it unsuccessful; where did the graduate go wrong, what they need to improve on, how they can improve etc.
- Graduates should affiliate with different professional bodies of their field/ study or acquire qualifications, for example, the South African Board for People Practice (SABPP), or the Institute of People Management (IPM). This will enable them to build connections or networks, and gain mentors who can advise them from time to time and share with them their knowledge and experience about how things are done in the workplace or industry. Graduates can also have access to different articles, seminars/ webinars, workshops, courses, etc.
- Graduates should follow a career that is aligned with their passion or talent. This would help them stay encouraged and allow them to invest in continuous learning, because they will always strive to be better and do better. Graduates should invest more in self-exploration in order to be able to identify which career path is in their interest and which one they should take.
- The industry and higher education institutions as other key stakeholders involved in the school-to-work transition and the employability of graduates should adopt the HR competency models. Organisations should do so by incorporating the model in their HR functions (i.e. recruitment and selection, learning and development, performance management, and talent management) as this would ensure that they equip graduates with competencies that are both relevant and sustainable for future employment. Higher education institutions should incorporate the competency models in their programmes, in

a practical manner. For example, academics should incorporate these models in their teaching and learning plans (lectures, assessments, etc.).

CONCLUSION

The call is on graduates to do their part well. Graduates should explore different platforms such as LinkedIn to acquire or enhance their soft skills so that they can be updated and be able to compete in the market. Moreover, graduates should be mindful of the generic skills they acquire and rather focus on acquiring competencies (particularly skills) that are specifically related to the industry or market of their qualifications. Acquired skills should be relatable to graduates' qualifications so that they are able to compete in their professions and not become underemployed or underused when they get employment opportunities. Graduate employability should continue to be a priority for employers and higher education, and all other stakeholders. All parties can advise each other on how they can bridge the gap between education (what is taught, what the modules entail) and the labour market (what is needed or what is in demand).

Organisations and universities should work together in order to meet challenging expectations, service delivery and production. Institutions of education should prepare students for lifelong learning and for the workplace or professional life. Lifelong learning will enable graduates to be able to adapt to volatile markets and to organisations' demands. Both existing employees (old and experienced employees) and prospective employees (recent graduates) should change their mind-sets and attitudes so that both employees and organisations can be successful, develop, and remain relevant and sustainable. The youth should be equipped with relevant competencies so that they can be change agents and reshape the organisation and society for the better.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure A: Ethical clearance certificate



NWU[®]
NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY
NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITEIT
YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONGE, SOUTHRIMA

Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 018 299-4849
Email: nkosinathi.machine@nwu.ac.za

25 April 2022

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)** on 22/04/2022, the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-RERC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: An employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: Exploring HRM professionals' perspective
Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Dr K Paadi – MCom in Human Resource Management
Student: Molamu, TJ (24828696)

Ethics number:

N W U - 0 0 6 3 6 - 2 2 - A 4

Institution Study Number Year Status
Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation, A = Authorisation

Application Type:

Commencement date: 25/04/2022

Expiry date: 25/04/2023

Risk:

Low

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- *The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.*
- *The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.*
- *Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.*
- *The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.*
 - *in the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and EMS-REC reserves the right to:*
 - *request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;*

1

- *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;*
- *withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;
 - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the EMS-REC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or
 - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.*
- *Please note that the ethics approval of this application is subject to the Covid-19 protocols.*

The EMS-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the EMS-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Rathbone

Digitally signed by Mark Rathbone
DN: cn=Mark Rathbone, o=North-West University, ou=Business management,
email=mark.rathbone@nwu.ac.za,
c=ZA

Annexure B: Language editing certificate

House 367

Hex River Lifestyle Estate

Waterkloof East Ext 12

Rustenburg 0299

25/11/2022

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

**AN EMPLOYABILITY COMPETENCY MODEL FOR HUMAN
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (HRM) GRADUATES: EXPLORING HRM
PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVES**

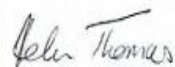
Submitted by **TSHIAMO JANE MOLAMU**

For the degree of **MASTER OF ADMINISTRATION
(HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT)**

At the **NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY**

Has been edited for language by

Mary Helen Thomas (B.Sc. Hons. PGCE)



Email: thomashelen212@gmail.com

Cell: 072 242 9066

Annexure C: Request Letter



Private Bag X2046, Mmabatho
South Africa 2735

Tel: 018 389 2111
Fax: 018 392 5775
Web: <https://www.nwu.ac.za>

**School Industrial Psychology and
Human Resource Management**
Tel: 018 389 2391
Email: Kelebogile.Paadi@nwu.ac.za

April 2022

To whom it may concern
South African Board for People Practices
Willowbrook House, 1st floor
Constantia Office Park 14th Avenue & Hendrick Potgieter Street
Weltevredenpark Roodepoort 1715
Tel: +27(011) 045 5400
Web: <https://www.sabpp.co.za>
Email: info@sabpp.co.za

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN HRM PROFESSIONAL BODIES

This letter serves to introduce Miss Tshiamo Jane Molamu (24828696) as a registered human resource management masters' candidate in the School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management at the North-West University currently conducting research on the title below.

Study Title: Exploring an employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: HRM professionals' perspectives

The objective of this research study is to determine which competencies will enhance human resource management graduates' employability.

Ethical Clearance Number: ***to be attached once study is approved***

A request is hereby made to the SABPP to help Miss Molamu to conduct her academic research study by recruiting participants or respondents who will help her attain the objective of the study.

The researcher will be following the prescripts of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), which aims to protect subjects from harm by protecting their personal information. POPIA sets out conditions over (i) how people should give consent to share their information; (ii) information collected should be for valid reasons; (iii) there should be accountability and transparency from the researcher should the information be compromised; (iv) participants may withdraw from the study if they wish to; and (v) control measures should be in place to control and protect the information. Information will only be accessible to the researcher and supervisor. It will only be used for academic purposes (this study and publishing in academic journals). Information will also be password protected.

Your time in considering this request is appreciated and hope for a positive response.

Supervisor Details: Dr. K. Paadi at 018 389 2391 or 071 561 0313, you can also send an email to Kelebogile.Paadi@nwu.ac.za if you have any questions or comments regarding the study.

Organisation Consent

Please sign the form to indicate that:

1

- You have read and understand the information provided above.
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.

I _____ (name of organisation representative) hereby give consent and permission for the abovementioned study to be conducted in (name of organisation)

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Annexure D: Permission letter



E: info@sabpp.co.za
Willowbrook House, 1st floor, Constantia
Office Park, corner 14th Avenue and
Hendrik Potgieter road, Roodepoort, 1709
PO Box 2450, Houghton 2041, South Africa
T: +27 11 045 5400
www.sabpp.co.za

13 May 2022

Ms Tshiamo Jane Molamu
School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management
North-West University

Dear Ms Molamu,

APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITHIN THE SABPP MEMBERSHIP:
“AN EMPLOYABILITY COMPETENCY MODEL FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (HRM)
GRADUATES: EXPLORING HRM PROFESSIONALS’ PERSPECTIVES”

The South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) hereby acknowledges receipt of your application for assistance to conduct your research titled, “An employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: Exploring HRM professionals’ perspectives”, within its membership base.

Please note that the SABPP only assists the researcher with communicating a link and brief descriptor of the research to its members. This is under the strict condition that participation in your study is *voluntary* and *consent-based*; and that *anonymity* and *confidentiality* throughout the research process and subsequent publications will be ensured. The SABPP will not share its members’ personal and contact details (such as email addresses) with the researcher; and will review and evaluate the member details requested in the researcher’s instruments. The SABPP does *not* and will *not* endorse, promote, and certify the researcher, the research and the findings and publication thereof. The SABPP will exercise its discretion regarding the sharing and dissemination of the research and findings.

This letter serves to acknowledge your application for assistance and, upon your agreement with and signature below to all the terms and conditions laid out in this letter, it provides **permission** to conduct the research with the SABPP members.

The following requirements must be complied with:

- The SABPP database and member information are confidential and cannot be divulged to, or shared with, the University and any other persons and institutions;
- The SABPP database and member information are not to be utilised for commercial purposes by the researcher and any other persons and institutions;
- The researcher or his or her associates will not seek access to its membership database and will not disclose it;



- The SABPP identity, brand and logo will not be used or cited in the survey instrument; nor will endorsement by the SABPP be implied or stated in the survey instrument or study (unless under the authority of the SABPP);
- The findings from your study can be used by the SABPP for publishing and in relation to their product offering as and when they deem it fit; and
- All information requested in the research must be authorised by the SABPP.

I would like to confirm that SABPP grants you permission to utilise their service for the distribution of your request for participation in interviews subject to the above conditions. This is subject to the management and control of the SABPP exclusively in accordance with its processes, policies and with due consideration for the protection of their members' identity and privacy.

Please provide the final research proposal from the University if the previously provided one is not final.

Please contact me should you require any further information.

Kind regards

Dr Ajay Jivan
SABPP: Head of Research and Assurance

I, Tshiamo Jane Molamu, accept that permission has been granted subject to my agreement and signature to the above stipulated conditions and is subject to final approval by the SABPP. I confirm that I will provide SABPP the approval from the University for the research and the required ethics clearance. I will share all research instruments and will provide SABPP a detailed explanation of the research design and process and will answer all related queries from the SABPP. I also acknowledge that the findings from my study can be used by the SABPP for publishing and in relation to their product offering as and when they deem it fit.

Please initial all pages and sign below.

Signed : _____

Place : _____

Date : _____

Annexure E: Call for participants

Hi fellow Human Capitals

My name is Tshiamo Molamu, currently doing my Masters in Human Resource Management at the North-West University. My study is titled "*An employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: Exploring HRM professionals' perspectives*".

My interest in this study is informed by various factors; interest in academia, discovering new knowledge and sharing it with HR graduates like myself. Like most graduates in our country, I have not been lucky with finding permanent employment and there's always questions at the back of mind "Why am I struggling? What is that I do wrong? What am I not doing right?". These are common questions that I seem to share with graduates I engage with as well, things I see on different social media platforms and this informed my interest of wanting these questions answered.

Research and direct interactions with other people has shown that HR graduates struggle to find employment immediately after graduating and my research objective is determining which competencies will enhance human resource management graduates' employability so that they can get first-hand information from HRM professionals in the industry. It is anticipated that the information we gain from this study may aid in discovering solutions to unemployment challenges HR graduates face and challenges organisations face when HR graduates apply for positions in their organisations.

Annexure F: Informed consent form



INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN AN ACADEMIC RESEARCH STUDY

April 2022

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Exploring an employability competency model for human resource management (HRM) graduates: HRM professionals' perspectives

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in the above-mentioned academic research study conducted by Miss Tshiamo Jane Molamu from the North-West University (NWU). I am currently registered for a Master's Degree in Human Resource Management (24828696). As the primary researcher, I am available on 0792712555 or email address janemolamu@yahoo.com

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to determine which competencies can be considered key for a human resource management graduate competency model to enhance their employability. It is anticipated that the information we gain from this study may aid in discovering solutions to unemployment challenges HR graduates face and challenges organisations face when HR graduates apply for positions in their organisations.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

You have been selected to participate in this research study because of your expertise in the field of Human Resource Management. We believe your insight will assist the researcher in answering the research questions that have been identified for this study. Please answer the interview questions with honesty and please be detailed as possible. This should not take more than 45 minutes of your time.

COLLECTED DATA

The data obtained from all the participants is only for academic and research purposes. The results of the study will also only be used for academic purposes and may be published in an academic journal. There will be no benefits for participating in the study. Participants will also be provided with a summary of the findings only after the dissertation has been examined, on request.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is very important to us. You may however, choose not to participate and you may also stop or withdraw from participating in the study without any negative consequences. Your identity will remain confidential and anonymous and your name will not appear on the interview schedule. The study is developed to anonymous, meaning that the participant will not be connected personally to the information they provide. The researchers undertake to keep any information provided herein confidential, not to let it out of our possession and to report on the findings from the perspective of the participants.

DETAILS OF THE SUPERVISOR

Please contact my supervisor Dr. K. Paadi if you have any questions or comments regarding the study. Dr. K. Paadi is available during office hours on 0183892391/ 0715610313 or via email at 16256824@nwu.ac.za.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Please sign the form to indicate that:

- You have read and understand the information provided above.
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntarily basis.

Participant's signature

Date

Annexure G: Interview schedule

PART A - DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

(Indicate X) (Fill Required Field)

Demographic details of participants enable the researcher to get a proper description of the participants and provide understanding concerning their fit for the study and they will be solely used only for that purpose.

GENDER	Male		Female	
---------------	-------------	--	---------------	--

RACE	Black		White		Coloured		Indian		Other	
-------------	--------------	--	--------------	--	-----------------	--	---------------	--	--------------	--

AGE	19-21	22-24	25-27	28-30	31-33	34-36 and above

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	Certificate	Diploma	Bachelor's	Honour's	Master's	Doctorate

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION	
Position held	
Sector	
Years of service	

DURATION IN THE HR FIELD (Years/ Months)	
Public/ Government	
Private	
Parastatal	

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION OR MEMBERSHIP			
Yes		No	

DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

Competencies – Soft and hard skills that an individual has acquired and can be able to demonstrate them when executing a job or in a job.

Employability – Competencies and qualifications that enable an individual to use both education and training opportunities available in order to secure and retain decent work, progress with the organisation and between jobs, and to cope with growing technology and conditions of the labour market (Pouratashi & Zamani, 2019).

Graduates – individuals who have spent a specified period of time at higher learning institution in order to complete their course of study and attain their formal qualification.

PART B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions – they will not be limited to these as some responses from the participants can lead to additional questions where more clarity is required.

- 1) What is your definition of graduate employability?
- 2) In your view, why do you think HRM graduates take longer to find employment after graduation? (the researcher will explain that this question is based on a study that was conducted).
- 3) Which competencies should HRM graduates possess in order to enhance their employability and enter the labour market successfully?
- 4) What methods does your organisation use to train HRM graduates practically?
- 5) What advise can you give to HRM graduates so that they can enhance their employability status?