

Community Development & Social Work @ Unisa

A guide to preparing for
career opportunities



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The information in this publication is correct as of 10 December 2025. Visit the Unisa Counselling and Career Development [downloads page](#) to check for updates.

Please check the Unisa qualifications webpage (<http://www.unisa.ac.za/qualifications>) regularly for updates related to available qualifications and the admission requirements to study.

How will this brochure help you?

- It will provide you with some insight into what studying community development and social work involves.
- It will help you to explore the career opportunities and work environments linked to community development and social work.
- It will help you gain more information about the skills needed in the fields of social work and community development.
- It will assist you with finding relevant qualifications offered by Unisa.

What problems do you want to solve

“Don’t ask kids what they want to be when they grow up but what problems they want to solve. This changes the conversation from who do I want to work for, to what do I need to learn to be able to do that.”

Jaime Casap, Google Global Education Evangelist

One way to think about your career is by focusing on the **problems you care about**, not only on job titles. This shifts the question from “*What do I want to become?*” to “*What do I want to contribute?*”

Activity

1. Write down some problems or challenges you care about — in your family, community, South Africa, Africa, or the world.
2. Think about how you might contribute to solving them.
3. Ask: *What skills or knowledge would I need to prepare myself for that role?*

Example: You may want to address the problem of rising youth unemployment in your community. Think about the different individuals who can contribute to solving this challenge: social workers, community development practitioners, counsellors, educators, local government officials, NGO workers, and skills-development facilitators.

As a social worker, you may provide psychosocial support and connect young people with resources. A community development practitioner may coordinate programmes that build skills and create opportunities; an NGO worker might design youth-focused projects or advocate for funding; and an educator could offer training that prepares young people for the job market.

Together, these roles demonstrate that tackling social issues requires many people working with different strengths. Your background in social work or community development can position you to make a meaningful, practical impact in the lives of individuals and communities.

Understanding social work and community development

Before you start: Why choose social work and community development?

Before considering pursuing this field of study, here are some basic questions you can ask yourself:

- Why are you interested in studying social work and/or community development?
- Where does your interest come from?
- Where are you hoping to be in five years? In ten years?
- What opportunities are you hoping to prepare for by completing a qualification in these fields?

What is community development?

Often when we think of community, we think in geographic terms (e.g. the city or town we live in). Communities can also be defined by common cultural heritage, language, and beliefs or shared interests. Most of us belong to more than one community, whether we're aware of it or not. For example, you may be part of a community in your neighbourhood, a sporting community, or an online community.

Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives on the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities. Community development should help people to recognise and develop their ability and potential and organise themselves to respond to problems and needs that they share. It supports the establishment of strong communities that control and use assets to promote social justice and help improve the quality of community life.

Community development ranges from small initiatives within a small group to large initiatives that involve the broader community.

Further reading

- <http://www.peernetbc.com/what-is-community-development>
- <http://www.scdc.org.uk/who/what-is-community-development/>

What is a community development worker?

Community development workers help communities to help themselves. This profession is all about working alongside members of troubled communities, inspiring them, supporting them, and offering them guidance and opportunities for initiating social change and making improvements to their own community. Community development workers act as a bridge between marginalised communities and government authorities at local, regional and national levels. They also provide vital assistance in the distribution of funding, the implementation of community projects and monitoring the progress of the communities in their jurisdiction.

Community development workers can come from a range of backgrounds and disciplines, for example, development studies, social work, psychology, theology, life sciences, agriculture, and business.

Further reading

- <https://www.allaboutcareers.com/careers/job-profile/community-development-worker>

Opportunities in community development

Job opportunities and work environments

Possible job titles

- Child and youth care practitioner
- Community care worker
- Community development practitioner
- Community service worker
- Lecturer (university) *
- Policy analyst *
- Programme/ project manager
- Researcher
- Skills development practitioner *
- Training facilitator

Possible work environments

- Community-based organisations
- Educational institutions
- Government (national, provincial and local)
- Higher education institutions (public and private universities, universities of technology & colleges)
- Research institutions

What is an NGO?

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) is a non-profit organisation that is independent of governments and international governmental organisations. They are usually funded by donations, but some avoid formal funding altogether and are run primarily by volunteers. NGOs are highly diverse groups of organisations engaged in a wide range of activities and take different forms in different parts of the world. In South Africa, non-profit organisations

(NPOs) may be non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), or Faith-based organisations (FBOs).

The Department of Social Development (<http://www.dsd.gov.za/npo/>) is responsible for maintaining the register of non-profit organisations (<http://www.npo.gov.za/>) in South Africa. The South African National Non-Governmental Organisation Coalition (SANGOCO) (<https://sangocoonline.wordpress.com/>) is the largest umbrella organisation of NGOs in the Southern African region.

Welfare services in South Africa

According to the Department of Social Development, the purpose of welfare services is to create and provide social protection to the most vulnerable of society through the delivery of social welfare services, delivered via provincial government and NPO structures. Functions include:

- Develop policy and legislation that promote the rights of older persons
- Develop and strengthen programmes, Care, Support and development of older persons
- Develop and implement strategies to protect and promote the rights of older persons

For more information, visit their official website at <http://www.dsd.gov.za/>.

What is social work?

Social work is an academic and practice-based professional discipline that seeks to facilitate the welfare of communities, individuals, families, and groups. Underpinned by theories of social science and guided by principles of social justice, rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. Social work endeavours to promote social change and grassroots empowerment of people and aids in socioeconomic development, social cohesion, and liberation from abuse and oppression.

What do social workers do?

Social workers typically assess the social needs of individuals, families and groups, assist and empower people to develop and use the skills and resources needed to resolve social and other problems, and further human well-being, human rights, social justice and social development.

Some of the tasks performed by a social worker include:

- interviewing clients individually, in families, or in groups, to assess their situation and problems and determine the types of services required;
- analysing the client's situation and presenting alternative approaches to resolving problems;
- compiling case records or reports for courts and other legal proceedings;
- providing counselling, therapy and mediation services and facilitating group sessions to assist clients to develop skills and insights needed to deal with and resolve their social and personal problems.

Download the [Social work scope of practice](#) document published by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) to learn more about the role of social workers.

The South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP)

The South African Council for Social Service Professions is a statutory body that has the primary focus of developing as well as protecting the integrity of the social service professions, as well as the interests of the public at large. The Council guides and regulates social workers, social auxiliary workers, child and youth care workers, and auxiliary child and youth care workers in terms of registration, education and training, professional conduct and ethical behaviour, ensuring continuing professional development, and fostering compliance with healthcare standards.

The council has two professional boards under its auspices:

- The Professional Board for Social Workers
- The Professional Board for Child and Youth Care

The SACSSP creates and maintains registers of all social service practitioners for whom a Professional Board has been established. Available registers include:

- Student social workers;
- Social workers;
- Student Social Auxiliary Workers;
- Social Auxiliary Workers;
- Child & Youth Care Workers;
- Child & Youth Care Workers at an auxiliary level;
- Student Child and Youth Care Workers for professional and for auxiliary levels.

Detailed information about the different registration categories is available on the SACSSP website at <https://www.sacssp.co.za/Professionals/Education>.

Skills needed for a career in community development and social work

Social work requires a diverse and demanding range of professional, emotional, and cognitive skills. Many of these skills will be developed because of formal educational training, while some will require you to develop yourself as a person.

Some of the skills that are most relevant and useful for social work include: organisational skills, understanding of human, knowledge of human developmental stages, knowledge of interventions applicable to one's area of specialisation, empathy, professional boundary setting, ability to facilitate co-operation both among individuals and groups, active listening skills, critical thinking skills, verbal and written communication skills, patience, a caring nature, resilience to stress, and good time management.

Opportunities in social work

Social workers may be found in government departments, community centres, schools, hospitals, hospices, adoption agencies, mental health clinics, correctional services, student development centres, in private practice, higher education institutions, and retirement or old age homes.

Social workers may choose to specialise in a variety of areas, including:

- child and youth care social worker,
- school social worker
- community social worker
- hospice and palliative care social worker
- medical and health social worker
- mental health social worker
- substance abuse social worker

The South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) offers specialisation registration for adoption work, occupational social work, and probation

Further studies in social work can prepare you for clinical social work and play therapy opportunities.

Alternative careers for social workers

Your training as a social worker provides you with the skills needed for a variety of work contexts. These include education, human resources, employee assistance programmes, public health administration, labour relations, advocacy organisations, and legal settings.

Job opportunities and work environments

Possible job titles

- Addiction counsellor
- Adoption social worker *
- Auxiliary child and youth care worker
- Auxiliary social worker
- Case manager
- Childcare worker
- Clinical social worker
- Community development practitioner
- Education officer
- Employee wellness manager
- Employee wellness practitioner

- Family counsellor
- Forensic social worker
- Medical social worker
- Monitoring and evaluation practitioner
- Occupational social worker
- Policy developer
- Policy researcher
- Probation officer
- Programme evaluator
- Programme/ project administrator *
- Programme/ project manager *
- Researcher
- School social worker
- Social counselling worker *
- Social worker
- Training facilitator
- Lecturer (university) *
- Youth care practitioner

Possible work environments

- Community and rehabilitation clinics, and other healthcare facilities
- Community-based organisations
- Consultancies
- Government departments (e.g. Department of Health, Department of Labour, Department of Social Development, SAPS and Correctional Services, South African National Defence Force)
- Higher education institutions (public and private universities, universities of technology & colleges)
- International aid organisations
- Medical aid schemes
- Monitoring and evaluation consultancies or organisations
- Non-profit organisations
- Private sector (e.g. mining and insurance)

- Private, public and psychiatric hospitals
- Self-employment
- Social research institutions (e.g. HSRC, NRF)

Exploring and researching careers

Making informed career decisions means going beyond what you already know. Career research helps you explore opportunities in community development and social work, understand what employers are looking for, and identify the steps you can take to prepare yourself.

Try this:

Here are some simple activities to help you explore opportunities in social work and community development. Choose 2–3 to start with:

1. Online search

Search “career in communication South Africa” or “entry-level jobs related to social work” and make a list of the qualifications and skills mentioned.

2. Occupational information websites

Visit the South African Department of Higher Education and Training’s [National Career Advice Portal](#). Search for specific job titles (for example, social worker or community development practitioner) and read about work activities, skills, and job outlook.

3. Job search portals

Check portals like [Indeed](#), [Career Junction](#) or [PNet](#). Type in specific job titles and see which employers are currently hiring and the requirements.

4. LinkedIn

[Search for Unisa alumni](#) who studied social work and/or community development and see where they work now. What career paths do they follow?

5. AI tools

Use ChatGPT or Google Gemini to ask: “What are emerging careers in social work and/or community development in South Africa?” Compare the results with what you see on job portals.

6. Talk to others

Set up an informal chat with someone working in the field or at an organisation you are interested in to learn more about their career journey and daily work.

7. Attend a careers fair

When Unisa or professional organisations host career fairs, look for employers related to community development and/or social work. Prepare 2–3 questions to ask them about entry routes into the profession.

8. Join a professional organisation or network

- [South African NGO Coalition \(SANGOCO\)](#)
- [CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation](#)
- [National Development Agency \(NDA\)](#) (supports community development initiatives)
- [National Association of Child Care Workers \(NACCW\)](#)

9. Volunteering

Look for volunteering or vacation work opportunities. Note the skills you develop through these experiences.

For more detailed steps and extra activities, see our [Career Research brochure](#).

Preparing while you study

Many students believe that a degree will lead directly to a specific job. In reality, your career path is shaped by more than your major. It is also about the **skills you build, the experiences you gain, and how you prepare along the way**. While you study, there are many things you can do to get ready for opportunities.

Your degree is one part of your career journey. By building skills, gaining experience, keeping a portfolio, and investing in your confidence, you'll be better prepared for opportunities during and after your studies.

Develop your transferable skills

Your studies give you subject knowledge and valuable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, working independently, and adapting to new situations. Reflect on what you're learning and practise explaining these skills in ways that employers will understand.

Activity

- List three skills you've strengthened this year and one example of how you've used each.
- List three skills you intend to strengthen and how you plan on doing so.

Build a career portfolio

A portfolio helps you keep track of your achievements, experiences, and goals. Include your skills, certificates, volunteering, work experience, and career ideas. Over time, this will become a powerful tool for applications and interviews.

Useful resource

- [Unisa Career Portfolio](#)

Gain experience (volunteering or part-time work)

Getting experience outside your coursework helps you explore fields of interest, build networks, and develop workplace skills. Volunteering is especially valuable when done responsibly and with respect for the community.

Think about

- Which organisations could benefit from your skills?
- What could you gain in return (skills, networks, insights)?
- How will this experience link to your career goals?

Enhance your employability

Employability means your ability to get, keep, and grow in fulfilling work. Today's careers are flexible: people change jobs and industries often, and success can mean many different things. You can boost your employability by:

- Managing your personal brand (how others see your professionalism).
- Developing job search skills (CVs, cover letters, interviews, networking).
- Exploring flexible career paths and lifelong learning opportunities.

Useful resources

- [Unisa Prepare for Job Opportunities](#)
- [Counselling and Career Development YouTube channel](#)
- [PNet Grad Pack](#)
- [GradNext](#)

Grow your self-confidence

Believing in your ability to succeed is just as important as skills and knowledge. Low self-confidence can hold you back from studying effectively, applying for opportunities, or connecting with others.

Ways to strengthen your confidence:

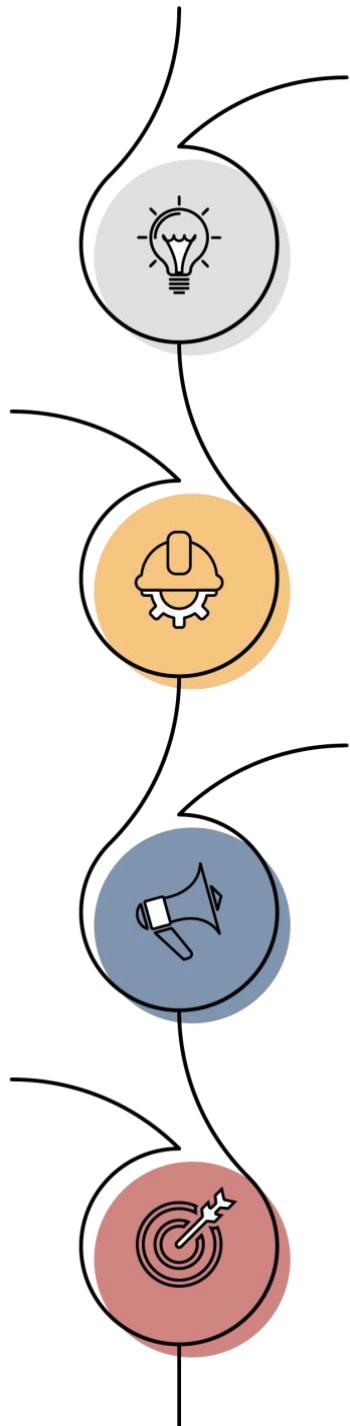
- Focus on your strengths and successes.
- Ask for help when needed: it's a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Practise self-talk that encourages growth instead of fear.

Remember: confidence grows with action. The more you try, the more you'll believe in yourself.

Your roadmap to success

Embarking on a career journey while studying can feel exciting and overwhelming. This roadmap will guide you year by year, helping you to stay intentional, informed, and adaptable.

Careers are rarely straight lines. Think of this roadmap as a flexible guide: you can move between stages depending on your opportunities and goals.



Year 1: Explore and build foundations

- Reflect on your interests, strengths, and career goals.
- Research career paths linked to your qualification.
- Plan your modules and think about postgraduate options.
- Identify key employability skills to develop.
- Create a basic CV and LinkedIn profile.
- Join a student or professional organisation.

Year 2: Grow and gain experience

- Focus on excelling in your studies.
- Apply for internships, part-time jobs, or volunteer work.
- Attend workshops, webinars, or conferences.
- Gain certifications (if relevant).
- Expand your professional network.
- Update your CV and portfolio with new experiences.

Year 3: Refine and specialise

- Revisit your career goals and explore specialisations.
- Connect with alumni and seek mentorship.
- Strengthen your professional presence (LinkedIn, portfolio, personal website).
- Practise with mock interviews and improve communication skills.
- Contribute to professional discussions online or at events.

Final Year: Launch your career

- Start an intentional job search (LinkedIn, job boards, company websites).
- Tailor your CV and cover letters for each application.
- Practise interviews and refine your elevator pitch.
- Attend career fairs and networking events.
- Evaluate and negotiate job offers with guidance from mentors.
- Commit to lifelong learning and professional development.

My career learning plan: Next steps

Your next step is to plan how you will get the information that you still need to make optimal career decisions. Use SMART goals to help you plan your career research.



S – Specific: What exactly do I want to find out?

M – Measurable: How will I know I've done it?

A – Achievable: Can I realistically do this step?

R – Relevant: Does this help me make better career decisions?

T – Time-bound: By when will I do it?

What career questions do I still need answers to?

My career question	What steps will I take?	By when?	Who/what can help me?	Done?	What's next?
E.g. What jobs can I do with a community development and/or social work qualification?	Search LinkedIn profiles of Unisa community development and/or graduates	15 Oct	LinkedIn, Alumni page	Yes	Connect with 3 alumni

Career planning is not about having all the answers right now. It is about staying curious, setting small goals, and building momentum.

Study opportunities at Unisa

Undergraduate qualifications

- [Bachelor of Arts African Languages and Development Studies \(99311 - ALD\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Archaeology and Development Studies \(99311 - ADS\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Communication Studies and Development Studies \(99311 - CSD\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Archives and Records Management \(99311 - DAR\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Criminology \(99311 - DCR\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and English Studies \(99311 - DES\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Geography \(99311 - DSG\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and History \(99311 - DSH\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Industrial and Organisational Psychology \(99311 - DIO\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and International Politics \(99311 - DIP\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Ministry \(99311 - DSM\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Philosophy \(99311 - DPH\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Private Law \(99311 - DPL\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Psychology \(99311 - DSP\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Public Administration \(99311 - DPA\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Scripture \(99311 - DSC\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Sociology \(99311 - DSS\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Development Studies and Theology \(99311 - DST\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts Linguistics and International Politics \(99311 - LIP\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts in Community Development \(98618\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts in Development Studies \(99312\)](#)
- [Bachelor of Arts in Government, Administration and Development \(99301\)](#)

- [Bachelor of Social Work \(90088\)](#)
- [Higher Certificate in Social Auxiliary Work \(90011\)](#)

Visit the Unisa website at <http://www.unisa.ac.za/qualifications> for more information about the admission requirements for these degrees.

Postgraduate qualifications

Honours degrees

- [Master of Arts in Development Studies \(98412\)](#)
- [Master of Social Work \(98630\)](#)

Master's and PhD

- [Doctor of Philosophy in Development Studies \(90178\)](#)
- [Doctor of Social Work \(90037\)](#)

Read more about the Research Focus Areas [here](#).

Counselling and career development services at Unisa

The Unisa Directorate for Counselling and Career Development offers career, academic, and personal counselling services to Unisa students and the broader community. You can talk to a counsellor about:

- **Career decisions.** I am not sure which career path to follow; I don't know which qualification would be best; I want to change my career direction...
- **Career information.** How can I find out more about a career in ...
- **Employability.** How do I market myself to employers? How can I look for work? How can I compile an effective CV? How do I go about networking with others? How do I put together my career portfolio? How can I meet potential employers? How can I improve my interview skills?)
- **My studies at Unisa.** How can I get started with my studies? How do I plan my studies? How can I study more effectively? I don't feel motivated to continue with my studies... I feel worried about preparing for/ writing the exams. I failed my exams – what now? I need to improve my reading/ writing/ numeracy skills
- **Personal issues and mental health.** How can I have better relationships with others? How can I cope more effectively with issues that impact my studies?

Contact us

- Send an email to counselling@unisa.ac.za.
- Make an appointment to see a counsellor:
 - [In-person at a Unisa Centre](#)
 - [Online \(on MS Teams\)](#)

Further self-help resources for career, academic and personal development

Our website: www.unisa.ac.za/counselling

Our YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/unisacareers