

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG GRADUATES FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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—Abstract —

In South Africa unemployment remains one of the most persistent and contentious economic complexities. The situation is even more critical among young people, undermining both social security and the country's long-term economic growth and development prospects. Although graduate unemployment specifically is not worrying, the fact is that many of South Africa's graduates still struggle to get a job, even after graduation. This study aims to investigate the perceptions of graduates on factors influencing graduate unemployment. Using data collected from the alumni database of one of the universities in South Africa, the study made use of descriptive analysis and cross tabulations to explore the perceptions of the causes of graduate unemployment between employed and unemployed graduates. A chi-square test was used to further determine whether there are significant differences in the responses of employed and unemployed graduates. The need to understand what graduates perceive to be the reasons for graduate unemployment may clarify the exertion or absence thereof on their part in attempting to address their circumstance. The researcher does, however, consider the sample size as being insufficient to generalise the findings. Further research must aim to study a more representative sample.

Key Words: *Perceptions, graduates; graduate unemployment, South African university*

JEL Classification: R23, O15

1. INTRODUCTION

Unemployment is one of the most persistent and contentious economic challenges in South Africa. The situation is even more critical among young people, threatening both social security and the country's long-term economic growth and development vision. Young people constitute a large percentage of the unemployed (Festus *et al.*, 2015). For example, somewhere around 2008 and 2015, the unemployment rate among 15 to 24 year olds averaged at more than 50 per cent, while the 25-34 year olds averaged at more than 29 per cent; rates higher than those of adults (Stats SA, 2016).

Various efforts have been made to overcome unemployment with approaches such as entrepreneurship. However, one of the approaches has been education. The role of education in employment attainment is well-recognised (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2008; Stats SA, 2014). Giuliano and Tsibouris (2001) identified that unemployment declines with the level of education. In other words, the more people educate themselves, the better their chances of securing a job.

Be that as it may, in South Africa wide variations exist in the employment prospects of various educational disciplines, with general fields of studies such as Humanities having substantial number of unemployed graduates compared to hard sciences such as engineering (Acquah, 2009; Moleke, 2010; Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC), 2013; Spaul, 2013). Archer and Chetty (2013) and Stats SA (2015) further determined that even though graduate unemployment in South Africa is not troubling, the reality is that it has been progressively increasing over the years. Actually, the current generation of young people in South Africa is faced with numerous labour market challenges showed in complex ways. "The South African education system is producing a continued stream of insufficiently educated new work seekers" (Festus *et al.*, 2015:3). Therefore, education has in some way failed its ultimate purpose to ensure the employability of these graduates.

In particular, a few studies (Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003; Pauw *et al.*, 2008; Acquah, 2009) contend that graduates are not prepared for the workplace regardless of having tertiary qualifications. Some critics have attributed the issue to an oversupply of graduates that cannot be accommodated by the labour market demand (Pham, 2013:8). Festus *et al.* (2015) reiterated that South Africa's education system has produced graduates that are either not in demand by the

labour market or are already abundant in supply. Many jobs in South Africa remain vacant mainly because of shortages of people with the right skills. Moreover, findings by the Manpower Group's Annual Talent Shortage Survey reported that the number of South African employers who had difficulty in filling vacant positions mainly because of shortcomings of jobseekers with appropriate skills increased from 8 per cent in 2014 to 31 per cent in 2015 (Manpower Group, 2015). It appears to be, that there are jobs yet a considerable number of these graduates are not always employable. The problem of graduate unemployment is not only unique to South Africa. In Asian countries like Vietnam, employers are only able to employ one out of ten graduates (Pham, 2013). Graduate unemployment is also a pressing challenge in Nigeria caused by factors such as inadequate skills possessed by graduates themselves (Essien & Onukwubiri, 2015). In some Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, educational accomplishments increase the chances of employability (International Labour Organization (ILO, 2015).

Against this background, this paper aims to analyse the perceptions of graduates on factors that influence graduate unemployment. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, the section that follows will focus on the methodological processes that were followed. Results and discussions are presented in Section 4. Section 5 will conclude the study and provide some recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Unemployment in South Africa is disproportionately spread most recognisably by age, race, the type of qualification and to some extent by gender. Younger graduates are twice as prone to be unemployed than older graduates, where older graduates refer to those individuals older than 35 years (Altbeker & Storme, 2013). In 2015 unemployment rates among younger tertiary graduates was 8.3 per cent up from 5.6 per cent in 2008; rates higher than older tertiary graduates (Stats SA, 2015a). Very different unemployment patterns can also be observed within race groups. In a study conducted to determine the reasons why unemployment has risen in South Africa, Banerjee *et al.* (2008) determined that job searching is more effective for Indians and Whites than it is for Black and Coloured jobseekers. Furthermore, out of all race groups, Black jobseekers are more likely to move from actively seeking employment to either discouraged or not economically active category (Mlatsheni, 2014; Matsilele, 2015).

Job prospects for young women are more restricted than those for young men, resulting in higher unemployment rates for young women. Mlatsheni (2014) emphasised in a study on youth unemployment in Cape Town that the chances of young males getting a job as opposed to being unemployed are more than double those of young females. In a study analysing the labour market situation in Africa, the African Development Bank (ADB, 2012) stressed that in eight out of the twelve Sub-Saharan African countries surveyed, young females had a higher possibility of being unemployed than young males.

Graduate unemployment has also been associated with the Higher Education Institution (HEI) attended, as it was determined that some employers prefer to hire graduates from certain universities because of the trust and confidence they have in the education they provide (Moleke, 2010; Baldry, 2013; Oluwajodu *et al.*, 2015; Walker, 2015). In the case of South Africa, traditionally, formerly advantaged universities have been perceived to provide quality education with higher standards than formerly disadvantaged universities, resulting in employers to hire graduates from the former (Moleke, 2006; Baldry, 2013). Pauw *et al.* (2008) found that many employers do not approach formerly disadvantaged universities for their recruitment initiatives as the quality of education at these institutions is for the most part perceived to be lower and a large majority of its graduates do not have good grades. Furthermore, many of these historically disadvantaged universities do not provide courses in the fields of critical skills (e.g. Engineering and Sciences) and only provide those in Humanities and Arts, which are often not in demand. The impact of university attendance as a factor influencing employment prospects is not only a problem in South Africa. In their study, on Chinese graduates, Jun and Fan (2011) argued that graduates from reputable educational institutions with higher standings find jobs more easily. A similar study in England also suggested that the reputation of higher educational institutions has substantial influence on graduate's employment search (Nguyen & Bradley 2004).

Graduate outcomes and pathways are also different for various fields of study, with some graduates from certain fields taking longer to find a job than other graduates. Acquah (2009) and Walker (2015) asserted that Science and Engineering graduates have higher chances of finding employment after graduation than graduates with qualifications of a more general nature such as Humanities and Arts. Not all graduates will enjoy better job opportunities mainly because of diverse situations and job misalliances that exist in the labour market.

Among others, the quality and relevance of the education received is important in the labour market.

Some findings argued that perhaps there is an incompatibility between qualifications and labour market skills required (Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003; Farooq, 2011; Nel & Neale-Shutte, 2013). In a study which looked at how students perceive employability in higher education in South Africa, Walker (2015) found that there is a misalignment between theory and knowledge applications through practical work in nearly all degree programmes of the sampled universities. Dai *et al.* (2008) argued that higher educational institution courses have mainly been too theoretical and have neglected to prepare their students for the workplace. Other studies (Griesel & Parker, 2009; MacGregor, 2007) argue that there could be a problem regarding the expectations of companies and what graduates bring to the table, which may be misaligned. On the other hand, graduates are often of the opinion that their first jobs will be a high paying with a good position, only to find that many entry level jobs do not even come close to their expectations. Sirat *et al.* (2012) also found high wage expectations as one of the reasons some graduates struggle to find jobs.

Job search is listed as one of the factors that have kept unemployment high in South Africa. Banerjee *et al.* (2008) contend that spatial division between job locations and where young people reside is one of the most significant factors influencing their employment status. The more secluded a place is, the higher the costs of job searching and consequently the higher the chances of unemployment. Mlatsheni (2014) argued that a lack of job searching may be because of a number of financial challenges. Many unemployed youth including graduates are influenced by circumstances (Posel *et al.*, 2014). Such constraints can include a lack of financial resources, obstacles such as poverty and a lack of labour market information as to where job opportunities are. Indeed, in their study on unemployment in South Africa, Kingdon and Knight (2007) determined that the unemployed who were not actively searching for jobs were on average more underprivileged and destitute than those actively searching for jobs. Findings from Mlatsheni (2014) also revealed that more than 70 per cent of the youth who were not searching for jobs in the Khayelitsha district reasoned that their location restrained them from searching for jobs, as financial means restricted their ability to access job searching resources.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The sample frame included graduates both employed and unemployed, disregarding where they live, who successfully completed their higher education qualification (i.e. at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent and higher educational qualifications) at a South African university and are 35 years or younger in order to fit in the young graduate category. A quantitative research method was deemed suitable for the purpose of this study.

Primary data were collected using a survey questionnaire conducted from 17 July to 31 August 2015. The questionnaire had three sections, where the first section addressed demographical information, followed by questions relating to education and employment and the final section considered the perceived causes of graduate unemployment, which made use of a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These responses were further categorised into two groups where those that strongly agreed and agreed were divided into one group, and similarly, those that strongly disagreed and disagreed were also combined into one group. A sample of 233 graduates was involved and as indicated by Swanepoel *et al.* (2010), a sample size (n) bigger than 30 is considered adequate for normal distribution. Therefore, statistically the 233 sample size is large enough. Participation was voluntary and all participants were guaranteed of anonymity and obscurity. For ethical purposes, the name of the graduates' university is not disclosed.

3.1 Data analysis

This study made use of descriptive analysis and cross tabulations to explore the perceptions of the causes of graduate unemployment between employed and unemployed graduates. A chi-square test was used to further determine whether there are significant differences in the responses of employed and unemployed graduates. Only significant causes were discussed with regard to the subsection on empirical findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Demographics

Table 1 provides the demographic profile of the sample (N=233). The sample distribution by age was fairly balanced with graduates between 21-24 at 35.6 per cent, 25-29 at 33 per cent and 30-35 at 31 per cent. In the gender category, there

was a balanced distribution with females making up 57 per cent of the sample and males at 42 per cent.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the sample (N=233)

Category	Factor	N (Valid %)
Gender	Female	57.9
	Male	42.1
Race	Black	57.9
	White	39.9
	Coloured	1.3
	Indian/Asian	0.9
Age	21-24	35.6
	25-29	33.0
	30-35	31.3
Field of Study	Commerce	53
	Science	11
	Humanities	25
	Education	11
Educational Level	1 st Degree	35
	Honours	43
	Postgraduate diploma	3
	Masters/MBA	19
Most popular majors	Human resources/Industrial Psychology/Labour relations	19.3
	Economics & Risk management	18.5
	Accounting & Finance	15.9
	Marketing & Business management	10.3
	Government & Political studies	4.3
	Computer Sciences and IT	6.9
	Psychology and Sociology	5.6

Source: Survey data (2015)

In terms of race, there were more Black graduates at 58 per cent followed by White graduates (40%). Coloureds and Indians accounted for 1.3 per cent and 0.9 per cent respectively. A large number of the participants have an honours degree (43%), followed by a bachelor's degree (35%) and a master's degree (19%). Only 3 per cent of the surveyed respondents have postgraduate diplomas. The university in question has only the following fields of study; Education, Science, Commerce and Humanities. Table 1 illustrates that over half of those surveyed had a qualification in Commerce (53%). The second field of study, which had the largest number of respondents, was Humanities at 25 per cent, which was

followed by Education and Science both at 11 per cent. From the list of major modules, only the following were the most popular among graduates. The major module with the highest number of respondents was Economics and Risk management and Human resources at 19 per cent respectively, followed by Accounting (16%), Marketing and business management (10.3%), Computer sciences and information technology (6.9%), Psychology and sociology (5.9%) and Government and political studies at 4,3 per cent.

Table 2 indicates the cross tabulation results between employment status and various variables. The results between employment status and race show that within the various races, Black graduates face higher unemployment rates (15.6%) compared to other races, in particular, White graduates who have a 5.4 per cent unemployment rate. Part of the explanation for the differences in the unemployment rates for Black and White graduates can be attributed to the fact that research shows that a higher proportion of Black graduates graduate from institutions that are historically disadvantaged than White graduates whose majority graduate from formerly advantaged institutions, which are historically advantaged (Van Broekhuizen, 2016). Some of these Black graduates do not do well in the schooling years and as a result end up not getting marks that will qualify them for admittance into hard science qualifications or even formerly advantaged universities that are perceived to provide quality education.

Cross tabulation analysis also indicate that unemployment rates are higher among graduates between the ages of 21 and 24, and 25 and 29 respectively at 14.5 per cent and 14.3 per cent, compared to those in the 30-35 age category. Cross tabulation between field of study and employment status indicated that higher unemployment rates are higher in the Humanities (20.3%) and Commerce (8.9%) fields of studies compared to Education and Science at 7.7 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. This can be explained by the fact that the number of graduates coming from this field of study outweighs the number of jobs available in the field. A further explanation could be attributed to the fact that some of the qualifications in Humanities do not '*directly prepare graduates for a profession*'.

Table 2 also illustrates results of the cross tabulation analysis that was done on employment status and majors held by graduates. Comparing all modules, the major module with the highest number of unemployed respondents was Government and Political studies (40%), Psychology and Sociology studies (23%), and Human Resources and Labour relations (13.3%). Another 10.8 per

cent majored in Accounting and Finance, followed by Marketing and Business management (8.3%). Economics and Risk management had the lowest share of unemployment (7%).

Table 2: Cross tabulation analysis between employment status and various variables

Category	Factor	Chi-square Sig.	Employment status	
			Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)
Race	Black	0.05	84.4	15.6
	White		94.6	5.4
	Coloured		100	0.0
	Indian/Asian		100	0.0
Age	21-24	0.070	85.5	14.5
	25-29		85.7	14.3
	30-35		95.9	4.1
Field of Study	Commerce	0.065	91.1	8.9
	Science		96	4
	Humanities		79.7	20.3
	Education		92.3	7.7
Most popular majors	HR/Industrial	0.049	86.7	13.3
	Psychology/Labour relations		93	7
	Economics & Risk management		89.20	10.8
	Accounting		91.7	8.3
	Marketing & Business management		60	40
	Government & Political studies		76.9	23.1
	Psychology and Sociology		100	0
	Computer Sciences & IT			

Source: Survey data (2015)

4.2 Empirical findings

Table 3: Perceptions of graduate unemployment among both employed and unemployed graduates

Status	Perceptions	Agree	Disagree	Sig.
Employed	Lack of job market information	75.8	24.2	.116
	Lack of job searching skills	76.8	23.2	.035
	No professional networks	81.2	18.8	.004
	No formal working experience	89.9	10.1	.065
	Mismatch between qualifications attained and available jobs	74.4	25.6	.007

Status	Perceptions	Agree	Disagree	Sig.
	HEI attended	42.5	57.5	.272
	Age	38.6	61.4	.079
	Race	52.7	47.3	.628
	High cost of job search	53.1	46.9	.946
	Geographical area one lives in	80.2	19.8	.030
	Lack of self-esteem or confidence	78.7	21.3	.005
	Corruption (e.g. no connections)	75	25	.060
Unemployed	Lack of job market information	61.5	38.5	.116
	Lack of job searching skills	57.7	42.3	.035
	No professional networks	92.3	7.7	.004
	No formal working experience	88.5	11.5	.065
	Mismatch between qualifications attained and available jobs	69.2	30.8	.007
	HEI attended	53.8	46.2	.272
	Age	26.9	73.1	.079
	Race	57.7	42.3	.628
	High cost of job searching	53.8	46.2	.946
	Geographical area one lives in	61.5	38.5	.030
	Lack of self-esteem or confidence	53.8	46.2	.005
	Corruption (e.g. no connections)	76.5	23.5	.060

Source: Author's own calculations using survey data (2015)

Table 3 illustrates that the majority of graduates both employed and unemployed believe that the inability to effectively search for a job and living far from job centres are one of the factors that influence employment prospects of graduates. This may be explained by the fact that jobs in South Africa are situated in cities that are far from where average South Africans live. There are, however, other possible explanations especially considering the fact that many unemployed youth are influenced by circumstances that may include poverty, financial constraints, thus preventing them from effectively searching for jobs. Many individuals wishing to go and search for employment simply cannot afford to do so.

A substantial number of employed graduates (81.2%) and unemployed graduates (92.3%) reported that they believed not having the right people by your side can often affect a graduate's job prospects. This was also statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance. At times knowing the right people can open doors of opportunities and it is through referrals that certain people are hired. On the

other hand, the majority of the sampled graduates (both employed and unemployed) strongly regard the lack of connections as one of the perceived causes of graduate unemployment. In Baldry's (2013) study, graduates reported that connections often resulted in expensive bribery during recruitment, and not paying the bribe resulted in unemployment.

The majority of the sampled population agreed that the lack of formal working experience is one of the causes of graduate unemployment. About 89 per cent of the unemployed graduates agreed compared to only 12 per cent that did not. A possible explanation for this may be that employers are doubtful about employing new labour market entrants especially those with no job expertise. Hence, preference is given to adults who have work experience and thus can handle work pressures.

Table 3 further illustrates that a large number of both employed and unemployed graduates believe that incompatibility between qualifications of graduates and the type of jobs available can result in unemployment among graduates. A possible explanation for this may be that very often many graduates graduate with qualifications that are not sought by employers especially taking into consideration the fact that outcomes and pathways are different for various fields of studies with some graduates taking longer to get a job than others. As previously discussed, employers are also of the opinion that graduates lack some of the vital skills that are needed to handle workplace pressures and demands. Another possible explanation is that while some graduates are still not competent enough to handle workplace demands, the economy of South Africa is influenced by scarce job opportunities where more jobs are being lost than created.

The majority of the respondents (both employed and unemployed graduates) felt that age does not affect employment prospects of graduates, as long as a graduate is qualified; employers overlook age, which is mostly young. From those that are employed, only 38.6 per cent perceived age to be one of the factors influencing graduate unemployment, while from the unemployed category only 26.9 per cent agreed with this item. This study's results may be explained by a number of reasons. In spite of the fact that the lack of work experience may mean something negative for younger graduates, in some cases companies may be looking for young graduates mainly because of continuity. What this means is that if graduates are young then the company is in a position to groom and employ them for quite a while. Also, companies may lean towards these young graduates for

developmental purposes since young people are vibrant and full of ideas. Lastly, although employers may prefer older employees because of experience, they additionally consider them to be expensive (Munnell *et al.*, 2006).

A lack of confidence in ones abilities also prevailed as a significant cause that the unemployed graduates in the sample perceive to influence unemployment. Furthering of studies is fuelled by an expectation that a higher education qualification will result in better employment prospects. If such an expectation is not met, the resulting effect is a loss of confidence in higher education and frustration with society at large (The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), 2015:5). AEO (2012) found that a lot of the discouraged youth had given up job searching mainly because they were excluded from the labour market since they did not have what potential employers were looking for.

The most obvious findings that emerged from the analysis are that there were no statistically significant association between graduate unemployment and the following causes: lack of job market information, race, high cost of job searching, and higher education institution attended, differing from the findings of Baldry (2013), Moleke (2010), Pauw *et al.* (2008).

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main goal of the current study was to investigate the perceptions of graduates towards graduate unemployment. The paper considers the perceptions of both employed and unemployed graduates to explore the difference in their perceptions. The results demonstrated that both employed and unemployed graduates concurred with the vast majority of the recorded reasons for graduate unemployment, despite the fact that there were more unemployed graduates differing in contrast with employed graduates. In simple terms, more unemployed graduates disagree with the perceived causes of graduate unemployment. The perceived causes of graduate unemployment centred around a lack of job searching skills, having no networks, a lack of formal working experience, incompatibility between qualifications of graduates and the types of jobs available, age, being geographically secluded from job hubs, a lack of confidence and inappropriate practices during recruitment such as not having connections. Both employed and unemployed graduates disagreed that the age of a graduate negatively influences their employment prospects, thus a cause of graduate unemployment. The study also indicated differences in the responses of employed

and unemployed graduates. Unemployed graduates regard the HEI they attended as one of the reasons why they may be unemployed. However, the response of employed graduates did not regard the type of HEI attended by graduates as a cause of graduate unemployment. Response differences were also seen in the lack of job searching skills as a cause of graduate unemployment. A high number of unemployed graduates compared to the number of employed graduates, seem to disagree that a lack of job searching skills was one of the causes of unemployment, arguing that perhaps the reason they are unemployed is more external than it is their fault. The most obvious findings emerged from the analysis is that there were no statistically significant association between employment status (i.e. both employed and unemployed graduates) and the following causes of graduate unemployment: lack of job market information, race, high cost of job searching, and HEI graduates attended.

Organisations and higher educational institutions must cooperate to provide career guidance to graduates in order to guarantee a selection of employable choices of courses. Career guidance should go as far as ensuring that it is compiled to fit the requirements of the labour market as well as bridging the gap between graduates and potential employers through regular effective recruitment drives. This will assist with reducing the problem of qualification incompatibilities. Students and graduates should also be made aware of the benefits of vocational employment that improve prospects of finding employment. The researcher does, however, consider the sample size insufficient to generalise the findings to the entire South Africa. Further research must aim to get a more representative sample.

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