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CHAPTER 17

POST-GRADUATION TRAJECTORIES OF YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS

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Introduction

What graduates end up doing after they leave university has become of increasing concern and interest over the last few decades. In these times of increased participation in higher education, growing economic uncertainties and neoliberal politics, an increasing number of stakeholders are interested in graduate outcomes. While parents and students seek access to universities with better employment prospects, financial constraints continue to influence university access with increasing cost-sharing policies. University managers on their part have used graduate tracer studies as marketing tools and a proxy for academic or institutional quality. From the perspective of the employers, though, the notion of core employment skills is increasingly becoming a fluid concept due to changing technological advances and hence changing professional demands.

These combined effects mean that there has been a growing focus in the higher education literature on graduate employment – whether graduates are employed or not, and if so at what level. From a survey of UK research in this field, Behle et al. (2015) show how relatively recent is this concern – until the 1990s only a minority of UK university students had a clear sense of what they would do after graduation. This lack of knowledge did not significantly affect graduate outcomes, as a university degree or certificate provided an almost secure path to decent employment. An anticipated relationship between university participation and decent employment is now a significant policy driver, especially given that the introduction of tuition fees means that the choice to enter higher education is now linked to an ability to repay these fees through graduate earnings. In the UK the research focuses substantially on whether graduates are getting ‘graduate jobs’ and this enquiry is focused not only on whether graduates are able to use their skills and knowledge, but also, crucially, on whether the choice to enter higher education ‘pays off’ for the individual.
Linked to the experience of graduates in the UK, there is increasing evidence also in the US context that the working aspirations of graduates are not always being met once they get into the world of work. Especially in large corporates, over half of graduates feel they are underemployed, with one in seven graduates saying they did not want to work in a large company (Smith, LaVelle, Lyons, & Silverstone, 2016). In a context such as Australia, the notion of graduate employment is perceived slightly differently since there about 72% of undergraduate students are already in full-time employment. All the same, this literature does cite some concerns on graduate underemployment (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018).

While researching graduate employability continues to be a critical issue across higher education systems globally, it can be argued that contextual realities shape and inform the focus and policy interventions. Based on the above introduction, it can be seen that graduate outcome research is strongly shaped by the higher education system, the socio-economic dynamics and even historical patterns.

In the South African context, as elsewhere, studies on graduate outcomes and students' post-graduation trajectories have tended to focus mostly on employment patterns, and less on other aspects such as whether graduates are self-employed or involved in other valuable pursuits (such as parenting, care-giving or further study) or on the wider civic purposes of higher education. This focus on employment patterns is not surprising in the South African context, with high levels of unemployment (van der Berg & van Broekhuizen, 2012) and where graduates have some of the highest rates of return in the world on their personal investment in higher education (Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014). Nevertheless, although this chapter focuses predominately on the employment trajectories of graduates, it will also argue for the value of research into the other non-employment outcomes of higher education, such as the influence of higher education on graduates’ dispositions and attitudes toward civic matters such as political activism, democratic citizenship and serving as role models for others in their various communities.

An overview of the South African context

The debate on graduate destinations in South Africa occurs within a different context, with its own distinct apartheid legacy of racialised participation in the economy and in the education system. Across the board, unemployment is a significant concern. Overall, South Africa has high levels of unemployment – 36.7% defined broadly (including those who have given up looking for work and 26.7% defined narrowly (only considering the population actively looking for work) (StatsSA, 2018). Youth unemployment is at 52%. While South Africa industrialised faster than other African contexts from the late 1800s, colonial and apartheid policies meant that access to higher education and employment opportunities was racially stratified. The higher education system and the economy never accommodated the majority
black and African population into the mainstream education system and subsequently into formal employment. Therefore, changing the post-apartheid socio-economic situation has not been an easy undertaking.

The apartheid education legacy also plays into this debate. Public schooling remains highly uneven, with the majority black population receiving education of a significantly inferior quality, even when compared across the continent. In the 2017 World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report, South Africa’s education system is ranked 134th out of 138, with quality of maths and science education ranked last of the 138 countries. During apartheid, universities were racially segregated, and while formally this system has been changed, historically black universities (HBUs) continue to suffer lower levels of resourcing and perceptions of quality of education. Walker and Fongwa (2017) note that the top six most preferred universities by major private sector employers are historically white advantaged universities. Considering the added complexities of access to these universities linked to academic quality, funding and institutional posture, interrogating graduate employment in South Africa becomes even more complex.

Thus the debate on graduate destinations in South Africa has been centred in the first instance on employment and unemployment for the masses who had been excluded from the mainstream labour force. There has been an anticipation in post-apartheid policy that the education system would be a major driver of social and economic redress (Department of Education, 1997), and that widened access to higher education would result in improved economic circumstances for the previously disenfranchised majority.

Concerns that black graduates were not moving as easily into the workplace as had been assumed arose in the early 2000s (Moleke, 2005), and this continues to be a focus for public concern almost two decades later. Social media frequently features university graduates standing on the side of the road with placards, in the manner of indigents asking for work. At the same time, there has been a substantial amount of research on this topic over the last two decades, and in this chapter we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of this work.

Two distinct modes of research have informed this debate: the Labour Force Surveys conducted on the broad working population, and Graduate Destination Surveys which target graduates from specific institutions. We start with an overview of the various studies that have been conducted in these domains.

**Key studies in the field**

Since the early 2000s there have been studies of graduate employment in South Africa that use the annual Labour Force Surveys (LFS) conducted by Statistics South Africa, the government’s...
statistics organ. It is important to note that these surveys are used to provide estimates around patterns in the full population that participates in the labour force. There are a few important issues to note upfront when using these analyses for information about graduate destinations which create limitations for the interpretations that can be made from their findings. Firstly, graduates form a small part of this overall population, and unemployed graduates a particularly small part, and so measurement errors get magnified – for example it is noted that estimates of graduate unemployment from these surveys have been made off raw data comprising 50–80 unemployed graduates (van der Berg & van Broekhuizen, 2012). Secondly, it must be noted that these surveys are of the entire working age population; for graduates therefore this includes those who graduated up to four decades previously, and the impact of recent changes in higher education and in the youth population will be somewhat muted in overall statistics. These analyses do allow for some disaggregation by age cohort, but again small sample sizes start to become an issue at this level of analysis.

Early studies based on the LFS data suggested that graduate unemployment was a significant and growing problem (see, e.g. Bhorat, 2004; Kraak, 2010; Pauw, Oosthuizen, & van der Westhuizen, 2008) with Bhorat (2004) suggesting that unemployment of those with tertiary qualifications increased by 139% between 1995 and 2002.

However, subsequent work by van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) raised some important methodological questions regarding previous studies. Firstly, some studies have defined graduates as referring to all of those with post-school qualifications. This is a very wide definition including those with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) qualifications and in fact bachelors graduates are a minority in this group. Research shows very different employment trends across these categories and it is therefore suggested to hold to a narrower definition of a graduate as one with a bachelors degree. Secondly, some studies only use two data points from which to draw trends. It is also noted that the October 1995 LFS, which for some studies is the starting point, did show a surprisingly low rate of graduate unemployment.

For the purposes of this chapter therefore, we will focus on the more recent work by van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) which utilises this narrower definition of graduate, and which also uses multiple data points over a longer term period (from 1995 till 2011) from which to elucidate trends. We also refer to subsequent work (van Broekhuizen, 2016) which draws on LFS data in combination with Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) data on graduate characteristics from the different institutions.

Compared to the Labour Force Surveys, in which graduates are a small proportion of the labour force surveyed and the focus is on the full working population, Graduate Destination Surveys (GDS) allow for a closer examination of the situation for graduates, since they target graduates from particular cohorts and institutions. Graduate Destination Surveys (also called Graduate Tracer Studies) are well established in developed countries, but are only more recently being used in developing countries, not least because of the resource and logistical implications to obtain these data. Thus in South Africa these surveys have been infrequent. Data in the
GDS is dependent on who responds to the invitation to participate. The first issue is that these have tended to have low response rates, thus making statistical analyses difficult, but moreover it is hard to assess the bias inherent in the profile of respondents compared to the cohort (Branson & Leibbrandt, 2017; du Toit, Kraak, Favish, & Fletcher, 2014). A few of these GDS are described below.

In South Africa, the first national graduate destination studies were conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Following on the work of Moleke (2005), the book by Letseka, Cosser, Breier, & Visser (2010) reports a follow-up study by the HSRC which surveyed the 2002 cohort of both ‘leavers’ (drop-outs) and graduates at seven selected HEIs (University of the Witwatersrand, Tshwane University of Technology, Stellenbosch University, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of the Western Cape, University of Fort Hare and University of Limpopo). A 16% response rate (based on the full cohorts of both leavers and graduates) was received on this postal survey. The detailed analysis of this survey is presented in the chapters of the book by Moleke (2010) and Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser (2010).

In 2013, the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) published results from a study of 2010 graduates from all four universities in the Western Cape – University of Cape Town (UCT), Stellenbosch University (SU), the University of the Western Cape (UWC), and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT); graduates were contacted in 2012 (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013). Using a combination of an online survey supplemented by telephonic interviews, they achieved a response rate of 22.5%. To address the issue of potential skewedness in respondents, they adopted a statistical weighting procedure (du Toit et al., 2014), though Branson and Leibbrandt (2017) point out that this is only valid if the characteristics used for weighting are those most influential on employment outcomes.

More recently, Rogan and Reynolds (2015) conducted a graduate tracer study in another geographical area of South Africa, the Eastern Cape. The study approached a stratified random sample of all Rhodes University (RU) and University of Fort Hare (UFH) graduates who had completed a three- or four-year bachelors degree in either 2010 or 2011. As with the CHEC study, telephonic interviews were used to supplement an online survey – remarkable response rates were achieved (39% for the UFH and 47% at RU).

Another recent study (Baldry, 2016) surveyed #1175 graduates who graduated between 2006 and 2012, from a market survey database (15% response rate) of graduates across all 23 public higher education institutions.

Findings

Overall levels of graduate unemployment

The concept of ‘unemployment’, as noted earlier, needs some definition. Economists differentiate between a ‘narrow’ concept which only focuses on those not in work and looking for work, while the ‘broader’ concept includes those who want work but have given up looking
for it. In terms of graduates, it is noted that this group is relatively small in the overall population of the South African working age population, and thus the narrow definition tends to be utilised. Thus it must be noted that there is a group of graduates who are not employed or unemployed (narrowly defined). These include those in full-time study, but also those who for other reasons have chosen not to be working.

Using LFS data from nearly two decades, van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) show that overall graduate unemployment did peak in 2001 – at 6.75%. It reduced between 2001 and 2007 and has edged slightly upwards since 2008, although it is relatively stable at between 4 and 4.5%. Taking statistical considerations into account, the peak in 2001/2002 can be verified, but over the broader period there has been no overall change in graduate unemployment, contrary to earlier studies on this topic drawing on more limited data as discussed above. The authors note that the response to worsening economic conditions has been muted for graduates compared to the overall population, where an increase in unemployment has been noted since 2008. Another important issue that this report emphasises is the dramatic increase in the total number of graduates in the labour force between 1995 (around 450 000) to 2011 (over a million), but that this has not resulted in an increase in graduate unemployment.

Van Broekhuizen (2016) offers a useful graphical overview of these findings, reproduced here as Figure 1.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1** Narrow unemployment rates from the LFS comparing graduates, diplomates and the overall working-age population (reproduced from van Broekhuizen 2016)

*Note:* Own estimations using StatsSA’s March 2000 LFP – QLFS2015Q4 data. Estimates are weighted and are calculated only for the working-age population (15–64 year-olds).

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24 Measured in terms of the narrow definition, used through this section. For graduates it is noted that broad and narrow unemployment rates are close, given the small numbers of discouraged job seekers (due to low overall unemployment).
Focusing on more recent graduates, the age cohort analysis in this study is important, although as noted earlier it suffers from small sample sizes. Here the study does note a concerning relative increase in unemployment levels for the cohorts aged 20–39 between 2008 and 2011 – from about 10% (historical level) to about 15%. This might be related to the global economic downturn of 2008 and its effect in subsequent years.

Moving to GDS findings, it becomes possible to get some sense of trajectories in employment as opposed to the LFS snapshot. Graduates get asked at some period after graduation about what has happened since then until the present. Thus, analysing the HSRC data, Moleke (2010) found that within one year of graduation, only 84% of graduates had found work, and looking over the whole two-year period since graduation, that 23% of their respondents had experienced unemployment at some point. The Baldry (2016) study with a market sample across all institutions found 8.3% were unemployed and looking for work. The other GDS studies are discussed below, since their findings are pertinent to particular institutions.

**Disaggregation by race**

Overall, in terms of race, white graduates, irrespective of the field of study, seem to experience less unemployment (narrowly defined) compared to those from other population groups. Van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) show that the overall labour force participation rates for black graduates are highest; this seems to be because across their life spans there are a fairly large number of white adults who choose not to work due to other financial resources.

Van der Berg and van Broekhuizen (2012) show a peak in black graduate unemployment of 14% in 2000, reducing by half to about 7% by 2011. The racial gap in graduate unemployment has substantially narrowed, although white graduate unemployment is still lower and has been relatively stable at under 2% over the whole period, as can be seen in Figure 2 below reproduced from van Broekhuizen (2016).

The findings across the GDS studies confirm the differential between black and white unemployment rates. In terms of descriptive statistics, for example, the CHEC study shows that unemployment was highest among black African graduates (20%) compared to coloured (7.8%) and white graduates (4%). In short, there is no study that has not shown this differential in absolute employment rates. Further work has thus sought to look more closely at what this means. Not surprisingly, factors such as social capital and access to workplace networks are closely linked to race (to be discussed below). Another key issue, given South Africa’s highly stratified higher education landscape, is to look at how employment rates correlate to institutions (and to field of study).


**Figure 2** Comparison of narrow unemployment rates from the LFS for black and white graduates

![Graph showing unemployment rates](image)

- Black
- White

**Note:** Own estimations using Stats SA’s March 2000 LFP – QLFS2015Q4 data. Estimates are weighted and are calculated only for the working-age population (15–64 year-olds).

**Source:** Reproduced from van Broekhuizen (2016)

**Influence of institution and field of study**

Bhorat et al. (2010), analysing the HSRC data, show that while racially skewed unemployment did seem to track racially skewed institutional profiles (with HBUs having largely black enrolments and poorer employment outcomes compared to HWUs), unemployment rates were also racially skewed within institutions: 42% for black graduates from HWUs vs. 10% for whites at HWUs. This is linked to the historical context and is often poorly represented in public discussions over graduate employment.

The CHEC study found an overall unemployment rate of 10% two years after graduation for these Western Cape graduates, noting though that this differed significantly across institutions – 16% for Cape Peninsula University of Technology graduates and 14% for University of the Western Cape graduates compared to 5% and 6% for Stellenbosch University and University Cape Town respectively. Rogan and Reynolds (2015), surveying two to three years after graduation, found an unemployment rate of 7% for Rhodes graduates and 20% for UFH graduates and understandably do not report an average unemployment rate across the study. Findings from the Walker and Fongwa (2017) study confirm the above mentioned findings as all graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand who wanted to work were employed, while about 50% of graduates from the University of Venda were still searching for work about one year after graduation.

Van Broekhuizen (2016) presents a new methodology that links LFS data to that in HEMIS. He offers a probabilistic estimate of employment based on race and institution
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attended, based on a statistical linking of characteristics of LFS respondents with individuals in the HEMIS database for given institutional types. This analysis confirms that for black graduates, employment is better for those who have attended an HWU. But contrary to other findings, it suggests that within an HWU, black graduates have better employment probabilities than white graduates.

Regarding field of study, there has long been a concern that Arts and Humanities have poor employment prospects (following the ‘mismatch’ or ‘scarce skills’ thesis (see, for example, Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016), and early work by Moleke (2005) seemed to confirm this. While the GDS surveys have been limited in their capacity to explore the influence of field of study due to sample size, none of them have further confirmed this, and in fact the Rogan study explicitly shows that unemployment for humanities graduates is not significantly higher than for other fields of study. The only area with consistently better employment outcomes is education (Bhorat et al., 2010; Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013; Rogan & Reynolds, 2015).

Socio-economic background and accessing the workplace

Baldry’s (2016) multivariate analysis showed that only three variables were statistically related to unemployment: race (12.7% for black African participants compared to 2.5% for white participants), socio-economic status (26% unemployment for those who responded that they struggled with money for basics such as food and clothes) and coming from a family in receipt of financial support (for the latter category, 28.5% graduate unemployment was noted). While educational variables such as institution and field of study were associated with employment outcomes, when considered in conjunction with other variables these were found to be statistically non-significant.

The two recent GDS studies also sought to find out information on job search strategies. CHEC noted that the use of social networks was more prevalent amongst graduates from UCT and SU. Overall, 28% of white graduates report benefitting from social capital in comparison with only 11% of black African graduates. The Rogan study found that for RU graduates, the most common strategy was through personal contacts/networks/social media (about 50%); for UFH graduates, mostly through newspaper advertisements (36%). Walker and Fongwa (2017) also identified the role of social capital as a critical factor in searching and securing employment before and after graduation.

These studies also compared private and public sector employment. CHEC found that 47% of all graduates were employed in the public sector – education; health and social work; provincial and municipal government; arts, culture and sport. Here again there were some institutional differences: UWC (64%), SU (56%), UCT (42%), CPUT (41%). The Rogan study found that 73% of RU graduates are employed in the private sector, while 67% of UFH graduates are employed in government (public sector).
Discussion and conclusion

The issue of graduate unemployment is a key matter for debate in South Africa and thus it is not surprising that research on graduate destinations tends to focus in the first instance on employment, and the literature reviewed in this chapter reflects that. This can also be linked to the government’s drive to provide economic opportunities to the previously disadvantaged. Our focus has been especially on Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) findings.

A key distinction between the LFS data and the GDS data is that the former focuses on the full labour force, while the latter tend to focus on recent graduates from particular institutions. The LSF age cohort analysis notes that graduate unemployment is higher in younger cohorts and offers a range of reasons for this. Historically for the cohort aged 20–39 this was in the region of 10% graduate unemployment, nearly double that for the full labour force. Towards 2011 a substantial increase in unemployment towards 15% was noted for this group. This finding needs to be borne in mind when considering the GDS studies. Here, looking at recent graduates, higher unemployment rates are noted. The recent studies are possibly worthy of more focus since some methodological issues have been ironed out. From these studies the impact of race on unemployment is clear. The CHEC study shows 20% unemployment amongst black African graduates, the same level as that found in the Rogan study for UFH graduates (mostly black African). Both these studies note the impact of social capital, with white graduates more likely to get jobs through personal contacts, and black graduates through advertisements. The recent Baldry (2016) study takes this further, disaggregating beyond race to show the impact of socio-economic status on employment.

Overall, therefore, in South Africa a young person is generally better off if they manage to get a university degree, with graduates having substantially lower unemployment rates overall than non-graduates. But these studies also show that within graduates, race and socio-economic background (very much still correlated in South Africa) have a substantial differentiating effect: a white graduate with degree in hand having access to other crucial cultural and social capital to get a job is better off than a black graduate with the same degree, but without the additional social capitals coming from family and community background. Across the studies it is also suggested that this impact is far stronger even than field of study and institution, although the latter especially is of course also correlated with race and socio-economic background. Black graduates are more likely to look for work in the public than in the private sector. This is not surprising especially with government initiatives here, and a broader pattern in post-independence sub-Saharan Africa of the anticipated link between graduates and service in the public sector. However, this pattern might become a concern in South Africa as we face an impending constriction in this sector of employment.

Another critique of the current approach to researching graduate employment has been made by Koen (2006) who notes that this research seldom locates the observed
outcomes within a broader understanding of the economic and political factors that shape opportunities for graduates. Bozalek and Boughey (2012) also characterise this research as ‘misframing’ the issues in that graduate outcomes are ‘depoliticised’ when taken out of the broader context.

Others have argued for an expanded conceptualisation of graduate outcomes research that accounts for the human development aspects of higher education within a context of inequality of opportunity and outcome (Fongwa, in press; Walker & Fongwa, 2017). Specifically, students at historically black universities continue to experience under-resourced and lower quality higher education, which compounds what for many of them are poorer social backgrounds – their employment outcomes cannot be analysed without a location within this broader context and its historical legacy.

Patterns of employment in the public and private sector also seem under-explored in GDSs. Graduate outcomes research in South Africa has noted the private sector employer bias towards a limited number of institutions (historically white advantaged universities), and this bias will likely increase with the advance of a globalised economy and global rankings in higher education. This raises further crucial questions for publicly funded higher education in South Africa and its connection to broader societal challenges.

In the South African context, as elsewhere, studies on graduate outcomes have tended to focus mostly on employment patterns, and less on the wider civic purposes of higher education. In this light we might need to reconsider the contents of the GDSs – while surveys are always limited, it might be useful to conceptualise a graduate tracer study that utilises survey items that gauge graduates’ attitudes to key societal issues such as racial integration, income inequality, social justice etc. Such a study might draw on existing surveys, for example those that survey US college students’ attitudes towards civic involvement (for example, Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002), or African-based studies on higher education’s contribution to democracy (Mattes & Luescher-Mamashela, 2012). These surveys measure civic skills, diversity and social skills, attitudes towards democracy and good citizenship.

Such survey questions would capture the broader, societal outcomes of higher education, emphasising higher education’s role in promoting democratic citizenship and contributing to the public good. This would broaden the current, narrower focus of the graduate tracer surveys on employability, underpinned by human capital theory. Given the huge investment directed towards higher education by the state, such surveys would give an indication of the extent to which higher education was delivering on the public good aspect of its mission in terms of developing graduates with a commitment to critical citizenship and social justice.

In conclusion, then, it is suggested that much of the current research into graduate outcomes focuses on employment trajectories of graduates and rests on too narrow a conception of the purposes of higher education. While investment in human capital is part of the story, it doesn’t tell us enough about the potential impact of higher education on society. There is a need for further graduate survey research into the broader, non-employment outcomes of higher education.
References


