18 Exploring Differences in South African Graduate Outcomes

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CHAPTER 18

EXPLORING DIFFERENCES IN SOUTH AFRICAN GRADUATE OUTCOMES

Samuel Fongwa, Delia Marshall and Jennifer M. Case

Introduction

Interest in graduate employability tends to centre on the role of graduates in the workplace and the capacity of higher education to prepare them for the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012). Graduate employability has been argued to be a result of a combination of personal qualities, skills of various kinds and subject understanding (Yorke, 2001). These graduate skills are often referred to as ‘employable skills’, ‘graduate attributes’ or ‘generic skills’ (Barrie, 2006; Shivoro, Shalyefu, & Kadhila, 2018). Moreau and Leathwood (2006) introduce another layer of complexity, relating to the nature of the labour market and related policies. They argue that the transition from university to employment is not a direct function of formal credentials, which are increasingly becoming a less reliable guide to success in the adaptable and changing labour market. Tomlinson (2012), similarly, notes that the massification of higher education may be amplifying class–cultural differences in access to higher education, as well as to economic outcomes in the labour market. For example, as Moreau and Leathwood (2006, p. 308) note, graduate skills are often socially constructed along gendered or racialised lines and most often ‘the decision to appoint a candidate is not the result of a purely rational and neutral decision’. In a range of higher education contexts, university status, social class and access to social networks are also seen to be linked to employability outcomes (see, for example, Gonzalez-Roma, Gamboa, & Peiro 2018; Morrison, 2014; Strathdee, 2011).

In the South African context the situation is not dissimilar. Graduate outcome has been observed to align, inter alia, with field of study, university graduated from, and race (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013; Letseka, Cosser, Breier, & Visser, 2010). This chapter uses empirical evidence from two recent studies to interrogate the intersection between social background and graduate outcome in South Africa.
Although many graduate outcomes studies focus predominantly on employment, we also argue that assessing graduate outcome within a framework of human development and social justice cannot be limited to employment alone. We need to consider graduate outcomes as encompassing the wider cultural and social benefits of higher education, and higher education's role in contributing to the broader development agenda and in developing critical citizens and public good professionals (Nixon, 2011; Singh, 2014; Walker & McLean, 2013). Graduate outcomes should go beyond employment outcomes to encompass graduates’ attitudes toward social justice, sustainability, diversity and democracy (McCowan, 2012).

**Theoretical framework**

In the field of human development, the capability approach (CA) has been widely regarded as an alternative framework for measuring economic growth and development (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1999); see Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion). The CA provides a nuanced approach in measuring well-being based on individual circumstances and can be used to interrogate graduate outcome studies from an individual viewpoint. While approaches such as graduate destination studies and labour market surveys are important in understanding broad trends and making broader policies, they fail to provide an explanatory account of the differences that are found for graduates even from the same university and field of study. The capabilities approach, with its interest in individual people’s ability to choose to live their lives in accordance with what they value, offers a rich conceptual framework to examine the impact of higher education on graduate outcomes.

**Theoretical framework**

In the field of human development, the capability approach (CA) has been widely regarded as an alternative framework for measuring economic growth and development (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1999); see Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion). The CA provides a nuanced approach in measuring well-being based on individual circumstances and can be used to interrogate graduate outcome studies from an individual viewpoint. While approaches such as graduate destination studies and labour market surveys are important in understanding broad trends and making broader policies, they fail to provide an explanatory account of the differences that are found for graduates even from the same university and field of study. The capabilities approach, with its interest in individual people’s ability to choose to live their lives in accordance with what they value, offers a rich conceptual framework to examine the impact of higher education on graduate outcomes.

Sen (1999, p. 235) asserts that ‘the focus of the capability approach is thus not just on what a person actually ends up doing, but also on what she is in fact able to do, whether or not she chooses to make use of that opportunity’. Ilieva-Trichkova (2014) argues that these are not just abilities one possesses but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the external environment – political, social and economic. Sen (1999) introduces the term ‘conversion factor’ to indicate that each individual is differently positioned to convert his/her resources into capabilities. Individuals within the same system, country or region will convert goods and services into achievements differently (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). So, in the case of graduates, the ability of a graduate to convert his/her degree into gainful or valued employment depends on a number of factors which can be personal, social or environmental.

Firstly, personal conversion factors describe the personal characteristics or attributes such as physical conditions, gender, intelligence and reading ability, which assist or limit the ways in which a person converts a commodity or service into functionings. In our context, a degree that does not develop employability skills will not have the intended graduate outcome of employment, namely the functioning. Social conversion factors relate to the social structures including, inter alia, social norms, policies, hierarchies, perceptions and constructs which limit an individual from achieving desired or aspired functionings. If employers perceive that
graduates from particular universities are not employable, then even some very employable graduates from these universities might be deprived of these opportunities. Lastly, environmental conversion factors such as climate and geographical location play a key role in enhancing or limiting graduate outcomes. The location of a university could determine the ultimate degree experience and graduate outcomes, through extracurricular activity or exposure to employment opportunities or social networks that a graduate might develop during her/his studies.

While achieving employment is a key graduate outcome within higher education and government policy, knowing the constraints and enablers related to such an outcome becomes important for any just and socially inclusive policy. Using the core tenets of opportunities and functionings, the notion of conversion factors within the capability approach provides for a more nuanced and expanded understanding of the graduate outcome process. Employment as a functioning, though important, does not become the ultimate normative measure of graduate outcome (Robeyns, 2003).

Within the capability approach, freedoms thus become critical in assessing one’s well-being and functionings. This relates to ‘the range of options a person [or student/graduate] has in deciding what kind of life to lead’ (Dreze & Sen, 2002, p. 10). Any assessment of graduate outcome needs to account for the effective opportunities linked to individual aspirations from the point of access, experience and employment outcome. Graduate outcome then moves beyond the preferred alternatives one currently enjoys or experiences after graduation to focus on the level of freedom to other alternatives or the freedom to choose (Saito, 2003). Capability freedom requires an evaluation of real educational or graduate advantage which identifies the disadvantages, constraints, marginalisation and exclusions which limit one person or group of persons from aspired functionings or functionings they have reason to value (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

The studies

Evidence for this chapter was gathered from two different empirical studies both conducted between 2013 and 2015, and both aimed at interrogating graduate experience during university and after graduation. One of us was involved in the first study and two of us in the second study. In this chapter, we focus particularly on graduates’ employment outcomes, but in moving beyond a human capital approach, we also look at the development of other, broader outcomes of higher education.

In the first study25 (British Council, 2016; Walker & Fongwa, 2017) 115 final-year students were sampled across four universities (see Table 1 for details of the participants). The first university is the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) which is a traditional, historically white, research-intensive institution (HWI) in Johannesburg, the economic heartbeat of the country. Second is the University of the Free State (UFS) which is a traditional, historically white institution in Bloemfontein, a secondary city. The third university is the University of

25 This study was funded by the British Council as part of a four country study.
Venda (UNIVEN) which is a comprehensive, historically black institution (HBI) in the rural town of Thohoyandou in the Limpopo province. The fourth university is also a comprehensive university (though an HWI), now known as the Nelson Mandela University and located in Port Elizabeth, an urban city in the Eastern Cape Province. Senior students were recruited for interviews from the fields of Economic and Management Science (or Commerce), Law, Humanities, Arts and Natural Sciences, with a few engineering students. About a fifth of these students were also tracked one to two years after graduation to gain better insights into their graduate employment outcomes and some of the factors affecting them. A quantitative dimension involved the sampling of 17% of final-year students across the four institutions to provide further descriptive dimensions related to broad themes.

In the second study (Case, McKenna, Marshall, & Mogashana, 2018), 73 young people from three research-intensive universities were sampled: the University of Cape Town (UCT), a traditional, historically white institution (HWI) in Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), a traditional, historically black institution (HBI) also in Cape Town, and Rhodes University, a traditional HWI in the small town of Grahamstown. The study focused on students who had commenced higher education some six years ago at one of these three universities, and interviewed graduates, as well as those who had left university before completing their degrees (i.e. non-completers). Most of those who had graduated had entered the workforce at the time of the interview, but some were still studying either undergraduate or postgraduate, sometimes at other universities. The fields of study were in Natural Sciences and Humanities, including Arts (see Table 1 for details of the participants).

Table 1 Details of the participants in both studies

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<th>Study 1 Participant details:</th>
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<td>UNIVEN</td>
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26 NMU has recently changed its name from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University which was the name when the study was taking place in 2013–2015.
Study 2 Participant details:

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Both studies used interviews to explore not only student experiences but also their aspirations, choices, perceptions of their graduate employment prospects and outcomes. Both studies provided opportunities for students to reflect on their university experiences, as well as graduate outcomes and factors affecting their outcomes.

Crucially, the research designs are centred on different comparisons. Study 1 deliberately chose four quite different institutions, one HWI with a strong research profile, one HWI with less of a research profile, one comprehensive HWI, and one comprehensive, rural HBI. Study 2 includes three institutions which are traditional universities, two HWIs and one HBI. These three institutions have significant institutional differences around history, size, geographical location and connections to the workplace.

The focus of Study 1 was on the employability perceptions of the graduates, based on what the university is doing through curriculum and pedagogy, while Study 2 was more interested on the formative BA and BSc degrees, and where relevant it draws distinctions between these different curricula. In both studies data was collected mainly through structured interviews and analysed thematically. In this chapter we bring these two studies in conversation with each other, looking for overlapping themes, and looking for similarities and differences within the findings. While Study 1 focused only on graduates one year after graduation, Study 2 also included students who had not completed their studies for one reason or another. Of key importance in this chapter is to note the points where these studies, coming from different empirical sites and with different theoretical orientations, converge on similar findings.

Influences on employment outcomes

As noted earlier, the graduate outcomes of students, from a capabilities approach perspective, relate directly and indirectly to the level of freedoms each graduate has experienced throughout their trajectory in getting into, getting through, and getting out of higher
education. Both studies look at these full trajectories, but for the scope of this chapter we focus on their findings at the post-graduation stage of the trajectory.

From thematic analysis of data from student interviews, a number of factors emerged across both studies as strong determinants of entry to work. Interestingly, these factors had little to do with personal conversion factors (related to the qualities of the individual), but rather with social and environmental factors, most of which the students could not influence. These included the status of the university, the need for practical training and career guidance, field of study, family background or social capital, the geographical location of home and the university, and opportunities regarding public/private sector employment.

**Status and reputation of university**

Evidence from Study 1 suggests that the institution from which a degree was obtained was strongly related to employment outcomes – with all students from WITS in this sample having found work, while less than half of those from UNIVEN had (admittedly these were small sub-samples). A student from UNIVEN reflects as follows:

> I don't think there's an advantage of being a graduate of UNIVEN. Unlike most universities, the name itself, despite your grades, will speak on your behalf to people who are going to employ you. If I did my degree at WITS, obviously you are going to have a better advantage than a person who has done a degree here. (Study 1, black female UNIVEN BSc student)

From UNIVEN and UFS there were students who had resorted to postgraduate studies because they couldn't find work. Students also articulated the perception that the status of their university would affect their employment prospects, as noted by the UNIVEN student in the quote above.

In Study 1, there was a strong perception, supported by some feedback from employers, that employers in the private sector do prefer to employ from historically white institutions (HWIs) before considering candidates from the historically black institutions (HBIs). While such policies are sometimes indirectly influenced by the agreements or partnerships with departments, faculties or areas of specialisation in these universities, these practices continue to discriminate against students who, though academically qualified, are not able to access these universities.

It appears from these studies that graduates from HBIs are therefore limited by institutional reputation in accessing the workplace, and this is further exacerbated for HBIs in rural areas, where graduates have less exposure to practical experience, internships and contact with employers.
Access to urban networks of employment and social capital

... class, geographic background and race have huge, huge implications. If you are from a poorer background and black, you are unlikely to have the [right] contacts. It's ten times easier if you are white and advantaged – you are set from the get go regardless of what you are studying. (Study 1, black female WITS BA student)

As noted by a black student from Study 1 in the quote above, the influence of family was felt to extend into employment prospects, with students from wealthier families having more contacts into the workplace. Study 2 also noted the significance of social networks in accessing the workplace, and in both studies, internships offered by the private sector were seen to play a significant role in this regard. In Study 1, most students from middle class backgrounds felt that they were well positioned to take up internship opportunities which they had access to, based on their social capital. This was the first job they obtained, often explicitly short term and relatively poorly paid. From students’ accounts in Study 2, it seemed that the internship often functioned as a sort of extended interview in that a few months into the internship, the employee would be offered a better and more stable job. However, the internship model assumes that the graduate has access to other family or financial resources to survive on an intern salary. This increasing reliance on internships as a bridge between studies and the workplace raises equity questions in the South African context, where many graduates need to be earning money to support their families.

In both studies, geographical location played a key role in accessing the workplace, with most students finding work in the large cities. Study 1 noted that rural universities with limited industrial or commercial bases will be unable to provide their students with the same access to internships and practical experience as urban universities in close proximity to industry and business. This obviously has implications for employment outcomes once students graduate.

In Study 2, it was noted that participants who struggled to find work initially, or were unemployed for a period, were all students from small towns or rural villages. From a capabilities perspective, geographical location functions as an ‘environmental conversion factor’, enabling urban students to more successfully convert their degrees into employment opportunities than rural based students. While the low status of the HBU was perceived by some to possibly be a better preparation for rural jobs, including small-scale entrepreneurship, there is not adequate support for such initiatives.

The role of social capital, then, emerged as a crucial constraining or enhancing factor in determining graduate outcome. Students from rural areas, or working class backgrounds, with little or no social capital from family and friends struggled to secure internship opportunities and subsequent employment after graduation, compared to their counterparts, mostly white and middle class who had families and friends in positions to enhance their graduate outcomes.
Field of study and relevant experiences to access employment options

They say that the problem with having a BA is that you are not going to get a job, but actually the problem is that it opens up so many job opportunities that you actually just don’t know which ones to choose. … There are too many choices, you can go into journalism, into media, you can go into so many different industries and fields and you can find a job where you learn a new skill on the job as well. (Study 2, white male UCT BA Honours student)

This comment from a BA student in Study 2 runs counter to the popular perception that BA graduates struggle more than other graduates, such as BSc graduates, to get jobs. In terms of field of study, Study 1 found a perception that graduates from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields have better employment prospects, and that humanities degrees make one less employable, even though there was an acknowledgement of their being intrinsically valuable. However, Study 2 found a less clear pattern in this regard, with nearly all of the arts graduates in graduate-level work, even if not directly in the field of their major. Although several arts graduates in Study 2 felt that the degree had given them multiple employment options (as expressed in the quote above), it is likely that it was perhaps also the reputation of the particular universities from which they obtained their BA degree, and their stronger social capital, that opened employment options for them. This was also observed in Study 1, where BA graduates with stronger social ties could get employment, though not in their area of study. While graduates from STEM-related fields generally enjoy better employment prospects across both studies, Study 2 observed that the employment prospects of geology students were the most affected by labour market vagaries: the expectation that the BSc degree would lead to a good job in industry had been scuppered by the downturn in the mining sector.

The role of practical experience in enhancing job prospects was highlighted in Study 1, where students from all the universities in the study felt the need for more practical experience in the curriculum, through more practical work, internships or work integrated learning, in order to be more prepared for the workplace. Although students felt that their academic programmes were theoretically rigorous, they would have welcomed more opportunities to apply theory at practical level. They viewed this as a particularly important way of gaining work experience which, they felt, would open access to the workplace. This was seen as particularly pertinent for students from poorer backgrounds who lack the social capital to find vacation jobs or internships. Participants in Study 2 didn’t talk explicitly about needing more practical skills in order to secure a job. It may be the case that some students see practical experience as a prerequisite for securing a job after graduation, whereas in fact it may be more the case that students at higher status, urban universities can rely more on institutional reputation and social networks, which act as social ‘conversion factors’ (Sen, 1999) in accessing employment. Students in this study mentioned the role of
institutional career fairs and student organisations in helping them access the networks that could help them find employment.

Most students in Study 1, especially from HBUs and the humanities did not feel that their bachelors degree was going to be sufficient preparation for the workplace and felt that they were going to have to do postgraduate studies at least to the honours level. Study 2 followed trajectories post-bachelors graduation. Many of the young people interviewed had completed postgraduate studies at least until honours level. For the majority there was a clear narrative of how this fitted into their developing interests. In this study there was a minority for whom this seemed the only option due to difficulties in finding work.

Overall, then, these two studies show that field of study was seen as a less significant factor for employment than other conversion factors, such as university type and social connections.

Work aspirations in relation to public–private sector employment

Study 1 found that there were differences in students’ work aspirations in relation to public–private sector employment. White graduates were more interested in being self-employed, or working in the private sector or academia compared to black graduates, who intended to seek work in the public sector. In Study 2, by contrast, very few graduates took up public sector jobs. This was not unexpected: national graduate destination studies show that most of the students from traditional HWIs (the focus in Study 2) head to the private sector. This preference for the public sector is shown in Study 1 to be linked to perceptions of job security, and to the social and economic capital often needed to access private sector jobs. However, there are indications that public sector employment is shrinking, and Study 1 notes that this may force universities to increase their focus on developing graduates’ employability.

Furthermore, within both the public and private sectors, there have been a number of government policies within the labour market to give preference to graduates from previously disadvantaged groups. While such policies aim to address historic inequalities of the past, graduates in Study 1 increasingly feel that such policies constrain their abilities to gain employment in some sectors of the economy and hence their capacity to aspire to be and do what they value. These aspirations, even for white graduates, include their desire to use their engineering skills to work in the public sector. This concern about employment policies did not emerge in the interviews in Study 2, maybe not surprisingly, given that this study focused predominantly on traditional HWIs, where research has shown graduates have better employment prospects (Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser, 2010).

In summary, both these studies show that obtaining a university degree is not fully determinant of job opportunities: the ease to which a degree led to job opportunities was significantly mediated by the graduate’s urban/rural location, the type of institution attended and access to social networks. From a capabilities perspective, students were differently positioned in terms of being able to convert their university qualification to capabilities and functionings, and this led to varied graduate outcomes.
Graduate outcomes beyond employment outcomes

I think it has definitely opened my mind to many things in terms of worldviews …. it helped me aspire for more and [also] to want to question things more, and not just be happy with the status quo. It has helped me form relationships and not only on a cultural level, but on more levels than that. It helped me develop a sense of ‘who am I’ and developed me academically and holistically … (Study 2, black male Rhodes MSc student)

This comment above from a student in Study 2 reveals some of the wider outcomes of higher education beyond employment prospects. In this section, we look at what the two studies reveal about these wider outcomes of higher education. As noted in the introduction, while graduate outcomes research is often focused mainly on employment, there is an emerging literature that signals the importance of contributions to the public good. In this framing we need to examine to what extent graduates identify with social justice and democratic commitments, and whether they hold the dispositions to make an impact in this regard. A simple comparison of the findings from the two studies is not straightforward, since their research foci were different. Study 1’s focus was mainly on employability, whereas Study 2 was framed more broadly to encompass how university had influenced young people’s life paths, both in terms of employment but also more broadly. Nevertheless, we can point to some interesting findings.

Both studies asked young people what they saw as the value of their degree. In Study 1, the students’ focus was mostly on the employment outcome of university study, with little emphasis on wider development values. Only about 10% of the students surveyed rated the development of social citizenship as an important attribute. However, Study 1 found that – besides employment prospects – what students also valued from their degree was the ability to do hard work and to work with people, especially in culturally diverse contexts.

In Study 2, participants spoke more spontaneously about the intrinsic value of higher education. This may be because Study 2 was conducted several years later in the students’ trajectory, when almost all the students had secured jobs, which perhaps enabled students to reflect more fully on the wider purposes of higher education.

The broad, intrinsic benefits of education for leading a flourishing life with a love of intellectual pursuits was particularly evident in Study 2, with many participants in this study expressing how they valued the exposure to the broad fields of knowledge at university – ‘Ideas that you don’t come across in a small town’ (Study 2, white female Rhodes student, BA). They spoke about how this made them want to learn more; they had an even deeper sense of how much was ‘out there’. Contrary then to a dominant discourse that sees higher education in fairly instrumental terms, Study 2 shows much evidence that many graduates from higher education have intrinsic and passionate motivations for academic endeavours, and that this is something they take with them after completing their studies.
Besides the intrinsic value of higher education, students in both studies spoke about higher education fostering capacities that led to a sense of purpose in the world. In Study 1, students spoke of developing their self-confidence and a capacity for ‘hard work’. In Study 2, capacities developed included becoming more independent and responsible, developing resilience and the confidence to move into the workplace or further study.

Students in Study 2 talked about how higher education had fostered their personal growth, developed a more analytical way of thinking, exposed them to greater diversity, and developed a more critical consciousness about society and social justice.

*University … it shapes your thinking. You really grow up a lot and I mean not like just like generally grow up, but university teaches you how to critically assess pretty much everything, and it makes you curious, it makes you sceptical …*

(Study 2, black male UCT BSc student)

The students showed some evidence of the development of a social consciousness and nascent activism. Some of them talked about an idealism cultivated at university for doing worthwhile work and ‘saving the world’, and how this idealism sometimes is in tension with workplace expectations. This graduate in the advertising industry describes such tension:

*What I studied was politics and journalism and obviously its … very critical of the socio-economic sphere; … So I find it’s quite difficult [now working in advertising], … to switch that off in your mind, to stop being so critical of what you are looking at all the time. I mean, I write copy for an oil company!* (Study 2, white female Rhodes BA student)

These young people expressed dissatisfaction with inequality in society and clearly articulated the need for shifts in structural constraints. Graduates with these dispositions, termed by Walker and colleagues ‘public good professionals’ (Walker & McLean, 2013), are going to be crucial in addressing the radical inequities in South African society, and in strengthening democratic culture (Mattes & Luescher-Mamashela, 2012).

In both studies, there was some evidence around what students saw as the particular benefit of the institution they had attended. In Study 1, students at UNIVEN felt there was a genuine commitment to *Ubuntu*, and some also said they appreciated the strict ‘morality code’ on students’ behaviour. These students also exhibited a stronger sense of wanting to ‘give back’ to their families and communities. This institution was also characterised by a fairly homogenous student population. In Study 2, Rhodes University stood out from the other two universities in the study in terms of students’ perceptions of the institution facilitating a strong critical

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27 ‘*Ubuntu* is an African philosophy on how human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations from the moment they are born...

... We are born into a language, a kinship group, a tribe, a nation, and a family... We are mutually obligated to support each other on our respective paths to becoming unique and singular persons’ (Cornell & van Marle, 2015, p. 2).
Higher education Pathways

consciousness and awareness of social justice. Unlike the UNIVEN case, this way of thinking was not perceived to be based on a strict moral code; in fact students experienced considerable personal freedoms at this institution.

In terms of a capability approach, the two studies reveal how the different lived experiences of students at university provide them with different opportunities to develop various capabilities. So, students at a culturally homogenous, rural university may develop a greater sense of Ubuntu than the more individualistic attitudes of urban students, but they will not have the opportunities for exposure to diversity and working with peers across cultural differences. In Study 2, the three institutions were all culturally diverse, and this exposure to greater diversity of peers featured prominently in participants’ reflections on the value of higher education. Similarly, Study 1 points to the value of exposure to diversity, and students developing what is referred to as ‘diversity capital’, which can be later converted into social capital when students enter the workplace or take on wider roles in society (British Council, 2016; Walker & Fongwa, 2017). This student from Study 1 reflects on this as follows:

In the classroom, especially when we have to do things like group work … then it exposes you to a person’s life. You [tend to realise], this person is not that bad. Maybe I thought white people are like this, but this guy is different. So we’ve learned to appreciate other people. (Study 1, black female UFS BA student)

The studies also reveal how the structural arrangements of universities may serve to enable or hinder students’ broader development. Study 2 found a wide variation among the three universities in how undergraduate programmes were structured, and that greater curriculum flexibility allowed students to explore disciplines for their intrinsic interest, and to find their academic strengths and passions. What is interesting in considering variations in programme structure is the implicit assumptions these differences reveal about different ideas on the purposes of higher education: a narrowly specified programme leading to a specific employment option implies a more instrumental, ‘employability’ perspective on higher education, whereas a more flexible programme seems to imply a greater focus on the intrinsic, personal developmental purposes of higher education. A student from Study 1 reflects on the lack of such opportunities in developing the social and moral dimensions of students from a university perspective as follows:

They [departments] are lacking in being involved in communities. So I think the University looks at people who are going to have more impact on the economic side but on the social front I think that is where we lack … In our course we are supposed to do a community-based project, and we did do it but now we didn’t actually go to the local communities … We are lacking in making graduates socially aware of what is happening, especially in the local community. (Study 1, black male WITS BSc student)
In summary, this section, which has touched on graduate outcomes beyond employment outcomes, has shown how structural arrangements of universities may act as a form of ‘conversion factor’, allowing some students greater exposure to diversity and cultural difference, as well as to develop their intrinsic interests and to support their study and career deliberations.

**Discussion and conclusion**

A key finding from Study 1 is that the graduate employment outcome is a product of complex factors and dynamics much beyond the quality of the degree, field of study and even the core skills acquired during the degree process. While the actual skills/attributes of the degree are important in terms of employment, with most students and staff subscribing to a human capital theory thinking, other aspects influence graduate employment outcomes. These include students’ social capital, as well as the reputation of the university. The study also points to the impact of the externalities of the form of the labour market policies and practices. These factors, we argue, constrain or enhance the racial disparities in graduate destinations noted in the literature (Moleke, 2005). It therefore becomes vital to engage with a nuanced understanding of graduates, universities and the context of employment in understanding the apparent ‘skills gap’ dynamics.

As noted earlier, Study 2 surveyed students who had attended more high-status universities than some of those in Study 1, and their findings need to be interpreted in this light. Thus, overall, the graduates (and even non-completers) in Study 2 tend to have on average better employment outcomes (nearly all interviewees were either studying or employed six years after first year). All the same, similar trends explaining racial disparities in graduate outcomes are evident in this study, with more detail in this study on the actual trajectories into the workplace, since those interviewed had mostly been through this process. The findings of Study 2 also point to the significance of the social capital in the family in terms of accessing and succeeding in higher education. In terms of obtaining employment, university reputation was noted but was less prominent than in Study 1, possibly due to the institutions surveyed.

Using the notion of conversion factors, we argue that a student or graduate’s capacity to convert resources such as university experience or a degree to functionings such as getting a job one has reason to value, is not only a function of the quality of the degree, but also depends on personal, social and environmental factors which can either be enhancing or constraining.

Bringing together the findings from the two studies, for the majority of students, graduate employability in South Africa is significantly linked to a number of factors: student background, personal attributes and student social capital and networks before, during and after university significantly determines graduate outcomes. We further argue that graduate outcome is more complex and demands looking beyond factors such as field of study, university graduated from, or even race. While students graduate from high school with admirable aspirations of becoming engineers, medical doctors or accountants, the reality is that the percentage of students whose aspirations are translated into actual socio-economic mobility is closely linked.
to social background and other capitals they can bring along to, or develop at, university. In particular, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, or dysfunctional secondary and high schools lack a huge amount of academic, social and personal capital which intersect in defining their university outcome. With most students not managing to enrol in their desired courses or universities, those who manage to access universities do sometimes find themselves studying in fields such as arts and humanities, which are often perceived as having lower employment rates (the national evidence for this perception is mixed – see Chapter 17 for a fuller discussion of this point). Furthermore, many of the students who do complete their studies do not have the social capital and networks to enhance their employment outcomes (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013; Walker & Fongwa, 2017). The findings from both studies indicate that social capital from family and friends significantly influences graduate outcome, even when a student graduates with a degree perceived largely as less marketable. This echoes earlier studies (Shumba & Naong, 2012) which show that family members are the most influential groups in enhancing student aspirations before and during their studies. Translating these aspirations to reality depends also on the type and level of support that students gain.

While we, in the main, do concur with earlier research globally and in South Africa that higher education enhances graduate employment outcomes, we suggest a more nuanced and human approach in assessing graduate outcome. We have shown from the evidence that the human capability approach provides one such nuanced approach. We have seen that, while there is a broader narrative of the key factors affecting graduate outcomes, these trends are entrenched by historical, personal, or social factors. The presence of these conversion factors or lack thereof will continue to silently and sometimes unwittingly influence graduate outcome within the South African context, hampering efforts towards social justice and redress.

References


