Going to University. The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans

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CHAPTER 7
ENTRY TO THE WORKPLACE

Narratives already introduced:

Themba  BSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas
Tebogo  BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed
Nala   BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company
Martin  BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager
Martha  BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc
         Computer Science part-time
Hannah  B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee
Johnson BSc(Hons) Geology – MSc completed – working in environmental consulting company
Jo      BSc(Hons) Microbiology – doing MSc
Mulalo  BSc(Hons) Geology – working as an intern in a state department
Thato   BSc(Hons) – doing masters in Environmental & Geographical Sciences
Sima    BA – working in a bank
Yan     BSc – took year off – studying LLB through distance university
Tshidi  BSc extended programme – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – BSc
         Computer Science – work – part-time study and motherhood
Lerato  BSc – time out and work – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – doing BSc
         Civ Eng at another university
Bongi   BA Music – work – ND Chemical Engineering – motherhood with part-time study
         through the distance university
Paul    BA(Hons) Philosophy – MA History – working as a researcher
Cheryl  BA – year at home – work – Hons in Development Studies – working as research assistant

Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:

Lynda  BSc Computer Science – working as a software developer
Duma   BSc – moved to complete at another university – work in municipality – consulting
         and studying BComm part-time
Lucy   BA Journalism – working as a copywriter in advertising
We have already encountered two graduates who had spent a full year at home unemployed. Cheryl had completed her BA in minimum time and had applied to do honours in Psychology. When this didn’t work out, she went to her rural home town and started applying for jobs. Nothing came up and she spent most of the year caring for an aged family member. Mulalo had completed an honours degree in Geology, went home to her rural village in the far north of the country and started applying for jobs. It took a full year before she obtained an internship in a state department. On the other hand, at the outset of this book we encountered Nala, who had easily picked up work at a crowd-funding company even though she hadn’t come close to completing her degree.

Two other non-completers who moved with ease into the working world were one participant who had dropped out after one year and who became a very successful radio announcer, and another who after dropping out became a data analyst with an online company but is studying part-time to try and finish her degree.

Tebogo as a non-completer had, however, a very different experience to these two when it came to looking for work. When we spoke to him some six years after starting his Actuarial Science studies he is at home in a township outside a medium-sized South African town, unemployed and not so far making any progress in getting work.

The striking thing across these narratives is the similarity in the experiences of Cheryl, Mulalo and Tebogo, even though their higher education profiles are quite different – one near to completion of the bachelor’s, one completed bachelor’s, and an honours degree in science, and one not completed. Heading home from university to a rural hometown or village, and then starting to apply for jobs based on newspaper adverts is a very tough way to find a job, even in the cases where the person is a graduate. Nala and the other two non-completers who remained based in the large city were much more able to pull on prior experiences and networks to get a foothold into the workplace.

Here we have seen an illustration of how higher education is not fully determinant of job opportunities – issues of urban or rural location, and social networks or the absence thereof, are already apparent. To explore this further we turn for the remainder of this chapter to the issue of employment destinations for graduates. Of the 60 graduates in this study, at the time of the interview 16 were in postgraduate or further undergraduate study (discussed in the previous chapter), 41 were in full-time employment and 3 were unemployed and not studying: one participant who is Zimbabwean and struggling to get work after a period with an NGO, and two other participants who were ‘in between’ commitments but not worried about their capacity to get work (one who had just returned from studying in the US and one who had just finished a very intensive period of high-level work and had decided to take a short break).

The issue of graduate (un)employment is therefore complex to track – in this study it is only the Zimbabwean back in her home country who can be considered a graduate struggling in the long run to get employment. Moreover, a simple survey question to these participants would have obscured much of the detail that has emerged in the picture – knowing who was unemployed at the time of the survey you might catch participants like these three who had all
previously been working or were in between studies, and you wouldn’t necessarily know information about those who had spent earlier times looking for work. Nonetheless, we need to start with what is known nationally on the various surveys that have been conducted on graduate destinations.

The issue of graduate unemployment has enjoyed some attention in scholarly and popular South African literature since the early 2000s. At this stage there was an alarm that graduate unemployment from some institutions was at similar levels to overall unemployment in the country, but more recent analyses show that, with approximately 5% unemployment in the working-age pool of graduates compared to 29% for those only with school-leaving qualifications, graduates have substantially better employment prospects.

Within this broad pattern, graduate destination studies\(^\text{93}\) have found differences based on issues of race, field of study, and institution. Across the studies it is confirmed that race remains the most significant predictor of employment outcomes for young South African graduates. There is some evidence of ‘frictional unemployment’, referring to the delay that some graduates experience in obtaining their first job. Regarding job search strategies, the use of social networks is much more prevalent amongst graduates from higher-status institutions. A key finding is that students from historically black universities are more likely to go and work in the public sector than students from historically white universities.

As noted above, nearly all the participants in this study – 68 out of 73 – at the time of the interview were either studying full time or or were in full-time employment. Included in the 45 who were in full-time employment, four of these were the participants mentioned who had


\(^{93}\) Following work in the early 2000s, there have been two key recent graduate destination studies, one focusing on the four institutions in the Western Cape, and the other focusing on two institutions in the Eastern Cape: Cape Higher Education Consortium (2013). Pathways from university to work: A Graduate Destination Survey of the 2010 Cohort of Graduates from the Western Cape Universities. Cape Town: Cape Higher Education Consortium; Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.
not yet completed a bachelor's degree. The analysis from this point thus focuses on the 41 participants who had at least a bachelor's degree and at the point of the interview were in full-time employment.

Only two of these 41 participants were in jobs that could be considered not to require a graduate qualification (often termed ‘graduate jobs’):


one was a model and an actress (work she had done even before studying) and one was an estate agent (which although historically not a graduate job is increasingly becoming so). This is therefore an important finding: nearly all participants working were in jobs that could be deemed to require their university qualifications. For some of them, this was a very close match – for example, for those working in psychology or in microbiology, their professional role directly drew on the majors in their undergraduate degree. For others – for example a film and media major now working in marketing, the match was not as direct. To explore this a bit further, we excluded the two participants not doing graduate-level work (the actress and the estate agent), and divided the remaining 39 participants doing graduate-level work into a BSc (15 graduates) and BA (24 graduates) subgroup, and then categorised their domains of work.

Of the 15 BSc graduates in this group, four had majored in Geology and were working in some way related to that discipline, even though as noted in Mulalo’s case, they hadn’t necessarily managed to get the high-level jobs in mining that they had hoped for. Three participants who had majored in Computer Science were working somewhere in the software industry. Three who had studied in this area were doing work in the environmental domain (one a candidate attorney in environmental law). One was working as a technician in a microbiology laboratory, having done honours in this area. One was a qualified pharmacist. One was a school science teacher. This leaves only two of the 15 BSc graduates who were doing graduate-level work not in areas closely linked to their studies – one broadly in the commercial domain, and one in career advising at the university.

Of the 24 BA graduates in full-time graduate employment, five were working broadly in the fields of marketing, advertising, PR etc. None of these five graduates had majored in subjects specifically related to this sort of work. Five participants were in the commercial world including human resources and banking, again not related directly to their studies, but jobs that did require a bachelor’s degree. Adding in one media person who had not studied in this area, we get nearly half (11) of the BA graduates who were in graduate roles not directly related to their degree subjects, although of course drawing on the broader skills that their studies had fostered.

In terms of the 13 BA graduates doing work more closely related to their studies, two were university researchers and two were librarians. Two were school teachers. Three were working professionally in psychology. Two who were working in the media had trained as journalists.
One was training as a candidate attorney. Finally, there was Martin, the theatre administrator, whose honours had been in this area.

To explore this further we consider in a bit more detail the narratives of two young women who went into the workplace directly after the bachelor’s degree.

Sima, whom we encountered earlier in Chapter 4, completed her BA degree, and on graduating, went home and started applying for jobs. After four months nothing had come up, and so she became more proactive and started to approach managers at companies:

> I graduated and I was at home for about four months … and I was, like, ‘No I cannot do this, I have to volunteer!’ So, I went to companies and introduced myself to the managers and then luckily, because I had done psychology and HR, there was a recruiting company and they took me up as an intern type of thing.

Sima landed up with an internship doing administrative work for a recruitment company. Then she decided to put her story out on a radio programme which had a slot for graduates who were unemployed. This led to a better job with another recruitment company in a large city and she moved there. But after three months, she didn't enjoy the work and so she resigned and returned home. Her fiancé was working in a bank and so, after four months at home, through him she managed to get an interview for a position in the graduate training programme, starting in sales. She didn't like that and so she soon applied for another position in the same company and she is now enjoying that work and has been in it for two years.

She was interested to note that in the graduate training for the bank there were people with many different degrees, not necessarily with commercial backgrounds. She is happy in this industry, but notes that it is not necessarily that secure; there is always the possibility of retrenchments. She is still hoping to do postgraduate studies at some point. She wants to go deeper personally, she feels she still needs more confidence, and now she has a son she feels she needs to be someone he can be proud of.

An interesting counterpoint to Sima’s narrative, offering both striking similarities and some key differences, is that of Lynda, to be introduced now.

Lynda came from a small rural town and was bullied at school for being academically successful. At one stage she even contemplated dropping out. Two IT teachers made a difference, firstly a teacher in Grade 10 who advised her to stay in school, and secondly a matric teacher who was a retired university professor and who helped her with applying for university and bursaries, since her family was not able to pay fees:

> I knew from fifteen that I wanted to be a programmer because as soon as I wrote my first programme I knew, yes, this is what I want to do. So, I signed up at [the university], not knowing anything, I just came here and said, ‘I want to study programming. What boxes do I tick? I want to learn to programme!’ So, I ended up doing Computer Science.
She was a top student at university but could not contemplate staying for honours as she had to start earning money to support her mother. During her final year there was a university initiative which put companies in touch with soon-to-be graduates and she made a connection with a company whose work interested her, gave them her CV, and started working two days after her final exam. She had interviewed at a few other places but decided this was the offer that resonated for her. She really enjoyed this work environment but after a year and a half she felt she had to leave. She explained:

The only reason I left them was because I felt I had reached the top of what I was going to learn there. It was still a start-up so there wasn’t much room for promotions and moving from junior to mid-level developer and things like that. As a junior developer, I woke up in the morning and I knew exactly what I was going to do all day, I went and I did it and I came home, and that’s kind of boring.

From the first job she moved into a job with a major multinational online company, which was very demanding:

They expect you to work 12 hours a day or you’re not pulling your weight. It’s a highly competitive environment and you’re not just doing development, there are a lot of social things involved. … There are five meetings a day and you’re still expected to get your eight hours done. It’s a toxic environment. I do see how some people thrive in that high-pressure environment – very corporate – but it’s not for me.

After a year with this company she therefore quit, and took off two to three months to recover. Now she is with an online gaming company; she works from her home and has a lot of job flexibility but she still finds herself working too long hours and it has taken a toll on her health. Part of this is because she is still doing some freelancing on the side and doing a few hours in the evening on another project. She is busy interviewing for a job with another major IT-related multinational and if this comes through, she will move overseas with her husband whom she married a short while ago.

Lynda works in an industry where you do not necessarily need a degree – if you can program well, you can get a foot in the door. But she felt the university degree gave her the confidence that she needed. And her trajectory into the workplace has been comparatively smooth in terms of options and networks. When asked what she would have done if she hadn’t gone to university, she said:

I definitely would have stuck in computers but I probably would have gone and worked at an IT repair shop or something like that. … I’ve never been a very confident person and maybe it’s the field or university in general, but I know that Computer Science at university is known to be a bit of a cocky field and people there
get a bit full of themselves. And when you’re constantly surrounded by these cocky confident people, it rubs off on you and you stop doubting yourself so much.

It is very interesting to place Sima and Lynda’s narratives side by side, like this. In the common parlance of South African higher education discussions we might be inclined to focus on the issue that Sima is black and Lynda is white. But both come from families with limited financial resources; Lynda can only attend university because of bursaries. Both had to go and work after bachelor’s graduation, Lynda to support her mom. In fact, the striking difference in the narratives relates more to their disciplinary focus and what this means for their work trajectories. Lynda from an early age knows she wants to be a programmer, a specialised skill. She already has a basic level of this skill in place when she gets to university. Following graduation, she goes into a job that specifically uses this skill. This is even relatively unusual across the broader group of BSc graduates, but illustrates the advantage of having a niche area that you have specialised in even at the bachelor’s level (this is the upside of the BSc degree structure discussed earlier; it does force you to specialise).

Sima has likewise chosen university subjects that match her interests and which she deems to have potential work applicability. But Organisational Psychology doesn’t match you to a job in quite the same way that computer programming does, and so she struggles before she gets her first work exposure in a recruitment company. At the time of the interview she is working in the bank, doing estates management, not related specifically to her majors. In fact, she notes how the graduates she works alongside come from a very wide range of degree and subject areas. Sima’s employment situation is slightly more precarious; she knows that a large company like this can do periodic restructuring, although presently that is more at the branch level. Lynda, on the other hand, is finding herself in demand in the global area of online companies and their programming needs.

But you can’t choose your passions. And there are also potential risks at having specialised in a particular skill domain; Lynda fortunately loves this work. Sima sees herself still on an educational development trajectory and anticipates significant further personal and career development when she does get to do postgraduate work.

With these two narratives in the backdrop, we look now a bit more closely at the experience of getting into the workplace for the 43 graduates in this study.

The ease or difficulty of getting work

Sima was at home for four months struggling to get work when she decided to start a walk around of companies, introducing herself to managers in the coastal city where she lived. And this bore fruit: she managed to get a job with a recruitment company this way. For Cheryl and Mulalo, whose full year at home we considered at the outset of this chapter, a small rural township or village did not offer these kinds of possibilities.
The important focus here is on the first job after graduation. If you get stuck at home for a year this can be very dispiriting. What we have also seen above, for example in Sima’s narrative, is that once they have had a period of work, some of these graduates have a couple of months between jobs and often then go back home.

Having family support at home while searching for employment was seen to be important. For a law graduate in the study [16], being able to bide time at home meant that she was able to choose between two offers of positions as an articled clerk – one in a large law firm in Johannesburg which was not immediately available and required her to wait, and the other, immediately available, in a smaller town. Having the family support of being able to take a year off at home and work in her church meant that this graduate could take up the more desirable law articles position in the big city a while later:

*I kind of had to sit and pick. Do I want to work for a slightly biggish firm, better salary, in Joburg, better experience and training and so forth? Or do I want to … start in [a smaller town] for 2014 and 2015 and then try and switch to Joburg? So, when it came down to it, Joburg was the better option and so I thought, let me stay at home and just chill a while. And so, it was that I started doing work for my church … [16]*

Social networks or other forms of support in the city were very important for graduates looking for a job. This enabled graduates to survive in the city for an extended period while sending out CVs and following up on job leads, and so made their entry into the workplace easier than for job-seeking graduates in smaller rural towns or villages. This was the experience for Mulalo, a Geology Honours graduate from a rural village who was introduced earlier. She ended up spending an entire year at home unemployed, before securing her current internship in a state department.

The initial difficulty in finding a job was emotionally taxing, and some graduates described feeling despondent after months of unsuccessful searching. For some, there was the need to lower their expectations and apply for jobs that were not necessarily graduate level. For example, this Psychology graduate ended up applying for an internship at an online education company, doing rather menial, reception-type work:

*Eventually, after four months of trying I thought I needed to lower the expectation about the kind of job I wanted. So, I applied for an internship at [an online education provider]. I actually found them online. … To my surprise I got through from CV, to telephone interview, to face-to-face interview and then to a ‘team fit’ interview. I couldn’t believe it was happening, that anyone would want a Psychology Humanities student. They hired me as an intern. … So, I started as intern, working at reception, answering phones and getting coffee … I think I accepted the fact that*
I had to swallow my pride and start from the bottom, and put the Psychology on the back burner. [47]

As was often the case for these graduates, this relatively low-level job then fortunately led to her current job as project manager in the same company, a career which she now loves:

Project management was such a surprise career for me because it was completely unexpected, it happened organically, really, and had no connection to the five years of study I had poured myself into. So that’s where I am now, and have been in the same position officially for nine months. … I love what I do, and it is so different to what I imagined I would do. [47]

In reflecting on her path to employment, this BA (Psychology) graduate referred to the common perception that BA graduates have a harder time finding employment than their counterparts who completed professional degrees:

It was really difficult for me at the time. My friends had taken Commerce, Engineering and Medical degrees; I was the only Humanities student among my group of friends, and I was watching them hit the ground running after graduating with jobs they were really passionate about and that they loved. I’m very aware that for them it probably wasn’t the case at all, but from the outside it felt as though they just walked into these jobs. … It left a very sour taste about my five years of study. The stigma attached to Humanities students felt so real to me. [47]

This perception that BA graduates struggle more than BSc graduates to find jobs is not supported in general statistical evidence to date, and was also not apparent in this study. At a national level, labour force and graduate destination surveys indicate that the relationship between field of study (BA or BSc) and unemployment is not as strong as might be assumed. In the present study, of the 43 graduates, 15 described some hurdles in getting a job, but the type of degree was not a significant factor. Rather, what was more significant was whether the job-seekers were rural or city-based and the extent of their access to social networks. Thus, baldly speaking, the ease to which a degree led to job opportunities was significantly mediated by the graduate’s urban/rural location and access to social networks.

95 Overall, graduate destination studies show that social background is the strongest prediction of employment outcomes for graduates. The evidence around field of study needs to be understood against this macro picture. Here there has been mixed evidence around the popular perception that humanities graduates have poorer employment outcomes. See: Cape Higher Education Consortium (2013). Pathways from university to work: A Graduate Destination Survey of the 2010 Cohort of Graduates from the Western Cape Universities. Cape Town: Cape Higher Education Consortium; Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.
Of the 15 students who described some obstacles in entering the workplace, four were Geology students. For these students (all black South Africans), the expectation that the BSc degree would lead to a good job in industry had been scuppered by the downturn in the mining sector. They struggled to get the sort of jobs and salaries they had aspired to, and instead describe biding their time in lower-level internship positions.

As noted earlier, a greater proportion of the BSc students were doing graduate-level work closely linked to their degree subjects as compared with the BA graduates. Nearly half of the BA graduates (11 out of 24) were doing jobs not directly related to their area of study, but they were not less likely to have found employment.

With regard to the difficulty of getting work, as noted in the previous chapters, for some students a good option was to do postgraduate studies– both to find a form of ‘employment’ via a bursary, and also to skill themselves up to be more employable at the conclusion of their postgraduate studies.

The graduates in this study had mostly completed their degrees at relatively high-status research-intensive universities. They were well aware and expressed in detail their sense of how the reputation of the institution influenced their job prospects:

*I think that there’s this perception about someone who goes to [this university] – it’s a different kind of intellectual. I don’t know how to even clarify how [this university] is not just an institution, it’s a lifestyle. It’s been very helpful.* [29]

*So since [this university] is the top university in our country, it is looked at in a higher regard than the others. Because I was in the recruitment area, I know that when people hand in their CVs, someone who went to [this university] is going to be looked at more than someone who went to [another university]. So, it definitely does give you more of a competitive edge when you’re applying for jobs.* [32]

*… especially because the media is so small so, you know, when you hear that someone comes from [the same university] you also tend to gravitate towards one another a lot and you get treated very differently as well, so again, it’s like that eyebrow raiser, oh …* [19]

It must be emphasised that the institutions in this study occupy a very privileged space in the hierarchy of South African higher education institutions. Young people at lower status institutions do not have the same benefit of the reputation of the university propelling their career prospects. 96

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96 A key study in this regard is that by Rogan and colleagues who compared graduate employment outcomes for university graduates from the University of Fort Hare with those from Rhodes University: Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.
All of these students came from institutions with strong reputations, but even still, getting the first job required more than this. Looking across the participants in this study it can be seen that the ease or difficulty of getting work depends on social networks more than anything else. It required a way of networking into employment options, which was hard especially for those students without connections into the city. Type of degree had much less of an influence on the ability to get graduate level work than might be commonly assumed. We now explore these findings further by looking more closely at the specific strategies students employed for getting work.

**Resources and strategies used for getting into the workplace**

The striking thing about the experience of the two graduates who spent a full year at home looking for work, Cheryl and Mulalo, is that their job search strategies, by virtue of the location of their home town, was limited to newspaper and online adverts. By contrast, Nala, who hadn't even finished her degree, used the networks she had built at university to get a job.

Universities can be a tremendous source of future job contacts, and this seems especially so for the large urban university featured in this study. The location in the city meant close proximity to many potential employers, and a range of initiatives took place for students during their final year which exposed them to these possibilities, as was seen above in Lynda's experience. She obtained her first job through a university initiative to link top final-year Computer Science students with companies. Another Computer Science graduate, currently based in Brazil, got his job in a similar manner:

*In my final, Honours year I did a presentation for the project that I was working on for Computer Science, and because they have recruiters come and listen to us, the company that I am working for was there doing recruiting and that's how I got in touch with them.* [51]

Another graduate, in Environment and Geographical Science, also recounted how her first job was set up through university-employer networks:

*During my honours ... the managing director [of the consulting company] had a presentation and said that we can apply for internships at the Joburg office. So, I prepared my motivational letter and applied for that. During the holidays in my Honours year I did a three-week internship at [the consulting company]. So, I had the contacts within there, and then while I was there they also offered me a job.* [45]

Sima went home on graduation and then started looking for work in her home town. She was fortunate in that home was a largish coastal city but still she had severed links with the
university networks that were at hand in the university city. Yet somehow she summoned the confidence to be able to walk into firms and introduce herself. Without this mobilisation of agency she would not have got the position she did.

As noted in the range of jobs that graduates are doing, a not insignificant number of participants in this study got work broadly in the university – none of them yet in full-time employment as lecturers but at least five in administrative, research and library positions, or employed by projects that are connected to the university. For example, this graduate had been working on a part-time basis at the local museum for a few years, when her current, permanent position became available:

*I started with a temporary position when the previous curator left. I had been working at the museum part-time. They have small student positions and I’d been doing that for a few years just five hours a week. And then when they opened up applications for the permanent position, I was awarded that position.* [6]

For another graduate, his first employment was as an intern in his university’s Marketing Department, working on publications and online news [21]; another BA graduate was currently employed as a subject librarian at the university where he had studied [22]. Paul, who was introduced in the previous chapter, is now working as an assistant researcher in a university research and support centre, having come across the advert for his job on the university’s website. Although it is not in his field of history specifically, he is enjoying picking up new skills. Another graduate is currently employed in the university’s career service, working on a project with high school learners.

The university as an employer for graduates – not only in academic positions – is a perspective that is not always considered in debates around graduate employment.

**Experiences of the workplace**

Sima’s first job was an internship with a recruitment company. For a striking number of graduates in this study (27 out of the 41 graduates who are working) the first job they managed to obtain was an internship. This is a position that is explicitly short term and relatively poorly paid. In fact, some graduates suggested that you need to have access to other family or financial resources to survive on an intern’s salary. Lucy, whose narrative will be introduced later on in this chapter, said the following:

*You can’t afford to live off it [intern salary] so you have to have parents or savings that can help you during that time. … *[I]t wasn’t a well-paid internship, it was R4 000 at the time, but, it did evolve quite quickly so after three months they*
doubled my salary then they kept reviewing, so then it became quite a sustainable environment. I think I got very lucky.

From these experiences it can be seen that the internship often functioned like an extended interview in that a few months into the internship the employee would be offered a better and more permanent position.

Graduates who proved themselves during their internship were often quick to rise through the ranks. This graduate started off as a content writer for an online marketing agency. His BA degree meant that he was ‘comfortable with writing’ and he made a quick transition to a permanent job in project management with a significant salary increase:

I started writing content for them and then they gave me management of the projects … It was a very quick transition. I've been working for that company for 18 months. I started off as an intern on a six months probation and after that they took me on permanent and they doubled my salary. And then another six months later, they gave me this position now and then again raised my salary by 50%, so it has been very quick. [28]

Some graduates spoke about the tendency of internships to entail low-level and even rather exploitative work:

It happened to me with an internship … they essentially wanted me to do a job of what a mid skilled person would be able to do. And it was going to be nine to five so wouldn’t have been able to do another job to try pay my rent. And yes, there was no one mentoring me, I wasn’t learning anything. [19]

If it is understood as a rite of passage into graduate employment, then the internship could work. But it does require the graduate to be happy to do fairly menial work with a level of enthusiasm and initiative that makes the company keen to take them on in a more demanding position. It also assumes a level of family support that can enable a graduate to start in a relatively low-paying job.

This increasing reliance on internships as a bridge between studies and work raises equity questions in the South African context where many graduates need to be earning money to support their families. We must also stress that while internationally internships tend to be increasingly popular for students while studying (the ‘college internship’, sometimes even a mandatory part of an academic programme), the use of internships as noted in the present study is about the status of the first job after graduation.

As was the case with Mulalo, for many Geology graduates, their first job was in the form of an internship. This was experienced as particularly bitter to them, since the downturn in the
mining sector had meant that there were very few of the well-paid jobs they had anticipated on graduating:

> It is frustrating because when we studied we didn’t know that things would be like this. We had a perception that the moment you finish studying you’d have a job and that you just had a variety to chose from, but then when you graduate there are no jobs. Now I am doing an internship and the internship that I am doing is a government internship and I am getting paid three times less than what I would be paid if I was starting properly in the mines. [38]

It was notable that many graduates in this study found their first jobs in small companies (often in digital media), rather than large corporates. There were numerous accounts of working for start-up companies or starting one (for example, Nala, the social entrepreneur).

**Public sector employment**

What was notable in graduates’ accounts of entering the workplace was that very few took up public sector jobs. This is not unexpected: from the graduate destination studies referenced earlier we know that graduates from research-intensive institutions, such as are the focus of this study, do not appear to favour public sector employment. 97 This section introduces Duma, one of the few graduates who worked in the public sector for a time.

**Duma** was clearly a very academically talented pupil in school and ended up matriculating at the age of 16. He did an extra year to improve these grades and then applied to do a BSc – for some reason though he was offered a place for BComm at this university. He decided he didn’t want to do that degree and so took a ‘gap year’ which turned into three years working in the UK. Then he reapplied and finally got to start the BSc he had wanted to do all along. He had wanted to do meteorology and they advised him that the closest subject was Geology. His BSc also involved Physics and he started to enjoy that subject more than Geology because he found it challenging. He was part of an undergraduate Physics group who went on a trip overseas. But then in final year he failed a Physics course. He could not deal with how this made him feel:

> Even in our class they knew I was among the top five performers in class and here I was, I had failed. They asked what was happening because they used to come and asked me for solutions and now I was failing. So that’s why I decided that you know

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what, I can’t deal with this honestly speaking. Let me just leave and go to another institution and then just try something new.

He was one course away from graduation but he decided to move. His mother said it was his decision and she hoped it was for good reasons:

*I told her at the last moment that ‘OK Mom, I am going to [this other institution]’. She asked what was wrong and I told her that I needed to move. My mom is one of those people who let’s you make your own decisions in life so that you do not, at one point, point fingers at her. She said, ‘OK, if you are happy then it is your call, but just make sure that it is a good decision.’*

He moved to a university in a coastal town and managed to get in with a late application. He didn’t enjoy it much but he completed his degree.

He was almost finished his degree when through family friends he heard that the municipality was looking for a driver. He went into the offices and they were puzzled as to why he was applying for a job as a driver and they promised to look into graduate opportunities in the municipality and call him back. They did, and called him on the last day of his exams with the offer of a position as a property evaluator.

*The municipal offer* said, ‘This job may not necessarily apply to you but you are qualified and at the end of the day you are going to be part of a team of professionals in the team. Most of the people in the team are civil engineers, building engineers and all that.’ It was relevant to them, but he told me that I would learn along the way and it wouldn’t be rocket science. And it was nice for the first three months but after that it was like but we are doing the same thing all over again. Everyday I knew that we were going to a certain site and do this and that, draw and all that. It was just not me. But because the money was coming in at the end of the month I was like OK, but later said I am not really happy.

So he decided he needed to start thinking of other options: he felt that this was not what he studied for, even though he had also now realised that Geology was ‘not his thing’. He didn’t feel there were career growth prospects. So, while still working, he decided he should pick up his studies again. He went to the distance university and enquired with them about doing Physics, his first love. But they advised against this since they couldn’t offer the practical side of physics. So he decided to start a BComm in Law and is now in his second year of that degree. He said he loved the BSc but that he is also enjoying the way the BComm Law is broadening his perspectives further. After two years he resigned completely from the municipality job, giving the rather stark view that
with government and municipalities, you get to relax a lot and you don't get challenged enough to actually practise what you have done and know what it is.

Interestingly though, he is now in a small business with a few friends, consulting to the municipalities, doing online capture of documentation. And he is enjoying his part-time studies, especially the challenge and the independence.

What is striking when the variety of graduate workplace destinations is surveyed, is the absence of young graduates teaching in the South African public education system. Of the 60 graduates interviewed, only two are in teaching posts in South Africa, and both are teaching at private schools. One BSc graduate started teaching at a home-schooling tutoring centre and is now a maths and science teacher at the high school she had attended [35]. At the same time, she is completing her PGCE teaching qualification through the national distance university. The other teacher, a BA graduate, is in a locum teaching at a private school while completing her BEd (Hons) in Educational Psychology. Interestingly, she had taught English in Korea for a year before returning to South Africa to study further and teach. This teaching abroad option was also taken up by two other graduates – a BA graduate who is now settled in Japan teaching English [25], and a BSc graduate who taught high school science for a year in Thailand [50]. On returning to South Africa she was offered a teaching post at a public high school (even without a teaching qualification), but had taken up a research technician post instead. And another BSc graduate, currently employed a university careers service, has long-term aspirations to do a PGCE and become a teacher.

Another student who had enjoyed tutoring and was now in a banking job that she didn’t find satisfying, said she didn’t think enough about teaching as a career option:

I wish I had known about teaching before. I didn’t even know about PGCE; I didn’t know about that, which I could have done. In hindsight maybe rather than honours I probably should have done that. But in [the university I attended] I didn’t even do courses that could contribute to this because I didn’t even know about it. [30]

During apartheid, public sector teaching was a major destination for many (mostly white) university graduates (black teachers were largely produced in the college system) due to the availability of teacher bursaries to support those whose families could not pay fees. The ideology of the time rested on a close relationship between schools and universities (and the church). Post-apartheid policy saw a key role for education in social transformation, but has not enacted a system linking universities and schools so closely.

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Deliberations around the experience of work

Many of the graduates talk about deliberations and choices they make around the sort of jobs that they aspire to. Sima was explicit about what work she enjoyed doing and what she didn't enjoy doing, and she had no hesitation on more than one occasion in quitting a job that she didn't enjoy after only a few months. As we saw earlier, Duma felt he was stagnating in his repetitive and unsatisfying municipal property evaluator job and so he gave this up, despite the financial security it provided him, in favour of returning to studying. To explore this further we introduce here a further narrative, that of Lucy.

Lucy studied a BA. Neither of her parents had university degrees but they were well off and able to fund her to study wherever and whatever she wanted to do. She said the following about her choice of institution:

*My older cousin went to [this university] and she was so cool ... and it looked like such an amazing university and I just chose it largely for that idea of being far away from home and staying in a beautiful place.*

She was good at English and Art at school and so she felt a BA was an obvious choice; her parents were happy for her to follow her interests:

*I have always been independent minded so my parents – neither of them have degrees – so they could afford to send me to university and they were like, 'Whatever'. And my dad was like, 'Do Fine Art, who cares.' And for a long time, I went with the idea of doing architecture ... and it just sort of became more of a vague, 'Let me just do a handful of BA subjects' sort of decision.*

In her first year she took English and French literature, Politics and Journalism and said, 'I liked all of them.' She continued with the Journalism major but also had in the back of her mind the idea of one day doing something in international relations. Her Art interests led her to choose the Design strand in the Journalism degree. When she left university, she said:

*I wasn't really thinking about it at all. I was just graduating with my B Journ and I wanted to move to Cape Town, I think that's the main incentive because I'm from KwaZulu-Natal ... I was sleeping on a friend's couch and I was like, 'Well, let me see what jobs I can get.' And personally advertising stood out in Cape Town, probably because it's such a big industry here, and it seemed like something I could do ... and I applied for a creative internship.*
Four months into the internship her position was made permanent and she still works at that company focusing on copywriting. The prevalence of internships as routes into the workplace has been noted earlier. On this matter Lucy observed the following:

Because I think companies also recognise that as a graduate you actually can’t make them any money, you don’t have sort of skills that are going to help, and they just have to see enough in you that they’re going to sustain you for a bit longer so you can prove your worth which my creative director she once said to me was six months into working there then I became someone that she could let run with something.

She contrasts her background with the more common route into the advertising industry:

It’s double the price to go to one of these advertising schools and then they come out of it and they don’t know how to engage critically with the world around them. They’ve learnt something very practical but, not something very thoughtful. So, I am very glad I have approached the industry the way I did because, I gained so much largely on a personal level, I suppose but we’ll see where my career goes.

She enjoys the conceptual side of copywriting and thinks this relates to the broad suite of courses she took at university. She feels she has learnt to function in the ‘grey areas’ of the world, where much work is driven by the need to sell a product and make a profit. She remembers one prominent lecturer on the far left politically who she thinks would not approve of what her and many of her classmates are doing in the world of commerce, but she notes:

At the end of the day that’s not real life; you have to work within these spaces, especially when you’re young and you’re learning.

She is, however, aiming to get into more socially connected work and has applied for a position with a political organisation. Reflecting on having gone to university she says:

I look at my life through the lens that I cultivated at university and from the friends I made in university, … we all have similar priorities and for all of us education is the most important thing in our lives in a lot of ways, it sounds absurdly patriotic but I think that’s an honest truth I can’t … I don’t think that I would have been different if I had gone to [another university] but the mere fact that I went to an institution of higher education … that, I mean is everything.

Lucy said that she valued being in a collegial workplace. Here she contrasts her nurturing work environment with the more general tendency of advertising agencies to be ruthless and demanding workplaces:
I am obviously eternally grateful for the wonderful fostering environment that I’ve worked in for the last three years, because I had to work with such nice people which I think is uncharacteristic of agencies in Cape Town. They have this reputation for being very ruthless, for working very long hours and all of those things … So, at least I work for an agency that was small and they gave me the impression that they were interested to seeing how I could develop personally and I have been able to change job positions within my company rather than change jobs which has been really nice.

Lucy had the benefit of a family who could support her ambitions and she was able to choose a degree that matched what were already her intellectual strengths and interests. Her experience seems almost seamless, moving through university subjects with enjoyment and progressively refining her interests, and then managing to convert an internship quickly into a permanent and relatively fulfilling job – although she does niggle a bit about the lack of positive social impact in her work.

From the graduates’ interviews, there emerges here a sense of graduates’ agency in deciding which jobs to pursue and which to let go. Here, a few key dimensions start to emerge: whether the job is interesting and challenging enough, or whether the work schedule is perhaps too demanding; whether the workplace culture matches their expectations or their personal values and commitments. At this stage in their working lives, challenge and career development are key attributes many are looking for in a job. This graduate reflects on the importance of growing into a career and not merely working for a salary:

When I go back into the workforce it would be better if I got something that I would like and enjoy so that I could grow into a position or a career, and not just go back for the sake of money. [21]

Cheryl, whom we met in the previous chapter, expressed her frustration with the non-graduate-level jobs she was compelled to take while trying to get into Honours in Psychology. Of her administration work at an alarm company, she notes that:

Mostly it was just monotonous, everyday it was the same thing, on the computer and capturing the same data.

As noted earlier, many of the Geology graduates describe difficulties in finding satisfying work in which they are required to use their disciplinary knowledge directly. One Geology graduate describes how her frustration at doing mostly administration work in an internship with a government agency led her to negotiate with her employers for a more suitable Geology-related internship at a Geology consulting company:
So, I did my internship [with a government agency] but the internship was definitely not Geology related. … At some point, there was someone from [the agency] that came to check how we were doing with the internship and I was not happy with my internship – I knew it was not Geology but at least I thought I’d be using my Chemistry knowledge or something like that, because I was working under nanotechnology … So, I told them that I felt like I was just there and mostly doing admin work and I was not adding value to my career. I got into an agreement with [the agency] that if I looked for another place, I’d go to that company and they’d continue sponsoring my internship, because places are not taking internships because they don’t have the money to pay them. So, I ended up in a Geology consulting company and [the agency] was fine with that and they continued to pay for me. [38]

This graduate’s determination to find a more stimulating internship paid off, and after only a month at the Geology consulting company, she was offered an even better internship at a major mining company.

Another aspect of the workplace that influences graduates’ decisions about jobs is the workplace environment and sense of collegiality. We saw earlier with Lynda how a pressured work environment can exact a toll on its employees; in her case, she took two or three months off to recover from a high-pressured job with a major multinational online sales company.

Other graduates talked about the importance of work that was consistent with their ideological beliefs. Paul, whom we met in the previous chapter, discusses this dilemma when he had searched for jobs after completing his masters in History:

*I applied for a corporate type research job out of desperation but it was … you know, mining industry stuff. So, I would have gone straight from talking about the horrors of mining … straight into consulting for them – not just doing consulting for them, but doing research work for them.*

Lucy also grappled with this issue. Constraining the social consciousness fostered during her studies with the lack of social awareness or critique in the advertising industry, she says:

*What I studied was politics and journalism and obviously it’s … very critical of the socio-economic sphere, whereas working in advertising … it’s not very conscious of that sphere it’s working within … . It doesn’t put any thought in how it’s critiquing it or how it’s changing it – or even worse how it’s continuing the problems in the social sphere. … So, I find it’s quite difficult, especially having studied in [this university’s] politics department 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!*
Deliberations about the value of the degree for career prospects

The study included participants from two professions that stemmed from BA and BSc degrees, namely Journalism and Pharmacy respectively. As noted in Lucy’s experience, the Journalism graduates did not necessarily go into the traditional careers in this area. In Pharmacy they did go into directly related careers, at least in their first jobs after graduation. We also noted that a number of students, like Johnson, did Geology in the hopes that this would open the route to a good job in the mining industry, but that mostly this did not seem to be the case. Computer Science was also regarded by many as a route with good job prospects, yet those in the field, including Lynda, noted that you really didn’t need a degree to succeed in this area. A striking observation of this study was how few students appeared to be entering the professional sector of public school teaching, even though the prospects for employment in this sector are strong.

Students’ deliberations in this domain are complex. In many cases, students contradict themselves in trying to rationalise their investment of time in higher education. For example, Tshidi commented that she knew that one did not have to have a degree in order to make money because many of her peers were doing so, yet she also made the following statement:

*When you check job websites, all the time they ask for a degree. So, I do realise that it is important.*

Many students in this study put forward the standard view, which is supported by evidence, that having a degree significantly increases the number of potential job opportunities. Some of them like Cheryl felt there were no opportunities without a degree, and this is very likely a reflection of her own home community with limited opportunities and high unemployment. She said:

*With just matric you can’t really get a job. With an undergrad, I was able to do that. For example, having a certificate meant something at [the home alarm company] and other people were inspired or intrigued by that.*

The somewhat concerning point here is that the short-term administrative work she had at the alarm company was hardly a graduate-level position. But she felt she would not even have been able to get that without a degree. This may well be an accurate perception, given the employment situation for her non-degreed peers in the rural town she came from.

In this regard, some participants referred to the sense of ‘professionalism’ that university gave them, but also surprisingly referred to aspects of work readiness that might be expected from schooling, such as interpersonal skills, writing of CVs, etc. One student said:

*From a personal point of view now I can relate to people of different races, gender, old and young people and how to treat them with respect. It has taught me a lot of*
things, from time management to submitting whatever I am given in time and to approach people that can be of assistance in time instead of being late. [40]

Some students were bothered by this state of affairs, almost as if the degree only served a credentialing function. One student commented at some length:

*I think sadly there is a kind of [prestige] associated with having a degree of some sort. Maybe people take me more seriously than I should be taken because I have this degree behind my name, and the colleagues who have done a few courses here and there but are so brilliant at what they do, don't get the recognition they deserve.* [47]

She also said:

*So, I am very grateful to have just that one line to put at the bottom of my CV. If I think about what that one line means, and what went into it, it blows my mind. That five years of study culminates in that opportunity. I think it was a ridiculous idea that it should have meant more because I've always known that a degree doesn't necessarily dictate your job. It's just a different story when you're living it and you have your degree and it's four months and your inbox is empty and there are no bites and nobody wants you.*

Students were also asked in the interview to reflect on what their lives would have been like if they hadn't gone to university. Some like Tshidi noted that you could be successful in the commercial world without a degree, and that having a degree did not guarantee work. It was noted that succeeding in business required not only an entrepreneurial capacity, but also some access to capital. One student explained:

*Nowadays I don't think there are that many options unless you are an amazing entrepreneur and you find a niche in the market and you utilise it. Without a degree, I think your options are hugely limited. Ok, maybe if you took over your parents' business you could do well, but if you don't have an avenue to do that I don't know how you'd be able to enter the world of working.* [4]

Quite a few participants felt that their job opportunities would be less interesting and/or less well paid if they hadn't gone to university. According to Lerato:

*Without a qualification, there is only so much you can do. Also in terms of salary, you are not going to be paid what I feel is a living wage. People take you for granted, they treat you like this is the only thing you can do because you couldn't go to school.*
I think you are more limited without a qualification, unless maybe you start your own business and you are able to grow through that.

There were many deliberations over the investment of time in higher education and how this affected your career route. Some felt that going to higher education, even though it keeps you out of the job market for a few years, would ultimately allow you to get more quickly to a certain career position, for example:

[Without university,] I would have maybe come out in the same direction but it would have taken me much longer and I think I would have struggled more. [49]

Some felt that going directly into the workplace would allow you to get ahead, but you could find yourself trapped down the line with limited options (in agreement with the broader point outlined above). Nala had this concern with her current job and explained why she was still hoping to complete a degree through part-time study:

Something that bothers me is my position in the company. It is quite a good position but for someone who doesn't have the formal training, it might become a problem in the future. So that is why I want to do that.

Another participant drew together the threads of this overall conundrum nicely:

I think [your options] are limiting [if you don't go to university] because you know you only have this space and the freedom to do a certain amount of things, in a certain way … You can only grow to a certain level or a certain space but then again, you do hear about these people who, for example are doing sales or something with only matric and they are super successful. They're top in the company, or they're earning lots of money, or whatever the case is. So, I think there is space for those who don't want to go to university to really make a success of themselves but it takes a specific type of person to have the will, and the motivation, and the push, and the drive to really be able to do that. [15]

There were interesting deliberations by BA graduates, given the general negative view about the job prospects following this degree. Some of them agreed with these concerns, for example:

BA doesn't give you any content career subjects. I know someone who has PhD in Anthropology and she is struggling to find a job. [22]
It was also BA graduates who tended to raise the issue of the theoretical focus of university studies compared to what they saw as more practical concerns in the working world. One student said:

> You can have a PhD in Media and it still makes no difference. You are well educated but can you land a big client? [21]

On the other hand, another BA graduate was particularly emphatic that this degree opened up many career opportunities:

> 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. It gives you too many options when you do a BA. Sometimes I wish I had studied engineering where I knew that I was going to be an engineer, but you know when you do a BA they ask you ‘What are you going to be in?’ and you say ‘I don’t know’. It is true because you actually don’t know because there are just too many choices. [28]

The BA graduates in this study were generally able to articulate ways in which the skills they developed in this degree were applicable in the workplace. They also recognised the importance of being able to sell yourself in this way to a prospective employer. For example, Paul succinctly summarised his skills as follows:

> I understand well the mechanics of arguments and different methodology … So, I know how to make a strong argument, and I know how to look at data, and I know how to use different types of evidence to make an argument. And I can write and I can understand and I can execute tasks in a sort of like a professional way, you know, like attention to detail and neatness …

From an interesting angle, a BA graduate who worked in modelling felt that her BA qualification gave her skills that actually were valuable in this field, not usually considered requiring graduate level skills:

> I think sometimes I go to castings with girls who are definitely more beautiful than me and definitely better in that job in my opinion and I’ll get it because I think that they like to have something different and a lot of models haven’t studied.

In this chapter it has been seen that the majority of graduates in this study are in the workplace some six years after first year, and in this chapter we have traced their trajectories into
employment. Some found work quickly, but for many it was a challenge. Location played a huge role; being in an urban area and in a working community offered a tremendous advantage. The university itself also offered a space of networking that supported the job search.

We noted that nearly all bachelor’s graduates were in positions that could be described as requiring graduate-level skills. Comparing BA and BSc graduates, there did not seem to be any difference in their ease or difficulty of finding work, but it was noted that BSc graduates tended to be in positions more closely related to the major subjects in their degrees.

In terms of accessing the first job after graduation, we noted the significant prevalence of internships, which almost constituted an extended interview in which the graduate starts with a low-paying contract job and needs to prove themselves. The few students in this study who headed into the public sector did not rate this destination highly, although as noted in other studies this is, for many black African students at HBUs, the main employment opportunity. We noted the complete lack of public sector school teaching across the 73 interviewees in this study; even accounting for bias in response, this is somewhat extraordinary for a sample of BA and BSc graduates and graduates-to-be.

We have now completed our analysis of young people’s life trajectories and how higher education has influenced these. In the final chapter we return to the big questions that kicked off this study, around the purposes of higher education in society, and to what extent these are being met in post-apartheid South Africa.