

Examining the post-graduation trajectories of young South Africans: A critical review of the literature on graduate destinations (0259)

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Extended abstract:

What graduates end up doing after they leave university has become an increasing concern and interest over the last few decades, in times of increased participation in higher education, growing economic uncertainties and neoliberal politics. These combined effects mean that there has been an especial focus on graduate employment – whether graduates are employed or not, and if so at what level. The main instrument for determining this has been the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), well established in developed countries, but only more recently being used in developing countries, not least because of the resource and logistical implications to obtain these data.

In South Africa, the first national graduate study was conducted by the HSRC (Moleke, 2004). They traced 2 672 graduates who had obtained their qualifications between 1990 and 1998. The key findings were that the rate of unemployment among university graduates was generally low (about 94% of graduates found employment within a year of graduation). However, the study also noted that black graduates, women, those with degrees in the humanities and graduates from HBUs were all significantly more likely to report having experienced a period of unemployment.

This study was then extended by the subsequent, larger HSRC study conducted in 2005 (Moleke, 2006). This was a tracer survey of the 2003 cohort of tertiary ‘leavers’ (drop-outs) and graduates at seven selected HEIs (WITS, TUT, SU, CPUT, UWC, UFH, UL). A 16% response rate was received on this postal survey. This study provided more detail on the phenomenon of graduate unemployment, showing again that black African graduates (at both HBUs and HWUs) were more likely to be unemployed. The overall statistics were as follows:

	Black African	Coloured	Indian	White
Graduates	41%	18%	14%	9%
Non-completers	48%	28%	6%	5%

Bhorat et al (Bhorat, Mayet, & Visser, 2012) provided a further analysis of these data, showing that unemployment rates racially skewed within institutions: 42% for black graduates from HWUs vs 10% for whites at HWUs. They also showed that graduating or not completing is not significant in terms of probability of finding employment, but that it does affect earnings, with graduates earning on average 25% more than non-completers. Once employed, this study showed that race and gender did not significantly impact on earnings. Programmes with increased probabilities of finding work were those in Education (although with lower earning possibilities) and in general programmes from the universities of technology.

In 2013, the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) published results from a study of 2010 graduates from all four universities in the Western Cape (UCT, SU, UWC, CPUT); graduates were contacted in 2012 (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013). Using a combination of an online survey supplemented by telephonic interviews, they achieved a response rate of 22.5%. To address the issue of potential skewedness in respondees, they adopted a statistical weighting procedure. Key findings were that 84% of the interviewed cohort were employed at the time of the interview. Unemployment was highest among black African graduates (20%) vs. coloured (7.8%) and white students (4%). There were significant institutional differences between the 4 HEIs were significant – with unemployment rates as follows: 15.8% (CPUT), 13.5% (UWC), 6.4% (UCT), 4.8% (SU). Regarding job search strategies, they note that the use of social networks was more prevalent amongst graduates from UCT and SU. Overall, 28% of white graduates report benefitting from social capital vs 11% of African graduates. Regarding debates on higher education as a public good, they noted with interest that 47% of all graduates were employed in the public sector – education; health & social work; provincial and municipal government; arts, culture & sport. Here again there were some institutional differences: UWC (64%), SU (56%), UCT (42%), CPUT (41%).

Recently, Rogan et al (2015) conducted a graduate tracer study which approached a stratified random sample of all RU/UFH graduates who completed a three- or four-year bachelor's degree in either 2010 or 2011. As with the CHEC study, telephonic interviews were used to supplement an online survey – very impressive response rates were achieved (39% for the UFH and 47% at RU) were much higher than for past SA tracer studies (cf. 16% HSRC; 22.5% CHEC). Key findings were that there was a significant difference in RU and UFH unemployment rates (7% among Rhodes graduates cf. national average of 7% vs 20% among UFH graduates (3x higher). Contrary to the findings of some previous studies, they found that unemployment for humanities graduates is not significantly higher than for other fields of study. Similarly to other studies they found that graduates in education had the lowest unemployment rates. There were also institutional differences in the sectors in which graduates were employed - 73% of RU graduates are employed in the private sector, while 67% of UFH graduates are employed in government (public sector). Similarly to the CHEC study they also found important differences in job search strategies: for RU graduates, most common strategy was through personal contacts/networks/social media (about 50%); for UFH graduates, mostly through newspaper advertisements (36%).

Thus, looking across all the studies we can see that the problem of graduate employment

was initially overstated – it is about 7% for university graduates overall. However, race, gender and type of HEI attended (HWUs vs. HBUs) are still key determinants of labour market outcomes. Unemployment for humanities graduates is not uniformly higher than for other fields of study (education has the best chances of employment). Significant differences were noted across institutions in the sector of employment (private sector vs. public sector). Regarding job search strategies, the key role of social networks was noted.

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