FROM GRADUATE TO EMPLOYEE:

examining the factors that determine the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds

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FROM GRADUATE TO EMPLOYEE: EXAMINING THE FACTORS THAT DETERMINE THE PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS OF GRADUATES FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following on the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), commissioned in 2012 by the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC), that tracked the pathways into employment of the 2010 graduate cohort from the four universities in the Western Cape, there was a need to explore in more depth the experiences of particularly disadvantaged graduates from this cohort, five years after them entering the workplace. Hence, this follow-up study was conducted to answer the following question: *What are the factors that determine the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds from Western Cape higher education (HE) institutions?*

In order to answer the main research question, answers to the following sub-questions were sought:

1) Which strategies did these students employ at university in order to graduate successfully?
2) Which strategies did these students employ to secure employment?
3) How is success in the workplace understood by these graduates?
4) How is success in the workplace understood by their employers?
5) How, according to these graduates and their employers, do their degree studies feed back into their jobs?

The survey data of the GDS formed the sampling frame from which a sample of thirty research participants were selected. Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants. Email interviews were conducted with 13 employers representing a variety of employment sectors in the Western Cape.

The findings are presented according to the four phases of the graduate journey, namely 1) entry into higher education, 2) experiences in higher education, 3) transition into employment, and 4) negotiating employment. Participants' perspectives on the value of higher education in their career journeys are also reported. Lastly, themes emerging from the employers' interviews are identified.

Graduates' views on the first phase of the journey, i.e. entry in higher education, highlighted the constraints in their choices as far as academic programmes and higher education institutions are concerned, mainly due to poor schooling and financial difficulties. Their

choices were also hampered by their lack of knowledge about potential employment opportunities and the nature of work. In retrospect, some of them believed they should have made different choices.

Once they had entered higher education most participants experienced it as a 'foreign' environment where they could only survive through hard work, perseverance and with the support of family and friends. Institutional support mechanisms for these students seemed to be of limited value as they were either unaware of available support or chose not to make use of it. Mainly as a result of them struggling to be academically successful, their engagement in extra-curricular activities was very limited. Participants had clear-cut views on the institution that they had attended, also in comparison with some of the other institutions, and institutional reputations certainly played a role in this regard. There was also evidence of 'qualification inflation' in the importance that participants afforded to acquiring postgraduate qualifications.

Participants' inputs around their transition into employment produced several themes, the most prominent of which was their struggle to find employment. This could be related to their lack of prior planning for the transition from higher education to the world of work, and possibly also by them limiting their job applications to certain geographical areas or employment sectors. Whereas the internet was the preferred tool in their job searches, evidence of them using social networks to find employment was also quite strong. A third factor that contributed to them finding employment was in-service training opportunities and internships afforded to them during their studies. On the downside, some participants reported that it unexpectedly took them a look time to eventually secure employment, and because of this, some had to settle for being underemployed. Once again, the inadequacy of support from higher education institutions during this phase transpired from the interviews.

Having found employment participants' biggest challenge was traversing the gap between higher education and the world of work for which they largely felt unprepared. During this time of 'settling in' they depended on the support of peers and colleagues in the workplace. They also had clear ideas on what constitutes success in the workplace, and related this mostly to personal happiness and personal goal achievement.

As far as the value of higher education is concerned participants believed that having a university qualification leads to better career options. In addition, and possibly even more important, they credited the higher education experience with development of the whole person. They were also convinced that a stronger relationship between higher education and the work world could have better prepared them for employment.

In their feedback, employers emphasized the importance of academic qualifications and for graduates to have strong academic records, while also valuing a wide range of graduate attributes. Employers also clearly expressed preferences for certain institutions when recruiting and hiring graduates.

In conclusion, the report makes a number of recommendations pertaining to the roles that a variety of stakeholders can play in facilitating employability of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds. Firstly, graduates themselves need to acknowledge the importance of developing a strong graduate profile, and consciously work towards doing this from their final school years, and throughout their time at university, by not only performing well academically but also developing a broad range of attributes through extra-curricular involvement and extending and strengthening their social networks. Secondly, higher education institutions need to extend institutional goals beyond graduation rates to rates of graduate employment, and consider how academic offerings, extra-curricular activities and support services could all contribute towards building strong graduate profiles and employable graduates. Lastly, employers may need to reconsider their preconceived ideas with regard to institutions' reputations, interpretation of academic records and graduates' 'fit' with the workplace as far as particularly disadvantaged graduates are concerned.

1

INTRODUCTION:
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This research report follows on the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) of the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) done in 2012 (see CHEC 2013). The GDS aimed at determining levels of graduate employment and understanding the different pathways from higher education into work. The GDS covered the 2010 graduate cohort from the four universities in the Western Cape, namely Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of the Western Cape (UWC), Stellenbosch University (SU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT). The research report with the title: *Pathways from university to work*, was published in June 2013 (see CHEC 2013).

The GDS identified seven pathways graduates follow after graduation, namely 1) already employed, 2) first-time entrants into the labour market, 3) self-employed, 4) graduates employed in the informal sector, 5) unemployed, 6) continuing higher education, and 7) caregivers. The GDS report provides valuable data on graduate destinations and employment status of one graduate cohort in the Western Cape.

The GDS report also highlights the need to complement the quantitative survey data with more in-depth qualitative work. Issues pertaining to, for example, graduate attributes and employability could not be explored in depth in the quantitative study. As a second phase of the CHEC project, a call for proposals went out in June 2014 for a qualitative study to examine the successful transition from university to employment by graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds who had participated in the GDS.

Several considerations underpinned the decision to focus the qualitative follow-up study on graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds entering the labour market for the first time. As the South African higher education (HE) system is transforming from the former fragmented, elite and uneven system to one with widened participation, one such consideration was the larger numbers of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds entering higher education (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2016). Another consideration was studies showing that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face bigger challenges to complete higher education (Rogan & Reynolds 2015) than their advantaged counterparts.

Furthermore, statistics showing that 90% of the South African population who live in poverty are black[1] (Index Mundi 2013), and that blacks have the highest unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa 2012), all point to the necessity to investigate the experiences of particularly black students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although a disproportionate percentage of disadvantaged students do not complete higher education, many do graduate successfully, enter employment and build a career. A better understanding of the factors that contribute to the successful transition of these students into employment could inform a broad range of stakeholders, such as prospective and current students, HE managers, employers and parents to put measures in place proactively to facilitate the transition from higher education into the workplace, and to ensure a successful integration of particularly black graduates in the job market.

This qualitative research study focused on factors that influence and shape the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds, covering the journey of the graduate from higher education into employment, since first-time entry into the labour market and securing full-time, formal sector employment are considered the most important life course transition for a young graduate (CHEC 2013; Piróg 2016). The main research question that guided the research was: *What are the factors that determine the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds from Western Cape higher education (HE) institutions?*

The following sub-questions were addressed in order to answer the main research question:

1) Which strategies did these students employ at university in order to graduate successfully?
2) Which strategies did these students employ to secure employment?
3) How is success in the workplace understood by these graduates?
4) How is success in the workplace understood by their employers?
5) How, according to these graduates and their employers, do their degree studies feed back into their jobs?

Hence, the focus of the study was to determine the factors that influence and shape the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was done by considering the entry of these graduates into higher education, their experiences in higher education, their transition into employment and their perspectives on their success in the labour market. Their perspectives on the value of higher education for future careers were also investigated.

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[1] In this report, we use the term **black** to refer to black Africans.

Dr Elza Lourens, a facilitator in the SciMathUS access programme at Stellenbosch University (SU) and Prof. Magda Fourie-Malherbe of the Centre for Higher and Adult Education in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University were appointed to undertake the research. The empirical research was conducted during the period February to November 2015.

The survey data of the GDS formed the sampling frame from which possible participants were selected. The selection took place according to a set of criteria agreed upon by the Project Reference Group comprising representatives from CHEC and from the four Western Cape universities. Thirty research participants were selected from graduates who had participated in the CHEC GDS. Face-to-face interviews of approximately forty minutes each were conducted with the participants. Email interviews were also conducted with 13 employers representing a variety of employment sectors in the Western Cape.

The findings of the study cover participants' perspectives on their entrance into higher education, their experiences in higher education, their transition into the labour market and their success in the labour market. These findings should be interpreted against the background of international and national labour market and graduate employability trends.

2

A CHANGING LABOUR MARKET AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT: INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 International perspectives

Globally, labour markets are in flux. A report prepared for the 2017 World Economic Forum, entitled: *The future of jobs – Employment, skills and workforce strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (World Economic Forum [WEF] 2016b: 3) highlights the "disruptive changes to business models" that will have "a profound impact on the employment landscape over the coming years". The report goes on to discuss the drivers of change in the labour market, underscoring the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' with its technological advances, together with a set of broad socio-economic, geopolitical and demographic developments, which are interacting with and intensifying one another.

> While these impending changes hold great promise for future prosperity and job creation, many of them also pose major challenges requiring proactive adaptation by corporations, governments, societies and individuals. As whole industries adjust and new ones are born, many occupations will undergo a fundamental transformation (World Economic Forum 2016b: 8).

As the dataset that formed the basis of the WEF report comprised the 100 largest global employers in nine target industry sectors, and included 15 major developed and emerging economies (including South Africa), the trends foreseen in the report deserve close attention. Clearly, labour markets across the world are facing significant changes as far as the nature of work and the type and availability of jobs are concerned. We can conclude that the "transformative impact" (World Economic Forum 2016b: 3) of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on employment and on education and training has major implications for higher education as the main provider of highly skilled or 'knowledge' workers.

Knowledge workers are expected to supply and manage their knowledge in order to make a contribution to a knowledge-driven economy. The shift towards a post-industrialised knowledge-driven economy has been affecting the labour market since the end of the 20th century, resulting in a demand for specifically trained individuals with high-level skills and

knowledge (Tomlinson 2012). In this context, knowledge is regarded as a capital with the potential to benefit individuals and countries in terms of economic return and general wellbeing (Brown & Hesketh 2004).

However, the view that the labour market is knowledge-driven is not universally accepted. Brown and Hesketh (2004), for example, contend that the focus on knowledge workers is skewed since for every job requiring a degree in the United States, there are almost three that do not have such requirements. Furthermore, Brown and Hesketh (2004) believe that the supply of knowledge workers exceeds the need. Brown and Lauder (2012) refer to this overemphasis on knowledge workers as the 'death of human capital'. In spite of dissenting viewpoints, the belief that the labour market is shaped by a knowledge-driven economy continues to influence stakeholders' perspectives on the role of higher education as the primary vehicle to a more prosperous society.

From the above follows that the transformative potential of higher education has become critical in both developed and developing economies, as higher education is considered pivotal for development. The value of higher education in producing high-level research and advancing technological capacity is well known, but its role in the preparation of graduates for employment in both the private and public sector is also regarded as fundamental (McCowan 2016).

Higher education is, however, also a private good. Worldwide it is by and large accepted that higher education determines graduates' life chances (Marginson 2007; Parry 2005). Yet, the public and private good of higher education are intertwined. The effect of preparing a graduate to be employable stretches beyond the personal gain of the graduate: graduates entering and remaining in employment contribute to the tax base of the economy and could also, through other contributions, potentially have a positive effect on whole communities. Thus, higher education is widely considered the key to employment, development and prosperity. But how has higher education responded to these expectations?

Tomlinson (2012) argues that the shift towards a knowledge-driven economy resulting in increased pressure on higher education to fulfil the needs of such an economy coincided with the massification of higher education. The massification of higher education globally was primarily the result of the democratisation of higher education underpinned by notions of inclusivity and diversity rather than elitism and the exclusivity of higher education (Blessinger 2015). One would assume that the massification of higher education would satisfy the demand for graduates in the labour market. However, in spite of the expansion of HE provision and a sharpened focus on the preparation of graduates for the world of work, the

expectations that graduates would be easily employed and employers would be satisfied with the skills and attributes of graduates, have not realised. Paradoxically, both a critical shortage of scarce skills and high levels of graduate un- or underemployment exist (Mourshed, Farrell & Barton 2013). This apparent paradox is explained by what Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003: 110) call the "duality of employability", referring to the relative and absolute dimensions of employability (cf. McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). The 'absolute dimension of employability' refers to whether graduates possess the appropriate knowledge, skills and other relevant characteristics to do a job, whereas the 'relative dimension' relates to supply and demand in the job market. This implies that employability cannot merely be seen as an individual responsibility, as a graduate's employment will also depend on the availability of appropriate employment and the graduate's position relative to other job-seekers. For purposes of this research report, employability is therefore not simply defined as the graduate having a particular set of attributes, skills and knowledge or achievements (Yorke 2004) or the graduate having the capability to gain and maintain initial employment and obtaining new employment (Hillage & Pollard 1998). Keeping the duality of employability in mind, the definition of graduate employability of Brown et al. (2003: 111) was adopted: "… employability can be defined as *the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment"* (italics in original).

From this follows that the rapid changes in labour markets are a further factor that confounds graduate employability. According to a 2013 McKinsey report (Mourshed et al. 2013), a shortfall of 85 million high- and medium-skilled workers will exist by 2020. The report maintains that only 43% of employers indicated that they could find skilled entry-level workers (i.e. graduates with appropriate qualifications). According to the Foundation for Young Australians [FYA], 60% of students are educated for jobs that will not exist by the time they graduate (FYA 2015). Current sought-after jobs in many industries did not exist ten years ago, and the pace of job-related changes is still accelerating. Linear progression in traditional career structures is becoming less common (Bridgstock 2009), and career structures are becoming increasingly flexible (Tomlinson 2012). Graduates are thus expected to adapt to these new work environments and requirements for rapidly changing technical and social skills (World Economic Forum 2016a).

2.2 National perspectives

Similar conditions are prevalent in the South African (SA) labour market. Skills shortages in South Africa are highlighted, amongst others, in construction and engineering industries. Yet, our labour market is challenged by slow economic growth, high unemployment rates as well

as continuing disparities resulting from our apartheid past. Despite the increase in the number of skilled workers across all population groups since 1994, the proportion of skilled people per group is still uneven with only 18% of the black workforce being skilled in 2014. This is in stark contrast with the 61% skilled workers in the white work force (Statistics South Africa 2014).

In an attempt to ameliorate the enduring inequalities along racial lines in the labour market, the SA government introduced various initiatives over the past 18 years. In 1998, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) was introduced in order to eradicate all forms of discrimination in the labour market by fast-tracking transformation in the workplace. The Act intended giving preference to black, coloured and Indian people as well as women and people with disabilities when employment decisions are made (Department of Labour [DoL] 2016). In 2003, black economic empowerment (BEE) was introduced to enable black, coloured and Indian people to enter the mainstream economy in order to realise the country's full economic potential (Department of Trade and Industry [dti] 2016). Another example of a government initiative is the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) (see SA Government On Line n.d.), which was launched in 2006. The purpose of ASGISA was to address skilled labour shortages and lift barriers to competition in certain segments of the economy (Walker & Fongwa 2016). Despite these policy interventions, racial inequalities in the labour market are still prevalent and employment opportunities remain limited, pointing to enduring social, economic and development issues (Van Broekhuizen 2013). Graduates entering the labour market in South Africa thus face a complex and challenging environment.

One of the challenges in this environment and an unexpected consequence of major changes in the labour market is that of a shrinking workforce. A McKinsey report (Mourshed et al. 2013) posits that young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than their parents. In Greece, Spain and South Africa more than half of young people are unemployed, while 25% and more young people are unemployed in Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa. The International Labour Organization estimates that 75 million young people across the world are unemployed and that this number could triple if underemployed youth are also taken into account (Mourshed et al. 2013). The phenomenon of unemployment is not restricted to young people without tertiary qualifications. Various studies report on rising levels of graduate unemployment (Baldry 2016; Botha 2015; Chillas, Marks & Galloway 2015; Sin, Tavares & Amaral 2016; Varghese, Panigrahi & Heslop 2015). In 2014, the average unemployment rate in OECD countries was 7.4% (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2014) while that of graduates in Africa was 25%

(McCowan 2014). Although in 2013 graduate unemployment in South Africa was only 6%, the fact that it had doubled since 2008 is serious cause for concern (Van Broekhuizen 2013). The rise in graduate unemployment in South Africa is most pronounced among black graduates, holders of diplomas and certificates, humanities graduates and new graduates (Baldry 2016). Furthermore, Brown and Hesketh's (2004) somewhat older analysis showed little or no prospect of the graduate labour market expanding in line with the increased supply of graduates. From these studies, one could conclude that the journey into employment after graduation is not as simple as one might have expected. What is needed is an understanding of the transition of graduates into first-time employment and the factors that influence the graduate journey.

The transition from being a graduate to becoming an employee is considered to be one of the most important transitions in a person's life course, and is characterised as 'messy' (Sin & Neave 2014) and 'complicated' (Holmes 2015; Mourshed et al. 2013) with a variety of routes that can be followed. Different routes have different challenges and requirements that need to be negotiated. The period between graduation and first employment as well as the type of employment secured by the graduate influences his or her perceptions and decisions regarding a future career (Piróg 2016). Many young people get lost along the way. A better understanding of these journeys and the challenges that young people come across along their journeys could equip higher education institutions (HEIs) to prepare and support graduates better for employability (Mourshed et al. 2013).

2.3 A local perspective: The CHEC GDS

The introduction to this report referred to the seven pathways out of university into work identified by the GDS conducted in 2012 (CHEC 2013: 2). The focus of the study reported on here was the first group, i.e. employed graduates who entered the labour market in 2010 and who were in full-time employment. The analysis of employment rates of this group in the GDS provided a valuable back-drop to the current study, and is therefore discussed briefly.

Of the total number of graduates who participated in the GDS (20 592), 10% were unemployed at the time of the survey (two years after they had graduated). There were evident differences between unemployment rates among graduates of different institutions. Whereas 15.8% of CPUT graduates and 13.4% of UWC graduates reported as unemployed and looking for work, only 6.4% of UCT graduates and 4.8% of SU graduates fell in that category (CHEC 2013).

More than half of the cohort (50.6%) were employed in the private sector (only 3% were self-employed), and 36.4% were employed in the public sector. There were noticeable differences in employment patterns according to gender and race. More men than women found employment in the private sector (54.1% compared to 42.6%) whereas twice as many men were self-employed in the private sector compared to women (4.0% compared to 2.3%) (CHEC 2013).

The GDS report also highlights racial differences in employment patterns: whereas 61.4% of white graduates were employed in the private sector, this percentage was only 35 and 44 for African and coloured graduates respectively. African graduates also experienced the highest level of unemployment (19.1%), compared to 7% for coloureds, 5% for whites and 3.2% for Indians. The GDS report concludes:

> The public sector is clearly playing a critical role in human capital formation amongst university graduates, firstly, by employing a significant number of young graduates from the four institutions, secondly by employing more women than men, and thirdly by employing larger numbers of Africans and coloureds than the private sector (CHEC 2013: 41).

The GDS analysis of 2010 graduates' employment by occupation showed that about 61% of the graduates were employed as professionals (CHEC 2013: 46). This percentage was higher for UCT (73%) and SU (71%) graduates, whereas CPUT had the highest number of graduates employed as technicians, associated professionals, clerical, sales and craft workers, which, as the GDS report points out, are all mission-appropriated employment outcomes (CHEC 2013: 47). The GDS also found evidence of under-employment among the cohort who participated in the survey, a finding that was confirmed by the current study. As far as status of employment is concerned, the GDS found that most of the 2010 graduates were in permanent (72%) and full-time (90%) positions. Yet, a certain level of vulnerability was evident as 28% of the graduates were in contract positions (CHEC 2013: 48).

The analysis of employment patterns of the 2010 cohort of university graduates in the Western Cape points to high levels of employment of graduates, more or less equally distributed among the public and private sectors, and mostly in permanent positions. Although some racial and gender differences were still evident, the bigger differences in employment patterns were according to HE institution with graduates from the two historically advantaged institutions still clearly benefiting from institutional reputation and possibly social capital as far as employability is concerned. These differences will be highlighted again in the latter part of this report.

GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY
AND HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 International perspectives

As mentioned earlier, the transformative potential of higher education is recognised globally. As a result, the preparation of graduates for the world of work is on the agenda of HEIs in most countries.

The relationship between higher education and graduate employment is neither causal nor simple. Reporting on the REFLEX study (see Arthur & Little 2010), a European Commission project (which examined how graduates in different European countries were prepared for the labour market) Arthur and Little (2010: 15) cite Storen and Arnerson (2007) as arguing that "[the] relationship between study at higher education and preparation for work and employment gained after graduation can be viewed in terms of 'match' or 'mis-match', i.e. higher education prepares students well for work or not". Stiwne and Alves (2010) point out that the Bologna process as well as the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, amongst other initiatives, informed the focus on graduate employability in European universities.

In the United Kingdom, Enterprise in Higher Education, established in December 1987, encouraged HEIs to include graduate preparation for work as part of their purpose (Editorial 1993). Likewise, the goal to deliver employable graduates is supported in the United States through various initiatives of which the National Association of Colleges and Employers is an example. Amongst other things, the Association supports HEIs through the provision of literature and information on graduate employability (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2011). Australian universities, informed by government policies, have developed statements of graduate attributes to enhance graduate employability (Hager, Holland & David 2002). Evidence of engagement with graduate employability is also prevalent in Canada, New Zealand (BIS 2011), Vietnam (Tran 2015), Morocco (Sawahel 2016) and Malaysia (Abdullah 2009).

3.2 National perspectives

Since the establishment of the SA democracy in 1994, several policy and guiding documents (Department of Education [DoE] 1997; Department of Science and Technology [DST] 2007) have been released, communicating a vision of a more equitable, expanded and diverse education and training system. The HE system could contribute to the redress and transformation of society through improving the life chances of individuals and through developing active, responsible citizens for society. In addition, higher education should contribute to the national economy by producing skilled workers. Eight years ago, Griesel and Parker (2009) pointed out that, in line with higher education globally, the SA HE system is experiencing pressure to contribute to the human capital development of the country. More recently, policy documents have been highlighting the importance of developing human capital for specific sectors, such as space science and technology, energy security and global climate change (see Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2013, National Planning Commission [NPC] 2011).

Lately, more evidence of engagement with graduate employability at both national policy and institutional level has emerged. The CHE *Framework for institutional quality enhancement in the second period of quality assurance* (CHE 2014) associates student success with graduate attributes, and points to the importance of curricula with the potential to develop graduate attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable. At institutional level, programmes focusing on entrepreneurship, life skills, leadership and assertiveness skills as well as professional work attitudes and sound work ethics have been reported (Walker & Fongwa 2016). Although some universities have engaged with graduate employability to a significant extent, not all HEIs in South Africa have incorporated a holistic, inclusive approach to graduate employability. Except for a few quantitative studies (Altbeker & Storme 2013; CHEC 2013; Griesel & Parker 2009; Rogan & Reynolds 2015), limited empirical research based on sound theoretical foundations has been published about the graduate experience of searching for employment and making the transition into the world of work.

4

EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATIONS
OF GRADUATES

Employers have different perspectives on what they expect from graduates. Studies exploring the expectations of employers in South Africa point to these varying perspectives. According to Griesel and Parker (2009) employers in the SA context expect graduates to have four categories of skills, namely:

1) basic skills and understanding;
2) knowledge and intellectual ability;
3) workplace skills and applied knowledge; as well as
4) interactive and personal skills.

These authors found that the perceived gap between what employers expect and what universities offer is smaller than expected. However, in a study by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and Higher Education South Africa (HESA), a considerable gap between employer expectations and what graduates offered was exposed (*City Press* 2012, cited by Walker & Fongwa 2016: 19). This perceived gap was corroborated by a study of 2 841 NMMU (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) graduates between 2005 and 2008, which reflected a discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge of the graduates and their ability to apply theory in practice (Nel & Barnard n.d., cited by Walker & Fongwa 2016: 19). These varying perspectives emphasise the need for more research into what the reality in the labour market is as well as a need for improved collaboration between employers and higher education.

<p align="center">5</p>

METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research design

The researchers adopted an interpretivist paradigm, as the purpose of the research was to understand the experiences of the participants, and not to make broad generalisations or predictions. A qualitative methodology that incorporated conducting individual interviews was followed. This approach gave the participants the opportunity to describe their experiences during their graduate journey.

The aim of this study was to examine the factors that determine the professional success in first-time employment of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds by considering:

- the strategies they employed at university to graduate successfully;
- the strategies they employed to secure employment;
- how they and their employers understood success in the workplace; and
- the relevance of their degree studies to their careers, according to them and their employers.

5.2 Research participants

i   Graduates as employees

The sampling frame for the project was all the students who had graduated in 2010 from the four universities in the Western Cape and who had participated in the CHEC GDS survey. From this sampling frame, first-time employed graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds were identified. In this study, the term 'first-time employed graduates' referred to graduates who had entered the labour market for the first time and who had acquired full-time employment. The employment could be in the private or public sector, and contractual or permanent.

The GDS targeted 24 710 graduates from the four Western Cape universities, of whom a total of 5 560 participated in the survey. The sampling frame at our disposal thus comprised these 5 560 graduates. In order to identify a smaller group of participants in our research that

would satisfy the criterion of coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, a systematic process of elimination was followed.

Firstly, specific questions in section 3 of the GDS survey were used to identify first-time entrants into the labour market namely:

Question 3.3 was used to establish the status of the student before graduating in 2010. Students choosing categories 1, 2, 7 and 8 were included in the sample.

> 3.3 *What was your employment status just before you started studying towards the qualification you obtained in 2010?*
>
> > 1 – N/A – I was still in school
> > 2 – N/A – I was studying fulltime, not working and not looking for work at all
> > 7 – Unemployed and looking for work
> > 8 – Unemployed but not looking for work, e.g. 'gap-year', caregiver, homemaker, stay-at-home parent, etc.

The selection produced 3 549 potential participants.

To confirm whether these graduates had entered the labour market after graduating in 2010, question 3.4 was used as the next selection criterion, and students choosing categories 2, 4 and 6 were included. Category 7 (Unemployed and not looking for work) was not included since there was no further information to verify whether those graduates worked at all after graduating in 2010.

> 3.4 *What was your employment status on the 1st of September 2012?*
>
> > 2 – Employed in the private sector (part- or full-time)
> > 4 – Employed in the public sector (part- or full-time)
> > 6 – Unemployed and looking for work (these students could have worked after 2010 but stopped working for whatever reason)

The selection produced 2 644 potential participants.

Question 3.4.1 (*When did you start the job you had on the 1st of September 2012?*) was used to confirm that the selected graduates started working after graduation. Some values here are 'null' since the students in category 6 did not answer this question.

Question 3.4.12 (*Since when have you been looking for work given your current unemployment situation?*) was then used to confirm the status of students in category 6 in

question 3.4. These dates were used to select students who were employed after 2010 but who were no longer in employment on 1 September 2012.

The next question was used to refine the selected sample and to ensure that all the graduates in the sample did enter the labour market after graduating in 2010. Categories 2, 4 and 8 were included.

> 3.4.1.1 *What was your employment status mostly between graduating and starting the job you had on the 1ˢᵗ of September 2012?*
>
> > 2 – Employed in the private sector
> > 4 – Employed in the public sector
> > 8 – N/A – The job I had on the 1ˢᵗ of September started soon after studying

The selection produced 1 270 potential participants.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were then selected from the sample of 1 270 first time-entrants into the labour market. 'Disadvantage' in this case was distinguished by using students' means of financial support during their HE studies and their parents' level of education as proxies. Due to the obligation of institutions to protect private information, school data could not be verified and thus could not be used as proxy for educational disadvantage.

The following questions were used to identify possible participants:

Question 2.2.1 was used as a proxy for economic status. Categories b, c, e, g, h and j were included.

> 2.2.1 *What means did you use to pay for the registration, tuition and book fees for the qualification you obtained in 2010?*
>
> > b – Funds or loans from my parents/guardians
> > c – Funds or loans from other family members or acquaintances
> > e – NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) bursary/loan
> > g – A bursary or scholarship from my university
> > h – A private bursary or scholarship
> > j – Other

The selection produced 1 270 potential participants.

Noticeably, the filter of economic status used above, produced exactly the same number of potential participants. This implies that none of the 1 270 potential participants identified up

to this stage, paid for their studies from own funds, funds of loans from their employer, an NRF (National Research Foundation) bursary, or a bank loan (categories a, d, f and i), and points to the extent of reliance on bursaries and loans for the majority of students.

Question 3.1 was used as proxy for the parents' level of education, and categories 8, 9, 10 and 11 were selected. This selection criteria also implied that all the students in this sample were first-generation students (FGSs) as none of the parents completed any form of tertiary education.

3.1 What was the highest level of education that each of your parents/guardians had completed as on the 1ˢᵗ September 2012?

    8 – Some formal schooling
    9 – No formal schooling
   10 – I am not sure
   11 – N/A – This parent/guardian was deceased at the time

The selection produced 209 potential participants.

Since 81.34% of the 209 potential participants resided in the Western Cape and Gauteng on 1 September 2012, it was decided that, for practical purposes, participants from these two provinces only would be selected. Due to privacy considerations (cf. 5.3 Ethical considerations), only alumni whose emails were still active and who could be informed by CHEC that follow-up research would be done, were contacted by us.

The final sample therefore included 170 potential participants.

All the potential participants were black, coloured or Indian, demonstrating the lingering legacy of apartheid (cf. 2 Background to the study). Thirty participants from the group of 170 potential participants were then selected purposively to be representative of gender, race, home province, level of qualification, field of study, occupation during September 2012, and the four institutions involved (see Table 1). As school data could not be verified beforehand, the final sample included four participants who had attended former 'Model C' schools. They did, however, still meet all the other criteria used as proxies for being from a disadvantaged background.

Table 1:   Summary of selected participants

Institution		Field of study		Level of qualification		Gender		Race		Sector employed		Home province	
CPUT	9	AgriSciences	0	PhD	1	Male	14	African	12	HE	3	Western Cape	26
		Arts and Social Sciences	8	Master's	2								
SU	6	Economic and Management Sciences	6	Honours	4			Coloured	17	Private	12		
		Education	1	Postgraduate diploma	2								
UCT	9	Engineering	3	Bachelor's	19	Female	16	Indian/ Asian	1	Public	14	Gauteng	4
		Law	0	Diploma	1								
UWC	p	Medicine and Health	3	Certificate	1			White	0	Un-employed	1		
		Science	9										

ii   Employers

Thirteen employers were selected to participate in the study on the basis of being involved in an industry in which one or more of the participants were employed or on the basis of being directly referred to by a graduate participant. Six employers were from the public sector, five from the private sector and two from the HE sector.

5.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from all four institutions involved in the research. The process (see Appendix A) to obtain ethics clearance for the project, and to gain access to student data was drawn out, confusing and often frustrating. The types of forms, number of forms, terminology, processes and offices/officials involved differed from institution to institution. It further seemed as if there was little consistency in the implementation of regulations relevant to ethics clearance in the various institutions. The alignment and streamlining of these requirements and procedures would go a long way to facilitate interinstitutional research at regional and national level.

5.4 Data collection

The contact details of the participants were obtained from the GDS data base. Participants were first contacted telephonically. The researcher introduced herself and explained the purpose of the study, after which the participant had the opportunity to ask questions and indicate whether he/she would be willing to participate in the research. If the participant

indicated that he/she was willing to participate in the research, an appointment was scheduled. The telephone call was followed by an email confirming the appointment. A consent letter was attached to the email for the participant's information. At the beginning of the interview, the participant signed a hard copy of the consent letter and also received a hard copy to keep as reference.

Semi-structured interviews of approximately forty minutes each were conducted with each participant. Interviews were conducted in and around Cape Town and Johannesburg from March to November 2015. Most of the interviews were conducted during office hours at the participants' workplaces, whereas a few were conducted in public places like coffee shops. An interview schedule (Appendix B) was developed in order to elicit answers to the research questions. Although interview questions provided structure to the interview, the interviewer adopted a flexible approach and followed some of the participants' responses up with further questions or prompts (Leech 2002). The interviews were recorded and transcribed after which they were checked for accuracy.

The selected employer participants were also invited telephonically to participate in the study. They were requested to complete an email interview consisting of five questions. The telephonic invitation was followed by the email as well as a consent letter.

5.5 Data analysis

The transcriptions were coded in ATLAS.ti (Rambaree 2007). During the coding process, 150 codes emerged (Level 1 coding). These were organised into five categories, namely 1) entry into higher education, 2) experiences in higher education, 3) transition into employment, 4) negotiating employment, and 5) value of higher education. These categories were determined in consideration of the main research question and the sub-questions, as well as the literature review. The first four categories represented the four phases in the graduate journey and precipitated a chronological approach to the data analysis. The level 1 codes were then categorised into 23 themes (Level 2 coding) in the five categories. The interview data of the employers were analysed in a similar fashion to identify five emerging themes. The themes in both the employees' and employers' data form the subheadings according to which the data will be presented.

5.6 Limitations of the study

The study provided a broad overview of the journeys of thirty graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds into first-time employment. Rich thematic descriptions of the entire data set are provided in order to highlight the predominant themes in the journeys of the graduates.

The one-interview-per-participant approach, however, did not allow for an in-depth exploration of specifics of participants' experiences during their individual journeys (Braun & Clarke 2006).

The relatively small number of employers interviewed could also have affected the extent to which their responses could be seen to be representative of employers of graduates generally.

6

FINDINGS

The pathway of first-time entrance into the labour market is one of seven possible pathways, identified in the CHEC GDS, to describe the transition of the 2010 Western Cape graduate cohort from higher education into work. We consider this transition from higher education into first-time employment as a journey (Dwyer, Smith, Tyler & Wyn 2005) that begins when the student starts considering post-school education and makes a decision about what to study. The findings are presented in the four phases within the graduate journey, namely 1) entry into higher education, 2) experiences in higher education, 3) transition into employment, and 4) negotiating employment. We also report on the participants' perspectives on the value of higher education in their career journeys. Lastly, the themes emerging from the employers' interviews are discussed.

In reporting the data, participants are anonymised by using pseudonyms for all first names. Verbatim quotations were translated from Afrikaans, where applicable, and filler sounds were deleted to enhance readability without changing the meaning. Quotes used in the text are italicised in order to enhance readability, and all quotes are reflected verbatim and unedited. Participant quotations are identified by means of identifiers in brackets after the pseudonym of the participant. Each identifier includes race, gender, degree and institution. An example of such an identifier would be: (black, female, BCom, UWC). Abbreviations used for qualifications are listed in Appendix F.

6.1 Entry into higher education

Constraints in choices of programmes and institutions

Graduate employability can be linked to considerations of future careers (O'Regan 2010). In this respect, entry into higher education is a critical point of transition, which should at least partly be influenced by career decisions. However, from the interviews, it transpired that when the participants entered higher education, they were unclear about what they would do after their studies or what their future work would entail. Programme choices were made on account of preference (what they liked or thought they liked), what they considered their

personalities to be or by personal experiences. In some cases, the choices were constrained by their choice and/or availability of school subjects, and their achievement in those subjects. For example, Vuyiseka's (black, female, MSc, SU) achievement in science subjects at school determined her programme choice, "*I just loved … I did well in sciency stuff and I just loved science,*" while Sibahle (black, female, BCurr, UWC) explicated how experiences earlier in her life informed her programme choice:

> Since I was very young … I had that … that passion of taking care of people … And I also had an aunt who was very sick. My mom was looking after her at home … And I used to help my mom. So, I think I developed that passion. When I was looking after my aunt … But unfortunately she died in our hands … But I told myself, no, like I really want to be a nurse, and I must be a nurse.

A striking feature of the participants' responses was the high aspirations students had had about the type of careers they wanted to pursue. Often these aspirations had to be amended due to prior school performance or programme availability. They then accepted second and third choices of study programmes merely to gain access to higher education. An example is the case of Faith (black, female, BCurr, UWC), "*Actually I wanted to do medicine … that's all that … like … I grew up wanting to be a medical officer, but then I saw how I was performing. So, I told myself, let me do nursing.*"

This determination to enter higher education, pointing to their conviction that higher education would guarantee them employment, was also reflected in their choice of institution. Some participants accepted the first place offered to them, even though it was not their first choice, merely to gain access to higher education. This was revealed in Abongile's (black, female, BA, UWC) narrative:

> Actually, I wanted to study at Fort Hare, which is like, I think, forty minutes away from where I stay. But they took quite longer than UWC to answer me back … in terms of admission and all of that. So, UWC was much more quicker in answering that I have been accepted … So, I thought, let me just choose that one.

For other participants too, the institution where they studied was a matter of chance more than of intent. They indicated that they did not know much about the institutions where they applied, and the decision to attend a specific institution was made on account of them receiving funding, it being the cheapest or the closest. Due to a lack of confidence or being uninformed, they limited their institutional and programme choices to those where they believed they had a chance of getting accepted.

> You'll laugh at me. Before I came to Cape Town, I … in my mind I had that I'm gonna study at Pentec. I never heard of UWC in my life … yes. But then … because I didn't get the course I asked … they said they don't have a space for me at Pentec. They don't have a space in nursing. So, then I met someone who was also at XXX High School. Then she referred me to UWC. She said, no, you can go there. Perhaps they have a, they still have a space (Sibahle – black, female, BCurr, UWC).

Although most participants had some idea of which programmes they wanted to enrol for at which institution, their choices were in many cases constrained by their school background and a lack of information.

Lack of information on programmes and institutions

For many participants, the choice of programmes and institution was limited due to a lack of information. This was particularly prevalent among participants from rural areas. Phumza (black, female, BTech Surveying) recalled how limited her information on possible programmes was, "*Okay, there's teacher, police, nurse.*" Most students received little or no career guidance and were largely uninformed about available programme options.

From the interviews with the four participants who had attended former 'Model C' schools it transpired that they had a different experience in choosing programmes to follow in higher education. In their schools, entering higher education after secondary school was a normal life course transition, and better career guidance was provided.

> I think also the school that I went to, made that also more possible for me, because of my train of thought. The sort of thinking that most people are going to go and study after school. So, most of your friends are speaking about going to study next year … it's not the sort of thought that, you know, people think, I'm going to go and work (Chantelle – coloured, female, BSocSc, UCT).

The differences in the school experiences of participants highlight the prevailing inequalities in basic education and how these inequalities carry over into higher education and graduate employability. As mentioned above, graduate employability starts with decisions about programmes and HEIs, and basic education plays a critical role in supporting students in making these choices.

Ignorance about employment opportunities and the nature of work

Another theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was that most of them entered higher education without explicitly considering employment opportunities related to their programme choices or what such employment would entail. Job prospects did not play a role

in their programme choices. The 'no problem' discourse was evident in many of the participants' reflections. It seemed as if they believed that with any HE qualification, everything would fall into place. Chantelle (coloured, female, BSocSc, UCT) explained as follows, "*I didn't know much about the field … I just felt that I'm gonna take the chance, apply and see where it takes me,*" while Sibahle (black, female, BCurr, UWC) maintained, *"I didn't have any information. I just wanted to be a nurse and I didn't care if I'm not gonna get a job in time."*

There were a few exceptions. Some participants did investigate employment options and were convinced that they would find employment in the career path they chose. However, the information they relied on appeared to be mostly hearsay or advice from friends or family, as indicated by Anele (black, male, BTech Eng, CPUT), "*I had my cousin's sister … she suggested that I should do chemical engineering*".

The participants admitted that they had no idea what their jobs would entail. Even in the case of better-known careers, such as medicine, reality turned out to be very different to what they thought it would be.

> I mean you hear stories about how bad internship is and working state and how demanding it is and stuff, but I don't think you ever appreciate it up until it's time for you to do it. So, even while you are in medical school, I don't think you can really appreciate what the work would entail until you're actually doing it (Leighton – Indian, male, MBChB, UCT).

At the point of entering higher education, most participants had not committed themselves to a specific career path. It seems as if they were overwhelmed by the choices they had to make with little or no support. It is possible that, at that stage, the participants did not realise how crucial career decisions were. They entered higher education without thinking about their graduate journeys or the relation thereof to future careers.

6.2 Experiences in higher education

Higher education as a 'foreign' environment

For most students, entering higher education is an overwhelming experience (Leuze 2010). The interviews revealed that the participants experienced the HE environment as a foreign environment with which they were unfamiliar and that was totally different from anything with which they had come into contact before. The participants experienced a considerable gap

between school and university. As very few of them had any contact with people who had been to university, they had to adapt to an environment about which they knew very little.

For some, the interaction with people from different cultures, races and languages contributed to the stress of dealing with this new environment. It was noticeable that the adjustment for participants from former 'Model C' schools was less difficult, once again highlighting the importance of the school environment as preparation for higher education. Rebecca (coloured, female, BSocSc Hons, UCT), who had attended a former 'Model C' school remarked, *"I think I adapted well. I thoroughly enjoyed studying, yeah so …"*

As students, the participants had to negotiate a range of challenges for which they were not well prepared. This was reflected in Ashlin's (coloured, female, BCom, UCT) narrative, *"It was a lot harder than I had thought … and I wasn't prepared in that sense".* This experience of being overwhelmed by many challenges in higher education is confirmed by previous research on first-generation students (cf. Badenhorst & Kapp 2013). The participants struggled with academic pressures and had to deal with the disappointment of failing modules and the related strain this caused.

Another significant challenge was finances, as reported in several studies about the experiences of first-generation students (cf. Steyn 2009). The main financial sources mentioned were NSFAS and parents. Some of them did part-time work to support themselves or had to work in order to save money before they could start studying.

> So, every day after my lectures were done, then I will go and I'll, you know … I used to 'temp' at the Waterfront. So, I'll go and work from four o'clock until nine o'clock in the evening. So, it was challenging, but I knew there was an end goal and I just kept going (Hope – coloured, female, BSocSc, UCT).

Personal circumstances further contributed to their challenges. Mention was made of the divorce or death of parents, and of falling pregnant. For others travelling to and from campus and not having access to the necessary resources such as computer facilities or Internet availability proved to be very taxing. Anele (black, male, BTech Eng, CPUT) reflected on this:

> I didn't have a computer to do my assignments. So, I would come back [home] late with the last train from, from varsity, so. It was a bit challenging … But then unfortunately again, because of the story of the computer and everything … there was one subject I failed, because I remember, because of my practical that I couldn't submit on time.

John (coloured, male, BCom, UWC) shared similar experiences, *"I did not have transport … I couldn't afford certain books … I wanted to give up … [but] I just had to push through".*

Despite the challenges the students experienced, they considered the opportunity to obtain a qualification as a chance to escape from the difficulties their families experienced. Higher education provided the possibility of employment and the potential of a better life, as Ntsu (black, male, BTech IT, CPUT) claimed, "*You must go to study … otherwise you won't get anything [employment]*". Yet, the journey to obtain the degree was difficult and for many a struggle for survival.

Surviving the 'foreign' HE environment

Regardless of the fact that most of the participants' family members had no HE qualifications, family and friends were singled out as the most important sources of support during the challenging years in higher education. The families provided emotional and instrumental support and helped the students to 'get by'. Instead of blaming their disadvantaged backgrounds as a stumbling block, some participants regarded this as a motivator to persevere and continue with their studies (cf. Norodien-Fataar 2016). This was revealed, for example, in Sibahle's (black, female, BCurr, UWC) narrative:

> My background … I was raised by a single parent and I could see that she was, she was struggling. She was doing everything in her power for me to go to school, for me to be a better person, to become a better person. So, I told myself I cannot let her down and I also want to be somebody in my life. And I told myself, you know what, whatever is happening now, whatever is gonna happen in future, but I am going to be a graduate and I am going to be a nurse. So, my background, my background.

They believed that by working hard and not giving up, they would reach their goals and overcome the disadvantages with which they entered higher education. An extract from Vuyiseka's (black, female, MSc, SU) narrative points to a sense of self-belief and being an agent of one's own success:

> I am a person who has a lot of initiative. Like I said, even in the ninth grade, I didn't have a math's teacher but I didn't fail. I'm that type of person … if there is no help, I create the help around me.

This was evident in most of the narratives. Although this self-belief helped the participants to survive the HE environment, in some instances it contributed to a false sense of confidence that 'everything will be fine'. This resulted in participants not seeking institutional support or making sufficient use of such support. This is discussed in more detail below.

Failings in institutional support

The participants' perspectives on the availability of institutional support and their use of such support varied. Even though some participants indicated that they were aware that support was available, they never used it. This confirms the findings of other studies that first-generation students often do not ask for help and maintain that everything will be fine in the end (cf. Badenhorst & Kapp 2013). Some participants felt adequately supported, while other participants felt that they were not adequately supported and that they were mainly left to fend for themselves. Chantelle (coloured, female, BSocSc, UCT) reflected on her disappointment:

> I felt a bit disappointed near the end of my course, because I went to some lecturers. I asked them, you know, I've got these subjects, I don't know what I can really do with it, where it can take me. If I do my honours next year and I get accepted, you know, where, how? I actually went to go and seek advice from two of the lecturers there. They said to me, you know what, don't worry about that. First finish your degree … And I didn't feel, looking back now, I didn't feel like that was sufficient advice. I couldn't do anything with what they were telling me.

Two participants had such negative experiences with institutional structures and processes that they struggled to overcome those experiences and blamed the institutions. They believed that the institutions should have provided better guidance since their parents were not informed enough to guide them. Rizqah's (coloured, female, BCom, UWC) narrative revealed her frustration:

> I got accepted for BCom accounting … when I went in to do the registration. They said that there was a mistake I must do a BCom general programme … my parents didn't really know about things like how to work, or this administration and how to go about it … I really wasn't happy with the way things went and my parents didn't fight for it, because they didn't know. They thought that's just the way it was. There was no way we could get around it. And I myself didn't know what to do. So, we just went along with. I think, the administration, UWC's administration was, it was messed up.

An area that was crucially affected by the effectiveness of institutional structures was that of in-service training and internships. Participants who had to do in-service training as part of their academic programmes (mainly at the university of technology) reported wide-ranging experiences of institutional assistance to secure in-service training positions. This seemed to be related to specific faculties and campuses. Anele (black, male, BTech Eng, CPUT) reported, "*We had a coordinator from chemical engineering. She was the one who was helping us getting the interviews and placing us in all the different companies. So, that's how I got in at [name of company]*." Reece (coloured, male, ND Biotech, CPUT) reported that he

had to find his own internship, and that the university would step in only if a student could not find an internship. Carin (coloured, female, NHC Acc, CPUT) revealed discrepancies between two campuses of the same institution, "*They do the same courses, yes. Whereas back then, Cape Town placed you. I was not [placed], because I was at Bellville.*"

Engaging in extra-curricular activities

The challenging HE environment affected engagement with non-academic and extra-curricular activities. For most participants, their engagement with non-academic and extra-curricular activities was very limited or completely absent due to financial, practical, and academic challenges as well as feelings of alienation. Lucy (black, female, BEng, SU) recalled, "*And then I wasn't really involved with all the activities that were happening around the university, such (as) maybe socialising a lot. I was really very absent, to be honest.*"

Those who were in fact able to engage in such activities revealed the value thereof, particularly in terms of leadership.

> The leadership roles that I played that I learned from: how to deal with individuals, how to work within the university, how to work within a structure and how to work within an institution. And then liaising with people and communicating with hierarchy and getting to understand how people at a certain level start making decisions and how they think and how I have to adjust or work a strategy around that. And that I think was one critical point in my life that made me succeed and where I am today (Jason – coloured, male, BCom, SU).

The value of involvement in non-academic and extra-curricular activities in order to develop the graduate as a whole has been highlighted in literature (British Council 2015; Jackson 2016; Sumanasiri, Yajid & Khatibi 2015), and this is becoming important as a screening device for recruiters and potential employers. From the interviews one sensed that most participants did, however, not realise the importance of these activities for their future careers, and even if they had been aware of the value of extra-curricular involvement it might still have been a challenge, given their contexts.

Institutions matter

Differences in participants' perspectives of their institutions were evident. While Rebecca (coloured, female, BSocSc Hons, UCT) indicated how proud she was of her institution and that being a graduate of "*Africa's best tertiary institution*" would be to her advantage, some participants felt that their institutions did not meet their expectations. They attributed the challenges they experienced in the labour market to the credibility of their qualifications that

was closely linked to institutional reputation. Retrospectively, Anele (black, male, BTech Eng, CPUT) said, *"I think if I had proper guidance from high school and went straight to UCT, maybe I would be in a better position now."* He believed his training was inferior to that of students from UCT and SU. *"I think they can improve the course … I have a lot of other friends from UCT and Stellenbosch as well and you hear the difference."* Some were disillusioned with the functioning of the institutions. This was, amongst others, alluded to by Rizqah (coloured, female, BCom, UWC):

> I mean if you should do a survey at UWC on old students, you will be shocked to see how many students apply there, get in for something and then they have to change to do something else … It's really sad, because so many people end up studying not what they really wanted to do … I mean UWC … I don't want to say it's a bad university, it's just the administration and the assistance … they've got a big issue.

Institutional reputation seems to be a defining factor of graduate journeys. When considering the number of applications for employment as well as time it takes to secure employment, the participants from UWC and CPUT took longer to find employment and had more complex graduate journeys than the graduates from UCT and SU. The influence of institutional reputation on graduates' employability is corroborated by a graduate employability study recently completed by Walker and Fongwa (2016: 25), which concludes that graduates from what are perceived to be more reputable universities will have better employment opportunities than graduates from less reputable universities.

Growing importance of post-graduate studies

A surprisingly large proportion (almost 60%) of the 30 participants had, at the time of the research, completed post-graduate qualifications or they were considering post-graduate studies. Six participants had completed honours degrees, three participants had completed master's degrees, and one had a doctorate. A further eleven participants were busy with or planning to embark on post-graduate studies. This points to their conviction that post-graduate qualifications would improve their chances of being employed and of gaining positional advantage in an oversupplied market. Chantelle (coloured, female, BSocSc, UCT) indicated:

> And I felt that if maybe I did my honours in geography I'd be able to expand on what, what I'm already knowledgeable or would like to be able to do. And then also give me a better opportunity for getting a better jobs or something like that.

The study by Walker and Fongwa (2016:36) found that most graduates who did general formative degrees (such as BA, BSc, BComm) perceived an honours degree as a requirement for employment. In more developed economies and labour markets, post-graduate qualifications do not necessarily guarantee a smooth transition into the labour market, since larger numbers of graduates with advanced qualifications have become the order of the day with the concomitant devaluing of credentials (cf. Brown & Hesketh 2004). In a developing economy and largely un- or semi-skilled labour market such as South Africa, over-qualification is probably a bigger risk for graduates, as the PhD is still not regarded as a requirement for employment outside of academia (Goneos-Malka 2017).

6.3 Transition into employment

This phase describes graduates' transition into employment, which is the next big step in the graduate journey after graduation.

Struggle to find employment

The participants revealed that the search for employment and making the transition into employment were difficult and challenging. Tanya (black, female, BEng, SU) described the process as, "*… a very difficult thing I had to do",* and at some stage she even wished that she *"… had failed".* The challenge of searching for employment was so daunting that she felt it would have been easier to remain in the familiar context of the university. Liezel (coloured, female, BTech Food Tech, CPUT) recalled how despondent she felt, "*Ugh, I went on many, many, many interviews.*" The reasons why participants found this transition so difficult were mainly related to how they approached this process, as explicated below.

Lack of planning for the transition

Whereas some of the participants were planning for their transition into employment even before graduation, they were in the minority. Jason (coloured, male, BCom, SU) said, "*I applied way before graduation."* Others, however, like Brandon (coloured, male, BCom PGD, UWC), "*didn't even think of the job, I was just thinking of graduating at the time.*" Regardless of when the participants started applying for jobs, they approached this transition mostly in a haphazard fashion by relying on the Internet or references from families or friends. Phrases such as, *"I just Googled"* and *"I didn't look for the job … I just gave my CV in"* confirm that little thought went into the search for employment.

Limited scope of applications

Similar to some of the participants' approaches to choosing an HE institution, a few other also limited the scope of their applications for employment. They only considered the public sector as potential employer, and only applied for posts in the Western Cape. Brown and Hesketh (2004) explain this behaviour in terms of a subjective dimension of understanding how people approach the competition for jobs and labour market outcomes. According to these authors, issues of employability are intimately connected to notions of the self and social identity. People tend to limit the range of jobs they apply for to those they feel they have a chance of getting, and to what they think is appropriate for them. This is illustrated by Rizqah's (coloured, female, BCom, UWC) case:

> I've been applying for jobs every week to try and get into my field. And that is not just in the City of Cape Town. Not private companies though. The City of Cape Town and I've been trying the Western, the Western Cape government as well.

In spite of having acquired a qualification that would be appropriate for the private business sector, this participant did not even consider this sector as a potential employer.

Internet as job search tool

The most common resource in the initial search for employment was the Internet. This was expressed as follows by Hope (coloured, female, BSocSc, UCT), *"Google was my best friend. I literally would Google, you know, jobs in South Africa."* Participants randomly used the Internet in the hope of finding suitable employment. Different search engines and sites were mentioned, e.g. Gumtree, Facebook, Jobvibe and Career Junction. These findings are not surprising since our everyday lives are increasingly digitalised and the Internet allows for virtually unlimited access to various types of electronic advertisements (Piróg 2016).

Even though online applications were the most common method of applying for employment, the participants found this a frustrating process as they received no or limited feedback from such applications. Tanya (black, female, BEng, SU) reflected, *"There was no response to all my online job applications after I had uploaded my CV. I wonder if they even look at the online applications."* In spite of the widespread use of the Internet for job-seeking purposes, the participants' responses point to limited effectiveness of this approach and, in spite of coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, it seemed their social networks played a stronger role in them finding employment than digital resources.

The use of social networks

Although some participants struggled to find employment, all participants, bar one, were employed at the time of the research (approximately five years after graduation). Almost without exception, participants confirmed the use of social networks in finding employment. This points to the importance of social capital as networks that enable or disable individuals or groups. The participants were able to navigate their networks and systems in order to find employment and stay in employment as in Kopano's (black, male, BCom, UWC) case, *"Then eventually my brother-in-law introduced me to this friend who started a consulting business."*

The quality of the secured employment was strongly associated with the quality of the networks available which, in turn, were influenced by family background and social inheritance (Behtoui 2016). With the exception of two participants, all the others' social networks primarily consisted of family and friends. The implication of these types of social networks is that few connections to circles outside their family and friends existed; hence, participants had limited access to 'outside' information. Hope (coloured, female, BSocSc) revealed the value of connections to 'outside' networks, "*Again somebody that I knew at [company name] contacted me and said there's a great job for [me], and I took it.*" Another factor that played an important role in finding a job related to in-service training and internships.

The value of in-service training and internships

In some cases, the job-seeking process was facilitated by in-service training, internships, part-time work or a bursary associated with a firm. 'In-service training' refers to practical work experience during studies, usually following after one or two years of theory have been successfully completed, while the term 'internships' refers to post-qualification work experience or practical work experience in a job that is related to the qualification obtained (cf. Hammond 2011). Participating graduates in the medical and accounting professions had compulsory internships, which made the transition easier for them. In a few cases, in-service training led to permanent employment.

> And then I came here to do my in-service training. But I was lucky enough that later when they were saying … it was not for me to come and do in-service training … it was for me to come and work (Phumza – coloured, female, BTech Surveying, CPUT).

This, however, was not the case for all participants. Liezel (coloured, female, BTech Food Tech, CPUT) remembered how she sent out CVs "*like crazy"*, but *"nobody wanted to take a*

chance, you know … because also I think because of my in-service … I didn't really do any like testing, lab work". According to her, her in-service training was inadequate and contributed to her struggle to find employment. Participants, particularly those who did not study at a university of technology, considered graduates from universities of technology at an advantage due to their in-service training. Yet, some graduates from CPUT regarded themselves as disadvantaged compared to graduates from traditional universities. As indicated before (see 7.2), graduates from CPUT had more complex and challenging journeys into employment than those of traditional universities.

Two participants obtained employment as a result of part-time work they did during their studies. In both cases, they considered the employment to be a stepping-stone only. Two bursary holders were employed by the companies that provided the bursaries, while another graduate could not find employment in the company concerned, regardless of the bursary.

Although 'having work experience to get employment' did not emerge as a strong theme on its own, it was mentioned that a lack of work experience hampered employment options. This was often intensified by a lack of participation in any extra-mural or community engagement activities while at university. Employers are increasingly requiring a well-rounded graduate profile that includes 'hard currencies' such as part-time work experience and involvement in extra-mural activities, and 'soft currencies' such as interpersonal skills, accent and appearance (see 7.6 on employers' perspectives). Jason (coloured, male, BCom, SU) who was actively involved in leadership roles during his years in higher education experienced that these activities developed him as a person and contributed to his success, *"And that is what I really enjoyed and what helped me as an individual to become successful today as well."*

Time to securing employment

The time it took graduates to secure employment ranged from them being employed immediately after their studies to a period of more than two years after graduating. For some it was, *"like from BTech straight into the job market"* (Chad – coloured, male, BTech Environ Health, CPUT), while for others it took more than two years. Rizqah (coloured, female, BCom, UWC) commented, *"then it was two years and two months that I've been unemployed since I started looking for employment".*

The period between graduation and first employment was a stressful and challenging time for the graduates. The fact that they had graduated did not immediately change their

circumstances. They were often back in their home town where they had no computer facilities or access to the Internet and they still did not earn any income.

The six graduates from UCT had a different experience. They were all employed immediately after graduation. Furthermore, all of them considered their employment to fit their education even though some considered the posts as stepping stones to more senior positions. Research shows that a sequence of stopgap jobs and high mobility rates in the journeys of graduates is not uncommon (Leuze 2010).

The harsh reality of underemployment

In some cases, the desperate need for employment led to underemployment. Liezel (coloured, female, BTech Food Tech, CPUT) remembered how desperate she was, *"I sent him (the manager) a message and I asked him isn't there maybe just a junior position, maybe just for a couple of hours. It doesn't have to be a permanent thing, maybe just a casual thing for me."* At the time of the interviews, five of the participants were still underemployed, but they remained hopeful. The stability of a permanent job, even one that did not fit their education, inhibited some of the participants from applying for other positions and risking transfer to another job. This was clear from Rizqah's (coloured, female, BCom, UWC) comment, *"one of my main concerns is the stability, the … you know, the retrenchments and all of that".*

One participant was unemployed at the time of the interview. He had not been able to find graduate employment, and after three months of being a cleaner in a factory he resigned.

Inadequacy of institutional support

Participants' experience of institutional support regarding the drawing up of CVs and cover letters and preparation for interviews differed. Some felt well supported, while others indicated that they mostly had to rely on the Internet or friends.

> I had to go the Internet, type out how to write a CV. By the time my CV … it was the first time I had one. So, it was a process at the time … improving and improving … I think in a way [it] was maybe the reason companies didn't respond to me, because they say your CV is your marketing tool (Kopano – black, male, BCom, UWC).

Given the importance of a CV for first impressions, some participants, as in Kopano's case, felt the institutions let them down in this regard. One participant mentioned that he was aware of assistance at his institutions, but that he had to pay for the help and he could not

afford it. Most participants agreed that they had not been sufficiently supported in making the transition into employment.

Very little mention was made of effective guidance and support from career services at their institutions. This confirms what other research (Tran 2015; Walter & Fongwa 2016) found on the underuse of career guidance centres in higher education. Jason (coloured, male, BCom, SU) reflected on his experience, *"I actually went to the career centre. And there wasn't much help."* Most participants indicated that they received no guidance on how or where to search for appropriate employment or how to apply for the employment. In effect, they had to handle this important stage in their life course by themselves. Given the potentially useful role of career services (Jackson 2016), and the institutional resources used for such services, this is a matter that should be investigated and addressed at institutional level.

6.4 Negotiating employment

Participants' interviews also explored their perceptions on being employed and on the workplace. From the interviews, it was clear that participants were consciously thinking about their careers and how these could be enhanced. Dwyer et al. (2005) describe this sense of 'it's up to me' in their research. The participants took responsibility for their future and for their career progress, as demonstrated in Jenel's (coloured, female, BA PGCE, UCT) narrative below.

> Yes, it was a career move up for me. I felt it was more in line of what I want to do and what I wanted to be […] I therefore applied for this learning support post at various, in like Fish Hoek, things like that. I mean I was willing to travel to … just for my career basically.

Even while experiencing real set-backs, participants still thought about how they were going to maintain financial stability, get a permanent job or get promotion. As a way of promoting their careers, many participants who had not yet completed post-graduate studies, were registered for post-graduate studies or were considering it.

Despite some common themes evident from the interviews, the participants' journeys into and within employment showed a high degree of variability, richness and complexity (cf. Holmes 2013) with few following linear trajectories (Dwyer et al. 2005).

Gap between higher education and the world of work

The interviews revealed that the gap between higher education and the world of work was in many respects as big and as difficult to navigate as the gap between school and higher education. Participants used phrases such as *'whole new culture'*, *'quite a steep learning curve'*, *'very rigid'* and *'it was difficult'* to describe this transition. They felt unprepared for the reality of work life. They regarded their theoretical knowledge as adequate but they struggled with applying their knowledge in the workplace. Ntsu (black, male, BTech IT, CPUT) remarked, *"at tech, they just give you the basics, just the simple basics. But when you get straight in the industry, it's totally different."* In order to negotiate the perceived gap between higher education and the workplace, the participants relied strongly on colleagues and peers.

Support in the workplace

A theme that strongly emerged from the interviews was that the participants felt well supported in their jobs. The type of support ranged from formal induction programmes to mentoring schemes and/or informal support by supervisors and colleagues. Their feelings of being unprepared were alleviated by this support. Abongile (black, female, BA, UWC) explained how she felt supported in the workplace:

> Our supervisor was very open, had an open door policy. So, whatever challenge that you come across, you just go and ask to assist. And also the other colleagues that we, that were there before us, they were also willing to assist us.

Success in employment

For this group of graduates, the main definition of being successful in employment was to be happy and content. This was associated with experiencing financial security and maintaining strong family relationships. Anelisa (black, female, BA, UWC) commented, *"Success for me is being happy with what you have. And living within your means … I've had a dream of one day owning my house, my car, being a mother, providing for my family."* Thabang (black, male, BEd, CPUT) explained being successful as follows:

> Basically for me achieving the goals that I had, which was to study, get employment, be able to support myself. And be able to take care of my family, which is my unemployed mother and my siblings. So, that is success for me.

Their perspectives on success should be interpreted against the background of having been disadvantaged and coming from disadvantaged families. Being able to provide for their

families and experiencing a degree of financial stability contributed to them feeling fulfilled in their work lives.

The second main definition of success that emerged from the interviews was to reach one's goals. For some participants, goals were related to financial stability, as mentioned above, but for others, it meant to fulfil a specific dream. "*I guess success for me would be achieving all the goals that I have. And as I said, one of my goals is being in the World Health Organization"* (Anelisa – black, female, BA, UWC).

For the participants who were underemployed at the time of the interview, success would be to find employment in the field they studied and which fitted their level of education. Although they did not all perceive themselves to be completely successful yet, they did feel that they were en route to success and were able to do so due to their intrinsic motivation and hard work. This supports the findings of an Alumni Perspectives Survey (Graduate Management Admission Council 2015) among graduate business school students world-wide highlighting personal effort and hard work as the main ingredients for achieving success in employment.

6.5 Value of higher education

The journeys of the participants from graduation to employment were mostly complex and difficult, and give evidence of high levels of courage, perseverance and determination. Even though some participants were still struggling to find the appropriate employment, they all agreed that higher education was worth their while.

Higher education leads to better career options

Even though it took months for some participants to secure employment, they nonetheless believed that they would have been worse off without higher education. They perceived higher education as the key to a better future through having access to better employment options.

> All the time, all the money, it's worth your while … because to be able to progress to higher positions in the working place, you need education. People need to know that you're credible. The only way for someone to know you are credible, is through education. You have to be someone independent, certified that yes, you have the skills and you can do the job. That is why you need education (Kopano – black, male, BCom, UWC).

The participants firmly believed that higher education is indispensable to obtain employment. In addition, they considered the HE experience as a positive developmental journey.

Higher education develops the whole person

The participants reflected how the journey through higher education shaped their personal development. They highlighted the advantages of intellectual development, but also of developing an array of 'soft' skills. Vuyiseka (black, female, MSc, SU) reflected on her cognitive development, *"Somehow my brain changed, the way your brain works, it changes"*, while Leighton (Indian, male, MBChB, UCT) referred to the soft skills he acquired, *"You learn a lot of responsibilities and dealing with people and maturing as a person."* Mention was also made of development in terms of '*know how to learn'* (Reuben), '*help you to deal with people'* (Agnes), '*learn communication skills'* (Ashlin), '*managing my time'* (Chad), and '*solving problems*' (Tanya).

Those who were able to participate in extra-mural activities and/or leadership roles highlighted the benefits of it, confirming that it is the total HE experience that prepares graduates for the workplace, and not only their academic work.

> Geez, without them [leadership opportunities] I doubt that I would've done such things, because there as a leader, that's where you learn to negotiate with people. That's where you negotiate, you're able to speak in front of people. I'm not scared of any interview. I'm not scared of any student. I never had stage fright (Thabang – black, male, BEd, CPUT).

Unfortunately, participation in extra-curricular activities was limited to a minority of the participants. For most of the participants, higher education was a survival game, and they were not able to handle more than the academic workload.

Higher education needs closer contact with the work world

Participants agreed that more contact with the world of work and more exposure to the reality of what was expected of them would have been beneficial. They needed more support in making contact with the world of work while at university. For the graduates who entered professions, this seemed less complicated since their journeys were relatively pre-determined, but for the participants who had done general formative programmes, it was more challenging.

> That's one thing that I always felt that the university might have done wrong … they've emphasised too much on CAs [chartered accountants], on BAcc students for commerce now. You would always find people, companies attending your BRek honours classes and say well we are Deloitte and Touche. This is what we offer for CAs … You know, but never for a general BCom student (Jason – coloured, male, BCom, SU).

The participants from UWC, SU and UCT considered the students from CPUT to be advantaged by their compulsory in-service training modules. Yet, this perceived advantage was not experienced in the same manner by the CPUT graduates, as demonstrated by some of their responses above.

6.6 Employers' perspectives

Thirteen employers from national government departments, local government, higher education and private sector firms in auditing, transport, information technology and legal services participated in the study. The analysis of the data from the employers generated four key findings relating to the employment of graduates of the four universities in the Western Cape.

Significance of academic qualifications and academic record

The academic qualification of the applicant was considered to be 'the first tick' in the box – prospective employees having a university qualification was taken for granted (Brown et al. 2003) and such a qualification should be relevant to the post for which the graduate is applying. Of the employers, 70% referred to the importance of a good academic record. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds and first-generation students often struggle academically more than students from middle-class families, because of a poor schooling background. This could cause them to take longer to complete their degrees (Lourens 2013; Mehta, Newbold & O'Rourke 2011). The implications of employers' expectations of a good academic record for the employability of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds need careful consideration. It is feasible that graduates from advantaged backgrounds with good academic records could actually have less 'grit' than those graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have taken more time to complete their degrees but eventually still succeeded. Employers need to take a broader view of prospective employees than just their academic records.

Value of a wide range of graduate attributes

In spite of employers' insistence on a good academic record as an important consideration when employing graduates, 92% of the participating employers indicated that they value graduates, not only for their theoretical foundation, but for the variety of skills and attributes graduates acquire from higher education. They mentioned a variety of preferred skills and personality traits that they expected from a graduate and which they regarded as crucial.

Specific mention was made of problem solving, critical thinking and life-long learning. Other attributes regarded as important by employers included being a self-starter, responsible, dedicated, reliable, trustworthy, having a good work ethic and being a team player. Being able to work independently and having a good content and technical knowledge were associated with achieving success in the workplace. Communication, management, organisational and computer skills were the main generic skills required. The skills and attributes mentioned correspond well to skills and attributes identified by a different sample of SA employers in a recent study by Walker and Fongwa (2016).

Yet, eight employers raised concerns about the ability of graduates to function in the workplace on a daily basis. These concerns included the ability to apply content to practice, as one employer (private sector) explained, *"Too much emphasis is on the universities' ability to get graduates into employment that matches their degree discipline, rather than on their readiness for a career."* Another concern raised referred to basic skills needed to function in the world and labour market:

> More and more I'm having to focus on basic life skills in my induction programme to assist them with the massive paradigm shift that is required. I speak specifically of such things as corporate etiquette, how to dress, how to engage with people at various levels of the organisation, providing guidance around renting their first apartment or buying their first car, providing advice on how to manage their money, as for many of them they suddenly have more money than they've ever had, and need to be taught to manage it wisely. All of these factors can create incredible stress for the new joiners, and prevent them from focusing on the job that is required and slowing down their integration into the organisation (Employer – private sector)

Many of the skills mentioned in this quote are ones that would come with a typical middle-class upbringing but which graduates from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may lack. These skills are not ones that would characteristically be developed or acquired in the academic environment, but rather in the out-of-class and social environment, such as student communities. This once again emphasises the importance of seeing the achievement of a university qualification as a holistic experience in which a variety of contexts, influences and stimuli should work together to prepare work-ready graduates.

What also emerged from the email interviews was the importance of 'fit' – culture fit, good fit or job fit. The importance of 'fit' was related to the identification of a possible candidate for a position as well as to the success of an employee in the workplace. An important question in this regard would be what the implication of culture fit is for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Affirmative action and employment equity requirements did not seem to play an important role when employers considered job-seekers, as this was mentioned by only two employers.

Institutional preferences

Institutional preferences were mentioned in seven of the thirteen email interviews. How employers acted on their preferences however varied. One employer (private sector) indicated that, although they accept applications from all institutions, they give preference to seven institutions in South Africa, since *"it is rare that these students [from the other institutions] stack up against those from the seven we've identified".* Another employer (government department) admitted that even though they are not allowed to give preference to certain institutions *"if I can choose only 5 candidates to interview, I will prefer to choose the candidates from the more established institutions like UCT and Stellenbosch."* Of the six employers who did not indicate that they had certain institutional preferences, four represented the public sector (municipality, defence force, primary school and CPUT).

Assessment of candidates

Assessing applicants through interviews was common practice among the employers interviewed. During these interviews, both technical and personal questions were asked. Employers emphasised the importance of an interview as the opportunity where an applicant can showcase him/herself as a graduate worthy to be employed. One employer (HE) described the interview as a "*rigorous process*" of assessment, while another (government) indicated, "*In the interview, a lot of personality issues gets tested, how do you see yourself, how do you handle pressure, culture difference issues, etc."*

The participants reported that referrals such as letters from lecturers or previous employers were utilised in most appointment processes. Background checks were sometimes used to ensure that the applicant had a sound credit record and no criminal record. Four employers referred to a CV reflecting a balanced student in terms of academic and non-academic activities as well as community engagement.

7

CONCLUSION

The journeys of the 30 participants in this study were presented as difficult and complex, and they were influenced by a variety of factors and circumstances. Challenges related to graduates' struggle to find employment, how long it took to get employment and the type of employment secured. One participant took more than two years to secure employment, while others were employed on and off in contract posts. After five years in the labour market, six of the participants were still underemployed, two were in contract posts, while one was unemployed.

A number of findings related to the different phases in the graduate journey. The perceived value of higher education and employers' perspectives were discussed. In conclusion, the following need to be highlighted.

Most of the graduates entered higher education without pro-actively thinking about future careers or employment opportunities. This was partly due to the limited availability of relevant information and a lack of guidance from schools and parents. Furthermore, the graduates entered higher education with a firm belief that an HE qualification would guarantee good employment. They had even higher expectations from having a post-graduate qualification.

During their studies, little attention was paid to the notion of graduate employability, as they mostly experienced higher education as a struggle for survival. They experienced a considerable gap between graduating and first-time employment and this they had to bridge with little or no support from higher education. Employers had rather fixed expectations about the kind of graduate profile they expected from applicants and whom they wanted to employ.

What do we conclude from these findings? In the first place, graduates need to be made aware of the complexity of the graduate journey and that getting a qualification does not presuppose securing appropriate employment. The graduate journey involves deliberate thinking about careers and available opportunities as well as taking specific actions towards achieving such goals. Both the building of a graduate profile that will be attractive to potential employees and the importance of the development of a social network needs to be emphasised. Graduates need to know where and how to search for employment and how to present themselves to potential employers. For graduates from more advantaged

backgrounds, much of the above becomes part of their tacit knowledge as they grow up and/or during higher education. However, for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds, this knowledge is not obvious and not easy to acquire. As a first step, these graduates need to be aware of the complexities of the graduate journey and to acknowledge that the transition into employment entails active involvement from their side. The role of personal agency on the part of the students cannot be over-emphasised. Every individual student should take responsibility for his/her graduate journey and during that journey, they should take the actions that will contribute to improving the likelihood of later entering and progressing in appropriate employment.

The emphasis on personal agency does not mean, however, that we subscribe to the 'individualisation' of graduate employability, i.e. the perspective that employability is solely the responsibility of the graduate. In keeping with the duality approach to employability, we acknowledge the effect of labour market factors of supply and demand on graduate employment. In addition, we also see HEIs as important agents in the construction of employability. This is supported by a recent study of Portuguese students (Sin et al. 2016).

From our findings, it is clear that the participating graduates did not feel adequately supported by higher education during the transition into employment. HE institutions put a lot of resources, effort and time into initiatives to provide access for disadvantaged students and to support them in order to be able to graduate. However, very little is done from the side of higher education to support graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds in the transition into employment. In South Africa, the social justice role of higher education should extend to the development of graduate employability of disadvantaged students. Without sufficient support for these graduates during the transition into employment, all previous positive efforts are in effect diminished and consequently social inequality is reproduced.

How can HEIs contribute to the development of graduate employability of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds? HEIs should start by rethinking their success criteria to include not only graduation rates but also graduate employment rates, particularly for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds. To be successful in this regard, institutions will have to be more pro-active and innovative in 'going that extra mile' with the graduate up to the point where he/she is appropriately employed. This 'extra mile' should include the strengthening and expanding of graduates' social networks. Although the participants' social networks did support them in finding work, the size and the level of influence of their networks limited the type of jobs to which they were exposed. With the exception of a few participants, most did not expand and develop their networks during higher education. The importance of expanding disadvantaged students' social networks is underscored by studies showing that

in a competitive labour market, advantaged graduates' families increasingly tend to mobilise social resources to help their children find employment (Mok & Jiang 2016). In this respect, higher education could support disadvantaged students by putting initiatives in place to enable such graduates to strengthen and expand their networks. This could be done, for example, by enabling students to participate in extra-curricular activities and living in residences.

Another area where higher education could support disadvantaged graduates is in the development of a graduate profile. This obviously would include academic support in order to obtain the best academic record possible, but also to support the students to develop in non-academic areas. For various reasons, most participants in this study did not participate in any non-academic and/or extra-curricular activities. That meant that they did not make sufficient use of all the opportunities afforded by a university education, leaving them with a 'lean' profile not demonstrating all the 'hard and soft currencies' employers are requiring.

A graduate profile would also include being able to present oneself to potential employers as a graduate who is worthy of employment. Writing cover letters, setting up CVs and being well prepared for interviews need to be addressed. Bridgstock (2009) points out that graduates' struggle to find employment may be related to the quality of their applications rather than the quality of the graduates themselves. Her point speaks to the ability of a graduate to present him/herself to employers in his/her CV as well as in an interview. It is noteworthy that none of the participants mentioned any benefits they might have experienced with regard to employment policies in support of racial equity. The possibility that the quality of the applications of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds disqualifies them even before they can be considered for a job and thus cannot reap the benefits of EEA or BEE policies needs to be considered, and further research into this aspect may provide useful insights.

The development of a graduate profile also involves improved engagement with career services. The chances of securing employment in which graduates can be successful will improve significantly if they receive career advice and acquire career development knowledge and skills. Developing graduates' skills to engage in well-planned and systematic job searches (rather than a random Google search), and equipping them with the 'know-how' of where to start, which companies to approach, which methods to use for application, and how to present oneself, could go a long way to make this transition easier and more successful.

Lastly, we turn our attention to the employers. Within the small sample, it was clear that each employer had a specific 'picture' of the graduate that he/she was looking for. Many skills and

attributes were expected, and interviews were highlighted as the 'window' to the profile of the graduate. Most employers were concerned with 'culture fit', and some of them also with institutional reputation. Participants from CPUT and UWC had to negotiate more 'stepping stones' than those from UCT and SU. At the time of the research, all the UCT and SU participants, with the exception of one, were in permanent graduate posts. Of the 18 CPUT and UWC participants, one was unemployed, four were underemployed of which one was a contract post, while another was in a contract graduate post. Also, the employers and employees had different perspectives of what success in employment meant. Whereas graduates mainly focused on personal benefits like financial security and achieving personal goals, for employers, success was demonstrated by performance and 'fit' in the work context. These perspectives beg the question, 'What are the implications of employer perspectives for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds?' Often these graduates had no opportunity to develop a specific 'fit' or option to choose an institution. In this regard, employers need to rethink their approach towards graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds as they can, by adopting a more nuanced approach and not a 'one-size-fits-all' tactic, play an important role in promoting social justice in the workplace.

From the perspective of both the graduates and employers, the value of higher education is undeniable. Graduates were convinced that their university education provided them with good job prospects, particularly over the long term, and they were outspoken about the ways in which this experience contributed to their personal growth. For employers, a university qualification was a prerequisite for a prospective employee, but this was only the starting point – a host of soft skills and personal attributes is also required. One needs to consider whether this focus on the personal qualities that graduates should have, in addition to their academic credentials, could impede the chances of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of employability.

Coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, the graduates who participated in this study were characterised by high levels of perseverance or 'grit' to which negotiating the challenging environment of higher education contributed. To some degree, the difficult transitions into employment could be attributed to their own actions, signifying their agency. The reality is thus that the participants succeeded in securing employment, but despite considerable support from families and communities, the transitions remained challenging with, in some cases, less than satisfying employment outcomes. Even though some stakeholders in higher education may feel the development of graduate employability is not their responsibility, it is crucial that all stakeholders in the HE sector work together to support graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds in their transition into employment.

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9

APPENDICES

Appendix A:
Process to obtain ethics clearance

The researchers, based at SU (Stellenbosch University), applied for ethics clearance for the study and institutional permission for utilising the information of SU graduates. This involved two separate applications. Institutional permission was received on 30 January 2015, while ethics clearance was received on 19 February 2015.

At a meeting of the Project Reference Group, held on 13 April 2015, a decision was taken that each of the representatives of the other three higher education institutions (HEIs) would confirm whether a re-application for ethics clearance was needed or whether the permission granted for the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) could be extended to the current study. It was also decided that school data of potential participants would be obtained from the respective institutions in order to confirm that the school attended by the participant was in fact situated in a disadvantaged community since 'type of school' was used as one of the proxies to determine whether the participants were educationally disadvantaged.

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) representative informed the researchers on 8 May 2015 that UWC required a new ethics clearance application for the project, since it involved further or new research that was not covered by the ethics clearance of the original project. This application was prepared and submitted by the institutional representative and ethics clearance as well as institutional permission was received on 24 June 2015.

After telephonic communication with the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) representative, the researchers received an email on 23 June 2015 from the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research, Technology, Innovation and Partnerships) of CPUT with the Human Participants Review application form that needed to be submitted for ethics clearance. On 22 July, the researchers made enquiries about the outcome of the application. This resulted in them being provided with a 'Faculty of Education Ethics for Original Research' form on 27 July, which also needed to be submitted. Ethics clearance and

institutional permission were received on 11 August 2015. Both UWC and CPUT provided the requested personal information, school data as well as study records of the selected participants to the researchers after the ethics clearance processes had been concluded.

On 14 May, we were informed by the Executive Director of Student Affairs at University of Cape Town (UCT) that an application for ethics clearance and access to student data was required. This involved obtaining ethics approval from the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) Ethics Research Chair after which the application to access student data could be submitted. Ethics approval was received on 27 July 2015. During the process of applying for access to student data, the researchers were informed by UCT that no student information would be made available. After lengthy email correspondence and telephone conversations between the researchers and various UCT officials, the researchers were informed on 3 September 2015 that they were only allowed to contact UCT graduates who participated in the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) GDS once these participants had been informed by CHEC about the follow-up study to the GDS. No additional personal information, school data or study records were to be made available to the researchers. The implications of these conditions were that the sample of UCT graduates became smaller to include only those whose email addresses, as given in the GDS data, were still active, and that the school data of the selected participants could not be verified before the interviews.

Appendix B:
Graduate interview schedule

On higher education (10 min)

1. **What was the secret to your success? / your experiences in HE?**
   a. What challenges did you experience? How did you overcome these challenges?
   b. How did your institution help you to be a successful student?
2. **How did you decide on the course you chose?**
   a. What did you know about the work related to the course?
   b. Did you think about employability prospects when you chose the course?

On securing employment (10 min)

1. **Explain the process to securing your first job.**
   a. Which factor/practices/anything was the one thing that helped you most to acquire work?
   b. What approach did you follow?
   c. Did you feel confident that you will secure work relatively easy? Explain?
   d. How long after graduation were you employed?
   e. Did anybody assist you?
   f. Did you have a CV? Who helped you setting up your CV?
   g. Did you have any prior work experience?
   h. Did you do volunteer work/service learning?
   i. Were you linked to a certain job through a bursary/contract?

On professional success (10 min)

1. **Explain you first month in your new employment?**
   a. Were you prepared for the world of work? Motivate.
   b. What were you never told?
2. **Are you successful? Why?**
   a. Which factor/practices/anything was the one thing that helped you most to be successful in your work?
3. **How do you navigate the working world and build your career?**
4. **Would you consider yourself as being civically engaged/socially responsible citizen?**

On higher education and its relation to work (5 min)

1. **Does your HE studies assist you in being successful in your current career? How?**
   a. Does your job relate to your achieved degree?
   b. Did you acquire any technical skills during your undergrad years? If so, describe. (define the term technical skills). Did it help you in your job?

    c.   Did you acquire any generic skills during your undergrad years? If so, describe. (define the term generic skills). Did it help you in your job?

2. **Was the amount of money spent on HE worth it?**
3. **What could HEI's do/add to better prepare graduates for employment?**

Appendix C:
Employer email interview schedule

1. Which factors do you consider to identify potential employees? Do you, for example, consider factors such as the higher education institution where the graduate studied/graduated from, the qualification that the graduate holds, referrals from acquaintances, or any other factors?

2. What knowledge, skills (generic and/or technical), and personality traits do you consider to be important in a potential employee?

3. How do you assess the above-mentioned skills, personality traits and knowledge of such an employee?

4. How would you describe a successful employee after 2-3 years of employment?

5. To what extent and how does university education, in your opinion, prepare employees to be successful in the workplace?

Appendix D:

Graduate participant consent letter

UNIVERSITEIT·STELLENBOSCH·UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

From graduate to employee: Examining the factors that determine the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds.

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Elza Lourens (MEd), from the Department of Curriculum Studies at Stellenbosch University. The results of the study will form part of a doctoral thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were part of graduation destination survey conducted by the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) in 2013.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Exploring the factors that determine the professional success of first-time entrants into the labour market may guide our thinking about which actions matter most in HE, how to organise and implement these actions, and what changes are needed in HE.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

be interviewed by Elza Lourens for approximately forty minutes.

3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

None

4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The narratives describing these journeys may inform HE institutions which interventions are effective in developing the employability of graduates and what is still lacking in developing employability.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive no payment as participant to the study.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping all collected data in a secure folder.

If you allow the recording of the interviews you will have access to all interview data in order to review the data. Except for Elza Lourens the data will only be accessible to a transcriber whom will handle the data with the same confidentiality as she will.

The findings of the research will be published in a doctoral thesis but your name will not be used. In presenting your data a different name which you may choose will be used.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Elza Lourens, 0218082608.

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to *me* by Elza Lourens in *Afrikaans/English and* I *am* in command of this language. *I* was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to *my* satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

....

Name of participant

....

Signature of participant   **Date**

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to (name of participant). He/she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in *Afrikaans/English.*

....

Name of investigator

....

Signature of investigator   **Date**

Appendix E:

Employer participant consent letter

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: From graduate to employee: examining the factors that determine the professional success of graduates.

REFERENCE NUMBER: DESC/Lourens/Feb2015/3

RESEARCHERS: Elza Lourens and Magda Fourie-Malherbe

ADDRESS: Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University

CONTACT NUMBER: 0824134408

Dear ....

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project.

Please take some time to read the information below, which explains the details of this project, and contact me if you require further explanation or clarification of any aspect of the study. Also, please note that your participation is **entirely voluntary,** and you are free to decline to participate. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you did agree to take part.

This study has been approved by the Humanities Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at Stellenbosch University **and will be conducted according to accepted and applicable national and international ethical guidelines and principles.**

Purpose and potential benefits of the study
The purpose of the study is exploring the factors that determine the professional success of first-time entrants into the labour market. This may inform HE institutions about interventions

that are effective in developing the employability of graduates and what is still lacking in developing employability.

Procedure

If you agree to participate in this study, we would ask you to simply answer five questions via email.

Potential risks and discomforts

None

Payment for participation

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Confidentiality

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping all collected data in a secure folder. The findings of the research will be published in a report, a doctoral thesis and scholarly articles, but your name will not be used. When reporting data all participants will be anonymized.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Elza Lourens (0218082608) or Magda Fourie-Malherbe (0218083908).

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICPANTS: You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development of Stellenbosch University. You have the right to receive a copy of the Information and Consent form.

If you are willing to participate in this study please sign the attached Declaration of Consent and return it to me.

Yours sincerely
Elza Lourens
Principal Investigator

DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT

By signing below, I.. agree to take part in a research study entitled *From graduate to employee: examining the factors that determine the professional success of graduates* **conducted by Elza Lourens and Magda Fourie-Malherbe.**

I declare that:

- I have read the attached information leaflet and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.

- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been adequately answered.

- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.

- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in my best interests, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.
- All issues related to privacy and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide have been explained to my satisfaction.

Signed at (*place*) .... on (*date*) ....2015.

....

Signature of participant

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to name of participant. He / she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English and no translator was used.

....

Signature of investigator   **Date**

Appendix F:

Abbreviations used in identifiers

BA	–	Bachelor of Arts
BAcc	–	Bachelor of Accounting
BCurr	–	Bachelor of Nursing Science
BCom	–	Bachelor of Commerce
BEd	–	Bachelor of Education
BEng	–	Bachelor of Engineering
Bio	–	Biology
Biotech	–	Biotechnology
BSc	–	Bachelor of Science
BSocSc	–	Bachelor of Social Science
BTech	–	Bachelor of Technology
Eng	–	Engineering
Environ	–	Environmental
Hons	–	Honours
IT	–	Information Technology
MA	–	Master of Arts
MSc	–	Master of Science
MBChB	–	Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery
ND	–	National Diploma
NHC	–	National Higher Certificate
PGD	–	Postgraduate Diploma
PGCE	–	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PhD	–	Doctor of Philosophy
Proj Man	–	Project Management

A research report for the
Cape Higher Education Consortium
(CHEC)