CDS RESEARCH REPORT

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT & POVERTY ISSUES

The appropriateness of education and training of school leavers and individuals that complete tertiary education: The views of the unemployed

CDS

Centre for Development Support
Sentrum vir Ontwikkelingsteun

The appropriateness of education and training of school leavers and individuals that complete tertiary education:
The views of the unemployed

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DETERMINING THE PERSPECTIVES AND OPINIONS OF UNEMPLOYED YOUTH

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1. INTRODUCTION

This research is objective 5 of the Research: Appropriateness of the Education and training of school leavers and individuals who have completed tertiary education and school leavers. Central to this research was to get the opinions of school leavers and graduates from tertiary institutions on the worth of their education and their perceptions on whether they think that their education did indeed prepare them for the labour market. This introduction captures the essence for which this research was conducted in the executive summary as well as the aims and objectives of the study.

1.1 Executive Summary

In terms of the Five-Year Research Plan of the Free State Youth Commission, the Commission and its research partners have been entrusted to research the appropriateness of education in relation to the economic market needs of the Free State. This study is one of the key objectives of that research. Consequently, this study aimed to pinpoint the reasons for the inability of unemployed graduates to find jobs, as well as their own perceptions in respect of this problem.

The research team applied a Convenience Sampling Method to identify the participants in a focus group interview to investigate the above-mentioned perceptions. From the study, some specific trends emerged which had a bearing on real or perceived reasons as to why unemployed graduates have been unable to find jobs during certain specific periods.

The main trend that has emerged in the report is the respondents' general lack of faith in the institutions of higher learning with regard to proper preparation for employment, as well as in the prospective employers with regard to the prospects for employment. The participants seem to think that the education that they received did not prepare them adequately for subsequent employment, once they had left the institutions of higher learning. As a result, the employers usually tend to emphasise experience as the major pre-requisite for employing graduates. This trend was more evident amongst the school leavers and graduates from the Further Education and Training institutions.

Also, the participants believe that nepotism is prevalent, both in the public and the private sectors. There is a notable perception that jobs are advertised only as a mere formality, because the people who will be filling the posts have already been identified.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The overall aim of this research was to determine the relevance of education and training in the Free State. In order to achieve this aim, the research has been structured into five objectives. Each objective is the subject of a separate report. The objective which was relevant to this study was that of gaining an understanding of how unemployed youth are struggling to find jobs; their experiences and the processes they follow in order to find a job; and how they cope with not being employed. Key questions which were put to the participants were related to the following aspects:

- The extent of practical work experience;
- the length of the period of unemployment;
- the number of applications made;
- perceived obstacles to finding employment;
- their thoughts on whether they are sufficiently equipped, both theoretically and practically, for their intended careers;
- the perceived inadequacies in the education received;
- the government's responsibility, as well as individual responsibility, in finding jobs for the unemployed graduates.

2　RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It was decided that the Focus Group Interview (FGI) would be used as the main method for data collection for Objective 5 (determining the perspectives and opinions of unemployed youth) of the research project: *Assessment of the Appropriateness of the Education and Training of School Leavers and Individuals Who Have Completed Tertiary Education*. In order to prepare for this endeavour, the research team deemed it necessary to look into relevant methodological aspects of the FGI. The discussion in this regard comprised the following:

- An orientation regarding the nature, possibilities and limitations of qualitative research.
- A brief introduction to grounded theory and constructivism as paradigms within qualitative research.
- A discussion of what the heuristic method of inquiry entails.
- An outline of the methodology of the Focus Group Interview.
- Ethical issues to be taken into consideration when embarking on qualitative research projects.

The focus group interviews were supplemented by questionnaires to enable the research team to ensure synchronisation between what was said by the participants in the focus group interviews on the one hand, and the group interviews, on the other.

In the following section, brief references are made to the above themes, along with indications of how they relate to the research orientation adopted for achieving Objective 5.

2.1 Qualitative Research

The qualitative research paradigm, within which the methodology of the FGI is embedded, distinguishes itself from quantitative research in terms of the following key features (cf. Mouton & Babbie 2001: 270):

- Research is conducted in the natural setting of social actors.
- A focus on process rather than on outcome.

- The "insider" ("emic") view is emphasised.
- Interpretative understanding through credible inter-subjectivity is pursued.
- The primary aim is in-depth descriptions and understanding.
- The main concern is to understand social action in terms of its specific context rather than to make generalisations relating to some theoretical population.
- The research is often inductive in its approach, resulting in the generation of new theories.

Since the researcher is the main "instrument' within this approach, the responsibility lies with him/her to gain the trust of the participants and establish a rapport with them during the FGI. For the purposes of the present research project, the research team decided that the facilitator (moderator) of each FGI should be a mother-tongue or first-language speaker of the language that was predominantly spoken by the participants in each of the various groups. This proved to be an effective approach to linguistic diversity, since participants were not burdened with the problem of language barriers during the interviews and could therefore contribute freely (at least as far as underlying power relations would allow!)

Owing to the fact that only one method of data collection was used for this section of the larger research project, the only form of "triangulation" that could be built into the process was the utilisation of a small research team, comprising five investigators from various backgrounds, bringing multiple perspectives to the table in an effort to enhance validity and reliability. In addition, it was decided that a team member should act as observer during each interview, in order to verify the interpretations of investigators.

2.2 The Constructivist Paradigm and Grounded Theory

A constructivist paradigm stands in contrast to a positivist paradigm which assumes an objective reality consisting of single truths which can be "discovered" by an "uninvolved" researcher. "The constructivist perceives reality as something that is created through our mental processes, experiences and language, and in interaction with others" (O'Brien, 2004). Exploring unemployed young people's way of thinking about their present situation - i.e. their perceptions of environmental constraints as well as of their own strengths in the face of adversity - served as a point of departure in the present research

project. In an effort to make sense of the local knowledge thus obtained through the FGIs, some methodological concepts from the grounded theory were gleaned and adopted where relevant.

A distinct characteristic of grounded theoretical methods is the emergence of theory from experience, rather than from existing theoretical frameworks. "['G]rounded theory' emphasises the process of discovery and places value on generating meaningful theories" (Zuber-Skerritt 2003: 347), as opposed to quantitative research which is aimed at verification of "grand theories" that are statistically significant and thus generalisable. Grounded theory, on the other hand, evolves from a continuous process of mostly qualitative data collection (i.e. "accessing experience"), analysis and interpretation, in order to provide knowledge and understanding of particular, individual cases. Strauss and Corbin (1994: 283) describe this process as "[the] grounding of theory upon data, the making of constant comparisons, the asking of theoretically oriented questions, theoretical coding and the development of theory".

2.3 Focus Group Interviews (FGIs)

The basic goal in conducting an FGI is to obtain participants' views on topics of interest to the researcher. This means that FGIs must be conducted in a way that allows participants to share their views. During focus group interviews, one should listen to the participants' point of view and all participants should be encouraged to present their own goals, feelings and points of view to the best of their ability. Focus groups should not be forced to reach consensus. Owing to the fact that sensitive issues might be discussed during FGIs, ethical conduct by the researcher is of the utmost importance. A major concern in this regard pertains to ensuring that other members within the group will respect the principle of confidentiality. Although the researcher can reasonably provide an assurance of confidentiality in respect of the research data, he/she cannot guarantee that other members of the group will not divulge information. Members are requested to respect the confidentiality of the other participants and the opinions shared during an FGI.

It is the task of the researcher to facilitate the FGI in such a way that the participants feel free to share their opinions without fear. The researcher should not intrude on the

process by introducing his/her own views on the proceedings and the topic. This can be achieved through a structured set of questions posed to the participants, or through a more free-flowing process in terms of which open-ended questions are posed to the participants.

The following questions were put to the respondents in a focus group interview:

i) Do you think that you are sufficiently equipped, both theoretically and practically, for your intended career?

ii) In your view, what are the inadequacies in the education you received, and what should be done to improve it?

iii) Have you tried to start your own business?

iv) Do you think that the type and quality of education you received prepared you to start your own business?

v) Do you think it is the responsibility of government to employ you? (Elaborate.)

vi) What do you see as your responsibility in finding employment?

vii) What do you perceive as obstacle(s) to getting a job?

viii) Give your general comments on this subject (education and employment).

2.4 Individual Questionnaires

As a supplement to the focus group interviews, the research team also utilised individual questionnaires. The utilisation of questionnaires was mainly aimed at ensuring that the research team would be able to obtain a maximum amount of information from the participants. Some people are not comfortable with responding to questions in a group environment, while others tend to be dominant. The individual questionnaire was thus aimed at eliminating this problem as far as possible.

The following questions were put to the respondents:

i) Indicate your population group.

ii) Indicate your gender.

iii) Indicate your age.

iv)   Specify your obtained qualification(s).

v)   Year in which the qualification was obtained.

vi)   Institution where the qualification was obtained.

vii) Do you have any work experience?

viii) If yes, how was it acquired?

ix)   What informed your career choice?

x)   In your view, do you think that there are still job opportunities for your qualification?

xi)   For how long have you been unemployed?

xii) Are you still searching for a job?

xiii) How many relevant applications have you made in the last 12 months?

xiv) What do you perceive as obstacles to getting a job?

xv)   Do you think that you are sufficiently equipped, both theoretically and practically, for your intended career?

xvi) In your view, what are the inadequacies in the education you received, and what should be done to improve it?

xvii) Have you tried to start your own business?

xviii) Do you think that the type of education that you received prepared you to start your own business? Elaborate.

xix) Do you think that it is the responsibility of government to employ you?

xx)   What do you see as your responsibility in finding employment?

xxi) Give your general comments on this subject (education and employment).

2.5 Research Ethics

Research should always be carried out with social sensitivity and responsibility, and with respect for the dignity and self-esteem of the individual as well as for basic human rights. One should ensure that the following principles are always adhered to:

- Good research practice: the planning of research in consultation with experts and adhering to the principles of honesty, clarity, comprehensiveness and accountability.

- Consent: the informed consent of all participants is vital and the nature of the research should be thoroughly explained to participants.
- Foreseeable consequences: researchers must be aware of the possible consequences of their research and must protect participants against negative consequences if possible.
- Participation: participants should only join research programmes if they are willing to do so, and must not be discriminated against if they should choose to withdraw from them.
- Confidentiality: the confidentiality of the research results must be protected and information pertaining to certain individuals may only be released with the consent of the individuals concerned.
- Intervention and support: the design of the research should limit the amount of possible distress to which participants are likely to be exposed.
- Publication of findings: Feedback sessions could be used to share the findings of the research with original participants and, if possible, research participants should be allowed to verify the content of the findings.

An endeavour to observe the above ethical principles and methodology at all costs was undertaken during the data collection process for this research.

3 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The critical dividers for identifying the participants for this research included the level of education as well as the demographic profile of the youth. With regard to the level of education, the research team identified the need to stratify between the school leavers, the Further Education and Training graduates, Technikon graduates as well as University graduates. As far as the demography of participants was concerned, the research team decided to stratify as follows:

> Population groups – The research team identified the need to select participants from dominant population groups in the Free State. According to Census 2001, the population groups of the youth of the Free State were comprised as follows: black (African) - 90%, white – 7% and coloured - 3%.

This in essence meant that the number of black (African) participants had to be dominant in the identified sample. Four out of the six groups were therefore constituted by black African participants.

➢ Institutions of learning – The research team then identified the need to select participants from specific types of institutions of learning, viz.: school leavers, Further Education and Training graduates, Technikon graduates, University graduates.

➢ Rural and urban areas – To ensure representation of the demographics of the Free State, Mangaung, which has both urban and rural residential characteristics, was chosen, as well as Mohokare Municipality, which represented peri-urban municipalities.

Consequently, the method used for identifying the participants was the Convenience Sampling Method, to meet the particular requirements of this specific research. In following this method, the research team engaged in three processes with regard to identifying the respondents. Firstly, an endeavour was made to involve the Youth Development Officers in identified Municipalities of Mangaung and Mohokare in the identification of possible respondents for the group of school leavers, as well as black graduates from Technikons, FET institutions and Universities. However, this was not an entirely smooth process. As a result, other options were explored. As a second step, therefore, the process of selection was consolidated by 'phoning graduates on the basis of, *inter alia*, the lists provided by identified institutions in respect of their alumni. Thirdly, for the coloured and white graduates, established networks in churches, private education providers and universities were utilised to access the participants.

4 FINDINGS

The findings for this research will be categorised according to the specific samples that the research group identified. Conclusions and recommendations will be arrived at on the basis of such findings.

4.1 Focus group 1 – Black School Leavers

4.1.1 Composition of the group

This group consisted of participants from both the old education system and the post-1994 education system, who had either finished Matric or who had left the school system without completing Matric.

4.1.2 Perceived obstacles to finding employment

The issue of nepotism was raised amongst the members of this group as one of the obstacles that led to their inability to find jobs. However, it should also be borne in mind that these respondents are a mixed group of school leavers, both with and without Matric. Other respondents mentioned a lack of money for transport and a general lack of the skills that are needed in the labour market.

4.1.3 The participants' views as to whether they have been theoretically and practically capacitated through acquired education for their intended careers

Because of the general nature of the education acquired by this group, they seem to be uncertain about their preparedness and capacities to make ends meet. One of the participants believes that by virtue of knowing how to draw up a Curriculum Vitae and a business plan, he/she is adequately capacitated. On the other hand, the majority of participants believe that they still need more education to enable them to make any impact at all in their endeavour to find jobs.

4.1.4 The participants' views on the inadequacies of their acquired education and their views on what should be done to improve it

There seems to be a belief amongst this group of young people that more practical knowledge will be necessary to enable them to make any headway in life. One of the respondents would prefer to do things with his/her own hands, rather than acquire more theoretical knowledge.

4.1.5 Perceptions on the relevance of the participants' education to preparing them to start their own businesses

In response to the question as to whether they believed that the content of the education that they received had prepared them sufficiently to start their own businesses, the youth were unanimous in saying that this was not the case.

4.1.6 The views of the participants on the Government's responsibility in creating jobs for them

The respondents believe that it is indeed the responsibility of government to create jobs for them. With a single exception, however, the respondents believe that they also remain equally accountable for finding jobs for themselves.

4.1.7 The views of the participants on their responsibilities in finding jobs

A crucial point is that the participants believe that acquiring skills and education is significant in respect of finding jobs. Some even believe that doing voluntary work may also be significant.

4.1.8 General comments

The participants believe that obtaining further education would open doors for them with regard to their prospective futures, as education gives its recipients a chance to live normal lives. They therefore believe that government must also invest in the education of the youth.

4.2 Focus Group 2 – Black Further Education and Training Graduates

4.2.1 Composition of the group

This group consisted of five FET graduates. Three of the attendees had completed engineering studies and the remaining two had studied Business Management. Except for one, the whole group was comprised of former Hillside View College students.

4.2.2 Length of time for which the participants have been unemployed

The participants had undergone varying periods of unemployment, ranging from less than a year to more than three years. All of them affirmed that they were still looking for jobs. The majority of them had made many applications over the last 12 months, ranging from four applications in one case, to 60 applications in the most extreme case.

4.2.3 How the participants acquired their work experience

None of the respondents had any practical work experience specifically related to their fields of study.

4.2.4 Factors that informed the participants' career choices

There were no significant underlying reasons for this group's choices of careers. The most likely explanation for this, is the possibility that these young people never received any career guidance/ counselling. Their choices were based more on speculation than on choosing a career on the basis of an informed perspective. The reasons for their career choices were therefore based mainly on the following incentives:

- o To take the opportunity to study for what was then perceived as a new and exciting career in relation to Maths and Science, namely engineering.
- o To be self-employed and able to create jobs for others.
- o To work with finances and people.

4.2.5 The participants' perceptions on the availability of job opportunities and their reasons for believing that they will (or will not) find jobs

The respondents are still optimistic about the job opportunities in their chosen fields. This optimism is based on their experiences of having been called for interviews in the past, and on the belief that, if they can just acquire the necessary experience, they will find employment.

4.2.6 Perceived obstacles to finding employment

Lack of experience was cited as the major cause of unemployment by the respondents. This factor has led these young people to believe that the component of practical experience that they acquired as part of their learning, is actually deemed insufficient by the prospective employers. However, other reasons such as the lack of a driver's license and nepotism were also mentioned as major obstacles preventing the youth from finding jobs. This group believes that for many positions, the advertisement is a mere formality, as very often the position has already effectively been filled as a result of nepotism and favouritism.

4.2.7 The participants' views as to whether they have been theoretically and practically capacitated through acquired education for their intended careers

In the questionnaire, some of the participants claimed that they have indeed been equipped by their former institutions, both theoretically and practically, for their intended careers. However, one of the respondents expressed a belief that the institutions had prepared the respondents well from a theoretical point of view, but that the scope of their practical learning was too limited to enable them to learn more about their chosen fields of work. It was furthermore too expensive to obtain practical experience from the institutions themselves. In a totally different response, one of the participants pointed out that in some cases, career choices had been undertaken purely with a view to passing examinations. As a result, she could neither confirm nor deny whether she had been sufficiently capacitated, theoretically and practically, to prepare her for her future career. These views were confirmed by the focus group interview.

4.2.8 The participants' views on the inadequacies of their acquired education and their views on what should be done to improve it

The participants seemed to believe that the practical side of their education had been too expensive and that it lacked relevant and contemporary content. It is also the participants' belief that the theory provided in these institutions costs too much and that it is not based on the realities that one encounters in the areas of employment. It is their

view that there should be linkages between the institutions of higher learning and the institutions which are supposed to provide them with the necessary work experience. Moreover, the participants believe that there is a huge gap between what a student is taught in a classroom and the real work experience. Some of them pointed out that "… it is as if you are learning something new when you arrive at the places of work for the first time." However, one of the participants who studied Business Management believes that if prospective employees were given adequate chances, they would be able to implement what they have learnt. These views were expressed both in answer to the questionnaire and in the focus group interview.

4.2.9   Perceptions on the relevance of the participants' education to preparing them to start their own businesses

Participants who have studied Business Management believe that with some support, they would be in a position to start their own businesses. However, those who engaged in engineering studies believe that they are not at all prepared to start their own businesses, in numerous respects. For instance, they do not believe that they have been sufficiently capacitated to implement what they have learnt in their engineering fields as independent contractors, let alone in a management capacity in any business. This was the predominant view that was expressed in the focus group interview. However, in response to the questionnaire, one of the participants expressed the view that an individual could learn to start a business on her/his own, since the spirit of entrepreneurship can never simply be learnt at school.

4.2.10 The views of the participants on the government's responsibility in creating jobs for them

The participants believe that while it is not the responsibility of government to provide them with employment, the government should nevertheless create the necessary conditions for job creation.

4.2.11 The views of the participants on their responsibilities in finding jobs

As reflected above, the respondents do not believe that the government should necessarily create jobs for them. In essence, this implies that the participants believe that they remain equally responsible to find their own jobs. However, they believe that the government must put the necessary pre-conditions in place for job creation. The market cannot simply be left to its own devices to create jobs with no help from the government.

4.2.12 General comments

This group believes that government should set the platform for job creation. The environment must be conducive to job creation. Some participants believe that they have acquired enough skills, and that they simply need to be given employment. The main problem is the whole issue of experience, which is regarded as the major obstacle.

4.3   Focus Group 3 – Black Technikon Graduates

4.3.1   Composition of the group

The group consisted of six graduates from the Technikon (currently called the Central University of Technology) and one graduate from the Ambulance Academy.

4.3.2   Length of time for which the participants have been unemployed

The participant from the Ambulance Academy has been unemployed for more than three years, in contrast to the Technikon participants, who have been unemployed for approximately one year.

4.3.3   How the participants acquired their work experience

Out of the group of seven, four participants indicated that they had no practical work experience at all. The remaining three, however, indicated that they had acquired some experience in their areas of expertise.

4.3.4   Factors that informed the participants' career choices

With regard to the question as to why this group chose their respective careers, there were several differing responses. In many cases, the respondents' love for the respective careers was central to their choice. However, some members of the group chose their careers because of the perceived demand for graduates in a specific field, and the perceived importance of the knowledge provided by certain careers, such as those related to computers. This response was more prominent in the questionnaire interviews than in the focus group interview. One of the participants' decision was influenced by guidance provided by a career exhibition at school. This factor was reflected in the questionnaire interview.

4.3.5   The participants' perceptions on the availability of job opportunities and their reasons for believing that they will (or will not) find jobs

All the participants indicated that they were still looking for jobs. However, their responses varied with regard to whether or not they believe that there are still job opportunities available in the market. While one of the respondents categorically asserted that there are no job opportunities in the market, the others said that there are presently no opportunities, but expressed faith in the government's ability to create such opportunities. The rest of the group believe that there are opportunities "out there", and that the only reasons for their not being able to access such opportunities are the obstacles that will be mentioned in the paragraphs below. These views were expressed in both the focus group and individual interviews.

4.3.6   Perceived obstacles to finding employment

All the participants indicated that they are still looking for employment. However, they believe that there are several obstacles preventing them from finding jobs. The main obstacle relates to the issue of experience. This was expressed in both the focus group and individual interviews. Within the group, mention was also made of a lack of other auxiliary skills, such as drivers' licenses, as a major obstacle to the participants' finding employment. Another important obstacle was the need for enhancement of acquired

skills. The students of computer and information technology expressed a common belief during both the focus group interview and the individual interviews, namely that an integrated and comprehensive approach to skilling, rather than limited specialisation, could enhance their chances of finding jobs. However, while they do not have a high opinion of the general nature of education at undergraduate level, they also believe that some generalisation is necessary, and that such generalisation should be of such a nature that it adequately prepares a graduate to become independent in thinking and approach. Contrary to popular belief, Technikon students do not believe that their qualifications are meeting the requirements of prospective employers. This view was strongly expressed in the focus group interview. The respondents seem to believe that Technikon education is inferior to that of Universities.

4.3.7 The participants' views as to whether they have been theoretically and practically capacitated through acquired education for their intended careers

The participants in this group seem to be uncertain about the value of the education that they have acquired in terms of theoretical and practical capacitation. However, the general belief is that they have acquired a reasonably sufficient amount of theoretical and practical knowledge to enable them to enter the labour market. While this view featured more strongly in the focus group interview, the perception that came most strongly to the fore in the individual interviews was that the subjects are more theoretically capacitated than practically capacitated. One of the participants believes that there is a discrepancy between the labour market and the education acquired. In what can be regarded as a challenge to the theoretical orientation of the institutions of higher learning in the country, another participant pointed out that theoretical knowledge does not necessarily enhance capacity, particularly with regard to the fine arts. The participant believes that theory is not necessarily relevant to the circumstances of an artist in a contemporary South African environment.

4.3.8 The participants' views on the inadequacies of their acquired education and their views on what should be done to improve it

The group seems to believe that the practical content of the courses offered does not really prepare the graduates for their future in the workplace. This view was predominant in both the focus group and individual interviews. These participants believe that students should be taken on trips to potential places of employment as frequently as possible, to ensure that they stay in touch with developments in their prospective fields of work. They further believe that there is too much theoretical content and very little practical content in the courses offered, since "… in a way sometimes it's hard to apply what you did (theoretically) [in] practice." This view was strongly expressed in the focus group interview.

4.3.9 Perceptions on the relevance of the participants' education to preparing them to start their own businesses

According to the responses from this group, the education system does not adequately prepare people to be self-employed. Instead, it prepares them to be potential employees. Their perceived ability to start their own businesses is based on popular and common practices, and not necessarily on the grounding that they received from the Technikon. This factor was more evident in the focus group interview. Except for one of the graduates, who had studied functional and project management, all the graduates believe that they are not adequately equipped to start their own businesses. However, to quote one of the graduates, "not everybody can be a business person". This view was expressed in both the focus group interview and the individual interviews.

4.3.10 The views of the participants on the government's responsibility in creating jobs for them

The group believes that the government is responsible, to some degree, for their status of unemployment and should therefore, in a way, be held responsible for their status of unemployment. One of the respondents believes that the government should ensure, in the first instance, that the quality of education provided to students is conducive to their finding jobs. This view was expressed in the questionnaire interview. In the focus group

interview, one of the participants expressed a belief that "… since the government has encouraged the youth to study, they must further ensure that these young people also do get jobs …". Alternatively, as another participant added, the government should assist the graduates in their endeavours to start their own businesses. In a nutshell, these participants believe that the government is somehow responsible for their unemployed status, and that the government should therefore remain accountable for their employment.

4.3.11 The views of the participants on their responsibilities in finding jobs

Alongside of the view expressed above, this group believe that they are also responsible for finding their own jobs. This was expressed more strongly in the focus group interview. Examples mentioned included possibilities of self-employment, a positive attitude in job-seeking endeavours, as well as a concerted effort in the endeavour to find a job. However, the participants do not exonerate the government from the responsibility to assist them in their endeavours. They believe that the government should, in some way, assist them on a contractual basis in respect of finding employment. This view was more predominant in the focus group interview.

4.3.12 General comments

From their general comments, it can be seen that the participants hold strong views to the effect that the government should play a significant role in assisting them to find employment. This view was expressed in both the focus group and individual interviews. The participants believe that, in a sense, they have played their part by obtaining the necessary qualifications and that it is now up to the government to ensure that they also find employment."   The graduates believe that they qualify for the privilege of being assured of a job, on the basis of their having acquired their qualifications. This belief was strongly expressed in the focus group interview. However, the attitude concerning the role of the government is not one of total gloom. One of the participants believes that the government's learnerships programme comprises a positive step towards ensuring the enhancement of the skills of the youth. The participant shared this view with the other participants.

4 Focus Group 4 – Black University Graduates

4.4.1 Composition of the group

This group consisted of four black university graduates from different fields of study. All of them had studied at the University of the Free State. One had studied natural sciences; another, marketing; another had studied computer and mathematical sciences; while the fourth graduate had studied economic and management sciences.

4.4.2 Length of time for which the participants have been unemployed

Between them, the participants had been unemployed for a time-span of less than two years.

4.4.3 How the participants acquired their work experience

The participants in the group had acquired experience mainly on a voluntary and part-time basis. Only one of the participants had apparently been employed on a full-time basis by a marketing company.

4.4.4 Factors that informed the participants' career choices

It would seem that in most cases, nothing other than the love of the respective courses had induced the participants to choose their careers. However, one of the respondents had opted for the respective course only because he/she had failed the initial course for which he/she had originally enrolled. What came strongly to the fore with regard to this group was a perceived (or real) lack of career counselling and development for the participants.

4.4.5 The participants' perceptions on the availability of job opportunities and their reasons for believing that they will (or will not) find jobs

All the participants in this group are still hopeful that they will find jobs in the future. However, their optimism is based on a variety of factors including the intention to obtain better qualifications, experience, and plans to move out of the province. To some

extent, this seems to indicate that while the youth have lost hope slightly with regard to the ability of the Free State labour market to absorb them, they are still hopeful that somewhere, somehow, the country will employ them.

4.4.6   Perceived obstacles to finding employment

These participants believe that their lack of experience is the major obstacle preventing them from finding jobs. However, other reasons such as corruption or nepotism, and the slow rate of transformation in certain industries, were also mentioned. These factors came strongly to the fore in the focus group interview in particular.

Another view that was more prevalent in the focus group interview, is the graduates' belief that the under-qualified staff at human resource departments are closing the doors against those who could possibly take away their jobs in the future. Thus, "… they [would] rather hire someone with a Matric and with no potential to offset them at all." With regard to transformation, some participants expressed the view that certain industries still foster the remnants of an Apartheid mindset, and that they are still hostile to the entrance of people of colour into such sectors. This was a common view expressed in both the focus group and individual interviews. In the individual interviews, one of the respondents expressed a belief that more qualifications are needed to ensure that the graduates do, in fact, find jobs in the job market. An interesting observation from one of the participants related to a perceived lack of self-esteem on the part of people who have just graduated. The participant believes that, in a sense, the graduates "look down" on themselves, and therefore "lose" their potential positions before they can even be employed. Another obstacle identified by the participants during the focus group interview is the structure of their qualifications. "…It is easier for somebody with a diploma to get a job than somebody with a degree. Each industry has its own criteria in hiring, but candidates from Technikons have real industry experience (sic)." This same issue was mentioned by the Technikon students, who believed, however, that their education was significantly inferior to that of their University counterparts. Another interesting factor was the issue of access to computer-related programmes, such as e-mail facilities. There is a perception that certain companies only accept applications sent via e-mail. As a result, there is an element of exclusivity which precludes access by the youth from the historically disadvantaged groups.

4.4.7 The participants' views as to whether they have been theoretically and practically capacitated through acquired education for their intended careers

As is to be expected from many University graduates, this group believe that they have acquired a sufficient degree of theoretical capacity. However, they do not believe that they have been practically capacitated. This view was expressed in similar ways in both the individual and focus group interviews. However, in an individual interview, one of the participants expressed a belief that the institution had provided him/her with an education of a sufficient quality for the purposes of employment.

4.4.8 The participants' views on the inadequacies of their acquired education and their views on what should be done to improve it

According to this group, the lack of application of the practical aspect of training is the major inadequacy of the education system at University level. This group believes that the content of the University training should also encompass internships as part of the courses. There was an overwhelming consensus in this regard amongst the participants in both the group and individual interviews. University education is further regarded as being too general and as not adequately preparing the graduates for their prospective jobs. The University graduates "… end up being lost in their careers because there is no hand-holding process for University students." This group further believes that as a result of over-exposure to international case studies, along with a lack of exposure to local case studies, students are not properly prepared for their future jobs, since the international case studies are not necessarily relevant to jobs in South Africa. This view was expressed mainly during the focus group interview.

4.4.9 Perceptions on the relevance of the participants' education to preparing them to start their own businesses

This group seem to believe that they are adequately capacitated to start their own businesses, since some of them have attempted to start their own businesses in some way or other. However, a variety of stumbling blocks have thwarted their attempts, including the non-existence of markets and attempts to start businesses in fields other

than their fields of study. However, their responses did not clearly indicate whether they believed that their abilities to start their own businesses had been influenced by the capacity that they had gained in the universities. It was not possible to establish whether this was the case, either from the focus group or from the individual interviews.

4.4.10 The views of the participants on the government's responsibility in creating jobs for them

On the basis of the individual responses to the questionnaire, there was not enough evidence to reach any conclusions as to whether the respondents believe or do not believe that government is responsible for finding employment for them. One of the participants believes that if the government creates a conducive environment for job creation, it will in turn be enabling graduates to contribute to the economy of the country. However, the rest of the group do not believe that the government directly owes them employment, but rather that the government should put the necessary policy conditions and programmes in place, in order to assist in youth employment.

In the focus group interviews, the group confirmed what they had said in the individual interviews. However, one of the respondents pointed out that the government cannot create jobs for everybody.

4.4.11 The views of the participants on their responsibilities in finding jobs

The graduates believe that they need to go back to institutions of higher learning to enhance their qualifications. They further mooted the issue of experience as a necessary pre-condition for them to find jobs. In this regard, they feel that possible solutions might include voluntary work, as well as carrying out research concerning the available job opportunities and marketing themselves. This view was generally expressed in both the individual and focus group interviews.

4.4.12 General comments

In general, this group believe that a stakeholders' summit should be held to discuss the issue of unemployed graduates. In a nutshell, they feel that the plight of the unemployed

graduates should be highlighted. They further contend that employers, in particular the government, should meet the graduates half-way by making provision for a longer probation period, in order to allow the graduates to gain experience. This group believes that the labour laws of the country, in particular those aimed at changing the status quo, are hardly worth the paper they are written on. In conclusion, according to the participants, the government ultimately remains responsible for ensuring that the necessary pre-conditions are created to ensure job creation.

4.5 Focus Group 5 – White Mixed Graduates

4.5.1 Composition of the group

The group consisted of four members, three of whom had studied at Damelin (a private institution), while the fourth had studied at the University of the Free State.

4.5.2 Length of time for which the participants have been unemployed

While two of the graduates had only graduated less than a year beforehand, the other two had been unemployed for two and three years respectively.

4.5.3 How the participants acquired their work experience

The majority of this group had acquired their experience by carrying out practical work in their prospective places of employment, including a travel agency, an entertainment institution and a salon.

4.5.4 Factors that informed the participants' career choices

The choices made by the individuals in the group were motivated by purely personal reasons. However, it must be borne in mind that these participants indicated that they had, in fact, been given career guidance and advice. However, one of the participants believes that he/she was given incorrect information for his/her studies. Another participant seems to have responded to family pressure.

4.5.5 The participants' perceptions on the availability of job opportunities and their reasons for believing that they will (or will not) find jobs

These participants seem to believe that there are still opportunities for their prospective careers "out there", provided that certain conditions are fulfilled. These include a need for some real opportunities, as well as for enhanced entrepreneurial skills. However, one of the respondents raised further reservations about the opportunities in the chosen career, whose market seems to be saturated. Furthermore another respondent, who is convinced that he/she possesses a special skill, believes that policies aimed at redressing the imbalances of the past are the major reason why he/ she may possibly not find a job, despite the availability of such jobs in the public service. This group confirmed that they are still looking for jobs. However, one participant is not necessarily seeking employment, since he/she is still freelancing for certain companies. The above-mentioned views were expressed in the individual interviews.

4.5.6 Perceived obstacles to finding employment

The major obstacles identified by this group range from the belief that people who are already established in the institutions are prejudicial, to affirmative action and a general lack of opportunities. Experience was also mentioned by this group. There was a unanimity of views about these issues in both the individual and group interviews.

However, one of the participants believes that in her/his chosen field, namely sound engineering, affirmative action is no longer a problem, since companies no longer wish to employ "non-whites" ("nie-blankes"), because the companies feel that "… you cannot argue with [them] … [they] will take you to the Union… The companies do not want to take that risk."

Once again, experience emerged as an obstacle in this group, since according to one of the respondents, "… people do not want to take a chance and give you an opportunity to prove that you can really do the job." There is also a belief that the general attitude of employers towards young people is negative.

4.5.7 The participants' views as to whether they have been theoretically and practically capacitated through acquired education for their intended careers

From the discussions, it can be deduced that the members of this group are somewhat uncertain as to whether they have amassed enough theoretical and practical knowledge to enable them to fit into potential jobs immediately. However, only one participant believes that he/she has not been adequately capacitated; the other respondents believe that they have enough theoretical and practical knowledge to start doing jobs for their prospective employers. One of the participants also pointed out that the local companies are not offering opportunities for the students to acquire experience. This participant added that University courses are too academic. The practical aspects are not attended to at all. Because the practical component offered by these institutions is so limited, the students acquire experience only through their own, or their lecturer's, initiatives. This was the view expressed in both the focus group and individual interviews.

4.5.8 The participants' views on the inadequacies of their acquired education and their views on what should be done to improve it

The group identified the following inadequacies in the system:

- No synchronisation between learning and practice.
- Students have to pay a great deal in terms of acquiring their education.
- Personal differences between academic staff.
- No opportunities for internships.
- The need for trips – visiting companies to see how the job is done.
- Attempts by institutions to save money, or to channel funds in other directions, have caused the institutions to deliver education of an inferior quality, while at the same time charging students exorbitant amounts. In essence, little effort or money is channelled into the development of the students.
- The limited contents and time-span of courses, which are not recognised by prospective employers. This is the result of institutions' attempts to make their courses seem viable, whereas in fact these courses are not generally recognised at all.

- The inability of the education institutions to equip the students with life skills, including the skills needed to seek employment and survive in the workplace.

4.5.9 Perceptions on the relevance of the participants' education to preparing them to start their own businesses

This group seem to believe that their courses did, in fact, prepare them to start their own businesses. However, one of the participants mentioned that he/she had not been offered the option of receiving the necessary training for opening his/her own business. The other interesting factor is the belief that, despite business management training, "… the environment in Bloemfontein does not necessarily support the initiative of small businesses in certain sectors, as the market seems to be either congested or non-existent." One of the participants, who has a qualification in social sciences, believes that the social sciences do not prepare one to start one's own business.

4.5.10 The views of the participants on the government's responsibility in creating jobs for them

This group seems to believe that the government is responsible, to some degree, for ensuring that there is a conducive environment for job creation. This was a general view expressed in the focus group interview. One of the participants seems to believe that certain institutions, such as state theatres, should remain in the hands of the state, so that the government can sustain and create jobs.

Another participant seems to believe that the government should employ the white youth instead of applying affirmative action, since the black youth have several problems including unwillingness to work and their obsession with Unions, which have a destructive effect on their ability to do their work properly.

4.5.11 The views of the participants on their responsibilities in finding jobs

These participants believe that they, too, have a responsibility to ensure that they find jobs. This was a popular view in both the focus group and individual interviews. One such responsibility includes that of obtaining an education and applying it as much as

possible. They also believe that it is necessary to have an adequate understanding of the industry in which one aims to find employment. Furthermore, young people should make maximal use of practicals/ internships. In the words of one of the respondents: "… If you do not have a job, then your job is to search for a job from 8 to 5…".

4.5.12 General comments

In general, this group believes that not all people can afford a good education – that is where the government's responsibility comes in. The policy of affirmative action was severely criticised. This group believes that as a result of this policy, there are better opportunities for white youth overseas than in South Africa. This view was mainly expressed in the focus group interview. The participants feel that they are being punished for the sins of their fathers, since they did not create Apartheid and some of them did not even understand what it all was about. The issue of acquiring a practical education was also identified as a necessary prerequisite for finding employment. The respondents furthermore believe that it remains the responsibility of government to create an enabling environment for job creation for the youth.

One of the participants believes that the SA youth are often exploited as "cheap labour" in other countries. They are willing to do anything and everything and are prepared to work hard. He believes that "… those English guys are lazy. If [they] do not work, the state gives them money." On the other hand, the participant believes that the Boer children are hard workers, hence their acceptance in other countries such as England.

In a rather interesting input, one of the respondents stated during the individual interview that blaming affirmative action will not necessarily help matters, since the white people did nothing when Apartheid was implemented. They did not raise any points of protest at all. However, it seems that "… now is the time to raise our voices when things are not going right."

4.6 Focus Group 6 – Coloured and Indigenous Mixed Graduates and School Leavers

4.6.1 Composition of the group

The group consisted of five young coloured persons, as well as two other respondents who preferred to be regarded as indigenous people, since they are descendants of the Khoi and San people of South Africa.

4.6.2 Length of time for which the participants have been unemployed

The group members' span of unemployment ranged from one to three years. No-one had been unemployed for more than three years.

4.6.3 How the participants acquired their work experience

Those in the group who had acquired experience explained that they had done so through Bible College and local youth drama groups. Basically, no real experience that was relevant to specific job opportunities had been acquired by the youth.

4.6.4 Factors that informed the participants' career choices

With regard to their reasons for choosing specific careers, one of the respondents stated that working with the youth had made her/him decide to go into the ministry and to help the youth to make a difference in their own lives. Other respondents did not seem to have had specific reasons for choosing specific careers.

4.6.5 The participants' perceptions on the availability of job opportunities and their reasons for believing that they will (or will not) find jobs

Except for two participants, all members of this group are still looking for jobs. They are still optimistic that they will find jobs in the near future. Some are engaged in other activities and are not necessarily looking for jobs. One of the respondents is of the view

that the relevant Departments are not responding to her applications. As a result, she does not feel motivated to continue looking for a job.

4.6.6   Perceived obstacles to finding employment

The general attitude expressed in this group relates to their fear as a result of the increasingly higher standards in the contemporary work environment and the increasing number of people looking for similar jobs. This view was mainly expressed in the focus group interview. All in all, these participants believe that there are too few high-quality jobs available in the market, with too many people applying. To a large extent, this leads to a failure on the part of prospective employers to respond to applications for employment.

In the focus group interview, it came to light that this group also believes that qualifications alone, without the relevant adequate experience, are not necessarily sufficient, even for elementary jobs such as working in a bar. The issue of nepotism was cited during this focus group interview as well. The young people simply believe that " … if they do not know you they will not employ you." Interestingly, too, the coloured youth believe that affirmative action discriminates against them as well. In fact, they go as far as saying that it disadvantages them just as much as it does in the case of the white youth. The participants are of the view that even if they volunteer, they are always overlooked for the new positions. According to the perceptions of this group, some of them have put their lives in jeopardy by volunteering for the police service - and have not even received a stipend in return.

4.6.7   The participants' views as to whether they have been theoretically and practically capacitated through acquired education for their intended careers

When asked whether they felt that the education that they received had indeed prepared them theoretically and practically for their prospective jobs, the participants in this group displayed mixed reactions. While three of them believed that they were adequately prepared for their prospective jobs, the other two did not necessarily seem to agree. From their responses, it was not possible to establish whether they felt certain that they

were adequately prepared. This was the case in both the group and individual interviews.

In the focus group interview, this group of young people openly aired the belief that, by virtue of having been trained, they should of necessity be ready for their prospective jobs. The overall perception that came to the fore among the members of this group of coloured youth, is the belief that their being coloured places them at a disadvantage in the work environment.

4.6.8 The participants' views on the inadequacies of their acquired education and their views on what should be done to improve it

The perceived inadequacies in this regard did not necessarily relate to the specific studies undertaken by the participants in this group, but rather to other, more or less "incidental" issues, including the desire to take additional courses of study. In the individual interviews, one of the participants stated that the teachers were "too lazy". Another participant, however, felt that the education received was of an outstanding quality.

The participants in the focus group raised other issues, such as that of access to computers and a broader access to other careers. The curriculum at schools was such that, in the participants' opinion, the education provided by these schools did not ensure broader access to anything more than elementary jobs.

4.6.9 Perceptions on the relevance of the participants' education to preparing them to start their own businesses

With regard to the question of whether the education that they acquired has prepared the participants to start their own businesses or not, there seems to be general agreement that it has, in fact, prepared them sufficiently. This view was expressed mainly in the focus group interview. However, in the individual interview, one of the participants stated that he/she had not really been encouraged to take the route of starting an own business. One of the participants has already started his/her own business. However, starting up a business did not work out for one of the respondents;

his/her business did not succeed at all. One of the participants simply believes that it is better to work for a salary, paid by someone else, than to start one's own business, since doing so is too costly.

4.6.10 The views of the participants on the government's responsibility in creating jobs for them

The overall view is that the government is responsible for creating jobs for unemployed youth, by virtue of the fact that the participants have done their part by completing certain studies – and also to keep the youth out of "mischief". However, two of the respondents in the individual interviews expressed the view that government should not create jobs for people who are lazy and who are not willing to take any initiative in finding employment. The respondents believe that the problem of nepotism should be stamped out, to ensure that the playing field is level with regard to job opportunities. However, they expressed their approval of the fact that the current premier is a coloured premier, whom they believe will be able to understand their plight. The participants believe that the students invest too much in their education to be able to afford not to find any employment, or to be under-employed, after graduation from the institutions of higher learning.

4.6.11 The views of the participants on their responsibilities in finding jobs

The participants believe that they remain equally responsible for ensuring that they not only find employment, but that they also create employment for others. They further believe that by acquiring better qualifications, one places oneself in a better position regarding one's prospects of finding employment. Issues such as independent thinking and approach, as well as contributing to nation–building, also came to the fore during the focus group discussions. This group believes that there cannot be a limit to what young people can do in respect of nation-building, provided that they are given financial and other support. According to them, the Youth Commission should assist in this regard. They believe that the focus should shift to other developmental issues besides HIV/AIDS.

4.6.12 General comments

In general, this group believes in the importance of a good education and skills development to enable them to be in a position to find employment. However, corrective action should be taken at high-school level, since the damage caused by inferior education cannot be rectified. The prevalence of an identity crisis amongst the coloured community was also mentioned.

5   SUMMARY: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings and recommendations can be summarised as follows:

➢ **Perceptions on the content and relevance of education**

The participants believe that education in South Africa in general lacks practical content. There is too much emphasis on theory, which is often not even relevant to conditions of South Africa, let alone to the conditions of the workplace. Thus, the participants believe that education and the practical reality of the workplace are not synchronised at all. This belief is general amongst the black University, FET and Technikon graduates, all of whom seem to feel that the other graduates have acquired better qualifications at their respective institutions (i.e., Technikon students seem to think that University graduates are better off than they are, while the converse perception is predominant amongst the University students). There is a general consensus among the respondents that education does not adequately prepare a person to start one's own business. However, this perception is more prevalent amongst the black youth than amongst the white youth. There is an additional general view that basic qualifications, such as first degrees, diplomas and certificates, are too general and do not prepare anybody for the prospective work environment. In a nutshell, the courses are not geared towards meeting the market needs.

Further to the above, the respondents believe that there should be a paradigm change in the approach in terms of which education is delivered in South Africa. The

participants believe that education should respond to the needs of the market. It should not be too theoretical or too general, since that is not what the market requires. There should be adequate practical course components, which can be facilitated by partnerships between institutions of higher learning and the prospective places of work.

➤ **Acquired practical experience**

In the main, the graduates have acquired very little relevant experience. This, in turn, hampers their prospects of finding employment. The trend is different among the white youth, who seem to have amassed relevant and adequate experience. One of the key issues raised is: "Where can we acquire experience if we are not afforded the opportunities?". Some young people are given opportunities to volunteer; however, they are not necessarily doing the jobs for which they were trained. Those graduates who have been given practical content at their institutions believe that it differs too much from the practical realities that one is likely to find in the real workplace. The respondents believe that there should be proper synchronisation between the educational content and the needs of the market. This calls for partnerships such as those mentioned above, between institutions of higher learning and the prospective employers.

➤ **Making career choices**

Career choices, in particular amongst the black youth, were made on the basis of speculation and the limitations of the subjects that they had passed at Matric level. Others tended to make career choices on the basis of statements by the media to the effect that a demand existed for particular courses. Others made certain career choices because of the limited scope of subjects, particularly at black and coloured schools. The white youth, in particular, seem to have made career choices on the basis of the relevant career guidance that they received while at school, which assisted them to make informed choices in respect of their preferences for the careers they chose.

➤ **Availability of job opportunities**

On the whole, the youth seem to believe that there is still hope that they will find jobs in the near future. However, many of them are discouraged by the obstacles that will be outlined below.

➢ **Obstacles to finding employment**

There is a general perception that both the private and public sectors are not fair in making appointments. The general view is that before the posts are advertised, they have already been given to "cronies" and family members. Nepotism was the single factor that was mentioned in all the groups as a major stumbling block to the participants' endeavours to find jobs. Other problems were also mentioned, including a lack of adequate skills and experience. Affirmative action was also cited as a key obstacle in finding employment, particularly amongst the white and coloured youth.

The majority of the interviewees believe that if they could enhance their skills levels, they would be in a better position to find employment. However, the lack of experience is an overarching issue amongst the youth. While experience and skills levels were key issues for all the groups, affirmative action was identified as a major obstacle by both the coloured and the white youth, who seem to believe that affirmative action is the major reason why they cannot find employment.

From the above, the following recommendations emerged:

❖ Because most of the youth cited nepotism as a major obstacle preventing them from finding employment, a need can be identified to expand this research to include investigations at institutions, in order to determine their employment practices, as compared to the provisions of legislation. If any violations are being perpetrated in this regard, then a recommendation for more stringent enforcement of legislation is relevant.

❖ Because strong recommendations with regard to experience were provided by the participants, it can be recommended that, since the government has approved the implementation of an extended public works programme, there should be a specific intention to make such programmes labour-intensive,

particularly with a view to accommodating the youth who did not finish their Matric, to enable them to gain experience from such programmes. However, caution is necessary, to prevent the youth from being used only for elementary jobs and as "cheap" labour in these extended public works programmes. Youth with qualifications should be afforded opportunities to manage these projects, so as to enable them to acquire experience. The government of the day has further approved the implementation of a National Youth Service, as a way of inculcating the culture of community service, while at the same time providing credits to the youth, along with much-needed experience. The Free State Government should be encouraged to speed up the process of implementing National Youth Service Programmes in the key areas of the Free State, targeting the unemployed youth in particular. Furthermore, government and private institutions should be lobbied to afford opportunities to the youth to undergo internships and learnerships. The internships in particular should be systematised, to ensure that the young people gain experience in the specific areas in which they have been trained.

> **Responsibility for finding employment**

The overall view of the youth as to who is responsible for finding jobs, was unanimous. They believed that the government should establish conditions conducive to job creation. This was a common view amongst all the groups. These young people implied that the market alone cannot create jobs without government intervention in creating conditions that are conducive to job creation. However, the interviewees feel that they remain equally responsible for finding jobs, *inter alia* by improving their skills. However, there was also a general feeling among them that, since the government has encouraged the youth to study, the government should honour its own part of the bargain by creating jobs.

> **Relevance of education in preparing the youth to start their own businesses**

Since the majority of the respondents expressed a belief that they were not adequately capacitated to start their own businesses, possibilities must be considered in order to

ensure that the youth become creators rather than seekers of employment. The institutions concerned with development in general and youth development in particular, should be tasked to ensure that entrepreneurial skills are transferred to young people, along with the right attitudes that are needed to start businesses in the key sectors of the Free State economy. This task must also be extended to the institutions of higher learning.

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