



HEHD RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION AND GRADUATE CAREER TRAJECTORIES

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2021

About this brief

This brief is a summary of a research project conducted between 2018 and 2020 on the employability and post-higher education career trajectories of media graduates from a sample of private higher education institutions in South Africa. The brief is intended to be of use to higher education managers and educators, as well as to researchers and policy makers, specifically those in private higher education but also more broadly those who are concerned with higher education processes and outcomes that are equitable for all graduates.

Context

In South Africa's post-1994 democratic dispensation, the higher education policy focus on widening access and participation for a diversity of students was a necessary first step towards more equitable provision of higher education. The growth in student enrolment and institutional provision includes the private higher education sector. Notwithstanding improvements in more equal access, broader provision, and greater demographic diversity, there has been less effect on equitability when it comes to graduate employment outcomes. Such outcomes continue to be unequally shaped by race, socio-economic status and schooling background (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015; Walker & Fongwa, 2017).

Conceptual framework

The project therefore used a human development (UNDP, 2015) and capability approach (Sen, 1999) to evaluate the opportunities provided for graduates in and through their higher education, and to understand how these are differently realised in the labour market. This approach foregrounds individual lives, and the opportunities each person has for making choices and enjoying well-being. However, social and structural barriers can predetermine and constrain employment opportunities and career trajectories for some graduates. Achieving more equitable and just outcomes for diverse graduates requires policies that address social, cultural and material inequalities, and that foster opportunities for graduate freedom in what each one is able to be and do, rather than being focused only on economic growth.

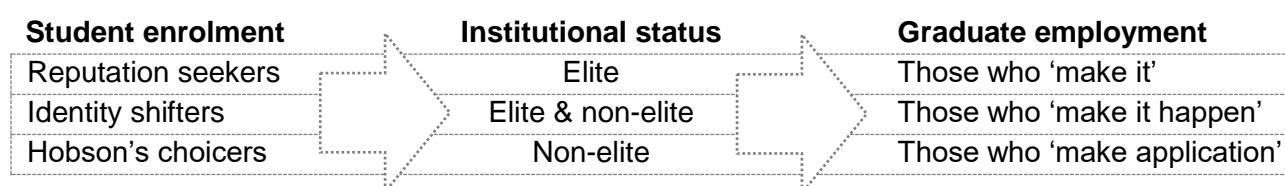
Methodology

The study focused on media graduates from three different private institutions – both elite and non-elite – who have been in the workplace for between one and five years. A mix of methods was used to explore graduates' employment experiences, and to understand how these relate both to their

higher education and to the expectations of employers. Initially, qualitative data was collected using in-depth interviews conducted with 21 media graduates, four staff members from the institutions, and six media employers. Subsequently, an electronic survey was conducted with a larger group of media graduates, to gain an expanded understanding of what graduates value in their lives, and the factors that enable and/or constrain their participation in the workplace.

Key findings

The percentage of private higher education graduates who find employment after graduating is relatively high. However, the study shows that the employment outcomes vary distinctly between different graduates, being strongly shaped by personal biographies as well as enrolment choices and options, and mediated by type of institution. The research produced an enrolment-employment typology matrix to conceptualise the variation in different graduates and their career trajectories. The following typological patterns emerged from the evidence:



The research shows that graduate employability, employment outcomes and career pathways are realised through the complex interplay of higher education processes and outcomes, as well as the dynamics of the labour market. The key findings can be summarised as follows:

Institution reputation matters:

Employers' recruitment choices are influenced by the reputation of an institution. Graduates from elite institutions stand a better chance of being employed immediately after graduation than those from less elite and lesser-known institutions. This means that enrolment choices can directly impact graduates' later opportunities for employment, irrespective of the quality of education received, the suitability of their qualification, or their skills and knowledge. Students from wealthier families can choose their institution freely. However, those who enrol in low-fee institutions and cheaper study programmes as their only option of access to higher education, are likely to find job prospects constrained.

Networks and connections matter:

Employers' recruitment choices are network-driven. Graduates who are aware of the importance of networks, and know how to build strong connections and draw on them, improve their chances of being employed. Private institutions thus expose students to their industry network. However, not all graduates have pre-existing social capital to mobilise and benefit from such networks. The study found that individuals whose social capital is weak or who do not understand the socio-cultural advantage of networking, sit alone at home making application for jobs, while confidence, connections and opportunities dwindle. But those who are able to draw on contacts and to collaborate with others in the industry get jobs or find that opportunities open up for them.

Experience matters:

Employers recruit graduates who have a year or more of working experience. Internships provide invaluable opportunities for graduates to build necessary experience, while also customising their skills to enable transition into employment. However, there are insufficient internships available, and owing to the very low stipend (if any) paid to interns, these are only feasible for graduates whose

families can support them financially during the internship period. The study found that access to internship is strongly linked with employer preferences (which might be an alma mater) and the perceived reputation of an institution. In addition, recruitment of interns and potential employees is predominantly based on the 'cultural fit' with the organisation. This means that graduates from the 'wrong' institution and/or who are not perceived to be 'the right fit' have reduced opportunities for internships, which in turn diminishes opportunities to gain the experience required to get a job. Graduates who are able to capitalise on connections gained during their higher education, and respond to opportunities to work collaboratively, in so doing expand their experience and also their own networks.

Type of work matters:

When graduates qualify, they expect to find a good job in their field. Graduates who have financial support can afford to wait for the job they want, however those from impoverished families are expected to earn and support their families. The study found that graduates who are desperate to earn are inclined to take even menial and unsuitable jobs, merely to secure an income. And yet, underemployment and time out of the field of practice diminish an individual's opportunities for later decent employment in his/her field. Some employers recruit freelance workers on a project basis, which is more cost-effective on a constrained budget, particularly given the rapid changes in technologies. Graduates who have technological skills, who are flexible and able to adapt to different work contexts, and who are willing to take some risks, are able to earn well enough while also exposing themselves to new contacts and work opportunities.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and implications, the following recommendations are proposed:

Building graduate careers and institution reputation:

Enabling access to higher education is a first step towards more equitable opportunities for graduates. But it is necessary to recognise that background inequalities accompany entry to higher education. Therefore, policies that are student/graduate-centred and allow for differentiated processes and outcomes would not make assumptions of student homogeneity but rather consider that some individuals require different strategies, resources and pedagogy to achieve the same outcomes. Policies that ensure successful higher education pathways for students from the point of entry are more likely to advance suitable career trajectories. In order to achieve this, enrolment policies could include processes for career guidance and support in study programme and course selection. This would ensure that from enrolment, individuals can build a vision of possible career options and alternatives towards which they are working.

Inequalities are easily blurred when an institution's success is based on aggregate numbers of the first jobs that graduates get. Such measures are not helpful for institutions to identify gaps in provision, nor do they provide insight into graduates' longer term career trajectories. Policies that guide an institution's career and recruitment services ought to be closely aligned to those of pedagogy (including experiential learning). In this way, institutions would work towards suiting employment outcomes to individuals rather than expecting graduates to fit into jobs. In addition, concern for graduates' longer term career success requires paying particular attention to the quality and type of work that individual graduates are able to get.

Building wider networks for longer:

Given the strong vocational and employment orientation of what private institutions do, developing all graduates' capabilities for connection ought to be a priority. Networks are built from personal

contacts and industry connections. This means not only showing students who the industry partners are but also including in the pedagogy specific teaching of techniques and strategies for building and drawing on connections. Individuals whose social capital is weak may need additional input and assistance (from the institution and peers), including with experiential learning placement. Building networks takes time and is not something that can be achieved in the latter part of the final year of study. Therefore, these skills should be developed over the duration of the study programme.

In addition, more attention could be given in the pedagogy and practical learning for opportunities to collaborate with peers and others. An example would be for students to work together on inter- and trans-disciplinary projects, which could be done both in the classroom and in the practical work experience. Building networks links in an integral way with building experience.

Building experience and type of work to fit graduates:

When it comes to experience and types of work, context matters. Policies need to take into account the social and economic circumstances in which graduates live, and where they can and will work. Rather than assuming that all graduates should and will be employed in the formal labour market, graduates can be prepared for work in different contexts – including options in the gig and township economies. This could be achieved by teaching towards and encouraging experiential learning participation not only in the formal sector but also in informal entities, as well as semi-formal capacities, working with freelance workers and those in self-employment. Also, by allowing for multiple experiential learning opportunities across a range of types of work, students would build more time in practical experience, be introduced to wider networks, and be exposed to contexts in which they could find their own fit.

Conclusion

Much progress has been made in widening access and participation in higher education. Enhancing the role higher education can play in shaping individual lives and contributing towards greater equality in society means it is time to shift the focus towards achieving fairer and more equitable employment outcomes for all graduates. Institutions need to attend not only to the knowledge and skills graduates require to be employed, but also to enabling each person to build networks, benefit from the institution's reputation and gain a range of experience, in order to expand the real opportunities all graduates have to earn a decent livelihood, to establish a career, and to live the kind of lives they value.

References

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