

Article

Navigating Expectations and Realities: A Phenomenological Study of Graduate Unemployment in Alfred Duma Municipality, South Africa

Nomfundo Kubheka¹, Nduduzo C. Ndebele², & Abisha Kampira^{3*}

¹Department of Public Administration, University of Zululand, 3886, South Africa

²School of Management, IT and Governance, Public Governance, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 3886, South Africa.

³Department of Public Administration, Tshwane University of Technology, 0183, South Africa.

*Corresponding Author: abishakampira@gmail.com

Received: 09 May 2025

Accepted: 01 August 2025

Abstract: In South Africa, graduate unemployment is a growing problem. This paper explores graduates' expectations when they leave universities versus what they encounter in the labour market and how they manage and react to it. The paper uses a qualitative, phenomenological design on a purposively drawn sample of 24 South African graduates from the Alfred Duma Local Municipality. Data were analysed using thematic analysis on Atlas.ti. The paper further applies a working hypothesis approach to draw testable hypotheses from the data. The study made the following thematic findings: Theme 1: Unemployed ADLM Graduates' Disillusionment with Employment Transitions; Theme 2: Perceived Sources of Graduates' Unmet Expectations; and Theme 3: The Sociopsychological Impact of Graduate Unemployment on Youths. In an integrated form, the themes show that graduates managed expectations versus reality gaps (further complicated by community expectations) by altering expectations. Still, failures to reconcile expectations versus realities came with psychological adversities among some. The paper advocates for individual psychological capital development and realistic expectations set by universities, alongside macro-level policy reforms like mandated internships, entrepreneurship and retraining grants, and unemployment benefits. The study proposes a working hypothesis model on how graduates can actively manage their job expectation-reality gap. This is key for future research, offering a testable model to predict graduate responses and inform interventions for unemployment.

Keywords: Graduate; unemployment; expectations; reality; psychological capital

Introduction

Graduate unemployment is a growing challenge in South Africa. According to Statistics South Africa, between 2018 and 2021, the cumulative number of unemployed university graduates grew from 125 000 to 217 000 - an annual average growth of 20.0% every year. The Department of Higher Education and Training (2022) notes that the majority of unemployed graduates (80 000) were from business, humanities (46 000), health (7 000) and the arts (2 000). As of the first quarter of 2025, the graduate unemployment rate stood at 11.7%, up from 10.2%, as recorded in the first quarter of 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2022, 2025).

Graham et al. (2019) assert that from a global perspective, the country's graduate unemployment rate was localised to specific qualification areas. However, in 2022, South Africa's graduate unemployment rate as a percentage of the total graduate labour force was 16.55% compared to Egypt (15.2%), Zambia (10.4%),

Mozambique (9.3%) and Nigeria (6.7%) (World Bank, 2025). Nonetheless, South Africa also had a lower graduate unemployment rate compared to Sudan (22.4%), Botswana (18.5%), Tunisia (22.4%) and Morocco (25.9%). In the BRICS, South Africa's graduate unemployment rate was the highest compared to Brazil (5.06%), the Russian Federation (2.6%) and India (14.3%) (World Bank, 2025). This indicates a higher graduate unemployment rate than the reviewed African and BRICS peers.

According to Meyer and Mncayi (2021), graduate unemployment in South Africa is associated with the failures of the educational systems to transform in response to labour market needs. Buthelezi et al. (2024) found the graduate unemployment problem in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to be more intense than reported and recommended reducing enrolments in low-employment courses. Gwala et al. (2023) noted the adverse psychological impact of graduate unemployment in the same municipality, associating it with loss of hope and dysfunctional behaviour. Studies, however, offer less discussion on the graduates' expectations versus reality perspectives, with many studies looking at employment expectations from a labour demand versus supply (Gwala et al., 2023; Buthelezi et al., 2024) perspective.

This study therefore explores graduates' labour market expectations when they leave universities versus what they encounter. Critical to the study is how graduates manage the actual and perceived gaps between expectations and reality. It further contributes to the development of an expectations-reality gap management theory using a working hypothesis approach. With the job market becoming extensively dynamic and traditional job roles being disrupted within economically and technologically challenging environments (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020), such a theory is critical in bringing focus on the psychological risks graduates are exposed to as a result of expectations-reality gaps. Given the above, the paper aimed to answer the following research questions:

- i. What is the nature and impact of the expectation-reality gap experienced by unemployed ADLM graduates?
- ii. What framework can inform interventions aimed at bridging the expectation-reality gap among unemployed graduates?

This paper, therefore, contributes towards new theoretical perspectives on labour market expectations versus experience in the new university graduate labour force niche.

Literature Review

1. Causes of graduate unemployment

There are several causes behind the graduate unemployment problem. Graham et al. (2019) point to higher education massification resulting in more graduates than could be absorbed by the labour markets. Other widely discussed factors behind graduate unemployment include study programmes that produce skills that are not in demand (Botha, 2021; Hlayisi, 2022), studying at perceived low academic reputation institutions (Harry et al., 2018) and low economic growth in relation to the graduate population (Daud & Nordin, 2023). Personal factors behind graduate unemployment included graduates' pickiness of available jobs (Mseleku, 2022a), low academic proficiencies (Maka et al., 2021), lack of technical skills and limited job-hunting skills (Othman et al., 2023). Thus, scholars like Botha (2021), Maka et al. (2021) and Hlayisi (2022), among others, look at graduate unemployment as a multifactorial challenge, with some factors being more prominent than others depending on context. The problem could, therefore, be experienced differently by demographic contexts that include race and gender.

2. Expectations Versus Reality

Expectations are what one looks forward to experiencing, while reality is what one actually experiences (Jackson, 2021). The difference between these two is sometimes referred to as an expectations gap (Aryanti & Adhariani, 2020). It is asserted that one of the key challenges in life is balancing these two aspects. From a psychological perspective, considerable literature speaks of therapies and interventions that have been developed over time to help people reconcile expectation-reality gaps that tend to surface from time to time (Shepherd et al., 2024). Such interventions include supporting the development of realistic expectations,

accepting and dealing with changing scenarios and coping with unprecedented and/or unappreciated changes (Shepherd et al., 2024). Also, the gap could be managed by altering reality such that it reflects what was personally and societally achievable (du Toit et al., 2018). However, personal realities of joblessness are not easy to manage when they encompass failing employment creation policies (Komguep & Nembot, 2021). This leaves consequences felt by those whose expectations are betrayed, whose reality is challenging to manage and who, at the same time, continue to expect the alteration of economic realities behind the problem.

3. Role of families and communities in graduates' expectations management

A graduate's idealised or actual higher earning capacity creates strong expectations for a better future within families and communities (van Lill et al., 2022). With graduation being considered a highly probable pathway out of personal and household poverty, the poor are more likely to bear a stronger socioeconomic and consequential psychological burden of failing to convert their graduation into meaningful employment (Fongwa, 2019; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2021). Fenta (2024) also notes that families are concerned that their graduates' unemployment could translate into a financial loss for them after having invested in the latter's education, and this, too, worries recent graduates and even discourages higher education pursuance in communities.

The fear of failing in such societally pressured environments fuels psychological instabilities among both graduates and would-be graduates. Ayala Calvo and Manzano Garcia (2020) found that graduates suffer from employability anxiety even before they have finished their education. In some cases, however, such anxieties result from unexpected outcomes that one realises once in the job and career markets (Mbokazi et al., 2022). The expectations versus reality dilemmas in the graduate employment/unemployment narrative are further examined from Vroom's expectancy theory perspective.

4. Vroom's Expectancy Theory

Vroom's expectancy theory asserts that one's behaviour within an organisational system is bound by three linear relationships (Chatiza et al., 2021). The first is the effort to perform a relationship. Under it, one assesses the probability that their efforts will yield a desirable organisational performance. The second relationship, the performance to an outcome, assesses the probability that one's performance would lead to the desired organisational outcome (Adamu & Shakur, 2023). The third links organisational outcomes to personal goals. Under this relationship, one questions the probability that the desired organisational outcome and its rewards would contribute to one's personal goals. Thus, individual performance within organisational systems is driven by the overall personal agenda of attaining valuable rewards (Adamu & Shakur, 2023). Individuals are motivated to perform under the expectation that this should be personally rewarding (Chatiza et al., 2021).

While the theory was primarily designed for employees in organisational setups, its logic can, however, apply to the graduate employment context. In the graduate employment environment, the university system can be taken as a proxy for an organisation. Performing well in it has expected personal rewards that include meaningfully gainful employment (Adamu & Shakur, 2023). One's instrumentality relates to the capacity to gain the desired skills required in employer organisations and valence - how they value being employed.

Vroom's Expectancy Theory is central to the first research question by offering a lens through which to understand how graduates' effort-reward expectations, particularly for gainful employment, diverge from their actual experiences, thus illuminating the expectation-reality gap. Another theoretical perspective - the psychological capital theory - could also be relevant in theorising this gap.

5. Psychological Capital Theory or Concept

Psychological capital has generally been topical in the employment/unemployment discourse as a result of self and societally destructive tendencies emanating from the failure to cope with the consequences of unexpected joblessness (Belle et al., 2022). Psychological capital has been described in some sources as a concept rather than a theory (Ayala Calvo & Manzano Garcia, 2020; Belle et al., 2022). Scholars who take it as a theory include Kauffeld and Spaurk (2021). Nonetheless, they all hold a common perspective that psychological capital refers to a set of behavioural characteristics that empower one to cope with challenging

situations. Belle et al. (2022) describe graduate unemployment as one such situation, arguing that students can amass psychological capital through career counselling and experiential learning. This capital could help them avoid mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, leading to suicides, which are notable outcomes of graduate unemployment (Airawadieh, 2021). Supported by the above views, the researchers, therefore, argue that expectations versus reality gaps in graduate unemployment can be methodically managed, but this could require equipping graduates with the skills and knowledge to do so. This second theory, therefore, relates more to the study's intervention need expressed in the second research question - specifically, how graduates could be helped or could help themselves to cope with expectation-reality gaps.

While previous studies, for example, Graham et al. (2019), Meyer and Mncayi (2021) and Gwala et al. (2023) have addressed causes of graduate unemployment in South Africa. Little is known about how expectations are managed on a psychological and sociological level using a phenomenological lens. This study addresses that gap by exploring in-depth expectation-reality gaps associated with mostly unanticipated unemployment among ADLM graduates."

Methodology

1. Research Philosophy, Design and Approach

The paper used a phenomenological research design within a constructivist paradigm. The paper takes a working hypothesis approach. According to Taylor (2022), this is a pragmatic approach targeting the development of hypotheses that can be used to test inductive findings. The approach accommodates rudimentary but factual evidence that can be used to advance theory-building within an interpretive paradigm (Casula et al., 2021). This method aligns with inductive logic as it empowers researchers to draw interpretive claims from findings and allows these findings to be objectively tested as part of theory building (Casula et al., 2021).

2. Study Context, Population and Sampling

The study took place in the Alfred Duma Local Municipality offices (ADLM), situated in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. It is primarily rural, with only 30% of its population of 356 200 residents being urban (ADLM, 2022). The study's participants were among the many graduates who visited these offices in search of employment placements, including under the Municipality's Youth Mass Skilling Programme between July 14, 2022, and August 25, 2022. Convenience sampling was applied, justified by the absence of a sampling frame with all unemployed graduates in the ADLM and by the exploratory nature of the study (Wang, 2024).

3. Data Collection

Data were collected using interview schedules and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The interview schedule had two sections highlighted in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Interview Questions

Section	Questions
Section A	Gender
	Race
	Age
	Which university qualification do you possess?
	Year and month of Graduation
	Institution of graduation
	Field of study and major
	Length of unemployment since graduation till now.
	Area of resident (WARD):

Section B	How long after graduation did you anticipate it would take before you find employment?
	What expectations did you have regarding salary, starting position, and employment benefits?
	What experiences have you had looking for a job and how do they compare with the above expectations?
	What has been the impact of being unemployed - socially, economically, psychologically?
	Any other comments you wish to add?

Section A collected data on gender, university attended, the programme of study, qualification, year of qualification, length of unemployment period, and the municipal wards the participants came from. It also collected data on how long the participants had expected it to take to find a job after graduation. Section B questions prompted participants to discuss factors and the impact of graduate employment. Face-to-face interviews that lasted between 15 and 35 minutes were conducted in English.

4. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis and reported as themes and subthemes. Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis were applied on Atlas. ti version 23.

5. Research Rigour and Ethics

In terms of research rigour, the trustworthiness of findings was enhanced through data co-coding by three authors, pilot-testing the data collection tool, and data saturation and reflexivity. The latter related to identifying preconceived notions on graduate unemployment and committing not to let them affect the co-coding process. The researchers got ethical approval for the study from the University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee (UZREC171110-030 PGM 2022/17) and the ADLM Youth Development Office (REF-01/02/2022).

The Findings

1. Participant Description

The study's sample consisted of graduates holding a university degree and 24 graduates were considered. Table 2 below shows the gender, age, highest qualification group, and duration of unemployment of the respondents.

Table 2. Graduate participants

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Qualification
P1	Male	25 – 30	Bachelors
P2	Male	25 – 30	Bachelors
P3	Male	25 – 30	Bachelors
P4	Female	25 - 30	Honours
P5	Male	25 - 30	Bachelors
P6	Female	25 - 30	Honours
P7	Female	30 -35	Honours
P8	Female	20 - 25	Honours
P9	Male	35 -40	Honours
P10	Female	25 - 30	Honours
P11	Male	30 -35	Bachelors

P12	Female	30 -35	PhD
P13	Male	30 -35	Honours
P14	Female	25 - 30	Honours
P15	Female	25 - 30	Masters
P16	Female	35 -40	Masters
P17	Female	35 -40	Bachelors
P18	Female	25 - 30	Bachelors
P19	Female	25 - 30	Bachelors
P20	Male	25 - 30	Honours
P21	Female	25 - 30	Masters
P22	Female	25 - 30	Masters
P23	Female	30 -35	Masters
P24	Female	25-30	Bachelors

The sample was mixed by gender, age and qualification, but all participants were black. Table 1 above shows that most participants were aged 25-30 years, with a smaller representation in the 20-25 and 30-35 age groups. Most participants either had a bachelor's or honours degree, with a few holding master's or doctorate degrees. The institutions attended were diverse, with the University of Zululand (UoZ), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) being the most represented. Some graduates had been unemployed for four years or more, while others had experienced the phenomenon for shorter durations.

2. Unemployed ADLM Graduates' Disillusionment with Employment Transitions

Under Theme 1, the researchers looked at graduates' experiences with unemployment with a specific interest in their expectations when they graduated versus what they experienced. It has four subthemes: Disillusionment with probable job types, disillusionment from prolonged job search timelines, Graduates' qualification-related reality checks, and Graduates' unanticipated experiences with alternative occupations. These subthemes are tabulated below (Table 3):

Table 3: Theme 1 Subthemes

Subtheme	Contributors	Representative Quotes
Disillusionment with job types	P3, P10, P13, P15, P16, P21	<i>"Graduates are too picky... Some have too high expectations on their first jobs." (P24)</i>
Disillusionment from prolonged job search timelines	P1, P5, P6, P20	<i>"I thought it would take two months, but it's been a year." (P24)</i>
Qualification-related reality checks	P7, P15, P17, P18, P21	<i>"With a Master's, companies think you're overqualified." (P22)</i>
Unanticipated experiences with alternative occupations	P21, P22	<i>"I enrolled for a second degree because I didn't get a job." (P15)</i>

The findings under Theme 1, summarised in Table 3, reveal a contrast between graduates' expectations and the harsh realities of South Africa's job market. Many graduates anticipated quick entry into reputable, well-paying jobs that would elevate their socioeconomic status (P3, P10, P13, P15). However, they were met with limited opportunities, often in low-paying or less respected roles, leading to frustration and reluctance to accept available positions (P24). Some were even deemed overqualified with advanced qualifications, such as master's or PhDs, making them "too expensive" for employers (P18, P22). Yet such graduates would have undertaken these qualifications hoping to better their employment opportunities (P21). Additionally, graduates

grossly underestimated the time required to secure employment, with some remaining jobless for years despite expecting to land work within months (P6, P20).

3. Perceived sources of graduates' unmet expectations

Graduates' expectations on the type of employment they would get, its benefits and appeals, and the time frame they would take to get it were motivated by information and experiences not only for the graduates but also for communities and societies at large. These sources of expectations were grouped into three subthemes - Economic and generational expectations, Societal and community pressures and Educational system messaging (Table 4).

Table 4: Theme 2 Subthemes

Subtheme	Contributors	Representative Quotes
Economic and generational expectations	P4, P9, P11, P22	<i>"Families invested scarce resources, hoping for returns to escape poverty." (P1)</i>
Societal and community pressures	P1, P4, P11	<i>"My family and Ward 5 community supported me, reducing pressure." (P21)</i>
Educational system messaging	P7, P22	<i>"I regret furthering my studies—the system overpromised." (P21)</i>

As shown in Table 2, graduates' employment expectations emerged from several intersecting influences, as demonstrated by participants across the study. A persistent generational belief - articulated by P1, P4, P9, P11 and P22 - framed degrees as guaranteed routes to gainful, life-changing employment, motivating significant family investments despite limited resources. This created intense pressure for graduates, though P21's experience showed how supportive communities could alleviate some stress. The educational system amplified these expectations through its promotion of certain qualifications, with P7's applied law degree and P21's advanced studies representing cases where institutional messaging conflicted with labour market realities. The resulting disillusionment, experienced by participants ranging from P1 (family expectations) to P22 (qualification value), reveals systemic failures in aligning education with employment.

4. The Sociopsychological Impact of Graduate Unemployment on Youths

Theme 2 looked at how graduate employment impacted the youth and broader society. The theme was mainly developed from questions that asked the participants to relate the period they had spent without a job since graduation and their job-hunting experiences, as well as a specific question requesting graduates to discuss the impact of graduate unemployment. The initial open codes generated were grouped into relevant impacts shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Theme 3 Subthemes

Subtheme	Contributors	Representative Quotes
Psychological distress	P1, P2, P4–P12, P15–P17, P19, P21–P23	<i>"I almost took my life. It is really difficult out there." (P22)</i>
Social stigma and status loss	P5–P7, P9, P11, P13, P16, P19	<i>"Leads to losing friends and respect... depression and health issues." (P19)</i>
Antisocial coping mechanisms	P1, P4, P7–P14, P17, P19, P24	<i>"Poverty leads to youth getting pregnant and diseases." (P10)</i>
Community-wide consequences	P4, P8, P10, P13, P17, P24	<i>"Social circumstances cause graduates to turn to crime." (P13)</i>

The findings from Theme 3 reveal the ripple effects of graduate unemployment across psychological, social, and community dimensions. Participants reported severe psychological distress, with P22's near-suicidal experience and P19's account of depression and social isolation as examples of mental health consequences. Such psychological challenges manifested in negative coping mechanisms, as evidenced by P10's report of transactional sex and P13's description of crime as a survival strategy. The social stigma emerged as equally damaging, with P11 and P16 detailing how familial and community expectations enhanced graduates' feelings of worthlessness, while P19 highlighted the loss of social standing and relationships. The participants' narratives collectively paint a picture of a systemic crisis where unmet employment expectations trigger a downward spiral of mental health deterioration, social marginalisation, and community destabilisation.

Discussion

The findings problematise the assumption that educational credentials guarantee upward mobility in rural South Africa, revealing that graduates' significant investment in education can result in disillusionment rooted in a mismatch between high expectations and the harsh realities of limited opportunities and employer biases. This extends beyond individual motivational breakdowns to highlight systemic failures in market absorption and the unrewarded instrumentality of education within the ADLM and relatable rural contexts. They exhibit a need for in-depth policy interventions on the creation and provision of commensurate employment opportunities in rural settings, issues that have been discussed by Harry et al. (2018) and Adetiba and Qwabe (2020), among others.

Further, the findings are confirmatory of what previous South African and global studies have revealed. On job market expectations, in a Czech study, Šimsová and Reissová (2016) got relatable findings in which students from esteemed qualification groups had higher salary expectations than those offered by employers. Also, they are expected to rise through corporate ranks at a pace faster than provided by employers (Šimsová & Reissová, 2016). Like this study, Ndebele and Ndlovu (2020) also note that while graduates saw themselves as well-skilled, their potential employers did not. This skills mismatch gap added to the expectations versus reality gap in graduate unemployment. This study's views, however, contrast with Oluwajodu et al. (2015) and Ndlovu and Ndebele (2019), who found that South African graduates' income expectations were not very detached from those of their employers.

On the sociopsychological impact of graduate unemployment, studies by Rafi et al. (2019) reveal that psychological challenges faced by ADLM graduates are commonly reported phenomena. From a Bangladeshi perspective, they found that anxiety, despair and depression were predictable outcomes of unemployment. Also, studies by Mseleku (2022) point to prolonged unemployment among graduates as posing antisocial behaviour risks among this group, a factor highlighted in this paper's findings. As mentioned by psychological capital proponents (Kauffeld & Spaurk, 2021), graduates need the capacity to handle unemployment as a challenge. Looking at the findings from the expectancy theory, the respondents show a view that their expectations had not been met despite them having put in adequate efforts. The findings further show that it was not only joblessness that was the problem. Rather, it was the absorption rate, job type, and income gap that were perceived to be too wide compared to what was expected.

The above exposes a critical breakdown in youth identity formation. Higher education policy's promise of upward mobility clashes with structural labour issues, creating profound identity dissonance. This leads to severe erosion of self-worth and purpose, as unmet expectations foster psychological distress and potentially harmful coping mechanisms, fundamentally destabilising young people's sense of self.

The findings show families and communities as key role players in (1) shaping graduates' expectations and (2) affecting how graduates respond to unmet expectations. Both are discussed in van Lill et al. (2022). In that study, the issue of unrewarded instrumentality also came out among graduates who thought they had given too much to their education.

The study's findings reveal that Vroom's Expectancy Theory, the motivational breakdown among unemployed graduates: their significant educational "effort" did not lead to anticipated career "performance" or desired "outcomes," generating profound "disillusionment." However, Vroom's primary focus on individual

expectations and motivation within a system fails to adequately address the external, systemic barriers that fundamentally shape the "reality" side of the expectation-reality gap—such as a constrained job market, economic factors, or employer biases against "overqualified" candidates.

Conversely, the Psychological Capital Concept, while not a predictive theory of behaviour in the same vein as Vroom's, powerfully explains the consequences of these unmet expectations by detailing the resulting psychological distress, social stigma, and maladaptive coping mechanisms. It highlights the deficit in internal resources (like hope, self-efficacy, and resilience) needed to navigate sustained unemployment. Yet, it does not fully explain the genesis of the initial expectation-reality gap itself or the structural impediments that create the need for such psychological capital in the first place.

Therefore, a consolidated approach is justified and necessary and this led the researchers to consider a possible framework to counteract these limitations. The researchers therefore present the framework below (Figure 1) as part of the expectations-reality management argument. This was inspired by the inductive qualitative findings above and is, at best, seen as a broad working hypothesis rather than a normative framework.

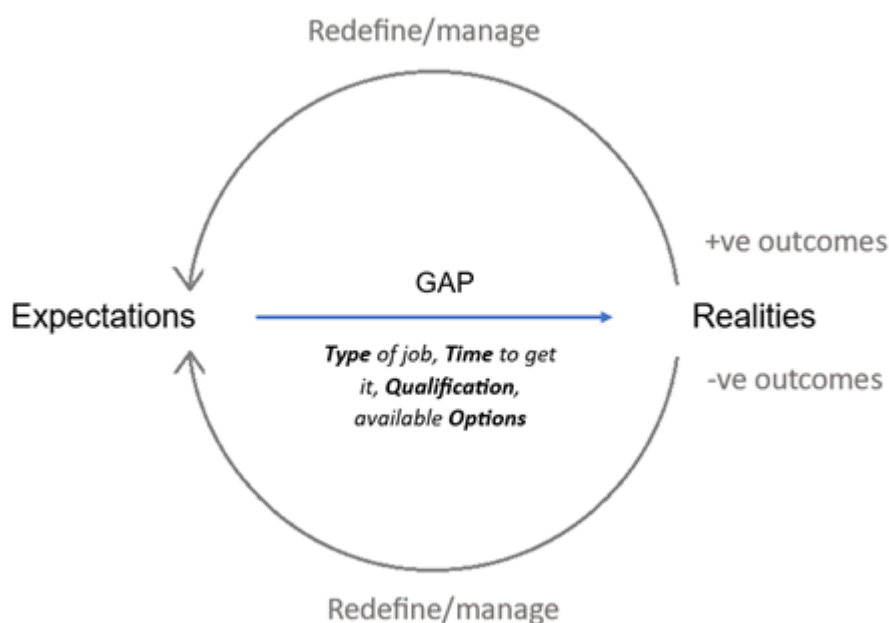


Figure 1. Expectations-reality gap and its management (Authors)

From the above framework, it is theorised that graduates can manage their realities, redefine their expectations or a combination of both if there is either a negative or positive gap between expectations and realities. Reality management involves (1) measures to minimise experienced sociopsychological adversities of being unemployed outside one's expectations or outcomes of unexpected joblessness and (2) direct actions to affect getting a job while holding similar expectations. The set of propositions that the above framework generates is:

- i. Expectations and realities and their gaps can be systematically identified and quantified.
- ii. The expectations-reality gap is dependent upon the type of job, the time required to get it, the qualification requirements, and the available options.
- iii. Expectations exhibit dynamic short-term adaptability to faced realities
- iv. In all, the impact of the expectations-reality gap is a dependent variable that can be influenced by expectations and reality management

The working hypothesis is underpinned by the view that psychological reactions are directly linked to gap sizes and these gaps encompass personal and community-level factors. As Casula et al. (2021) point out, working hypotheses are flexible enough to accommodate new outcomes in the theory-building process. Other researchers can quantitatively investigate the above propositions, ideally through Likert scale questions that

measure or rate expectations against realities. Further, regression analyses and structural equation models are possible analytical methods of testing the strengths and statistical significance of the above propositions.

Overall, it boldly suggests predictability in graduate behavioural reactions to unemployment and the need for theoretical tools to make this possible. The working hypothesis advances employability literature by highlighting that graduates can actively manage their "expectations-reality gap" to mitigate unemployment's psychological impact. This is a capacity necessitated by the said systemic labour market failures that result in graduates challenging their identities and prospects. This framework emphasises individual agency in adapting to career challenges.

Conclusion

The study's key takeaways are that labour market entry conditions present harsh, unanticipated, socially and psychologically damaging personal realities that graduates struggle to reconcile with preconceived expectations. Secondly, graduates can, however, have the agency to manage encountered expectations-reality gaps, while policy outcomes can also help to reduce the harshness of such realities. The paper makes recommendations at three levels – the micro, meso and macro. At a micro-level, students should redefine their expectations in line with observable realities and should find means of communicating these to families. The formation of graduate student support groups could also help with the management of psychological adversities of unexpected graduate unemployment. At a meso-level, the paper furthers the need for psychological capital development among university students to prepare them to better manage outcomes outside their employment expectations. Also, universities should be encouraged to communicate unemployment risks associated with some career options to facilitate the development of realistic post-school expectations among students. At a macro level, policy reforms that support graduate absorption, such as internship opportunities, entrepreneurship grants and retraining grants, could be enhanced, while possible short-to-medium term interventions like unemployment insurance could be considered. Unemployment benefits for immediate graduates could also be considered. Future studies should examine how university career services can integrate psychological resilience training into graduate preparation programmes. These findings are made with the recognition of the limitations associated with a purposive sample. The findings may therefore not apply to other contexts.

Acknowledgement: All graduates from the ADLM who participated in the study and the ADLM for making data collection possible.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Adamu, M. & Shakur, M.B.M.A., (2023). Graduate employability and skill gap: relationships of vocational training and machinery/equipment in an effective new business start-up. *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, 23(2), 115-126. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJHRDM.2023.131633>
- Alrawadieh, D. D. (2021). Does employability anxiety trigger psychological distress and academic major dissatisfaction? A study on tour guiding students. *Journal of Tourismology*, 7(1), 55-72. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/iuturizmoloji/issue/64058/923827>
- Adetiba, T. C., & Qwabe, N. T. (2020). The wave of unemployment amongst South African youths: Belonging to a political organisation as a way of escape. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 17(5), 164-179. <https://ejournal.ukm.my/ebangi/article/view/40215/10587>
- Alfred Duma Municipality. (2022). Draft 2022/2023 ADLM Integrated Development Plan. <https://www.alfredduma.gov.za/download/draft-2022-2023-adlm-integrated-development-plan/>

- Aryanti, C., & Adhariani, D. (2020). Students' perceptions and expectation gap on the skills and knowledge of accounting graduates. *The Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 7(9), 649-657. <https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2020.vol7.no9.649>
- Ayala Calvo, J. C., & Manzano García, G. (2021). The influence of psychological capital on graduates' perception of employability: the mediating role of employability skills. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(2), 293-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1738350>
- Belle, M. A., Antwi, C. O., Ntim, S. Y., Affum-Osei, E., & Ren, J. (2022). Am I gonna get a job? Graduating students' psychological capital, coping styles, and employment anxiety. *Journal of Career Development*, 49(5), 1122-1136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845321102012>
- Botha, D. (2021). Self-perceived employability among undergraduate students at a South African university. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19, 11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v19i0.1685>
- Buthlezi, S., Nxumalo, M. L., & Ngema, X. (2024). The Complexities and Challenges of Graduate Unemployment in KwaZulu-Natal: South Africa. *International Journal*, 14(1), 30-37. <https://doi.org/10.15640/jehd.v14n1a5>
- Casula, M., Rangarajan, N. & Shields, P. (2021). The potential of working hypotheses for deductive exploratory research. *Quality & Quantity*, 55(5), 1703-1725. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-01072-9>
- Chatiza, K., Mubvundu, M., & Chisango, S. (2021). Employee engagement and service delivery in tertiary institutions: Case of a Public University in Zimbabwe. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 5(11), 79-102. https://cedred.or.ke/jais/images/november2021/PDF_Chatiza_et_al_Employee_Engagement_and_Service_Delivery_in_Tertiary_Institutions.pdf
- Daud, S., & Nordin, M. S. (2023). Elemen Pelaksanaan Pendidikan Keusahawanan dalam Program Latihan Kemahiran TVET: Suatu Penelitian Terhadap Masalah dan Cabaran. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 20(3), 96-114. <https://ejournal.ukm.my/ebangi/article/view/62286>
- Department of Higher Education and Training (2022, May). *Skills Supply and Demand in South Africa Labour Market Intelligence research programme*. <https://lmi-research.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/DPRU-LMI-1-1-B2-Skills-Supply-and-Demand-2022.pdf>
- Du Toit, M., De Witte, H., Rothmann, S. & Van den Broeck, A. (2018). Contextual factors and the experience of unemployment: A review of qualitative studies. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 21(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v21i1.2083>
- Fenta, A. A. (2024). Assessing the socioeconomic challenges of graduate unemployment on the community: the case of Sekela Woreda, Ethiopia. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2306922. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2306922>
- Fongwa, S.N. (2019). Interrogating the public good versus private good dichotomy: 'black tax' as a higher education public good. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 51(4), 564-579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2019.1651194>
- Graham, L., & Mlatsheni, C. E. C. I. L. (2021). South Africa's high youth unemployment: Structural features and current responses. *Youth in South Africa:(in) visibility and national development*, 131-156. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2z6qdpw.13>
- Graham, L., Williams, L., & Chisoro, C. (2019). Barriers to the labour market for unemployed graduates in South Africa. *Journal of Education and Work*, 32(4), 360-376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2019.1620924>
- Gwala, F. N., Mthethwa, R. M., & Jili, N. N. (2023). An Analysis of the Factors, Effects and experiences associated with high graduate unemployment in the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality of South Africa. *African Journal of Public Affairs*. 14(1), 122-151. https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/ejc-ajpa_v14_n1_a8.

- Harry, T., Chinyamurindi, W., & Mjoli, T. (2018). Perceptions of factors that affect employability amongst a sample of final-year students at a rural South African university. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 44, 10 pages. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v44i0.1510>
- Hlayisi, V. G. (2022). Increasing unemployment rate amongst health professionals: Will there be jobs for newly graduated South African audiologists post-COVID-19? *South African Journal of Communication Disorders*, 69(2), 909. <https://journals.co.za/doi/full/10.4102/sajcd.v69i2.909>
- Jackson, D. (2021). The changing nature of graduate roles and the value of the degree. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 43(2), 182-197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1777634>
- Jackson, D. & Tomlinson, M. (2020). Investigating the relationship between career planning, proactivity and employability perceptions among higher education students in uncertain labour market conditions. *Higher education*, 80(3), 435-455. link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-019-00490-5
- Kauffeld, S., & Spurk, D. (2022). Why does psychological capital foster subjective and objective career success? The mediating role of career-specific resources. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 30(2), 285-308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10690727211040053>
- Komguep, M.C. & Nembot, L.N., (2021). Why Does Employment Policies Fail to Reduce Unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa? Looking towards the brain drain. *Economics Bulletin, AccessEcon*. 41(2). 615-633. <http://www.accessecon.com/Pubs/EB/2021/Volume41/EB-21-V41-I2-P55.pdf>
- Maka, L., Van Niekerk, J. A., DeBruyn, M., & Pakela-Jezile, Y. P. (2021). Perceptions of agricultural postgraduate students on unemployment in South Africa. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies*, 13(1), 55-78. DOI: 10.34109/ijsshs.202114003
- Mbokazi, M. S., Mkhasibe, R. G., & Ajani, O. A. (2022). Evaluating the Promotion Requirements for the Appointment of Office-Based Educators in the Department of Basic Education in South Africa. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 11(2), 181-191. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v11n2p181>
- Meyer, D. F., & Mncayi, P. (2021). An analysis of underemployment among young graduates: The case of a higher education institution in South Africa. *Economies*, 9(4), 196. <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies9040196>
- Mseleku, Z., (2022). From Workplace to Joblessness: The Determinants of Post-Internship Graduate Unemployment in South Africa. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 11(2), 330-330. <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2022-0055>
- Mseleku, Z. (2022a). Youth high unemployment/unemployability in South Africa: the unemployed graduates' perspectives. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 12(4), 775-790. eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1347076
- Ndebele, N.C. & Ndlovu, J., (2020). Employability in KwaZulu-Natal: perceptions of postgraduate students on work readiness in the labour market. *Journal of Public Administration*, 55(2), 226-238. <https://doi.org/10.20853/33-2-2802>
- Ndebele, N.C., Ndlovu, S.G., Mlambo, V.H. & Thusi, X. (2022). The Challenges of Youth Entrepreneurship from a Local Government Perspective in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33 (2), 92-106. <https://doi.org/10.31098/ijmesh.v5i2.1149>
- Ndlovu, J., & Ndebele, N. C. (2019). Employment experiences of postgraduate students in KwaZulu-Natal: An intersection of qualifications and employability in the labour market. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 33(2), 92-106. <https://doi.org/10.20853/33-2-2802>
- Oluwajodu, F., Blaauw, D., Greyling, L., & Kleyhans, E.P.J. (2015). Graduate unemployment in South Africa: Perspectives from the banking sector. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronnbestuur*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v13i1.656>
- Othman, I. W., Yusoff, M. S., & Kamal, M. H. M. (2023). Addressing unemployment issues and the role of universities as platforms for graduate employability. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(12), 1-39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i12/19698>

- Rafī, M.A., Mamun, M.A., Hsan, K., Hossain, M. & Gozal, D., (2019). Psychological implications of unemployment among Bangladesh Civil Service job seekers: a pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10, 578. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00578>
- Shepherd, D. A., Patzelt, H., & Breugst, N. (2024). Simple Rules for Managing Mistakes and Failures. In 66 *Simple Rules for Entrepreneurs: A Roadmap for Improved Performance* (pp. 109-118). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62032-4_12
- Šimsová, J. & Reissová, A., (2016). How much will I earn? Expectations versus reality. *E+M Ekonomie a Management* 19(2):4-20. <https://doi.org/10.15240/tul/001/2016-2-001>
- Statistics South Africa (2023). *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) Q4:2022*. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/Presentation%20QLFS%20Q4%202022.pdf>
- Statistics South Africa. (2025). *Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 1: 2025 (P0211)*. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2025.pdf>
- Taylor, S. D. (2022). Concepts as a working hypothesis, *Philosophical Psychology*, 35:4, 569-594. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2021.2014439>
- Van Lill, R. & Bakker, T.M., (2022). Life at a stop sign: Narrative plots of the transition to adulthood during unemployment among South African graduates. *Emerging Adulthood*, 10(1), 124-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696820937879>
- Wang, X. (2024). Use of proper sampling techniques to research studies. *Applied and Computational Engineering*, 57, 141-145. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2755-2721/57/20241324>
- World Bank (2025, May) *Unemployment with advanced education (% of total labor force with advanced education)*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.ADVN.ZS?end=2023&start=1970&view=chart&year=2022>