

Graduate Destination Survey: Tracking Graduate Employment Outcomes at Walter Sisulu University

Munienge Mbodila¹, Anele Bangani², Clever Ndebele³, Smiley Kgaugelo Mmakola⁴, Regomoditswe Mkhabela⁵

Abstract

This study examines the post-graduation experiences of Walter Sisulu University (WSU) graduates, with a focus on employment outcomes. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected through the 2024 Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), this research examines the status and experiences of graduates in terms of employment, self-employment, further studies, and the quality of work readiness support they received during their time at the university. The study reveals that while a significant majority of graduates feel academically prepared and confident in their problem-solving abilities, a disconnect remains between their qualifications and their ability to successfully enter the job market. In addition, high rates of unemployment, regional employment limitations, underutilization of key support services, and limited access to experiential learning opportunities continue to hinder the full realization of graduate potential. Based on these insights, the research presents several recommendations for enhancing employability skills and promoting greater alignment between academic programs and labour market demands. The study concludes by emphasising the importance of continuous institutional improvement to empower future graduates for success in the competitive and evolving job market.

Keywords: *Student Success, Academic Support, Workplace Readiness, Employment.*

Introduction

The transition from academic study to professional engagement is a critical stage in a graduate's life and a key measure of a university's effectiveness in fulfilling its educational mandate. In the South African context, this transition carries even greater significance, particularly for historically disadvantaged institutions like Walter Sisulu University (WSU), which serve predominantly rural and underserved populations (Lukose, Kantore, & Fosu, 2023). In such contexts, higher education is not only a pathway to knowledge but also a powerful tool for socio-economic mobility and regional development. Walter Sisulu University, as one of the six comprehensive universities in South Africa, holds a strategic position in the Eastern Cape province, a region characterised by high unemployment, limited industrial development, and persistent economic challenges (Fobosi & Malima, 2025). For many students and their families, obtaining a university qualification represents hope for a better future. However, it is not enough for students to simply graduate. The question that arises is: What happens after graduation? Are graduates employed, pursuing further studies, or struggling to find opportunities? Are they working in fields aligned with their academic training, or are they engaged in unrelated or informal sectors? To address these questions, the authors conducted the 2024 Graduate Destination

¹ Student Tracking and Institutional Research Department of Institutional Research and Planning Walter Sisulu University, South Africa

² Student Tracking and Institutional Research Department of Institutional Research and Planning Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

³ Department of Continuing Professional Teacher Development, Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa, Email: cndebele@wsu.ac.za, ((Corresponding Author))

⁴ Student Tracking and Institutional Research Department of Institutional Research and Planning Walter Sisulu University, South Africa

⁵ Student Tracking and Institutional Research Department of Institutional Research and Planning Walter Sisulu University, South Africa

Survey (GDS). The survey aimed to gather comprehensive information about the post-graduation paths of WSU alumni, focusing on employment status, job relevance, self-employment, and further studies.

The need for this research is grounded in the broader context of national and global calls for higher education institutions to ensure that graduates are well-equipped to meet the demands of the modern workforce (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). Universities are increasingly expected to not only provide theoretical knowledge but also foster practical skills, professional competencies, and personal development. In response, institutions must invest in effective student support structures, such as academic advising, writing centres, career development offices, psychosocial services, and work-integrated learning opportunities, that enhance student success both during study and after graduation (DHET, 2021).

This study, therefore, provides a snapshot of the current state of WSU graduate outcomes, helping stakeholders to understand who is succeeding in the employment sector, who is struggling, and why. The insights derived from this research are intended to inform policy decisions, and ensure that WSU continues to produce graduates who are not only academically qualified but also socially and economically empowered.

Literature Review

The Significance of Graduate Destination Surveys

Across the globe, graduate employability has become a central concern for higher education institutions, governments, and employers alike (Senekal & Munro, 2019; CHIETA, 2020; Mgaiwa 2021; Demissie et al., 2021). In South Africa, graduate unemployment remains a pressing issue, even as more young people attain tertiary qualifications. Studies by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2014) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2017) have consistently emphasized the importance of tracking graduate destinations to understand how institutions are contributing to the development of a skilled workforce. The CHE's Quality Enhancement Project (CHE, 2014), for instance, encourages institutions to implement graduate tracking mechanisms that can inform curriculum reform, support structures, and strategic planning.

Graduate destination surveys are known by a variety of names in different countries including graduate destination research, graduate follow up surveys, graduate tracer surveys, alumni research, graduate career tracking studies, graduate opinion research and exit surveys (Shongwe & Ocholla: 2011; CHIETA 2020; Mgaiwa, 2021). Their defining feature is that they all utilize information and data about what happens to students after they graduate from these higher education institutions (Shongwe & Ocholla, 2011; Senekal & Munro, 2019). As Lesskys & Dollinger (2025) show, there is little doubt that graduate outcomes surveys are incredibly useful and will continue to play an important role in the understanding of any national higher education system.

Graduate Destination Surveys have emerged as vital tools for evaluating the real-world impact of higher education. Senekal and Munro (2019) argue that such surveys offer critical insights that go beyond institutional performance metrics and delve into the lived experiences of graduates. They help institutions to not only measure success but also identify weaknesses in support systems, gaps between academic offerings and job market expectations, and areas where targeted interventions may be required. Graduate destination surveys are critical in that they provide information regarding typical career trajectories as well as higher education programme relevance and development, based on the reflections and evaluations of the educational experiences and employment activities of graduates from higher education institutions (Mubuke, Businge and Kiguli-Malwadde 2014; Senekal & Munro, 2019). Research into graduate destinations and pathways as they leave higher learning institutions is very important as a tool for planning the future, for measurement of current training efforts as well as for curriculum review for continued relevance by universities (Fongwa, 2018; Graham et al 2019; CHIETA 2020).

Walter Sisulu University's Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) plays an important role in providing data that can guide institutional planning, enhance curriculum relevance, and strengthen graduate employability initiatives. Given the university's strategic position in the Eastern Cape and its strong commitment to community development, it is essential that its graduates are not only prepared for employment but are also able to make meaningful contributions to the region's socio-economic growth. This aligns closely with the university's Vision 2030, which highlights the goal of producing "future-ready graduates" and frames WSU as an impactful, technology-driven African institution dedicated to addressing societal challenges through its core functions of teaching, research, and community

engagement (Walter Sisulu University, 2020). This literature review, therefore, frames the need for robust data and institutional introspection as central to the mission of WSU and other similar institutions.

Graduate Employability and Associated Challenges

According to national data from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), individuals with tertiary education qualifications generally experience lower unemployment rates than those with only secondary schooling. However, the transition into the job market remains uneven, with challenges more pronounced for graduates from institutions located in rural areas or those serving historically disadvantaged populations (Stats SA, 2022).

One of the major contributing factors to graduate unemployment according to literature reviewed is a systemic skills mismatch between the education system and the requirements of the employment sector (Mogomotsi and Madigele 2017; Graham et al. 2019; Mgaiwa, 2021; Demissie et al. 2021). The argument is that the education system does not adequately prepare graduates for future jobs and market demands and that employers are reluctant to hire young people or graduates because of the costs associated with upskilling them. Traditional university curricula often focus heavily on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills, further widening the gap between graduates and job market expectations (Yahui, & Dagogo, 2025). This brings up the question on what graduate attributes universities seek their students to have when they graduate. Universities are expected to produce graduates with a defined skill set—often alluded to as graduate attributes, among others (Fongwa, 2018; Shivoro, Shalyefu, and Kadhila 2018). The development of curriculum content and its major components, as well as their assessment should help form in students the competencies required for successful adaptation to the labour market and industry needs (Khodyreva, et al 2017; Demissie et al 2021 Yahui & Dagogo, 2025). Furthermore, findings from a study by Mgaiwa (2021) signal that best university practices such as university–industry partnerships, aligning university educational programs with a country's development plans and regular university curriculum reviews are critical to nurture employable graduates.

Discriminative and bias practices in the labour market have also been found to contribute to unemployment with race specifically cited where non-white workers in comparison to their white counterparts have been found to have the highest probability of being underemployed (Mncayi & Meyer (2022). Consistent with the literature on who is most vulnerable to unemployment in South Africa, unemployed graduates in a study by Graham (2019) were mainly black African, younger, from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. In the same vein, Njani (2022) argues that African graduates are particularly subject to scrutiny on the job in comparison to their white graduate counterparts, meaning they must be twice as good as their white colleagues to receive the same recognition in terms of employment.

Closely linked to the issue of discrimination, the type of institution that one graduates from also emerges as a feature that shapes employment prospects (Graham et al.,2019). Studies have revealed that graduates from historically black institutions experience higher unemployment than their counterparts who graduated at historically white institutions (CHEC, 2013; Oluwajodu et al. 2015; Rogan et al. 2015; Graham et al 2019; Yahui & Dagogo, 2025). Related to the issue of historically disadvantaged universities, geographical location has also been identified as a barrier to employment with individuals who are from least developed regions more likely to be underemployed regardless of whether they live in urban or rural areas (Stéphane, 2019; Yahui & Dagogo, 2025; Li & Pilz, 2023) probably due to employer perceptions of the quality of education offered at the various institutions (Moleke, 2005).

Other barriers include socio-economic status where graduates from low-income families have a harder time finding work than graduates from high-income families (Hwang, 2017; Yahui, S & Dagogo 2025) gender where unemployment of females is reportedly higher than that of males (Mncayi and Dunga 2016;Mncayi & Meyer, 2022) and the high costs of work-seeking which includes indirect interactions related to job placement, as well as direct costs such as application fees (Hwang, 2017;Graham, et al.,2019). As Graham, et al (2019) survey data show, job search costs exceed the average per capita household income of graduates and, on average, over a third of household income is potentially contributed to such costs. Lack of work experience poses as another barrier, as many job opportunities require a number of years working experience, something that new graduates do not have (Bhorat et al. 2016; Njani, 2022;Mncayi & Meyer, 2022; Yahui & Dagogo, 2025).

Objectives of the Study

This study was undertaken with several key objectives, each designed to support a comprehensive understanding of the status of graduates from Walter Sisulu University and how institutional support may have influenced their outcomes. These objectives are aligned with the university's strategic vision of producing socially responsive, employable, and professionally competent graduates.

1. To determine the employment status of WSU graduates.

This objective focuses on identifying the proportion of graduates who are employed, unemployed, self-employed, or studying further. It aims to uncover the realities faced by graduates in their transition from university to the workforce or further education.

2. To explore the alignment between academic qualifications and the demands of the labour market.

The research seeks to determine whether the degrees and diplomas offered by WSU are equipping students with relevant knowledge and skills for their fields of employment. It further investigates graduate opinions on curriculum relevance and preparedness for the job market.

3. To identify the barriers to employment experienced by WSU graduates.

This objective focuses on the challenges that hinder graduates from securing employment. These may include a lack of work experience, limited job opportunities in specific sectors or provinces, and mismatches between qualifications and employer needs.

4. To generate recommendations for improving graduate employability and institutional effectiveness.

Drawing from the survey data and related findings, this objective proposes practical strategies for WSU leadership, faculty, and student support departments to better serve current and future students.

Methodology

The survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data using both closed-ended and open-ended questions to allow for a well-rounded understanding of graduate outcomes. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods to determine trends and proportions in graduate outcomes. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis to extract common patterns, ideas, and sentiments. This mixed-methods approach provided a balanced view of graduate outcomes, combining statistical evidence with personal experiences.

The target population for the survey consisted of graduates who completed their qualifications at WSU in 2024. A total of 808 graduates were invited to participate through email and WhatsApp communications. The survey was administered electronically using the Microsoft Forms platform to accommodate ease of access across campuses and locations. Out of the total target population, 239 graduates submitted valid and complete responses, forming the final sample for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to protect participants' rights and well-being by established research principles (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before participation, all respondents provided informed consent after being fully briefed about the study's purpose, data collection procedures, and intended use of findings. Strict confidentiality measures were implemented throughout the research process, with all responses anonymized to protect participant identities.

Participation was entirely voluntary, with respondents free to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The research team ensured that the collected data would be used solely for institutional improvement purposes, with no possibility of punitive application against any participants. These ethical safeguards were reviewed and approved by Walter Sisulu University's research ethics committee, guaranteeing compliance with both institutional policies and national research standards. The implementation of these measures not only protected participants but also enhanced the credibility and reliability of the study's findings.

Key Findings

This section presents and interprets the findings from the 2024 Graduate Destination Survey conducted at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). It offers an overview of what graduates are doing after

completing their studies, looking at employment patterns, where they are working, the sectors they enter, and their engagement in further education. Alongside these trends, the section also draws on graduates' own reflections to shed light on the challenges they encounter when moving from university into the labour market.

The discussion builds a more complete picture of graduate outcomes by highlighting the key trends that emerge from the data, alongside the gaps and underlying factors that shape employability. These findings are then considered in relation to existing research and national developments, with the aim of identifying areas where the university can improve and strengthen its efforts to support graduates in securing meaningful employment.

Employment Status and Destinations

Figure 1 presents the post-graduation status of WSU alumni, including employment, unemployment, self-employment, and engagement in further studies or training programs.

Figure 1 highlights the post-graduation activities of WSU's 2024 graduates, revealing the most pressing concern in the transition to the labour market

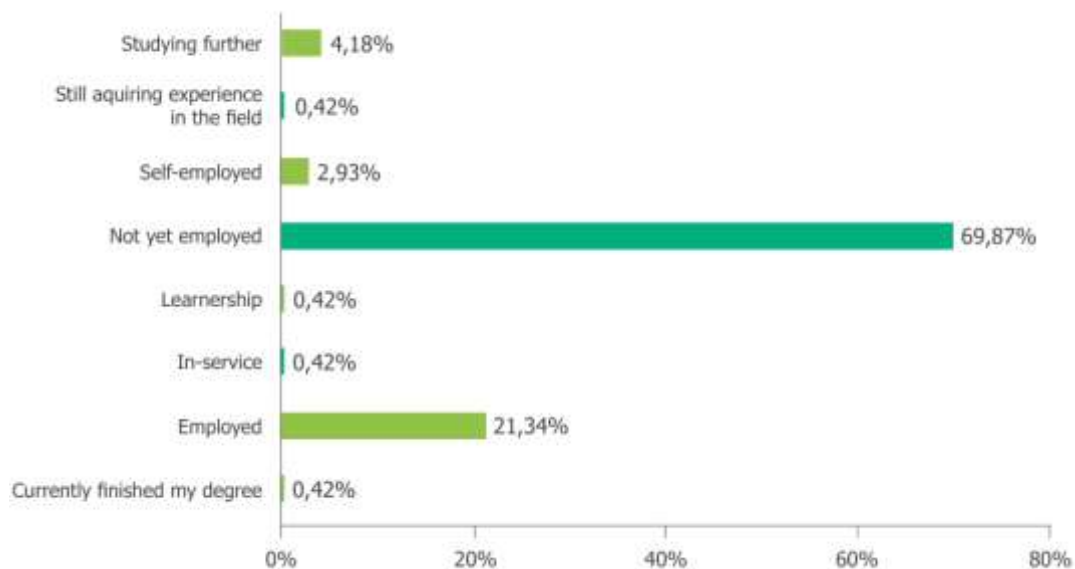


Figure 1 : Graduate Activity

A striking 69.87% of graduates indicated that they are “not yet employed,” which suggests that the vast majority are struggling to secure jobs despite having completed their qualifications. This figure is consistent with findings from the IFC Employability Assessment (2024), which reported an unemployment rate of 75% among WSU alumni six months post-graduation.

Only 21.34% of graduates are currently employed, pointing to systemic employment gaps and possibly misalignment between academic preparation and labour market requirements. Meanwhile, 2.93% have pursued self-employment, indicating a small yet promising entrepreneurial cohort. The remaining students are either studying further (4.18%), in learnerships or in-service training (each at 0.42%), or recently completed their degree (0.42%).

These findings highlight the urgent need to improve employability programs, such as industry-aligned curricula, internships, job readiness workshops, and graduate tracking. Bridging the gap between education and employment remains a critical priority for WSU.

The employment data reveal a troubling and consistent pattern across WSU graduate cohorts. Figure 1 shows that 69.87% of 2024 graduates remained unemployed, while the IFC Walter Sisulu University Employability Assessment Report (2024) alumni survey found this figure rising to 75%, indicating worsening employment outcomes in the critical months following graduation.

These parallel findings from different assessment methodologies confirm systemic challenges in graduate employability that transcend specific graduation cycles. The data suggests multiple potential gaps, including possible disconnects between academic preparation and labour market needs, insufficient career readiness programming, and inadequate support during the vulnerable post-graduation transition period. While 21.34% of 2024 graduates secured employment, maintaining consistency with 2023 patterns, the upward trend in unemployment demands urgent institutional attention. These findings particularly highlight needs in three key areas: enhancing industry-aligned skills development, strengthening work-integrated learning opportunities, and expanding career transition support services. The consistent unemployment patterns across consecutive graduate cohorts and independent surveys underscore the critical need for comprehensive, evidence-based interventions to improve WSU graduates' employment prospects and successful transition into the workforce.

These findings highlight the urgent need to improve employability programs, such as industry-aligned curricula, internships, job readiness workshops, and graduate tracking. Bridging the gap between education and employment remains a critical priority for WSU.

Figure 2 maps the provincial distribution of employed WSU graduates. A dominant 76% of graduates are employed within the Eastern Cape, underscoring the university's strong regional presence and influence in the local labour market.

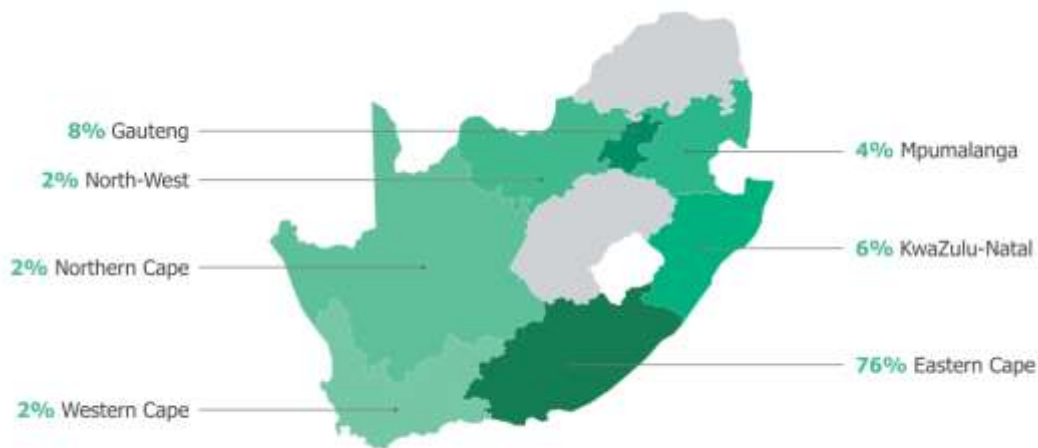


Figure 2 : Employment Distribution by Province

This proximity effect indicates that many graduates either choose to stay in the province for work or that most employment opportunities available to WSU alumni are concentrated there. KwaZulu-Natal accounts for 6%, Gauteng for 8%, and Mpumalanga for 4%, relatively moderate shares, while the Western Cape, Northern Cape, and North-West provinces each represent just 2%. The absence or minimal representation in certain provinces could indicate either a lack of outreach by WSU or fewer employment linkages in those regions.

The overwhelming concentration in the Eastern Cape offers both opportunity and risk: while it allows for localised impact, it may limit graduates' national mobility and economic diversity. To expand graduate access to national opportunities, WSU must prioritise strategic partnerships and alumni engagement across provinces.

The limited employment spread beyond the Eastern Cape illustrates regional constraints, possibly due to logistical challenges, cost of relocation, or lack of job market information.

This geographic concentration suggests that future employability strategies should focus on building employer networks beyond the Eastern Cape and improving access to urban labour markets across South Africa. Digital job platforms, job expos, and graduate relocation support programs could aid in diversifying the employment destinations of WSU alumni.

Of those employed, 66% hold full-time positions, while 34% are part-time. Additionally, 58% are in contract-based roles, while 42% are employed permanently. Perhaps more critically, 68% of employed graduates are working in fields related to their qualifications. This suggests a strong alignment between

WSU's academic offerings and labour market needs. However, 32% of graduates work in unrelated fields, which raises questions about the adaptability and perceived value of certain qualifications.

Figure 3 analyses employment trends by faculty and the duration it took for graduates to secure jobs.

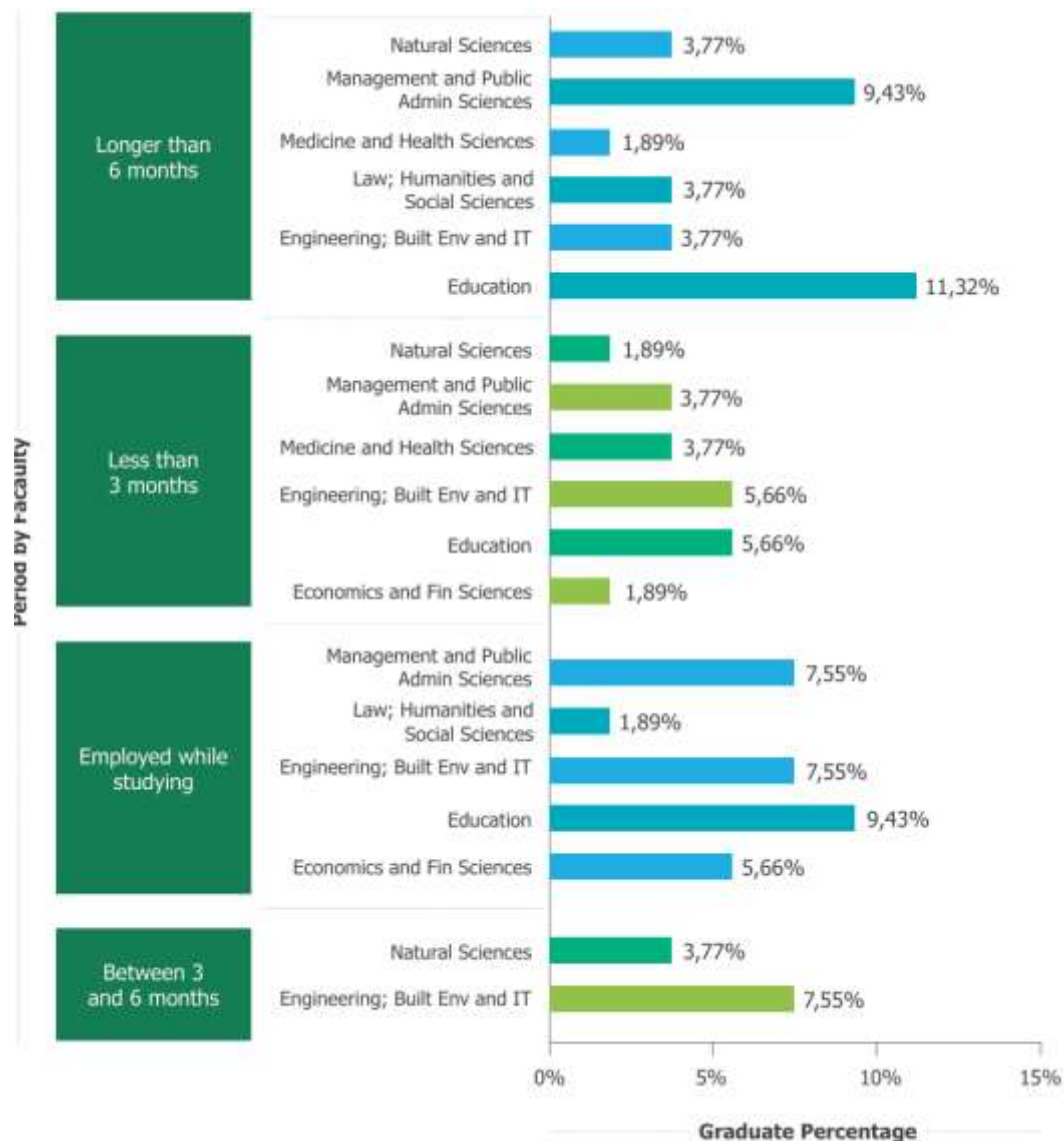


Figure 3 : Employment per Faculty

The data reveals significant variation across faculties in terms of employment timelines. Approximately 40% of all graduates took more than six months to secure employment, indicating prolonged job searches and possibly limited job availability or a misalignment between academic output and labour market demand. Another 30% secured employment during their studies, likely benefiting from workplace-integrated learning (WIL) or internship placements.

Notably, faculties such as Engineering, Built Environment, and IT, as well as Medicine and Health Sciences, appear to offer quicker transitions into employment. The data also shows that 24% of graduates had their education financed by employers, indicating the presence of work-study arrangements or bursary commitments tied to post-graduate work.

These patterns highlight the importance of strengthening experiential learning across all faculties. Faculties that perform poorly in early job placement could benefit from building stronger industry linkages and exposing students to internships early in their academic journeys.

Figure 4 breaks down how graduates obtained their current employment, revealing that job advertisements remain the most common and effective route.



Figure 4 : Methods of Obtaining Employment

Approximately 46.94% of graduates responded to a job advert to secure employment. This is followed by personal networks and referrals at 22.45%, underlining the value of social capital in the job market.

Campus recruitment accounted for 18.37%, suggesting that institutional efforts to host career fairs and recruiter visits are paying off. However, only 2.04% secured jobs through compulsory internships and just 4.08% via social media. These low percentages indicate missed opportunities for digital and experiential pathways into the job market.

These findings call for an expansion of formal internship programs and a more aggressive digital career strategy. Students should be trained in using professional platforms like LinkedIn, and the university could explore partnerships with employment agencies and job portals to diversify pathways into employment.

Figure 5 showcases the sectoral distribution of graduate employment. It shows that 60% of graduates are employed in the public sector, confirming a strong institutional preference or dependency on government job creation.

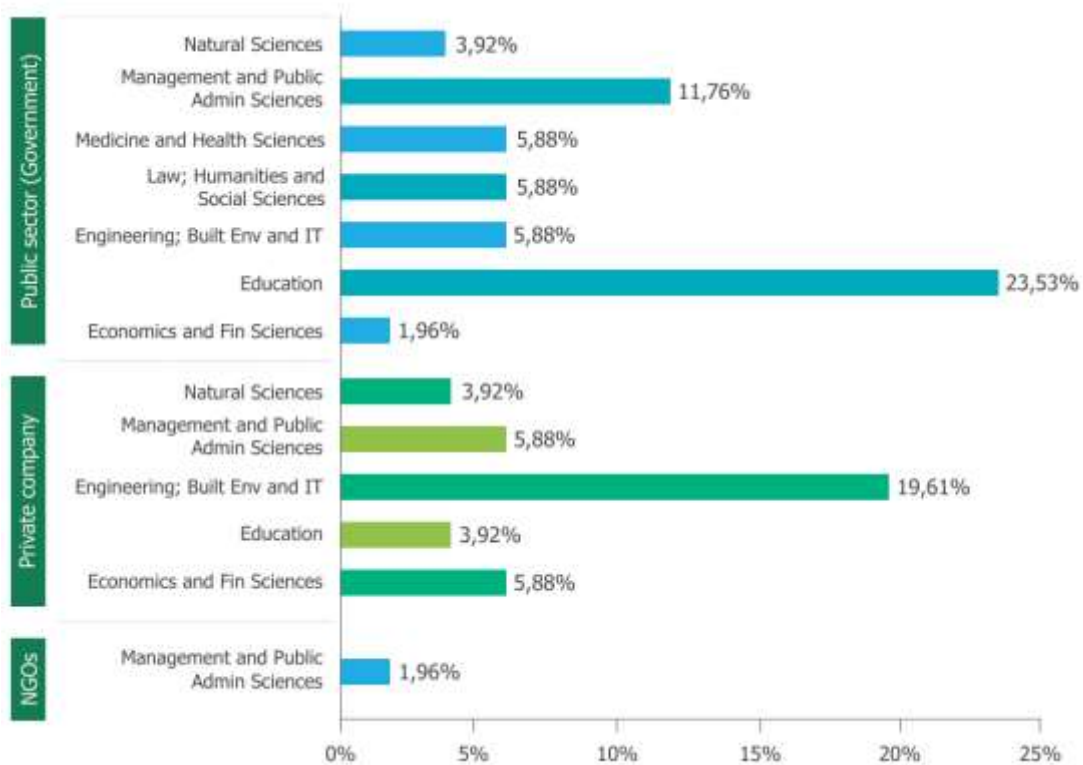


Figure 5 : Employment by Sector

This trend is particularly noticeable in the Faculty of Education, which contributes 23.53% of all public sector-employed graduates. This is understandable given the strong tradition of government-funded teaching posts in South Africa.

In contrast, about 40% of graduates work in the private sector. This includes a higher proportion of graduates from the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment, and IT, which indicates better alignment with the private sector and technical industries. The NGO sector has the smallest representation.

This distribution underlines a need for a strategic effort to increase private sector placement, particularly for faculties that predominantly feed into public sector jobs. Stronger private sector internships, employer roundtables, and innovation hubs could help shift the balance for broader employment opportunities.

Figure 6 provides insights into the extent to which self-employed graduates are operating in fields aligned with their qualifications.

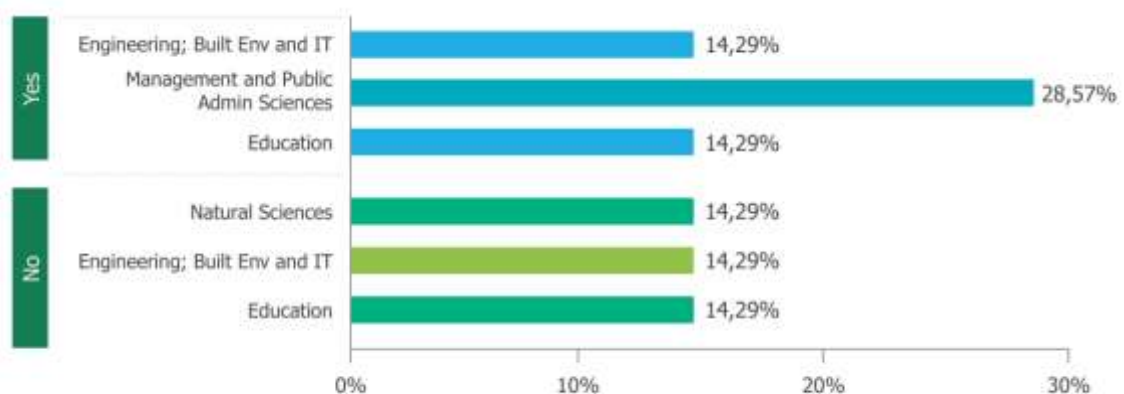


Figure 6 : Self-Employment by Field of Study

A total of 57.14% of self-employed graduates stated their business ventures were related to their academic field. This suggests that many are successfully translating university-acquired knowledge into entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in faculties such as Engineering and Public Administration.

However, 42.86% indicated that their businesses were unrelated to their qualifications. This may reflect either limited opportunities in their field, the discovery of new interests after graduation, or a need to pivot due to market constraints.

These insights suggest that WSU should expand its entrepreneurial education offerings and consider including modules on business development and market opportunity identification across all faculties to empower more students for self-employment.

Barriers to Employment: Qualitative Responses

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the barriers encountered by WSU graduates in their efforts to secure employment. Based on open-ended responses and thematic coding from the Graduate Destination Survey, the findings reveal that a complex interplay of personal, academic, structural, and economic factors influences employability.

A significant finding is that approximately 95% of unemployed graduates are actively seeking employment. However, their levels of preparedness and confidence vary widely. While some are optimistic and have expressed interest in pursuing further studies or internships to gain experience, others find themselves facing persistent and demoralizing challenges.

The most frequently cited obstacle was the lack of work experience, mentioned by nearly 40% of respondents. Graduates reported that although they have obtained their academic qualifications, the absence of practical training significantly diminishes their competitiveness in the labour market. Many employers require prior experience even for entry-level positions, creating a paradox for first-time job seekers.

"I apply for entry-level roles daily, but every posting asks for 2-3 years of experience. It feels like my degree is just a piece of paper without that 'office time' to back it up."

"The biggest challenge is that every job post requires experience, but no one is willing to give us the chance to gain that experience."

Around 25% of graduates pointed to limited job opportunities, particularly in specialized or oversaturated fields. This challenge is further compounded by a stagnant national economy, underperforming regional industries, and the slow pace of job creation in the Eastern Cape and beyond. Graduates from certain faculties struggle to find roles that directly relate to their academic training, resulting in increased underemployment or long-term joblessness.

"There are no industries here that cater to my specific qualification. Moving to Johannesburg or Cape Town is the only option, but I don't have the funds to relocate for an interview."

"The economy is stagnant. You find 500 people applying for a single internship position."

A further 15–20% of respondents noted that their qualifications were not aligned with current labour market demands. These graduates feel that shifts in industry requirements, rapid technological changes, and outdated curricula have rendered some academic programs less relevant. The absence of real-time labour market intelligence within the university's academic planning structures and the limited access to career guidance may have also contributed to this misalignment.

"The tools we used in the lab are outdated compared to what the private firms are using now. I feel like I have to relearn my entire profession just to pass a technical assessment."

"What we learned in class is too theoretical. When I get to an interview, they ask about software and tools that weren't part of our curriculum."

In addition, 10% of respondents identified administrative and regulatory challenges as a barrier to employment. These include the lack of professional certifications, licensing, or work permits required by certain industries. For example, graduates in health sciences, education, or engineering may face delays in professional board registration, which limits their employability immediately after graduation.

"I finished my hours, but the delay in getting my professional registration number means I can't be legally hired. I'm stuck in limbo while the bills pile up."

"The university took a long time to issue my final certificates, which caused me to miss out on several job opportunities."

A smaller number of graduates reported taking gap years or being temporarily disengaged from the workforce due to personal, financial, or academic reasons. While these individuals are not classified as chronically unemployed, their time away from professional development may impact their immediate job prospects.

These challenges are deeply multifaceted, encompassing individual, systemic, and economic issues. Addressing them effectively requires a coordinated approach among universities, government agencies, and employers. Academic institutions like WSU must take proactive steps to integrate work-integrated learning (WIL) into all programs, strengthen career readiness workshops, and regularly update curricula to reflect evolving labour demands. Employers, on the other hand, must consider implementing graduate trainee programs to reduce the "experience trap," while policymakers should address regional economic stagnation and create incentives for youth employment.

Further Studies

Postgraduate education remains a vital pathway for many graduates seeking to enhance their qualifications, deepen subject expertise, or improve their employment prospects in a challenging labour market. Among the 2024 WSU graduate cohort, the Graduate Destination Survey revealed that 57.14% of respondents have enrolled in further studies, signalling a strong commitment to lifelong learning and career development.

Of those pursuing further qualifications, 44.44% are enrolled in Honours programmes, making it the most common route of academic progression. This finding reflects a broader trend in South African higher education, where Honours degrees serve as a bridge between undergraduate study and advanced academic or professional careers.

A particularly noteworthy observation is that 77.78% of those pursuing further studies chose to remain at WSU. This high rate of institutional retention suggests that graduates maintain confidence in the academic quality, support structures, and cultural familiarity of their alma mater. WSU's ability to retain its graduates for postgraduate study could also be interpreted as an indicator of academic continuity and satisfaction with prior educational experiences.

However, this trend may also reveal a potential lack of alternative options or exposure to wider academic networks. Several graduates noted in open-ended survey responses that financial barriers, limited access to information about other universities, and personal circumstances influenced their decision to stay at WSU. In addition, the decision to continue studying was, for many, motivated not only by academic ambition but also by limited job opportunities. For some graduates, further education serves as a temporary strategy to delay entering a competitive and uncertain job market, particularly in fields where entry-level employment is scarce.

This dual motivation, academic growth and employment necessity, highlights the importance of aligning postgraduate programmes with labour market demands. WSU has an opportunity to innovate by integrating research-based postgraduate study with professional skill development, such as internships, industry partnerships, and entrepreneurship incubators.

Furthermore, the university should consider expanding financial aid, offering targeted postgraduate bursaries, and improving awareness campaigns that expose students to national and international opportunities for further study. Building stronger connections with postgraduate funding bodies like the National Research Foundation (NRF) or Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) could also help reduce financial pressure and expand participation.

In conclusion, the pursuit of further studies among WSU graduates reflects both confidence in institutional offerings and the pressing need to remain competitive in a challenging employment landscape. The university must leverage this momentum by enhancing the relevance, accessibility, and impact of its postgraduate education.

Challenges Highlighted by Graduates

Through qualitative responses, several recurring issues emerged. These include:

Delays in academic administration, such as late release of results, postponed graduation ceremonies, and slow processing of academic records. These administrative bottlenecks created anxiety and hindered job and study applications.

"The delay in getting my final academic record meant I missed the closing date for three different government internships. I had the marks, but I didn't have the proof."

"Postponed graduation ceremonies and late certificates make us look like we are lying to employers when we say we have finished our degrees."

Limited career guidance and job placement services. Many graduates felt they received minimal preparation for navigating job markets, building CVs, or accessing internships.

"I graduated without knowing how to structure a professional CV or how to conduct myself in a corporate interview. We need more than just a degree; we need a map to the job market."

"There was almost no guidance on where to look for jobs or how to apply for internships. I felt lost once I left the campus gates."

Inadequate access to workplace experience opportunities. Students expressed the need for more structured and compulsory internships across all faculties, not just those with built-in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL).

"Theoretical knowledge is good, but without compulsory internships, we are not 'work-ready.' Every course should have a mandatory six months in a real workplace."

"I struggled to find my own placement. The university should have more partnerships with companies to place students before they graduate."

Lack of proactive mentorship and alumni engagement. Some graduates believed that greater exposure to former students or industry mentors could have helped them set clearer academic and career goals.

"I wish I had a mentor from the industry to tell me which skills are actually in demand. I spent three years studying things that I now realize aren't used in the field."

"We never see the alumni who made it. If the university brought back former students to guide us, we would have clearer goals and better networks."

Discussion

The 2024 Graduate Destination Survey of Walter Sisulu University offers a nuanced picture of the post-graduation trajectories, perceptions, and challenges faced by graduates across faculties and campuses. The findings reveal a student population that is constrained by economic conditions, sectoral limitations, and structural barriers in the transition from university to employment.

Barriers To Employment Experienced by University Graduates

The most pressing concern in the data was the transition to the labour market. The data suggests multiple potential gaps, including possible disconnects between academic preparation and labour market needs, insufficient career readiness programming, and inadequate support during the vulnerable post-graduation transition period (2023 Graduate Employability Survey: Flash Report, 2023). While 21.34% of summer graduates secured employment, maintaining consistency with 2023 patterns, the upward trend in unemployment demands urgent institutional attention. Comparable national research confirms that even in contexts where overall graduate unemployment is relatively low, transitions into stable employment are uneven and often prolonged, particularly for graduates lacking relevant work experience and structured entry points into the labour market (Graham, Williams, & Chisoro, 2019).

These findings particularly highlight needs in three key areas: enhancing industry-aligned skills development, strengthening work-integrated learning opportunities, and expanding career transition support services. Research shows that graduates' chances of finding work are severely hampered by a lack of real-world experience, limited access to career counselling, and insufficient ties to the labour market, particularly in the first year after graduation. (Graham, Williams, & Chisoro, 2019). The consistent unemployment patterns across consecutive graduate cohorts and independent surveys underscore the critical need for comprehensive, evidence-based interventions to improve WSU graduates' employment prospects and successful transition into the workforce.

Misalignment Between Academic Preparation and Labour Market Requirements

Only 21.34% of graduates are currently employed, pointing to systemic employment gaps and possibly misalignment between academic preparation and labour market requirements. Evidence from graduate tracer research consistently shows that limited exposure to work-integrated learning, inadequate labour-market intelligence, and weak university–industry linkages hinder graduates' successful transition into employment (Senekal & Munro, 2019). These findings highlight the urgent need to improve employability programs, such as industry-aligned curricula, internships, job readiness workshops, and graduate tracking. Bridging the gap between education and employment remains a critical priority for WSU. Empirical studies demonstrate that such institutional practices are central to improving graduate employability, particularly when curricula and training are informed by employer needs and supported through continuous tracer studies (CHIETA, 2020).

Through curriculum alignment, employer relationships, and ongoing quality assurance procedures that prioritize employability outcomes, universities play a crucial role in bridging education to employment gaps, according to regional and international research. (Mgaiwa, 2021).

The Value of Experiential Learning

The most frequently cited obstacle was the lack of work experience, mentioned by nearly 40% of respondents. Graduates reported that although they have obtained their academic qualifications, the absence of practical training significantly diminishes their competitiveness in the labour market. Many employers require prior experience even for entry-level positions, creating a paradox for first-time job seekers (Mncayi & Meyer, 2022).

These graduates feel that shifts in industry requirements, rapid technological changes, and outdated curricula have rendered some academic programs less relevant. The absence of real-time labour market intelligence within the university's academic planning structures and the limited access to career guidance may have also contributed to this misalignment.

The Significance of Incorporating Entrepreneurial Graduate Attributes in the Curriculum

The findings show that approximately 3% of the graduates have pursued self-employment, indicating a small yet promising entrepreneurial cohort. A total of 57.14% of self-employed graduates stated their business ventures were related to their academic field. This suggests that many are successfully translating university-acquired knowledge into entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in faculties such as Engineering and Public Administration... These insights suggest that WSU should expand its entrepreneurial education offerings and consider including modules on business development and market opportunity identification across all faculties to empower more students for self-employment. Additionally, the findings around self-employment reveal that while some graduates have entrepreneurial aspirations, most turn to self-employment out of necessity rather than ambition. With over 58% of self-employed graduates willing to return to formal employment, it becomes clear that entrepreneurship is not yet a viable or sustainable path for many. This signals a need for institutional innovation in entrepreneurship education and incubation support.

The disparity in service usage also raises important institutional questions. While academic support services such as the Writing Centre and Tutoring programs were well-utilized and positively rated, counselling services were severely underutilized, with 84% of graduates never accessing them. Given the increasing importance of psychosocial support for student success and graduate wellbeing, this highlights a critical area for reform. Likewise, services like career development, academic advising, and mentorship showed low engagement, despite their potential to support smoother transitions into work or postgraduate study.

Impact Of Graduate Place of Work Preference on Graduate Employability

Many graduates prefer to look for work close to home. In South Africa, research shows that a large proportion of graduates remain in their home provinces after completing their studies, often because of family responsibilities, financial limitations, and limited access to broader professional networks (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021; Nongogo & Mashau, 2024). This pattern is particularly evident in the Eastern Cape, where graduates tend to stay in the province rather than migrate to larger economic centres (Iwara, 2025).

This study shows that 76% of the graduates are employed in the Eastern Cape. The overwhelming concentration in the Eastern Cape offers both opportunity and risk: while it allows for localised impact, it may limit graduates' national mobility and economic diversity. This geographic concentration suggests

that future employability strategies should focus on building employer networks beyond the Eastern Cape and improving access to urban labour markets across South Africa (Nongogo & Mashau, 2024).

To expand graduate access to national opportunities, WSU must prioritise strategic partnerships and alumni engagement across provinces. Studies on graduate employability further highlight the value of strong alumni networks and employer partnerships in improving graduate mobility, particularly for institutions located in rural or historically disadvantaged contexts (Bruns, 2023; Iwara, 2025).

From a regional perspective, the concentration of graduate employment within the Eastern Cape shows WSU's strong local impact but also reveals limitations in graduates' national and international mobility. This may be influenced by socioeconomic background, limited relocation resources, or regional job scarcity. It suggests a need for the university to extend its employer partnerships beyond provincial boundaries and support students in developing broader job-seeking strategies.

Further Studies as an Alternative to Unemployment

Postgraduate education remains a vital pathway for many graduates seeking to enhance their qualifications, deepen subject expertise, or improve their employment prospects in a challenging labour market. Among the 2024 WSU graduate cohort, the Graduate Destination Survey revealed that 57.14% of respondents have enrolled in further studies, signalling a strong commitment to lifelong learning and career development.

However, this trend may also reveal a potential lack of alternative options or exposure to wider academic networks. Several graduates noted in open-ended survey responses that financial barriers, limited access to information about other universities, and personal circumstances influenced their decision to stay at WSU. In addition, the decision to continue studying was, for many, motivated not only by academic ambition but also by limited job opportunities. For some graduates, further education serves as a temporary strategy to delay entering a competitive and uncertain job market, particularly in fields where entry-level employment is scarce.

Moreover, the decision by 77.78% of those pursuing further studies to remain at WSU reflects both institutional trust and, possibly, a lack of awareness or access to opportunities elsewhere. It signals the need for enhanced academic mobility and funding access to postgraduate programs across the country.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while WSU is fulfilling its core educational mandate, broader structural, economic, and institutional reforms are necessary to unlock the full potential of its graduates. The university's future strategies must therefore combine curriculum development with expanded employability support, stronger employer partnerships, improved access to psychosocial services, and enhanced postgraduate pathways.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations

Based on these reflections, the following recommendations are offered to enhance institutional performance and graduate outcomes:

1. Expand Internship and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Programs

Develop partnerships with government departments, local industries, and NGOs to ensure that all students, regardless of faculty, complete at least one structured work experience before graduating.

2. Strengthen Career Development Services

Introduce compulsory career readiness modules that include CV writing, digital job search tools, and mock interviews. Regular career expos and employer engagement events should also be institutionalized.

3. Curriculum Review for Relevance

Continually assess and update curricula based on labour market trends and feedback from industry partners to ensure that qualifications remain competitive and adaptable.

Conclusion

The 2024 Graduate Destination Survey of WSU presents a comprehensive and balanced overview of graduate outcomes, reflections, and institutional performance. The study reveals that while a significant majority of graduates feel academically prepared and confident in their problem-solving

abilities, a disconnect remains between their qualifications and their ability to successfully enter the job market. High rates of unemployment, regional employment limitations, underutilization of key support services, and limited access to experiential learning opportunities continue to hinder the full realization of graduate potential.

Moving forward, it is essential that WSU, in collaboration with government, industry, and other stakeholders, takes a proactive and strategic approach to bridging the gaps identified in this study. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for enhancing institutional impact and student success.

References

- [1] Bhorat, H., Cassim, A. & Tseng, D. 2016, 'Higher education, employment, and economic growth: Exploring the interactions', *Development Southern Africa*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 312–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2016.1161501>
- [2] Branson, N. & Leibbrandt, M. 2017, Assessing the usability of the Western Cape Graduate Destination Survey for the analysis of labour market outcomes, LMIP Report. Available at: http://www.opensaldru.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11090/857/2017_198_Saldruwp.pdf (Accessed: 22 October 2025).
- [3] Bruns, K. 2023, Strengthening alumni participation in African higher education, Stellenbosch University.
- [4] Cape Higher Education Consortium 2013, Pathways from university to work: A graduate destination survey of the 2010 cohort of graduates from the Western Cape universities, Wynberg.
- [5] CHIETA 2020, Research on tracking and tracing of learners trained and completed in selected programmes, Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.
- [6] Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2014, Quality Enhancement Project: Framework and guidelines, CHE, Pretoria.
- [7] Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, D.J. 2018, *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, 5th edn, SAGE, London.
- [8] Demissie, M.M., Herut, A.H., Yimer, B.M., Bareke, M.L., Agezew, B.H., Dedho, N.H. & Lebeta, M.F. 2021, 'Graduates' unemployment and associated factors in Ethiopia', *Education Research International*, pp. 1–9.
- [9] Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2017, The 2015 cohort study of university graduates in South Africa: Higher education and the labour market, DHET, Pretoria.
- [10] Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2021, National Academic Support Guidelines for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges, DHET, Pretoria.
- [11] Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring (DIPeM) 2023, 2023 Graduate Employability Survey: Flash Report, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg.
- [12] Du Toit, J., Kraak, A., Favish, J. & Fletcher, L. 2014, 'From study to work: Methodological challenges of a graduate destination survey in the Western Cape, South Africa', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 39, no. 7, pp. 853–864. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.875118>
- [13] Elfert, M. & Ydesen, C. 2023, 'UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank: A global governance perspective', in M. Elfert (ed.), *Global governance of education*, Springer, London, pp. 23–50.
- [14] Fobosi, S.C. & Malima, T. 2025, 'Unveiling inequality: The sociological dynamics of road infrastructure development and social justice in rural Eastern Cape, South Africa', *Frontiers in Sociology*, pp. 1–9.
- [15] Fongwa, S. 2018, 'Towards an expanded discourse on graduate outcomes in South Africa', *Education as Change*, pp. 1–23.
- [16] Graham, L., Williams, L. & Chisoro, C. 2019, 'Barriers to the labour market for unemployed graduates in South Africa', *Journal of Education and Work*, pp. 360–376.
- [17] Holmes, L. 2013, 'Competing perspectives on graduate employability: Possession, position or process?', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 538–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.587140>
- [18] Hwang, Y. 2017, 'What is the cause of graduates' unemployment? Focus on individual concerns and perspectives', *Journal of Educational Issues*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jei.v3i2.11378>
- [19] Iwara, I.O. 2025, 'Graduate employability in Africa: Reimagining rural-based entrepreneurial universities', *Sustainability*, vol. 17, no. 10.
- [20] Kember, D., Leung, D.Y. & Ma, R.S. 2007, 'Characterising learning environments capable of nurturing generic capabilities in higher education', *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 48, no. 5, pp. 609–632.
- [21] Khodyreva, E.A., Cai, J., Youngblood, V.T. & Khuziakmetov, A.N. 2017, 'Higher education curricula designing on the basis of regional labour market demands', *EURASIA Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, vol. 13, no. 7.
- [22] Le Grange, L. 2016, 'Sustainability education and curriculum improvisation', *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 32, pp. 26–36.
- [23] Lessky, F. & Dollinger, M. 2025, 'An international comparison of graduate outcome survey instruments: A critical reflection', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2025.2491884>

- [24] Li, J. & Pilz, M. 2023, 'International transfer of vocational education and training: A literature review', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 185–218.
- [25] Lukose, J.M., Kantore, A. & Fosu, A. 2023, 'Entry-level students' readiness to use e-learning in a South African rural university', *International Journal of Sciences and Research*, pp. 28–36.
- [26] McCowan, T., Walker, M., Fongwa, S., Oanda, I., Sifuna, D. & Adedeji, S. 2016, *Universities, employability and inclusive development*, British Council.
- [27] Mgaiwa, S.J. 2021, 'Fostering graduate employability: Rethinking Tanzania's university practices', SAGE.
- [28] Mncayi, P. & Meyer, D.F. 2022, 'Determinants of underemployment perceptions among graduates', *Cogent Social Sciences*, pp. 1–27.
- [29] Mncayi, P. & Dunga, S.H. 2016, 'Career choice and unemployment length', *Industry and Higher Education*, vol. 30, no. 6, pp. 413–423.
- [30] Mogomotsi, G.E.J. & Madigele, P.K. 2017, 'Policy alternatives for youth unemployment', *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 1.
- [31] Mokoena, S. 2012, *Smartphones and regular cellular phones: Impact on students' education*, doctoral dissertation, University of Zululand.
- [32] Moleke, P. 2005, *Inequalities in higher education and the labour market*, HSRC Press, Cape Town.
- [33] Mubuuke, A.G., Businge, F. & Kiguli-Malwadde, E. 2014, 'Using graduates as stakeholders to inform training', *African Journal of Health Professions Education*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 52–55.
- [34] Njani, E. 2022, *Graduates' experiences in seeking employment in the Western Cape*, MTech dissertation, Cape Peninsula University of Technology.
- [35] Nongogo, A. & Mashau, P. 2024, 'Revenue strategies that encourage graduate work placement', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 38, no. 6.
- [36] Oluwajodu, F., Blaauw, D., Greyling, L. & Ewert, P.J.K. 2015, 'Graduate unemployment in South Africa', *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 13.
- [37] Ramnund-Mansingh, A. & Reddy, N. 2021, 'Aligning graduate attributes to employability', *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*.
- [38] Rogan, M., Reynolds, J., du Plessis, U., Bally, R. & Whitfield, K. 2015, *Pathways through university and into the labour market*, LMIP Report 18.
- [39] Senekal, J. & Munro, N. 2019, 'Lessons from two decades of graduate tracer research', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 230–248.
- [40] Shivoro, R.S., Shalyefu, R.K. & Kadhila, N. 2018, 'Graduate employability attributes', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 216–232.
- [41] Shongwe, M. & Ocholla, D.N. 2011, 'Tracer study of LIS graduates', *Mousaion*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 277–245.
- [42] Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) 2022, *South Africa's youth continues to bear the burden of unemployment*, Stats SA, Pretoria.
- [43] Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) 2024, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey Q3 2023*, Stats SA.
- [44] Walter Sisulu University 2020, *Strategic Plan 2020–2030: Vision 2030*, WSU, Mthatha.
- [45] Walter Sisulu University 2024, *WSU overview*, Available at: <https://wsu.ac.za>
- [46] Yahui, S. & Dagogo, B.H. 2025, 'University graduates and employment challenges', *Peta International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 63–78.