CREATING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

**Social justice
perspectives from a
South African university**

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FROM GRADUATE TO EMPLOYEE

THE JOURNEYS OF FIRST-TIME ENTRANTS INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

Elza Lourens

INTRODUCTION

I had to look for a job. That was a very difficult thing I had to do. At some point I wished I had failed [did not graduate]. That's how horrible it was ... I had nothing! Nothing! No money. No food. Literally nothing at all.

These are the thoughts of Alice,¹ an engineering graduate, about her journey into employment. From a young age, Alice dreamed of being an engineer. During her studies, she did not socialise with her peers, but worked diligently and focused to obtain the sought-after engineering degree. Like most graduates, Alice believed that a degree would open up doors for her. She believed that she would find employment quickly and easily. However, the journey into employment proved to be much more complicated than expected.

Globally, the number of young people who want to attend universities has escalated. Similarly, in South Africa (SA), student numbers have doubled since the advent of democracy in 1994. One of the pertinent reasons for this phenomenon is that globally students and their families regard a degree as the key to a better life. This view is based, amongst other things, on low graduate² unemployment rates compared to the unemployment rates of non-graduates (BLS 2018; DoE 2018). In the United States (US) the unemployment rate for graduates is 3.7% (Statista 2019b) compared to 14.1% for job seekers with a recent high school diploma (Statista 2019a). Likewise in Australia, only 2.5% of graduates were unemployed in January 2017 compared to 12.6% of non-graduates (Dorfman 2017; Statista 2017). Recently

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² The term 'graduate' refers to a recipient of a degree or a diploma.

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in the United Kingdom (UK), graduate unemployment at 5.1% was found to be the lowest in 39 years while employer demands for graduates continued to grow (Graduate Prospects 2018). Allistair Jarvis, the Chief Executive of Universities UK, provided some explanation for this phenomenon: “Going to university is also a good investment for students. Graduate salaries are, on average, almost £10 000 a year higher than for non-graduates, and graduates are significantly more likely to be in employment” (Graduate Prospects 2018). In SA, graduate unemployment statistics are particularly telling. In the first quarter of 2019 the general unemployment rate stood at 27.6%. This rate decreases drastically to 7% when one holds a degree or a diploma. On the face of it, these statistics make tertiary studies a logical choice for young people (Stats SA 2019).

However, when unemployed graduates in SA are categorised according to age group, the unemployment rate differs dramatically between the different groups. The graduate unemployment for graduates up to the age of 24 is 33.5%; 10.2% for those aged 25-34 years; while the rate amongst those aged 35-64 years is only 4.7% (Stats SA 2018). Considering the age group in the first category, it can be assumed that most of these graduates would be first-time entrants into the labour market. The high unemployment rate in this category indicates that the transition from graduate to employee is more complex than what might be expected. Also, the graduate unemployment rate in SA is divided along racial lines with black graduates experiencing unemployment rates more than double those of white graduates (Majova 2018; Van Broekhuizen 2016). This is very concerning considering that almost 70% of black graduates are the first in their families to graduate and are expected to change the families’ well-being for the better (Higher Education News 2012). Since 1994, much effort has been made to provide access to higher education (HE) for particularly black students to counter the unequal participation in the past. If these students do not succeed in securing employment, these efforts are basically nullified and social inequalities are reproduced (Lourens 2016).

Employment of graduates is considered a major indicator of institutional success (Clarke 2018). Stellenbosch University (SU) is regarded as one of the top three universities in the country producing employable graduates (Topuniversities 2019). Students choose SU based on its academic excellence, high position in international and continental rankings, good reference for future careers and high employment amongst graduates (SU 2019). SU graduates generally expect to be employable and to find employment quickly and easily. This brings me back to Alice. If graduate unemployment is relatively low and SU has a good reputation, why was her experience of securing employment so horrible? Do all graduates have bad experiences on making the transition into employment? This chapter aims to shed

light on the transition from graduate to first-time employee. I aim to explicate this transition beyond mere statistics by exploring the journeys of 12 SU graduates into first-time employment using the capabilities approach as lens.

'THICK' VERSUS 'THIN' MORALITY

The capabilities approach has as its starting point the well-being of individuals, and considers whether individuals are able to be and do what they value as important to the quality of their lives (Wilson-Strydom 2015). The notion of conversion factors is used to bring structure and agency together in this approach and refers to the ability of the individual to translate resources into functionings (Bozalek & Leibowitz 2012; Wilson-Strydom 2015). Conversion factors such as environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives and distribution within the family influence the extent to which a person is able to make use of available resources to achieve capabilities and functionings (Wilson-Strydom 2015). This approach presents a language for HE to ask whether students are able to convert opportunities into functionings and capabilities. The contention is that HE institutions should provide a context where this can happen. Hence the capabilities approach stresses education for social justice. Within this context, Walker (2003) includes the notions of 'thick' versus 'thin' morality as indicators whether social justice is achieved within education. 'Thin' morality is grounded in competitive individualism and hierarchical divisions, while 'thick' morality is grounded in notions of the common good as the basis for policy and practice. In the context of employment, 'thin' morality will refer to graduate employment outcomes, amongst other things, while 'thick' morality will refer to what the graduates are actually able to do and be. In the context of the study on which this chapter draws, the question was whether they were able to convert their degrees into employment. My point of departure was not an instrumentalist one conflating the benefits of HE with employment (Soudien 2013). The focus rather was on the content and specificity of graduates' experiences of securing employment: did the graduates have access to the necessary resources to secure appropriate employment and were they able to convert these resources into capabilities and functionings? Next, I detail the study, and then present the findings, conclusions and implications for social justice.

THE STUDY

This study followed upon a graduate destination survey of the 2010 cohort of graduates from four universities in the Western Cape³ in SA. The survey revealed

3 The Western Cape is one of the nine provinces in South Africa.

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seven pathways into work for the 5 560 graduates who participated in the survey. One of these pathways was graduates moving into first-time employment (CHEC 2013). In this study, I investigated in greater depth the journeys of 12 SU graduates on this pathway. Survey results were used to identify all possible SU participants who were first-time entrants into the labour market in 2011 (Lourens 2016). Twelve graduates were purposively selected to provide a bird's eye view on graduate journeys into first-time employment. The participants represented males and females; black, coloured and white graduates, first-generation as well as non-first-generation students in a variety of fields and with different levels of qualification. The aim was thus not to present comparative or generalisable data, but rather to develop an in-depth understanding of what this journey entails. Using the capabilities approach as framework, I asked the questions, "What were the experiences of first-time entrants to the labour market during their transition from graduate to employee? Were the graduates able to convert 'having a degree' into 'securing employment'?"

I have already introduced Alice. Throughout the following discussion I will introduce the other 11 participants. I met with each participant for approximately 40 minutes during which we discussed issues such as how they had approached the process of looking for a job, which resources they used, how long it took, and whether they had support. The words⁴ of the graduates are the core of this chapter. In the study, their narratives provided a springboard for the exploration of the transition from graduate to employee. Analyses of the narratives did not produce neatly packaged themes, but rather unique, sometimes complex, sometimes straightforward, and often messy images of the participants' experiences. In the next section, I elucidate these experiences, focusing on the exercise of agency and the mediation of opportunities and constraints encountered in the social context of each graduate.

CONVERTING THE DEGREE INTO EMPLOYMENT

Amongst the 12 graduates, six had already secured employment by the time of graduation, while the longest duration to find employment amongst the remaining six was approximately eight months. On average, these statistics seem acceptable considering the graduates graduated at a reputable institution and it was expected that they would find employment within a short period. Also, at the time of the study, which was conducted three years after graduation, everybody, with the exception of Abigail (MA Public Administration), regarded themselves as being in positions fit for their qualifications. In general, the data do not present a bleak picture. However,

4 Verbatim quotations were translated from Afrikaans, where applicable, and filler sounds were deleted to enhance readability without changing the meaning.

statistical success is not enough. What is more important is to understand how the process of securing employment unfolded for each graduate and which factors shaped their experiences during the transitions.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Thabo enrolled at SU for a BCom degree in Financial Accounting. He explained his programme choice as follows:

I needed BCom. You are employable. You can do a lot of things. Especially if you're black. There's a shortage of black professionals in the financial industry.

Thabo believed that obtaining a degree in finance from a reputable university like SU would give him the edge needed to ensure an excellent position in the job market:

'Cause I knew as well that Stellenbosch was a very reputable university. So, I knew that if I got a degree from there, it would set me up very nicely.

He completed his degree in four years, one year more than the prescribed time, but was happy that he had persevered and was able to graduate. After graduation, he half-heartedly sent out some CVs, but he actually felt he needed a break, which he spent with his parents in Johannesburg and his friends in Cape Town. Only four months after graduation, he earnestly started job hunting when his parents threatened to withdraw financial support. The following three months proved frustrating:

When I was really looking for a job I was like ... I really need a job now ... you keep sending CVs, but they don't email back. Sometimes you're called for interviews and they don't call you back. Or you make it to the interview, you make it to the final stage and you don't get it. I still remember at Allan Gray, I made it like really, really far, but I didn't get the job. It's demotivating ...

Seven months after graduation, Thabo eventually secured a job as a trust fund manager through a personnel agency.

Amber took eight months to secure employment, one month longer than Thabo. However, her experiences were very different. Initially, Amber wanted to study medicine. After not being selected she ended up studying BSc Human Life Sciences. Like Thabo, she completed her undergraduate studies in four years. Amber believed it would be more difficult to secure a job in a science field compared to a financial field, for example, and to improve her chances of getting a job she continued with an honours degree in Genetics. After graduation she went back to the rural town where she grew up and started looking for a job. She was keen to put her qualification to work to support her younger sister and her parents who struggled financially:

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It is very difficult for us, because it is a small place. So, there isn't internet cafés ... no big shops selling newspapers. It is very difficult to look for a job from home ... I used the internet on my phone ... if I saw a possible job, I would ask the school where my cousin worked, whether I can send the application form there. Most applications are online, you know. I also mailed a few applications, but never received any feedback.

Amber did not have access to a computer, Wi-Fi or any resources that would have eased the process of looking for employment. She felt extremely frustrated. After eight months, an acquaintance notified her about an internship. She applied. The internship, which involved collecting plants for a very low salary, became her first employment. At the time of the study, she was in a second internship involving more responsibility at a better salary.

Both Thabo and Amber employed their agencies to obtain a tertiary qualification which they believed would open doors for them. Thabo embraced the notion that a black man in the financial world with a degree from SU would put him at an advantage, while Amber, although she had not become a medical doctor, went on to obtain an honours degree to put herself in a more advantageous position. However, their agency freedom was qualified by their social contexts when it came to securing employment. Although Thabo and Amber almost took the same time to secure employment, the conversion of their respective degrees into employment differed vastly. Thabo had support and resources and did not experience pressure to find employment immediately. Due to a lack of resources, it was much harder for Amber to convert her degree into employment. Alice, whom I introduced at the beginning of the chapter, found employment within three months, but her experiences during those three months were even worse than those of Amber. Her lack of resources left her unable to provide for even her basic needs. Amber's and Alice's experiences are not unique. These experiences echo what is frequently highlighted in social and online media, opinion pieces and research (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana 2018; Majova 2018). Majova (2018) explains the reality that many graduates, particularly underserved graduates, face in South Africa:

Exclusion trickles down to an activity as simple as job-seeking. We often underestimate the amount of resources required for the process of job-seeking. If we dissect the process, we easily find that due to a lack of resources, the process can be very ostracising for black graduates fresh out of university. Firstly, looking for a job mostly requires the internet and if we go by the average South African household, Wi-Fi installation is a luxury that most households cannot afford. Not to mention the exorbitant prices of data which automatically limit the amount of time one spends searching on the internet. The hourly rates at internet cafés can be very

expensive as everything is directly proportional; the more time you spend on the internet, the more money you cough out. On top of that, there are travelling costs to and from the internet café. And depending on how dedicated you are, visits to the internet café probably happen more than once a week. Privileged white graduates may be oblivious to these issues but for majority of black graduates, this costly process excludes them from fully participating in the job-seeking.

FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Coupled with social context comes the expectations of a family. Of the 12 graduates, six were first-generation students. First-generation students often experience pressure from their families to contribute to the family financially (Higher Education News 2012) as in John's case. John was the first in his family to go to university. He remembered:

[I]t was a proud moment in our family. Failure wasn't an option. I was a role model to my family members, cousins, friends. So, there were many that looked at me ...

John enrolled for BCom Economics. He was passionate about the economy and understanding the financial markets. After his undergraduate studies he applied for an honours degree in Economics:

I actually received provisional acceptance to do my honours. However, my parents said, look, it's time for you to start finding work ... they can't support me financially anymore, I think that is one thing that was sort of a setback ... I think that in terms of coming from a disadvantaged environment where your family don't have the necessary finances to make it available to you to continue your studies ...

John was aware that to have a career in economics, it would have been ideal to continue his postgraduate studies, but as a first-in-the-family graduate, his family expected him to start contributing to the family's well-being. Graduate training programmes ease graduates without work experience into the world of work whilst earning a small income. These programmes typically last from one to two years. John applied for such graduate training programmes and was fortunate to be placed in a programme even before graduation day. Although John had job security at the point of graduation, his family context had an impact on the extent to which he was able to use available resources to achieve capabilities; in his case a postgraduate qualification and a career in economics.

Connor dreamt of working for the United Nations (UN) and after a gap year teaching and travelling in England, he enrolled for a general BA degree:

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I wasn't sure what I wanted to study. And it was a general degree. It gave me a good grounding and it was what I was interested in. Political Science, Philosophy, Economics. Yeah, so, I did something that I wanted to do and something that was general ... sort of broad education.

He enjoyed his university life and completed his degree in four years, after which he obtained an honours degree in Philosophy. By that time, he was not interested in the UN any longer and decided to do a postgraduate diploma in business at another institution. He ended up working for a sports magazine, a job he obtained through friends:

I enjoy sport a lot and I enjoy writing. And there was a guy I studied with at UCT who had a friend who was part of the team talk business. I heard via him that there were vacancies there. So, I applied and then I was on trial for about a month and then I was assigned a job permanently.

Connor's narrative speaks mostly of his passion and dreams. His journey did not pan out in the way he had foreseen it, but he was able to follow his dreams step by step as they unfolded, without experiencing pressure to fulfil any financial obligations to his family.

The differences between John's and Connor's journeys into employment once again point to conversion factors, in this case the family expectations coupled with socio-economic status, playing in on individuals' capabilities (Webb 2021).

ACADEMIC RECORD

All through primary and secondary school Dale performed well academically and his teachers encouraged him to enter HE. He enrolled for a BSc and worked purposefully to obtain bursaries for postgraduate studies. His good academic results enabled him to continue up to a PhD. He did not really plan to become an academic – his career “just happened”:

When I completed my first degree, I didn't apply for a job. My marks were good enough, I checked in the Yearbook what [marks] I needed ... and that told me to do an honours ... I basically took it step by step ... I thought if I do badly, I will go work. So, every time I did well and said to myself ... OK, so do the next degree ...

His performance put him in a position where he did not need to apply for employment. His PhD led to a post-doctoral research position, which led to a teaching post. His transition into employment was unplanned and occurred in a linear fashion. To Dale, that was the result of his academic record.

Since she can remember, Karen has loved wood. After hearing a radio talk on a Wood Science course, she enrolled at SU for a BSc in Wood Science. She was

also fortunate to secure a bursary from a local wood company for the complete duration of her studies. The bursary was coupled with vacation jobs as well as work responsibilities. She experienced her time at university as difficult:

I really struggled. I studied six years on a four-year degree. I was ill, and it was a bit of everything ... Most of the subjects were really difficult. Engineering. There were many subjects that I really struggled with.

Although Karen's academic record was not exceptional, she was able to keep her bursary and moved into her first job directly after graduation. At the time of the study, Karen was still working at the wood company and had already moved between different posts. She still loved her job. Whereas Dale's academic record determined his career path, Karen's academic record did not influence her journey. In John's case, he felt limited by the fact that he took five years to complete his degree and therefore only applied for a limited scope of vacancies such as graduate programmes and internships (Tentama & Abdillah 2019). He reflected on his decision:

If you have strong academics, the possibility of being employed in an environment that is of high quality ... they always state that they will give preference to strong academic results.

In some cases, the academic record did influence the route to employment, while in others it did not. Since research on the impact of academic records on employment opportunities is scant, this topic needs further exploration. It is of particular importance with regard to first-generation students who tend to take longer to graduate.

BURSARIES

As discussed above, Karen's bursary was linked to a job and thus ensured a smooth transition into employment for her. Khanya had a similar experience although she had to start at the bottom. Khanya's mother was the driving force behind her success. In the same way that Khanya's mother arranged for her to go to a better school than the local township school, she also insisted that Khanya study at SU:

My mom's like, you know, my children are not gonna not succeed. She's that type of person ... my father as well was very supportive. I think if my parents were not like that, it could've gone either way. I don't know if I'd pushed so hard to get to it [degree].

Knowing that nothing less than success would be acceptable and while also having her parents' support, Khanya completed a master's degree in Polymer Science with distinction in the minimum time required to complete her undergraduate, honours and master's degrees. Her good academic results landed her a bursary during her postgraduate studies. After her master's degree, she had an offer to continue with a PhD, but she wanted to move closer to her family. Although not all bursary holders

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were offered employment, she was offered two positions. She chose the one closest to home even though it meant working as a technician, which was a position that did not require a degree. She found it extremely frustrating to be a technician, but her qualification, knowledge and skills helped her to get promoted soon thereafter.

Alice also studied with a bursary, but when she graduated, the company released her from all bursary responsibilities as they did not have a job opportunity at that stage. In some cases, bursaries led to easy transitions into employment, but a bursary is not necessarily a guarantee of employment.

INTERNSHIPS

The most difficult thing James ever had to do was to repeat his honours degree in BAcc after he had failed the first time:

I've never studied so hard and got such terrible marks in my life. I mean it was a massive setback for me, because of the amount of hours I have put in.

Despite this setback, James had a signed contract for an internship at an auditing firm before graduating. According to him, it was not even difficult to obtain the contract:

Well, I did some vac work, like vacation work. And we were told at varsity that if you do vacation work, and you impress the people, you pretty much always get a job. Especially for your articles. So, if you do vac work at different places, you get offers. So, I did vac work at three different places. Two smaller firms and then at [company name]. And I got offers from all three and, yeah, that's basically how ...

For James and most BAcc Honours graduates, the transition into first-time employment is a linear journey of completing honours and doing a three-year clerkship at an auditing firm. Medical students have similar journeys as they have to do compulsory internships as part of their qualification. These graduates thus have a different experience of entering first-time employment.

Many other graduates, like Amber, who do not have internships as a formal part of their qualifications, also start their careers through internships as it has become a frequently used bridge between studies and work. Internships often pay low salaries, which assumes some family support to enable the graduate to accept the job. For graduates whose families rely on them for financial support, these internships are seldom an option. This then raises equity questions as internships become another unequal opportunity (Case et al. 2018).

POSTGRADUATE QUALIFICATIONS

Abigail entered the university through an access programme which would give her admission to BCom Financial Accounting. Unfortunately, she did not show satisfactory improvement during the first six months of the programme and she had to discontinue her studies. This experience was demotivating and dispiriting. Two years later her mother motivated her to enrol at the university for a course in Human Resources. She went on to complete a master's degree in Public and Development Management. After her honours degree, which included a compulsory internship, she started looking for work. Regardless of her level of qualification and completed internship, she struggled. She was only able to secure temporary positions sporadically. Eventually, a friend got a new job and advised Abigail to apply for her post. Abigail applied even though it was a position for an administrative clerk which did not require a master's degree. At the time of the study she was still in that post. Abigail dreamt of working in her field of public administration:

Since 2010, I was applying for a government post. Never got a job. I have never even been invited for an interview. It's just unsuccessful, unsuccessful ... people say I am overqualified.

Abigail's postgraduate qualifications did not ease the journey into employment. It might even have impaired the process as some employers regarded her as overqualified. Eight of the 12 participants in this study had a postgraduate qualification while two were studying towards such qualifications. Only James, as an auditor, was required to complete an honours degree as part of his professional qualification. The others did so because they either believed it would give them a competitive advantage or, as in Dale's case, it was the obvious thing to do next. The postgraduate qualifications did not prove to 'do the job' of providing easier entrance into first-time employment. This might well be due to large numbers of graduates with postgraduate qualifications resulting in the devaluing of qualifications (Brown & Hesketh 2004).

Because Emma's aim was to be selected for Occupational Therapy, she worked hard and performed really well in her science undergraduate studies. Due to the effort she put into her studies, she fell in love with Chemistry and never returned to Occupational Therapy. She completed a master's degree in Polymer Science with distinction. After submission of her master's thesis, she continued working part-time for her supervisor while looking for work:

During that year I was going for a few interviews and I struggled, because there isn't really much actually available in Polymer Science.

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Emma acknowledged that she had never planned her studies or the impact it would have on a career path:

[I never] even look[ed] at opportunities, where I should be going. If I should be, you know, tailoring my master's to suit a certain career path that I would like to go into. I just sort of dropped into my master's without that.

It seems as if many graduates continue with postgraduate studies without considering job opportunities. For some, like Alice, postgraduate studies provided a fall-back position if they could not find employment. During the time Alice was struggling to find a job she came back to SU and enrolled for a master's degree:

So, I was like, what if I do master's now ... maybe I would get a sponsor and then I would have some food on the table.

For others, like Dale (already introduced) and Leah, postgraduate studies were part and parcel of their career paths. Leah completed her master's degree in Genetics with distinction. She decided to rest for a few years before continuing with her doctorate:

So, after my M [master's] I decided I was not mature enough to continue with a PhD. So, I took a break. I worked at the university in different labs for three years. I worked at a sequencing facility just to get more lab skills and broaden my technical skills. I was able to work on a variety of projects ... I set myself up to search for the right project ... I used the time to grow as researcher and to be able to handle pressure.

A doctorate was a part of Leah's career path and she deliberately planned her journey as such. She has since completed her PhD and is currently in a post-doc position at the university.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social capital and personal networks have become important means to gain access to information and resources in a competitive labour market, particularly amongst socially advantaged families (Lourens 2016; Mok & Jiang 2016). Amongst the participants in this study, Connor, Amber, Alice and Abigail pertinently mentioned that friends referred them to employment opportunities. Connor's friends referred him to an opportunity that fitted him like a glove. Amber and Alice received emails from friends notifying them of possible jobs for which they could apply, while Abigail's friend informed her about her own job that would become available. Amber ended up in an internship and Abigail as being underemployed as an administrative clerk. At the time of the study, Abigail was still underemployed.

The types of social networks graduates are exposed to are closely linked to family background. The size and volume of social networks for first-generation graduates, like Abigail and Amber, were limited to family and friends (Behtoui 2015; Lourens 2016). This implies that information about jobs is not necessarily transparent and inclusive, but may be more accessible to graduates from socially advantaged families (Mok & Jiang 2016) as John pointed out:

And I'll be honest, coming from a disadvantaged background, you don't have a family member that knows a friend that knows a friend, you know, in that role? Or you don't have friends that are in that kind of environment that can tell you, listen here, this company is an awesome company. These are the benefits. This is what you need. You will be able to receive this. Do this, go here. I wish I had that ...

The graduates' narratives revealed how social context, family expectations, bursaries, internships, postgraduate qualifications, academic records and social networks acted as conversion factors in the process of securing employment. While a specific factor might have enabled one graduate to secure employment easily, the same factor hindered another graduate to secure employment. Thus, conversion factors did not translate equally into functionings and capabilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The lack of 'cause and effect' within each conversion factor speaks to the complexity and the uniqueness of the graduate journey. The graduates' journeys into first-time employment can be likened to crisscross patterns, one very different from the other. Some graduates stepped into good jobs while others struggled for months and started working in low positions or for poor salaries. One of the key findings that has emerged from the study is that the journey into first-time employment is multifaceted and complex. This reality must be made explicit to students and their parents. The belief that a graduate journey constitutes getting an HE qualification and walking into a graduate job is a fallacy. Graduates need to be realistic about their expectations of the graduate journey and take responsibility for their own journeys and the development of their graduate employability (Ebner, Soucek & Selenko 2021). The graduate journey starts at the point where the graduate decides which course to take and which institution(s) to apply for. Careful and deliberate planning of the journey is necessary and requires active involvement from the graduate (Sumanasiri, Yajid & Khatibi 2015). Schools and HE institutions, and in particular university recruiters and career offices, should become involved by relaying this message to students during their high school years and from their first year at university.

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Another key finding is that a class-stratified society has an impact on the process of securing employment. From an institutional point of view, the narratives of the 12 graduates may give the impression that the transition into the workplace for SU graduates is relatively unproblematic. The duration to employment was not too long, everyone had a job within a year, and only one graduate was underemployed. The graduate outcomes looked good. However, converting degrees into employment produced different experiences. Conversion factors such as social context, family expectations of financial support, and social networks influenced the extent to which certain graduates were able to convert their degrees into employment. In a class-stratified society in which HE should be part of the solution to redress social inequalities, this becomes a matter of social justice. In order to promote 'thick' morality, HE needs to ask how equality of capability and advancement of agency can be obtained. It is not acceptable to be satisfied with good graduate outcomes ('thin' morality), while underserved graduates are not able to be and do what they need to improve the quality of their lives ('thick' morality). What is needed is a focused strategy to support particularly underserved graduates to bridge the gap between graduation and first-time employment. Interventions are needed that tackle unequal conversion factors.

One such intervention could be the development and expansion of social networks of students. As discussed above, accessing the job market becomes increasingly difficult if a prior possible work network is not built. According to Burnett and Evans (2016), no person can break into the hidden job market unless they are already connected to the web of personal relationships in which a job resides. Graduates need to be exposed and connected extensively to the labour market and possible employment options. This is of particular importance for the general formative courses where graduates do not have a predetermined job linked to the course. It is not enough to provide access and support for underserved graduates up to the point of graduation. To ensure equal opportunities for these graduates to convert their degrees into suitable employment, HE has to journey further and provide support to graduates to successfully enter first-time employment.

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