

Reconceptualising the ‘Education Equals Success’ Narrative: Graduate Unemployment and the Structural Limits of Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract:

Graduate unemployment in South Africa remains a pressing socioeconomic challenge, reflecting a persistent disconnect between higher education and the labour market. Despite expanded university access since 1994, many graduates experience unemployment or underemployment, with significant psychological and social consequences. The widespread belief that education guarantees success further intensifies graduate disillusionment and highlights the need to reconsider conventional assumptions about higher education and social mobility. This study examines the structural, social, and ideological factors contributing to graduate unemployment, with particular attention to the alignment between university curricula and labour market requirements. Human Capital Theory provides the guiding framework, positioning education as an investment in skills and national development while critically interrogating its limitations in explaining unemployment within structurally unequal economies. A descriptive systematic literature review analysed 54 studies published between 2000 and 2026, supplemented by two additional sources identified through citation tracking. Findings indicate persistent gaps in practical, digital, entrepreneurial, and transferable skills, alongside structural constraints that limit graduate absorption. The “education equals success” narrative further contributes to unrealistic expectations, stress, and disillusionment among unemployed graduates. The study recommends curriculum transformation, work-integrated learning, internships, mentorship, psychosocial support, and stronger university–industry–government collaboration. It concludes that improving graduate employability requires educational reform alongside broader labour-market transformation, inclusive economic development, and sustainable job creation.

Keywords: Education; graduates’ unemployment; policymakers; psychological; socioeconomic

Introduction

For decades, the phrase “education is the key to success” has occupied a powerful position in South Africa’s social consciousness. Its meaning is deeply connected to the country’s history of apartheid and the liberation struggle, during which education was understood as an important instrument for challenging racial oppression, inequality, and exclusion (Alexander, 2013; Mathebula, 2013; Vally, 2020). Vally (2020, p. 3) describes South Africa’s tradition of “education for liberation” through initiatives such as people’s education, workers’ education, popular adult and community education, and education with production. These movements demonstrated that education could extend beyond formal schooling to become a means through which oppressed communities developed political consciousness, reclaimed agency, and challenged systems of domination. Education consequently became closely associated with dignity, citizenship, empowerment, social justice, and socioeconomic transformation.

This historical significance is particularly important for understanding contemporary expectations surrounding education. Under apartheid, education was deliberately organised to reproduce racial and socioeconomic inequality. Although White South Africans received comparatively privileged educational opportunities, Black, Coloured, and Indian communities were systematically denied equitable access to quality education (Bunting, 2006; Chisholm, 2012; Neocosmos, 2017; Vally, 2020). The Bantu Education Act of 1952 institutionalised these inequalities by restricting the curriculum, resources, and educational opportunities available to Black learners (Ocampo, 2004). Black schools were frequently overcrowded, inadequately resourced, and characterised by unequal staffing conditions, while White schools benefited from substantially greater resources and better educational provision. Access to higher education was similarly shaped by racial exclusion, financial barriers, and institutional restrictions. Education therefore functioned as part of a wider political system that reproduced racialised labour hierarchies and restricted opportunities for Black advancement.

The democratic transition in 1994 fundamentally altered the political and social meaning of education. Education was repositioned as an instrument of liberation, redress, social justice, national development, and socioeconomic transformation (Badat, 2007; Boyte & Finders, 2016). Higher education institutions expanded access to historically disadvantaged populations, resulting in increased participation and growing numbers of graduates (Yende & Yende, 2019; Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). Education consequently became central to the project of building a democratic society and addressing the inequalities inherited from apartheid (Badat & Sayed, 2014). However, this transformation also strengthened the expectation that

educational attainment would provide a reliable pathway to employment, social mobility, and economic security.

It is this expectation that requires critical interrogation. The expansion of educational opportunities has not been accompanied by equivalent economic growth or sufficient employment creation. Graduates increasingly encounter unemployment, underemployment, precarious work, and intense competition for limited opportunities (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2023; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). This creates a fundamental contradiction between the promise attached to education and the realities experienced by graduates. The qualification remains valuable, but the labour market increasingly struggles to convert educational attainment into secure employment.

From the researcher's perspective, this contradiction cannot be explained simply through claims that graduates lack appropriate skills. Curriculum responsiveness remains important, and studies identify continuing gaps between educational provision and labour-market requirements (Yende & Mugovhani, 2021; Wills & Van der Berg, 2022). However, reducing graduate unemployment to a skills mismatch risks shifting responsibility towards individuals and universities while insufficiently addressing sluggish economic growth, structural inequality, labour-market saturation, and limited employment creation. Education can improve a person's capabilities and employment prospects, but it cannot independently generate the number of jobs required to absorb an expanding graduate population.

The consequences of this contradiction extend beyond employment and income. Graduate unemployment can generate frustration, disillusionment, diminished confidence, and weakened perceptions of personal worth (De Witte, Rothmann & Jackson, 2012; Sinha, 2018; Gedikli et al., 2023). The problem becomes particularly significant when graduates have internalised the belief that educational achievement should guarantee success. When this expectation is not realised, structural exclusion may be interpreted as personal failure. Consequently, the "education equals success" narrative can unintentionally intensify the psychological burden associated with unemployment.

This study therefore critically examines the enduring belief that education constitutes an unquestionable pathway to success in contemporary South Africa. It interrogates how historical experiences, educational policies, labour-market conditions, and societal expectations have collectively sustained this narrative. The central argument is that education remains essential, but its relationship with success is neither automatic nor universal. Educational outcomes are

shaped by the economic, institutional, social, and structural environments in which graduates attempt to convert qualifications into meaningful opportunities.

To develop this argument, the study draws on a systematic review of literature spanning education, labour economics, sociology, and psychology. Rather than approaching graduate unemployment exclusively as an employability or curriculum problem, the study examines the structural conditions and ideological assumptions surrounding the education-success relationship. It argues that meaningful responses require more than curriculum reform, work-integrated learning, or skills development. These measures must be accompanied by inclusive economic growth, employment creation, reduced structural inequality, and stronger connections between education and broader development strategies.

Ultimately, this study challenges the assumption that education alone is the “key” that unlocks success. Instead, it conceptualises education as one component of a broader ecosystem of opportunity, economic participation, dignity, and social transformation. This reframing does not diminish the value of education; rather, it recognises its transformative potential while acknowledging the structural conditions necessary for that potential to be realised.

Research Questions

For this study, the researcher formulated four primary research questions to critically examine the persistent challenge of graduate unemployment in South Africa. These questions aim to explore the structural, social, and ideological factors shaping the phenomenon:

1. How effectively does higher education in South Africa prepare graduates for the current labour market?
2. How can higher education better align with labour market demands to improve graduate employability in South Africa?
3. What are the psychological, social, and aspirational impacts of graduate unemployment on young South Africans?
4. In what ways does the “education equals success” narrative influence graduate expectations and public policy in South Africa?
5. Which systemic interventions best enhance graduate employability and workforce readiness?

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by Human Capital Theory (HCT) as its primary theoretical lens while adopting a critical stance towards its assumptions. HCT conceptualises education as an

investment in knowledge, skills, and competencies that enhances individual productivity and contributes to economic growth (Oketch 2014). Since the 1960s, the theory has significantly influenced education policy globally and in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), particularly through its emphasis on manpower planning, skills development, and alignment between education and labour-market requirements (Lauder 2015; Fitzsimons 2017). Education is consequently positioned not only as a social good but also as an economic investment expected to generate returns for individuals and the state.

In SSA, and South Africa specifically, HCT has influenced education reforms aimed at expanding access, improving skills, reducing inequality, and promoting socioeconomic mobility. Following colonialism and apartheid, increased participation in education was regarded as essential to developing a skilled workforce capable of supporting national development and participating in the global knowledge economy. Higher education consequently became associated with employment, income, social mobility, and improved living standards, reinforcing the societal assumption that education constitutes a pathway to success.

However, this study does not employ HCT uncritically. Although the theory provides a useful explanation of why education is expected to generate economic returns, its assumptions are insufficient for explaining contemporary graduate unemployment in South Africa. HCT tends to emphasise individual investment in skills and assumes labour markets will reward those investments. This assumption becomes problematic where structural inequality, economic stagnation, labour-market saturation, spatial disparities, and limited employment creation constrain opportunities. Consequently, possessing qualifications does not necessarily translate into employment or socioeconomic advancement.

Furthermore, HCT can understate the influence of historical, institutional, and social factors shaping labour-market outcomes. Unequal educational quality, disparities in social capital, persistent racialised inequality, and uneven access to employment networks can influence graduate opportunities independently of individual qualifications. A predominantly skills-based explanation therefore risks individualising unemployment by locating responsibility within graduates rather than recognising structural constraints.

Accordingly, this study uses HCT simultaneously as an explanatory and critical framework. Explanatorily, it contextualises the enduring policy and societal belief that education generates productivity, employability, and economic success. Critically, it exposes the limitations of

assuming that skills alone determine labour-market outcomes. This dual application enables the study to interrogate the “education equals success” narrative as a contested and context-dependent proposition. It therefore argues that meaningful graduate employment requires not only relevant skills and curricular responsiveness but also economic growth, labour-market expansion, institutional reform, and greater social equity.

Design and Methods

Study design

This study adopted a systematic descriptive review design to critically examine graduate unemployment in South Africa. Qualitative description provides a comprehensive and accessible account of complex phenomena while allowing interpretation of relevant experiences and perspectives (Kim, Sefcik & Bradway 2017; Polit & Beck 2009, 2014). The approach focused on three interconnected dimensions: curriculum–labour market alignment, the psychosocial consequences of graduate unemployment, and the ideological “education equals success” narrative shaping societal expectations and policy.

The review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework to enhance transparency, methodological consistency, and reproducibility. Qualitative evidence synthesis principles supported the integration of diverse sources. Literature included peer-reviewed journal studies, dissertations, government reports, policy documents, and grey literature retrieved through ProQuest, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Sabinet via the University of South Africa library. Identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion processes were systematically documented. Descriptive synthesis was subsequently used to identify recurring patterns, research gaps, and structural, economic, sociocultural, and ideological factors influencing graduate unemployment.

Search strategy

A systematic search was conducted across the identified databases using advanced search functions and combinations of key terms, including “graduate unemployment in South Africa,” “higher education and labour market mismatch,” “youth aspirations and unemployment,” “education equals success narrative,” “policy discourse and graduate employment,” and “curriculum reform or work-integrated learning.” Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were applied to refine searches. The review included English-language publications published between 2000 and 2026 and was conducted from March 2023 to April 2026. Given limited

literature addressing ideological framings of unemployment, relevant studies from other Global South contexts were incorporated for comparison. Backward and forward citation tracking was also undertaken to identify additional sources, strengthen comprehensiveness, and minimise publication bias.

Inclusions and exclusions

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies focusing specifically on graduate unemployment in South Africa or comparable contexts	Studies addressing general unemployment without a specific focus on graduates
Research examining higher education outcomes, employability, and labour market alignment	Studies focused purely on macroeconomic trends without linking to education or graduates
Peer-reviewed journal studies, accredited dissertations, government reports, and policy documents	Opinion pieces, editorials, blog posts, and non-academic commentaries without empirical or policy grounding
Publications in English (2000–2026)	Studies published outside the specified timeframe or non-English sources
Studies addressing skills development, curriculum relevance, WIL, entrepreneurship, and graduate transitions	Studies focusing on unrelated fields (e.g., purely technical engineering processes without labour/education linkage)
Empirical, theoretical, and policy-based studies relevant to education-to-work transitions	Duplicates or studies with insufficient methodological detail or inaccessible full text
Studies providing insights into psychosocial, ideological, or structural dimensions of unemployment	Studies not engaging with labour market, education systems, or graduate outcomes

These criteria ensured that only studies directly contributing to an understanding of the relationship between higher education and graduate labour market outcomes were included, while maintaining conceptual breadth across economic, psychosocial, and ideological dimensions of unemployment. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were further guided by the SPIDER framework (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type),

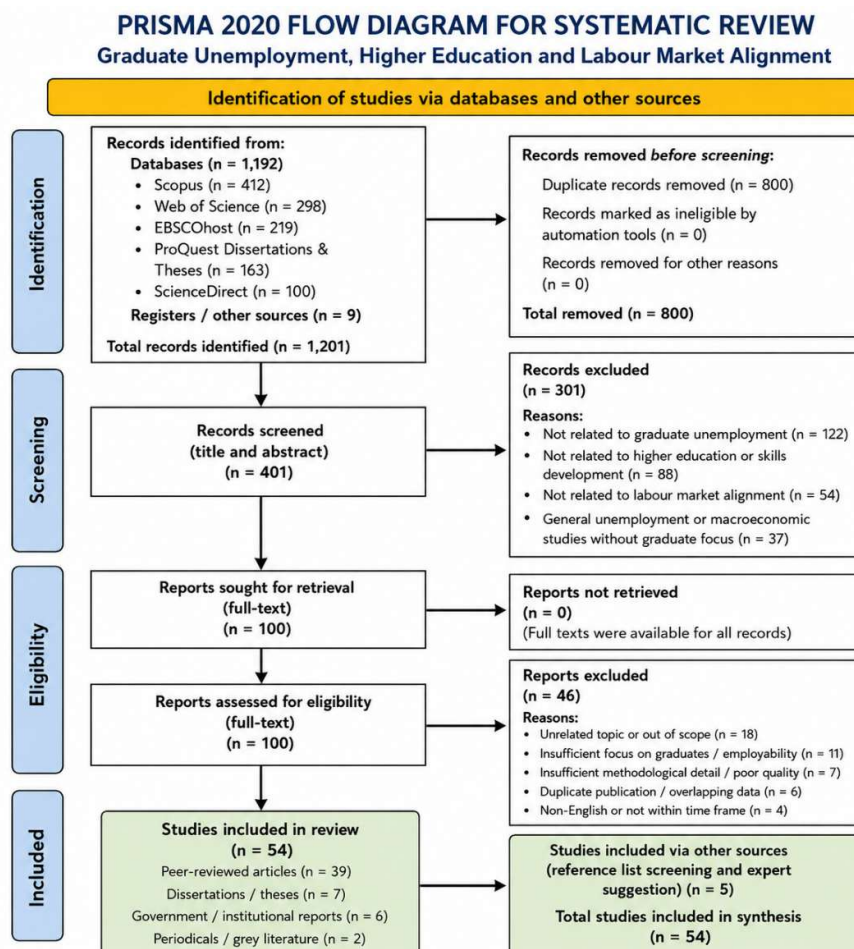
ensuring conceptual clarity and alignment with qualitative systematic review standards. The rationale for each criterion was to ensure that only studies directly engaging with graduate unemployment and education-to-work transitions were included (see the below figure 1).

Figure 1 presents SPIDER Framework

SPIDER FRAMEWORK <i>(Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type)</i>					
	S SAMPLE (Who?)	P PHENOMENON OF INTEREST (What?)	I DESIGN (How?)	D EVALUATION (What outcomes?)	R RESEARCH TYPE (What type of evidence?)
DEFINITION	The population or participants being studied.	The phenomenon of interest or issue being explored.	The research design or methodological approach used.	The outcomes, measures, or aspects of interest being evaluated.	The type of research or evidence sought.
EXAMPLE (IN THIS REVIEW)	Graduates, universities, employers, policymakers in South Africa and comparable contexts.	Graduate unemployment and its relationship with higher education and labour market alignment.	Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies; empirical, theoretical, and policy analyses.	Employability outcomes, labour market alignment, skills relevance, psychosocial impacts, policy effectiveness.	Peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, government reports, policy documents, and grey literature.
KEY CONSIDERATIONS	Who is included or excluded and why?	Is the phenomenon clearly defined?	Is the design appropriate to answer the review question?	Are the outcomes measurable or clearly described?	Is the evidence type appropriate and reliable?
Purpose: The SPIDER framework helps to develop focused and answerable review questions, define inclusion/exclusion criteria, and guide the search strategy in qualitative and mixed-method systematic reviews.					

A systematic search was conducted to identify literature on graduate unemployment, higher education, and labour market alignment. From 1,201 records initially retrieved, 800 duplicates were removed, leaving 401 studies for title and abstract screening. Of these, 301 were excluded due to irrelevance, resulting in 100 full-text studies assessed for eligibility. Following detailed review, 46 studies were excluded for reasons such as lack of graduate focus, insufficient methodological clarity, or duplication. Ultimately, 54 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The PRISMA process was revised to ensure numerical accuracy, transparency, and consistency across all stages of study selection. All screening decisions were systematically recorded in a structured review log to ensure auditability and reproducibility. Discrepancies in study selection were resolved through consensus-based review.

Figure 2 presents the PRISMA flow diagram of the search and screening process.



Study characteristics (Included studies matrix)

Table 2 presents a structured evidence matrix of all included studies, detailing bibliographic information, country of origin, methodological approach, and coded analytical constructs. This table enhances transparency and supports replication of the review process.

Table 2: Summary of Included Studies

Author(s)	Year	Country/Context	Methodology	Key Constructs / Coded Themes
Alexander	2013	South Africa	Book / conceptual analysis	Post-apartheid society, education, inequality
Andrews et al.	2020	OECD countries	Quantitative econometric analysis	Labour market entry conditions, career outcomes
Badat	2007	South Africa	Policy/critical analysis	Higher education transformation
Badat & Sayed	2014	South Africa	Theoretical/policy analysis	Social justice, education reform
Bowen	2020	International	Qualitative conceptual study	Work-integrated learning, remote learning
Boyte & Finders	2016	USA	Theoretical essay	Education, democracy, agency
Brouwers	2020	International	Position paper	Mental health stigma, unemployment
Bunting	2006	South Africa	Historical analysis	Apartheid education system
Chisholm	2012	South Africa	Policy analysis	Education inequality, post-apartheid reform
Cockshott et al.	2021	UK	Qualitative IPA study	Graduate unemployment, mental health
De Witte et al.	2012	South Africa	Quantitative	Psychological impact of unemployment
Eliophotou Menon & Athanasoula-Reppa	2017	Cyprus	Case study	Graduate unemployment, employability
Ferns et al.	2025	International	Conceptual/framework paper	Curriculum design, WIL
Fitzsimons	2017	International	Theoretical review	Human capital theory
Friedlander et al.	2007	Canada	Quantitative	Student adjustment, wellbeing
Gedikli et al.	2023	International	Meta-analysis	Unemployment, wellbeing
Govender & Wait	2017	South Africa	Mixed methods	Work-integrated learning, employability
Kim et al.	2017	International	Systematic review	Qualitative descriptive research
Khuluvhe	2023	South Africa	Government report	Labour force characteristics

Lauder	2015	International	Theoretical analysis	Human capital theory critique
Lumadi	2025	South Africa	Empirical study	Lifelong learning, skills development
MacGinty	2024	South Africa	Research report	Graduate unemployment trends
MacGinty & Whitelaw	2025	South Africa	Policy commentary	Graduate unemployment discourse
Majola	2025	South Africa	Empirical study	TVET progression barriers
Mama	2019	South Africa	Policy study	Skills myth, unemployment
Makananise	2023	South Africa	Master's thesis	Graduate experiences, coping
Matabane et al.	2024	South Africa	Empirical study	Employability skills development
Mathebula	2013	South Africa	Theoretical study	Education reform critique
Mseleku	2019	South Africa	Doctoral thesis	Internships, employability
Mseleku	2022	South Africa	Empirical qualitative	Barriers to higher education
Mutshidzi	2023	South Africa	Master's thesis	Graduate unemployment experiences
Mustafa & Lleshi	2024	International	Quantitative	Lifelong learning, productivity
Neocosmos	2017	South Africa	Theoretical essay	NGOs, democracy
Ndlovu & Ndebele	2019	South Africa	Quantitative	Graduate employment experiences
Ocampo	2004	South Africa	Historical analysis	Educational inequality
Ohei & Brink	2019	South Africa	Case study	ICT employability
Oketch	2014	Sub-Saharan Africa	Policy analysis	Human capital theory
Othman et al.	2023	International	Review study	Graduate employability
Pauw et al.	2006	South Africa	Labour economics	Skills shortages, unemployment paradox
Raciti & Motala	2025	South Africa/Australia	Comparative analysis	Equity in higher education
Ridley et al.	2020	International	Econometric study	Poverty, mental health
Rook & Sloan	2021	International	Qualitative study	Graduate attributes, WIL
Saini et al.	2023	India	Review study	Youth unemployment
Seti et al.	2025	South Africa	Empirical study	Industry perceptions, skills
Sinha	2018	India	Mixed methods	Graduate unemployment impacts
Skosana	2021	South Africa	Doctoral thesis	Psychosocial unemployment effects
Sunnemark et al.	2024	Sweden	Qualitative study	WIL conceptualisation
Terrance	2023	South Africa	Empirical study	Graduate unemployment determinants
Vally	2020	South Africa	Theoretical essay	Pedagogy of possibility

Wills & Van der Berg	2022	South Africa	Policy analysis	COVID-19 education impacts
Woldegiorgis & Chiramba	2025	South Africa	Empirical study	Student resilience
Yende & Yende	2019	South Africa	Conference paper	Massification, higher education
Yende & Mugovhani	2021	South Africa	Case study	Music graduate employability
Yende & Haskins	2023	South Africa	Case study	Creative industries collaboration

Quality Appraisal and Bias Assessment

To strengthen methodological rigour, all included studies underwent quality appraisal using criteria informed by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) framework. Assessment focused on clarity of research aims, methodological appropriateness, data collection procedures, analytical rigour, and relevance to the study objectives. Potential sources of bias, including publication, selection, and interpretive bias, were also considered. Particular attention was given to sample representativeness, transparency of analytical procedures, and consistency between findings and conclusions. Grey literature and policy documents were included to broaden the evidence base and reduce publication bias. Studies were not excluded solely because of methodological limitations; however, greater analytical weight was assigned to evidence demonstrating methodological transparency, contextual relevance, and analytical depth.

Data Analysis

Data from the 54 included studies were analysed using thematic synthesis guided by the research objectives. This approach enabled systematic identification, comparison, and interpretation of recurring patterns across the literature. Three principal themes emerged: graduate unemployment and labour-market alignment, examining the relationship between higher education curricula, graduate competencies, and industry requirements; psychosocial impacts, focusing on stress, anxiety, disillusionment, and social pressures associated with unemployment; and ideological narratives, examining the “education equals success” discourse and its influence on policy, aspirations, and societal expectations. Analysis followed three phases: line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes. Studies were systematically compared across contexts, with thematic categories repeatedly reviewed and refined. Divergent findings were examined to minimise selective

interpretation. To strengthen credibility, a subset of studies was independently coded, followed by comparison, discussion, and consensus-based refinement of coding categories.

Ethical Considerations

As this study employed a systematic review methodology, it did not involve data collection or human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval. Nevertheless, ethical principles guided the review. All sources were accurately represented, cited, and acknowledged to protect intellectual property and maintain academic integrity. The study avoided selective reporting by transparently documenting inclusion and exclusion criteria, search and screening procedures, coding processes, and synthesis methods. These measures promoted objectivity, transparency, reproducibility, and ethical integrity throughout the review process.

Triangulation Ethical Considerations

Triangulation enhanced the credibility, trustworthiness, and depth of the findings by integrating methodological, data, and theoretical perspectives. Methodological triangulation drew on peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, government reports, policy documents, and grey literature. Data triangulation incorporated evidence from 2000–2026 across South Africa and comparable Global South contexts. Theoretical triangulation combined Human Capital Theory, employability theory, the capability approach, and critical realism to examine the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions. Comparing converging and diverging evidence helped identify recurring patterns and contradictions, strengthening the study's confirmability and supporting a multidimensional understanding of graduate unemployment and the “education equals success” narrative.

Presentation of Results

Graduate unemployment remains a critical challenge in South Africa, reflecting the complex interplay between higher education, labour market demands, and societal expectations. While higher education is often framed as a pathway to success, evidence suggests that many graduates struggle to secure employment that aligns with their qualifications, resulting in psychological, social, and economic consequences (Badat, 2007; De Witte, Rothmann and Jackson, 2012). This misalignment raises important questions about the relevance of curricula, the effectiveness of work-integrated learning, and the broader societal narrative that equates formal education with guaranteed success (Alexander, 2013; Boyte and Finders, 2016). The research questions guided the identification of key themes, which illustrate both the challenges and opportunities in preparing graduates for meaningful employment.

Table 1 presents the research questions alongside the four emergent themes, their descriptions, and supporting literature.

Research Question	Emergent Theme and Description
1. To what extent does higher education in South Africa align with the demands of the labour market?	Mismatch Between Education and Labour Market: many graduates find their skills and qualifications misaligned with labour market needs, highlighting gaps in curriculum relevance and work readiness (Badat 2007; Oketch 2014; Othman et al. 2023; Wills & Van der Berg 2022; Mseleku 2022).
2. How can higher education better align with labour market demands to improve graduate employability in South Africa?	Aligning Education with Labour Market Demands: aligning South African higher education with labour market demands through practical skills, work-integrated learning, industry partnerships, and lifelong learning enhances graduate employability and socioeconomic mobility (Sunnemark et al., 2024; Yende & Haskins, 2023; Mustafa & Lleshi, 2024).
3. How does graduate unemployment affect the psychological wellbeing, aspirations, and social identity of young people?	Psychosocial Impact of Unemployment: unemployment negatively influences mental health, self-esteem, social identity, and future aspirations of graduates, creating a sense of disillusionment and marginalisation (De Witte et al. 2012; Gedikli et al. 2023; Sinha 2018; Cockshott et al. 2021).
4. What role does the persistent “education equals success” narrative play in shaping graduate expectations and policy discourse?	Unrealistic Societal and Policy Expectations: the entrenched belief that formal education guarantees employment creates heightened expectations, disappointment, and influences policy discourse without addressing structural labour market challenges (Alexander 2013; Boyte and Finders 2016; Badat and Sayed 2014; Mathebula 2013).
5. Which systemic reforms curriculum change, entrepreneurship, and work-integrated learning best prepare graduates for meaningful employment opportunities?	Need for Systemic Reform and Innovative Learning: incorporating curriculum updates, entrepreneurial skills, and experiential learning (e.g., internships) can enhance graduate employability and bridge the education-employment gap (Vally 2020; Woldegiorgis and Chiramba 2025; Chisholm 2012; Eliophotou Menon and Athanasoula-Reppa 2017).

Source: Researcher

Mismatch Between Education and Labour Market

The findings of this study demonstrate a persistent mismatch between higher education and the labour market in South Africa. Although universities have expanded access and increased the number of graduates entering the economy, educational attainment has not been accompanied by sufficient employment opportunities. This disconnect challenges the assumption that acquiring a qualification automatically improves a graduate's prospects for secure and meaningful employment (MacGinty, 2024; Mseleku, 2022; Seti, Ngqulana & Sindesi, 2025).

From the researcher's perspective, this mismatch should not be reduced to a simple deficiency in graduate skills. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), internships, entrepreneurship education, and industry engagement can strengthen practical competencies and improve graduates' readiness for employment. WIL provides opportunities to connect theoretical knowledge with workplace experience while developing communication, teamwork, leadership, technological, adaptability, and problem-solving competencies (Bowen, 2020; Govender & Wait, 2017; Rook & Sloan, 2021). Sunnemark et al. (2024) further position WIL as a mechanism for connecting university knowledge with workplace practice and challenging the traditional separation between theoretical and practical learning.

However, this study argues that WIL and entrepreneurship education should not be presented as guaranteed solutions to graduate unemployment. WIL can strengthen employability without creating employment in an economy characterised by slow growth, high youth unemployment, and limited graduate absorption (Ferns et al., 2025). Similarly, entrepreneurship education can encourage innovation and self-employment, but graduates require access to finance, markets, mentorship, infrastructure, and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Without these conditions, entrepreneurship discourse may shift responsibility for unemployment towards individual resilience while obscuring structural constraints.

The skills-mismatch explanation therefore requires critical interrogation. Although some graduates may lack practical, digital, communication, or problem-solving competencies, unemployment is also shaped by labour-market saturation, sluggish economic growth, automation, sectoral disparities, and limited employment creation (Ndlovu & Ndebele, 2019; Yende & Mugovhani, 2021; Terrance, 2023). Pauw, Oosthuizen and Westhuizen (2006) similarly identify the longstanding tension between increasing demand for skilled workers and unequal educational and employment opportunities. Consequently, treating graduate unemployment primarily as a curriculum problem risks individualising a fundamentally

structural challenge. Young people remain particularly vulnerable to this disconnect. Statistics South Africa (2022) reported unemployment rates of approximately 64% among those aged 15–24 and 42% among those aged 25–34, illustrating the severe difficulties confronting young people entering the labour market. These challenges are compounded by inequalities in schooling, higher education, professional networks, financial resources, and geographic access to employment opportunities (Mama, 2019; MacGinty, 2024).

The study therefore argues for stronger collaboration among universities, government, and industry. Curriculum reform, WIL, career guidance, mentorship, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning should be strengthened (Yende & Haskins, 2023; Mustafa & Lleshi, 2024; Lumadi, 2025). However, these interventions must be accompanied by inclusive economic development, job creation, and structural labour-market reform. Ultimately, graduate unemployment cannot be resolved by producing more employable graduates alone. Educational transformation must occur alongside economic transformation. Education remains valuable, but its capacity to generate sustainable socioeconomic mobility depends on whether the broader economy provides graduates with meaningful opportunities to convert qualifications, knowledge, and capabilities into productive livelihoods.

Aligning Education with Labour Market Demands

Addressing graduate unemployment in South Africa requires closer alignment between higher education and evolving labour-market demands. Education has historically been associated with liberation, social mobility, and socioeconomic transformation, particularly following the transition to democracy (Alexander 2013; Vally 2020). However, expanded university access has not eliminated the persistent mismatch between graduate outcomes and employment opportunities (Badat 2007; Badat & Sayed 2014). Curricular transformation is therefore necessary to incorporate disciplinary knowledge alongside digital, entrepreneurial, practical, and transferable skills (Mseleku 2019; Yende & Mugovhani 2021).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) offers an important mechanism for connecting theoretical knowledge with workplace practice. By embedding experiential learning within curricula, WIL can develop problem-solving, adaptability, professional competence, and workplace awareness (Sunnemark et al. 2024; Govender & Wait 2017; Bowen 2020). Nevertheless, WIL should not be treated as a universal solution. Its implementation remains uneven, particularly across historically disadvantaged institutions where access to quality placements, industry networks,

and economic hubs may be limited. Graduate employability is consequently shaped by institutional resources, social capital, geography, and socioeconomic background.

Effective alignment also requires sustained collaboration among universities, government, and industry. Such partnerships can facilitate curriculum development, internships, applied research, professional networking, and responsiveness to emerging labour-market needs (Yende & Haskins 2023; Ferns et al. 2025). However, excessive industry influence may narrow higher education towards immediate employment demands, potentially undermining broader objectives such as critical thinking, citizenship, intellectual development, and social transformation. Alignment should therefore balance employability with the wider purposes of education.

Lifelong learning provides another important dimension by enabling graduates to continually develop knowledge and adapt to technological and economic change (Mustafa & Lleshi 2024; Lumadi 2025). Yet, this emphasis can inadvertently transfer responsibility for employability from institutions, employers, and the state to individuals. Graduates are increasingly expected to continually reskill and remain competitive despite structural constraints over which they have limited control. Most importantly, education–labour-market alignment must be situated within South Africa’s broader economic realities. Graduate unemployment reflects not only skills mismatches but also sluggish economic growth, labour-market saturation, inequality, and limited employment creation (Pauw et al. 2006; Andrews et al. 2020; MacGinty & Whitelaw 2025). Persistent unemployment can generate stress, disillusionment, and social stigma, challenging the assumption that educational attainment guarantees upward mobility (De Witte, Rothmann & Jackson 2012; Gedikli et al. 2023).

Thus, the “education equals success” narrative requires critical reconsideration. Curriculum reform, WIL, industry partnerships, and lifelong learning can strengthen graduate preparedness, but they cannot independently resolve unemployment. A genuinely transformative strategy must integrate educational reform with economic restructuring, inclusive job creation, equitable institutional support, and broader labour-market transformation. Education can remain a pathway to opportunity, but its success depends fundamentally on whether the economy creates sufficient and equitable opportunities for graduates to realise the value of their qualifications.

Psychosocial Impact of Unemployment

The literature consistently demonstrates that unemployment has significant psychological and social consequences, including stress, depression, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and broader threats to wellbeing (Makananise, 2023; Ridley et al., 2020; Skosana, 2021). Prolonged unemployment can disrupt income, daily routines, purpose, and social participation, thereby reinforcing cycles of exclusion and poverty (Mama, 2019). For graduates, these effects can be particularly pronounced because tertiary education is widely constructed as a pathway to employment and upward mobility (Friedlander et al., 2007; Saini, Kaur and Mir, 2023). When qualifications fail to produce expected employment outcomes, graduates may experience frustration, disillusionment, reduced confidence, and diminished hope.

The psychosocial burden is intensified by unemployment stigma. Employment is frequently associated with identity, status, independence, and personal worth; consequently, unemployed graduates may internalise negative social perceptions despite structural barriers being largely responsible for their circumstances (Brouwers, 2020). Mutshidzi (2023, p. 127) highlights the effects of social stigma and financial instability on psychological wellbeing and social integration. Unemployment may therefore produce isolation, weakened social participation, and strained relationships within families and communities (Skosana, 2021; Brouwers, 2020). These consequences demonstrate that graduate unemployment extends beyond individual experiences to affect household stability and community cohesion.

Critically, these psychosocial consequences should not be interpreted solely as individual responses to unemployment. They are also manifestations of structural inequality, labour-market exclusion, and limited economic opportunities. The dominant “education equals success” narrative further intensifies vulnerability by creating expectations that educational attainment should inevitably result in employment. When this expectation is unmet, graduates may perceive structural exclusion as personal failure, deepening psychological distress and social stigma.

Addressing these consequences therefore requires integrated interventions, including career counselling, mentorship, psychosocial support, community-based programmes, and stigma reduction strategies (Mama, 2019; Makananise, 2023). However, such interventions cannot substitute for broader economic reforms. A purely individualised response risks depoliticising unemployment by shifting responsibility towards graduates while neglecting labour-market

constraints and unequal job creation. The literature consequently demonstrates that graduate unemployment is simultaneously an economic, psychological, and social problem. Its human consequences can only be meaningfully addressed by combining psychosocial support with structural interventions that expand employment opportunities, reduce inequality, and challenge the assumption that unemployment represents individual inadequacy.

Unrealistic Societal and Policy Expectations

The belief that education guarantees success remains deeply embedded in South African society, shaping family aspirations, public expectations, and policy priorities. Higher education is widely perceived as a pathway to employment, income, social mobility, and the reduction of inequality. However, labour-market realities increasingly challenge this assumption, revealing that educational attainment alone cannot overcome structural inequalities, economic stagnation, and uneven employment opportunities (Ohei & Brink 2019; Majola 2025). Consequently, the relationship between education and employment should be understood as contingent rather than deterministic.

Critically, the “education equals success” narrative also functions as an ideological framework through which unemployment is interpreted. By presenting education as a near-certain route to employment, it shifts responsibility towards individuals and graduates while obscuring structural constraints affecting job creation and labour absorption. MacGinty and Whitelaw (2025) argue that rising graduate unemployment does not necessarily indicate declining degree value or declining graduate quality. Rather, graduates remain exposed to wider economic conditions, including sluggish growth and labour-market shocks (Andrews et al. 2020; Mseleku 2019; Yende & Mugovhani 2021). Economic conditions at graduation can consequently influence early career trajectories, limiting employment opportunities, mobility, and income progression.

Importantly, graduates nevertheless generally experience lower unemployment than individuals with fewer educational qualifications, demonstrating that degrees retain considerable labour-market value. Higher education therefore remains an important mechanism for opportunity, professional recognition, and social mobility. The contradiction lies in the fact that qualifications can retain value while their expected returns become increasingly uncertain. Educational expansion has increased the supply of graduates without generating sufficient employment opportunities to absorb them.

This disconnect creates unrealistic expectations among young people and families. When degrees fail to produce anticipated employment, graduates may experience frustration, uncertainty, and disillusionment (Ohei & Brink 2019; Majola 2025). Policies emphasising expanded access without adequately addressing employability and labour-market conditions may inadvertently reinforce these expectations (Raciti & Motala 2025). Although curricular reform, skills development, entrepreneurship, WIL, and career guidance are valuable, they cannot independently resolve unemployment in a structurally constrained economy (Mseleku 2019; Yende & Mugovhani 2021).

A critical response therefore requires recalibrating the relationship between education and success. Higher education institutions should strengthen labour-market responsiveness while preserving broader educational purposes, including critical thinking, citizenship, and social transformation. Simultaneously, government must address economic stagnation, regional disparities, inequality, and limited labour absorption. Without these complementary interventions, employability reforms risk improving individual adaptability without substantially transforming unemployment patterns.

Ultimately, education remains an important pathway to socioeconomic mobility, but it is neither a guaranteed nor singular route to prosperity. Reframing the “education equals success” narrative requires recognising that educational outcomes depend upon the interaction between qualifications, social conditions, institutional opportunities, and the capacity of the economy to generate meaningful employment.

Need for Systemic Reform and Innovative Learning

Addressing graduate unemployment in South Africa requires systemic reform that extends beyond conventional curriculum revision. Matabane, Lodewyk-Raliphada and Graupner (2024) argue that graduates must be prepared to navigate complex and rapidly changing labour markets. Similarly, Yende and Mugovhani (2021) emphasise continuous curricular transformation to ensure responsiveness to evolving industry requirements. However, positioning universities as the primary solution risks overlooking structural constraints, including limited labour absorption, sluggish economic growth, inequality, and insufficient employment creation. Curriculum reform is therefore necessary but cannot independently resolve graduate unemployment.

Innovative learning should integrate disciplinary knowledge with practical, entrepreneurial, digital, and transferable skills (Mseleku 2019; Yende & Mugovhani 2021). Work-integrated learning (WIL), internships, and experiential education can connect theoretical learning with workplace practice, enabling students to develop adaptability, problem-solving, communication, and professional competencies (Sunnemark et al. 2024). Nevertheless, WIL opportunities remain unevenly distributed. Well-resourced institutions often possess stronger industry networks, while historically disadvantaged universities may face limited placement opportunities. Without equitable institutional support, WIL may inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities.

University–industry–government partnerships are therefore essential for strengthening curricula, facilitating internships, supporting mentorship, and promoting applied research and knowledge transfer (Yende & Haskins 2023). Such partnerships, however, require careful governance because private-sector priorities may narrow definitions of relevant knowledge and shift higher education towards immediate labour-market utility at the expense of critical thinking, citizenship, and social transformation.

Lifelong learning provides an additional mechanism for developing graduate adaptability. It promotes continuous, self-directed learning and enables individuals to respond to technological and occupational change (Mustafa & Lleshi 2024; Lumadi 2025). Yet, its growing emphasis can also transfer responsibility for employability onto individuals, requiring graduates to continually reskill despite structural labour-market constraints. Such approaches must therefore complement, rather than replace, institutional and governmental responsibility for employment creation.

Systemic reform must additionally address unequal access to quality education, professional networks, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. Graduates from historically disadvantaged communities frequently encounter compounded barriers that cannot be overcome through skills acquisition alone. Consequently, educational innovation must be accompanied by policies addressing spatial, socioeconomic, and institutional inequalities.

Ultimately, graduate unemployment requires an integrated strategy combining curriculum transformation, WIL, lifelong learning, industry collaboration, equitable institutional investment, and structural economic reform. These measures can strengthen graduate preparedness and expand pathways into employment, but their effectiveness depends upon

broader economic conditions. Education should therefore be understood as one component of a comprehensive development strategy rather than a guaranteed solution to unemployment. Sustainable progress requires simultaneous investment in educational transformation, inclusive economic growth, labour-market expansion, and meaningful job creation.

Critical Synthesis of the Literature

A critical synthesis demonstrates that graduate unemployment in South Africa results from the interaction of educational transformation, constrained labour markets, ideological expectations, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities rather than a single causal factor. Although higher education expanded considerably after 1994, graduate employment has not increased proportionately (Badat 2007; Badat & Sayed 2014). Consequently, dominant policy responses emphasising curriculum reform and skills development risk reducing a structural problem to an employability challenge (Yende & Mugovhani 2021; MacGinty & Whitelaw 2025).

A prominent theme is the demand for stronger alignment between higher education and labour-market requirements through curriculum reform, WIL, internships, and entrepreneurship education (Ferns et al. 2025; Govender & Wait 2017). Although these interventions strengthen practical competencies, they cannot overcome limited employment creation. WIL may bridge theoretical and practical learning (Sunnemark et al. 2024), but its effectiveness remains dependent on institutional resources, industry partnerships, and available employment opportunities. Similarly, university–industry collaboration may improve responsiveness but can narrow higher education towards immediate market demands, reinforcing human capital assumptions that prioritise employability over broader intellectual, civic, and transformative purposes (Fitzsimons 2017; Lauder 2015).

The synthesis further identifies the persistence of the “education equals success” narrative within families, institutions, and policy discourse (Ohei & Brink 2019; Majola 2025). While degrees retain labour-market value, rising graduate unemployment reflects broader economic stagnation and limited job creation rather than simply declining educational quality (Andrews et al. 2020; MacGinty & Whitelaw 2025). The narrative can therefore individualise unemployment by implying that graduates who remain unemployed lack sufficient skills or adaptability, obscuring structural labour-market constraints.

This contradiction has significant psychosocial consequences. Graduates may experience stress, disillusionment, diminished self-worth, and uncertainty when qualifications fail to produce

anticipated employment (De Witte, Rothmann & Jackson 2012; Gedikli et al. 2023). Unemployment also affects families and communities through financial pressure, weakened social participation, and reduced cohesion (Skosana 2021; Brouwers 2020). These consequences demonstrate that graduate unemployment is simultaneously an economic, psychological, and social condition.

Structural inequality further complicates the relationship between education and employment. Graduates from historically disadvantaged institutions and communities may encounter unequal educational resources, limited professional networks, geographic constraints, and restricted access to economic opportunities (Mama 2019; Raciti & Motala 2025). Lifelong learning can enhance adaptability, but its emphasis on continuous individual reskilling may inadvertently transfer responsibility for employability from institutions and the state to graduates (Mustafa & Lleshi 2024; Lumadi 2025).

Overall, the literature challenges a narrow skills-mismatch explanation. Graduate unemployment emerges from the intersection of constrained labour absorption, unequal educational opportunities, socioeconomic exclusion, and ideological expectations surrounding education. WIL, curriculum reform, and lifelong learning remain valuable, but they cannot independently resolve unemployment. Sustainable solutions require integrating educational transformation with inclusive economic growth, labour-market expansion, structural reform, and deliberate job creation (Yende & Mugovhani 2021; MacGinty & Whitelaw 2025).

Discussions

This study has argued that the dominant “education equals success” narrative remains deeply embedded in South African society but is increasingly misaligned with contemporary labour-market realities. Although higher education continues to provide important opportunities for employment, income generation, and social mobility, qualifications do not automatically guarantee successful labour-market outcomes (Ohei & Brink 2019; Majola 2025). The findings demonstrate that the relationship between education and employment is mediated by structural inequality, socioeconomic background, regional disparities, and broader economic conditions.

The study further establishes that graduate unemployment should not be interpreted simply as evidence of inadequate skills or declining educational quality. MacGinty and Whitelaw (2025) demonstrate that rising graduate unemployment is closely associated with broader economic stagnation, while Andrews et al. (2020) show that labour-market conditions at graduation can

influence subsequent employment trajectories. Graduates entering the labour market during economic downturns may experience delayed employment, reduced earnings, limited mobility, and prolonged transitions into stable work. These findings reinforce the importance of understanding graduate unemployment within its wider macroeconomic context.

At the same time, the study identifies a persistent mismatch between higher education outputs and labour-market requirements. Existing research highlights weaknesses in curriculum responsiveness and the need for stronger connections between academic preparation and workplace expectations (Mseleku 2019; Yende & Mugovhani 2021). However, this study cautions against treating skills mismatch as a sufficient explanation. While curriculum reform, work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship, and career guidance can strengthen graduate preparedness, they cannot create employment where economic growth and labour absorption remain inadequate.

The critical application of Human Capital Theory further demonstrates the limitations of viewing education primarily as an individual investment that produces predictable economic returns. Although HCT provides a useful explanation for the emphasis placed on skills, productivity, and employability, its individualistic orientation provides an incomplete account of graduate unemployment in a society characterised by historical inequality and economic instability. The findings therefore support a more context-sensitive interpretation in which educational outcomes are shaped by the interaction between individual capabilities, institutional conditions, labour-market structures, and socioeconomic inequalities.

Importantly, graduates continue to experience relatively better employment prospects than individuals with lower educational attainment, confirming that degrees retain significant economic and symbolic value (MacGinty & Whitelaw 2025). Nevertheless, this relative advantage should not be confused with a guarantee of employment. The increasing number of unemployed graduates demonstrates that the labour market cannot absorb all degree holders, thereby challenging the assumption that educational expansion alone can resolve unemployment or inequality.

The psychosocial consequences of this contradiction are equally significant. Young graduates who enter higher education expecting improved socioeconomic security may experience frustration, disillusionment, and diminished confidence when employment opportunities fail to materialise (Ohei & Brink 2019; Majola 2025). The gap between educational expectations and

labour-market realities can therefore transform structural unemployment into an experience of perceived individual failure. This reinforces the need to challenge narratives that place disproportionate responsibility on graduates.

The study consequently calls for a multidimensional response. Higher education institutions should strengthen curriculum responsiveness, WIL, entrepreneurship, digital competencies, and career guidance while preserving the broader intellectual and social purposes of education. Government and industry must simultaneously address economic stagnation, labour-market exclusion, unequal development, and limited job creation. Expanding access without creating corresponding economic opportunities risks reproducing unrealistic expectations and existing inequalities (Raciti & Motala 2025).

Ultimately, the study reconceptualises “education equals success” as a contested and context-dependent proposition rather than an absolute truth. Higher education remains an important pathway to opportunity, but its transformative potential depends upon the economic, institutional, and social conditions surrounding graduates. Meaningful progress therefore requires moving beyond individualised employability solutions towards an integrated strategy combining educational transformation, inclusive economic growth, structural reform, and sustainable employment creation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge. First, higher education institutions should strengthen curricular alignment and skills development by integrating practical, digital, entrepreneurial, communication, and problem-solving competencies. Expanded work-integrated learning, internships, mentorship, and industry exposure can strengthen the transition from education to employment. Second, policymakers should adopt holistic policy approaches that address structural unemployment, labour-market mismatches, regional inequalities, and uneven economic development. Expanding higher education access should therefore be accompanied by employment-creation and economic-development strategies.

Third, universities should provide psychosocial support and career guidance, including counselling, mentoring, resilience-building initiatives, and career-development services to assist graduates in navigating unemployment and uncertain labour-market conditions. Fourth, stronger government–industry–university partnerships should facilitate curriculum co-development, experiential learning, innovation, graduate placement, and sustainable employment pathways. Finally, higher education should advance emancipatory and inclusive

education that extends beyond employability to develop critical consciousness, civic agency, creativity, and social innovation. Addressing historical and structural inequalities is essential to ensuring equitable opportunities. Overall, graduate unemployment requires an integrated response combining educational transformation, labour-market reform, psychosocial support, inclusive economic development, and job creation.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the widely held belief that “education is the key to success” in South Africa and argues that this assumption requires substantial reconsideration. The study demonstrates that although higher education remains an important pathway to personal development, social mobility, and economic participation, obtaining a qualification does not automatically translate into employment, financial security, or improved social status. The realities of graduate unemployment reveal a much more complex relationship between education and success.

From my analysis, graduate unemployment cannot be adequately explained through individual shortcomings, inadequate skills, or poor curriculum design alone. Rather, it is produced through the interaction of limited employment opportunities, economic stagnation, structural inequality, unequal educational conditions, and an increasingly competitive labour market. This distinction is important because explanations that locate unemployment primarily within graduates risk shifting responsibility away from the broader economic and institutional structures that shape employment opportunities.

The study further establishes that the expansion of higher education has not been matched by sufficient expansion of employment opportunities. Universities may improve curricula, strengthen work-integrated learning, develop entrepreneurial programmes, and enhance digital and practical competencies, but these interventions cannot create employment where the economy lacks sufficient capacity to absorb graduates. Educational reform is therefore necessary, but it cannot be treated as a substitute for economic transformation and meaningful job creation.

A further concern identified in this study is the persistence of the “education equals success” narrative. This narrative continues to shape family expectations, student aspirations, institutional priorities, and policy thinking. When graduates discover that their qualifications do not guarantee employment, the resulting disappointment can contribute to frustration,

uncertainty, and social exclusion. The problem, therefore, is not simply unemployment itself, but also the expectations attached to educational attainment.

The study consequently argues for a fundamental reframing of how education, employability, and success are understood. Higher education should prepare graduates with relevant knowledge, practical competencies, critical thinking, adaptability, and entrepreneurial capacity, while also recognising that employment outcomes are shaped by forces beyond individual control. Universities, government, and industry must therefore share responsibility for creating meaningful pathways from education into sustainable economic participation.

Ultimately, this study contends that education should not be presented as a guaranteed route to success, but as one component of a broader social and economic system. Realising its transformative potential requires simultaneous investment in curriculum renewal, equitable educational opportunities, labour-market expansion, inclusive economic growth, and structural reform. The central argument is therefore that education can create opportunities, but it cannot guarantee success in the absence of an economy capable of translating educational achievement into meaningful and sustainable livelihoods.

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