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**From graduate to employee: examining the factors that determine the professional success of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds**

***Elza Lourens & Magda Fourie-Malherbe  
Stellenbosch University, South Africa***

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# Agenda

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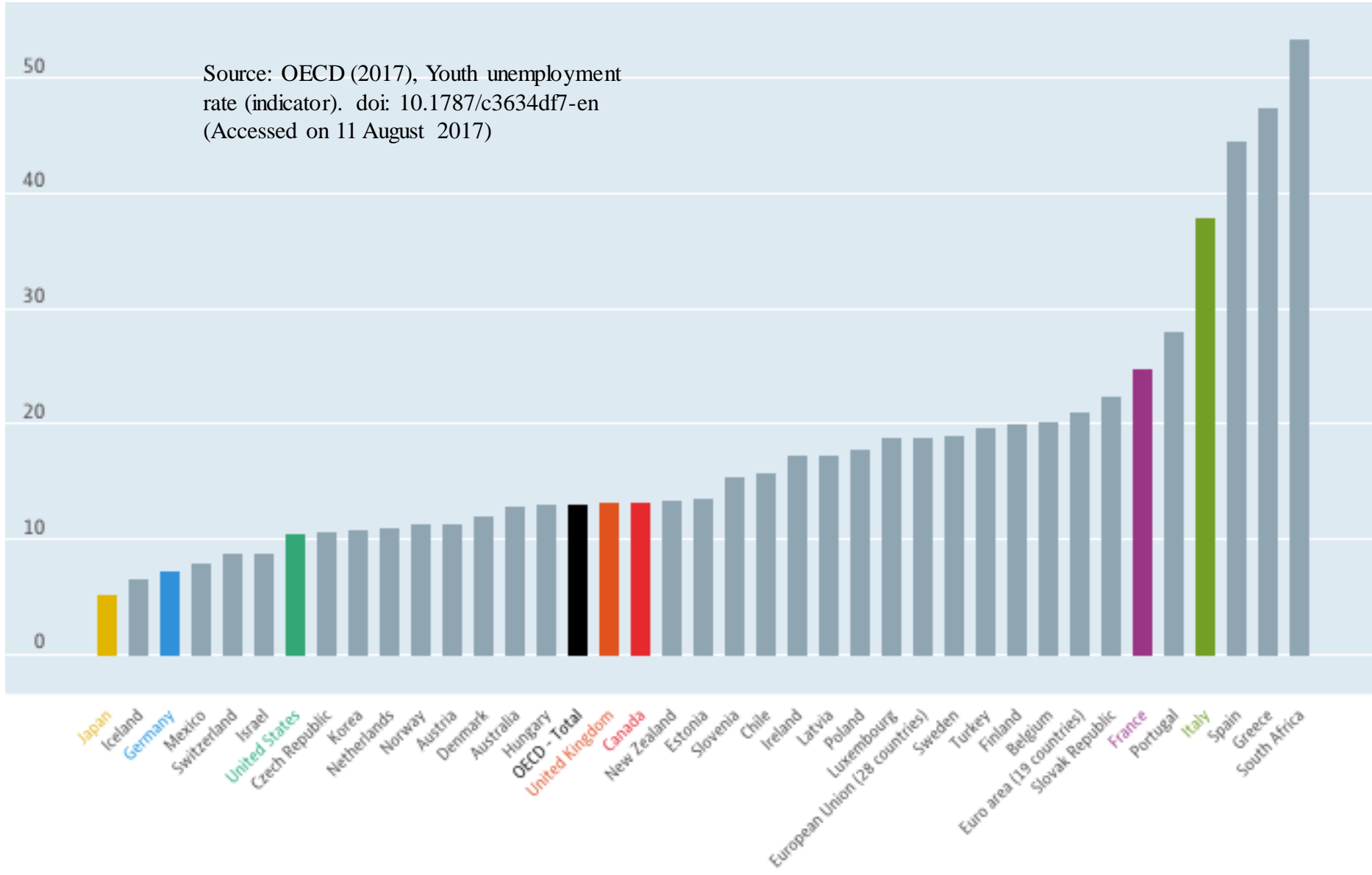
1. Why the focus on graduate employability?
2. Background to the research
3. Positioning the research
4. Defining graduate employability
5. The study
6. The graduate journey
7. Employers' perspectives
8. Findings
9. Implications
10. Questions and discussion



# Youth unemployment in OECD countries



Source: OECD (2017), Youth unemployment rate (indicator). doi: 10.1787/c3634df7-en (Accessed on 11 August 2017)





# South Africa: Youth unemployment rate, Jan 2015 - Jan 2018



SOUTH AFRICA YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



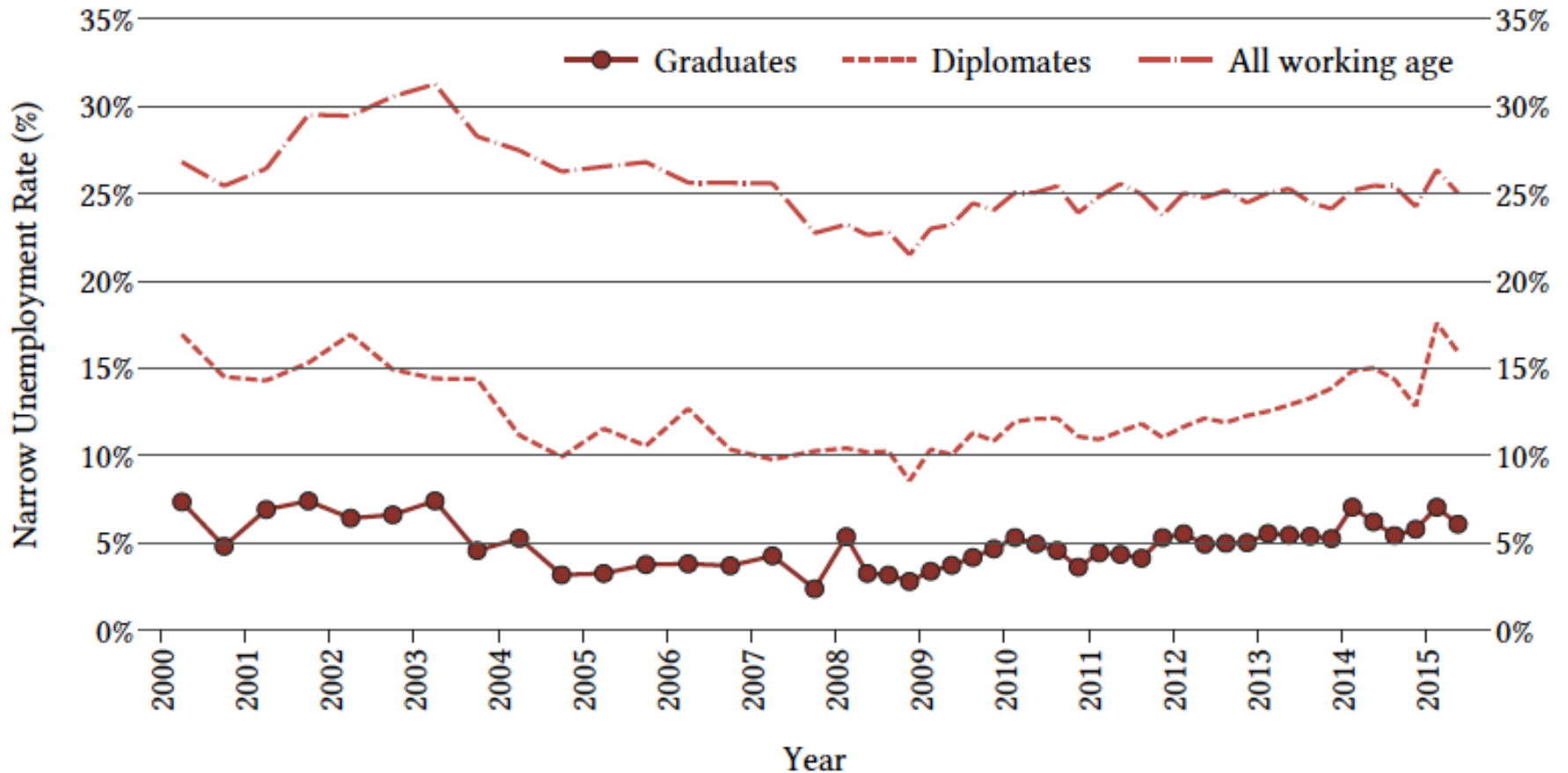
SOURCE: TRADINGECONOMICS.COM | STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA



# South Africa: Graduate unemployment rate, 2000 - 2015



Figure 6: Narrow unemployment rates (%) for graduates, diplomates, and the population of working-age (2000 - 2015)



NOTES: Own estimations using Stats SA's March 2000 LFS - QLFS2015Q4 data. Estimates are weighted and are calculated only for the population of working-age (15 - 64 year-olds).



# Why is graduate unemployment of such concern?

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“Graduate unemployment has been and remains a matter of great concern as the social and political consequences of high unemployment among the educated youth can be serious, as evidenced by the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ in North Africa. ...The causes of graduate unemployment are known: poor quality and relevance of qualifications, the lack of attributes and competencies (‘soft skills’) sought by employers in graduates, and **poor linkages between universities and the world of work**. As graduate outputs are expected to increase, the situation can worsen and **requires a concerted, well-defined strategy and action plan at national and institutional level.**” (Mohamedbhai, G. 2018. What do the next 10 years hold for higher education? *University World News* 3 April – online) (our emphasis)

# QS Graduate Employability Rankings 2018 Just Launched



For the International  
Office

For the Marketing  
Department

For the Office of  
Institutional Planning,  
Strategy and Research

For the Office of the Vice-  
Chancellor/President



We are excited to announce the launch of the Graduate Employability Rankings 2018. Labelled as arguably the most extensive global comparison of the employability outcomes achieved by higher education institutions, this innovative and unique ranking provides extensive insights into the link between university practices and graduate employability.



## Graduate employability becomes part of the international rankings game

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According to the results, Stanford University came in as the global leader, followed by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and Harvard University. Stanford leads by virtue of perfect scores for *Employer Reputation*, *Alumni Outcomes*, and *Partnerships with Employers* – the only university with three ‘full marks’ scores ([www.qs.com/graduate-employability-rankings-2018/](http://www.qs.com/graduate-employability-rankings-2018/))





# Background to the research

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- CHEC GDS 2013
  - 2010 cohort from four universities in WC
  - Focus on **first-time entrants** into the labour market
- Motivation for study
  - larger numbers of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds entering higher education
  - students from disadvantaged backgrounds face bigger challenges to complete HE
  - high unemployment rates



## Positioning the research

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- Expectations from governments that higher education should contribute to national development goals (cf. National Development Plan, SA White Paper for Post-School Education and Training 2013)
- Shift towards post-industrialised knowledge-driven economy requires graduates to be employable in more sophisticated labour market
- However, seeing the purpose of higher education purely in economic terms negates its broader social, intellectual, cultural and moral role
- “High-quality teaching and learning that addresses both students’ practical career needs in conjunction with their more lasting capacities for critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and civic participation” (American Academy of Arts & Science 2017: 88).
- In a highly unequal society such as SA the promotion of social justice should include a focus on graduate employability



# Definition of graduate employability



- Term associated with ‘graduateness’, ‘graduate skills’, ‘graduate attributes’, ‘graduate identity’, ‘graduate employment rates’.
- For purpose of this presentation ‘graduate employability’ defined as ‘the process of graduates seeking and gaining employment and the factors affecting this process’





## The study

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- Aim: examine the factors that determine the professional success in first-time employment of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds
  - the strategies they employed at university to graduate successfully
  - the strategies they employed to secure employment
  - how they and their employers understood success in the workplace
  - the relevance of their degree studies to their careers, according to them and their employers



## Participants in the study

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### Graduates

- Sample drawn from 2010 cohort of 5 560 graduates who had participated in a graduate destination survey
- Proxies for being disadvantaged:
  - Parents' level of education
  - Students' means of financial support during their HE studies



# Participants according to institution, field of study, qualification, gender, race and employment



Institution		Field of study		Level of qualification		Gender		Race		Sector employed		Residing province	
CPUT	9	AgriSciences	0	PhD	1	Male	14	African	12	HE	3	Western Cape	26
		Arts and Social Sciences	8	Masters	2								
SU	6	Economic and Management Sciences	6	Honours	4			Coloured	17	Private	12		
		Education	1	Postgraduate diploma	2								
UCT	9	Engineering	3	Bachelors	19			Indian/ Asian	1	Public	14		
		Law	0	Diploma	1								
UWC	p	Medicine and Health	3	Certificate	1	White	0	Un- employed	1	Gauteng Province	4		
		Science	9										



## Participants in the study

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### Employers

- Thirteen employers related to graduates or fields graduates worked in
  - Public sector: 6
  - Private sector: 5
  - Higher Education: 2



## The research

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- Interview with each graduate participant
- E-mail interview with each employer
- Thematic analysis of narratives
- Four phases of the graduate journey identified:
  - 1) entry into higher education
  - 2) experiences in higher education
  - 3) transition into employment**
  - 4) negotiating employment





# The graduate journey

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- Entry into HE
  - Constraints in choices of programmes and institutions
  - Lack of information on programmes and institutions
  - Ignorance about employment opportunities and the nature of work
- Experiences in HE
  - HE as a 'foreign' environment
  - Varied experiences of institutional support
  - Engaging in extra-curricular activities
  - Institutions matter
  - Growing importance of post-graduate studies



# The graduate journey

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- Transition into employment
  - Difficult and challenging
  - Time to employment
  - Lack of planning
  - Limited scope
  - Random internet searches
  - On-line applications
  - In-service training and internships
  - CV's and graduate profiles
  - Career services and institutional support
  - **Social networks emerged as main method to secure employment**



# The graduate journey

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- Negotiating employment
  - Gap between HE and employment
  - Support from various sources in employment



## Employers' perspectives

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- Qualification the first 'tick'
- Wide range of attributes
- Cultural 'fit'
- Graduate profile
- Lack of basic skills to function in the world of work
- Institutional preference



- Graduates do not think about future careers when they enter HE
- Students and parents believe that a HE qualification guarantees good employment
- Students believe postgraduate studies provide a positional advantage in the labour market
- There is little or no focus on graduate employability during HE
- A gap exists between graduation day and first-time employment
- Students from disadvantaged backgrounds still struggle more to capitalise on the benefits of HE for employability than their peers.
- **There is little or no support from HE or employers during the transition into employment**



## Implications of the study

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- 1) The study highlighted the complexity of graduate employability, particularly in a highly unequal society such as South Africa
- 2) The study demonstrated how important networking and the strengthening of social capital are for graduates with a view to employability
- 3) The study revealed the importance of a graduate profile in seeking and finding employment



# Implication: Complex and multifaceted challenge requiring collaboration

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- Affects all stakeholders  social justice
  - Graduate (including parents, family, friends )
    - Agency
  - Basic education
    - relevant information
    - difference between types of schools
  - Government
  - HE
    - employability as priority
  - **Employers**
    - **bridging the gap between graduation and employment**



# Implication: need for networks and importance of social capital

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- Networks that enable or disable individuals or groups
- Crucial in securing employment
- Quality of secure employment associated with quality of networks
  - Mostly friends and family
  - Limited access to 'outside' information





## Implication (cont)

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- Support graduates in developing and expanding networks, in both in-class and out-of-class environments
- Stronger connections between higher education and the world of work
- **Employers should rethink their recruitment processes**
  - **Appointment criteria**
  - **Spatial barriers to job seeking**



## Implication: Importance of graduate profiles

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- Support graduates in developing and expanding graduate profiles
- Improved institutional career services



Where should  
the graduate  
journey end?





## Finally...



- HE should think differently about the graduate journey; it does not end with graduation but extends up to the point of the graduate securing employment
- **Employers should become collaborators to support graduates in making the transition**





Thank you for your kind attention!



Contact particulars:

[el3@sun.ac.za](mailto:el3@sun.ac.za)

[mfourie@sun.ac.za](mailto:mfourie@sun.ac.za)

Questions and discussion

