

# Educated Yet Underutilised: A Qualitative Inquiry Into The Experiences And Challenges Of Unemployed And Underemployed Graduates In The Or Tambo District Municipality, South Africa

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## Abstract

*Background:* In South Africa, graduate unemployment and underemployment continue to be major issues, especially in rural areas like OR Tambo district. Many graduates find it difficult to find fulfilling work despite the growth of higher education, which has far-reaching socioeconomic and psychological repercussions. Rural prospects were restricted by structural impediments, and these issues are made worse by the discrepancy between academic preparedness and job market expectations. *Aim:* To investigate the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of unemployed and underemployed graduates in the OR Tambo District, with a view to identifying potential strategies for improving graduate employability. *Setting:* The research was conducted in the OR Tambo District Municipality, located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The district is characterised by high unemployment levels, socio-economic inequalities, and rural underdevelopment, making it an ideal setting for examining graduate unemployment and underemployment in context. *Methods:* The study employed a qualitative research approach situated within an interpretivist paradigm, using a phenomenological design to capture participants lived experiences. Data were collected using a semi-structured online interview guide and was distributed via WhatsApp to graduates from universities and TVET colleges residing in the OR Tambo district. A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used until data saturation was reached. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, was employed to identify and interpret emerging themes. *Results:* Four major themes emerged from the findings: (1) ongoing structural barriers to employment, such as nepotism, the "experience trap," and a lack of job opportunities in rural areas; (2) the significant social, economic, and psychological effects of unemployment, such as stress, financial strain, and a decreased sense of self-worth; (3) coping mechanisms, such as informal entrepreneurship, additional education, and reliance on social and spiritual support networks; and (4) recommendations from graduates that place a strong emphasis on mentorship, organised placement programs, entrepreneurship support, and tighter ties between the government, universities, and industry. *Conclusion:* The study emphasises the intricate interactions between personal, societal, and structural elements that influence graduate unemployment in rural South Africa. Multi-stakeholder initiatives are called for, such as structural changes to hiring procedures, targeted job creation in rural areas, increased assistance for graduate entrepreneurship, and better matching the demands of the labour market with higher education. *Contribution:* This study adds to discussions on graduate unemployment from an ecohumanist standpoint by highlighting the experiences of graduates in the OR Tambo District and highlighting the ethical and social justice aspects of employability. In addition to adding value to scholarly discussions, the findings give employers, higher education institutions, and policymakers useful information on how to increase community resilience and promote graduate involvement in the workforce.

**Keywords:** Graduate unemployment; underemployment; employability; lived experiences; OR Tambo District.

## Introduction

Globally, graduate unemployment is a persistent and complicated socioeconomic issue, with especially dire repercussions in developing countries like South Africa. It threatens social stability, impedes economic growth, and maintains inequality (Pauw et al., 2008). Many graduates are still unemployed or underemployed despite notable increases in higher education enrolment and graduation rates, which calls into question the efficacy of education as a means of achieving economic empowerment (Mlatsheni & Rospabe, 2002).

The national unemployment rate in South Africa is among the highest in the world; in the second quarter of 2023, it was at 32.9%, while the youth unemployment rate for those between the ages of 15 and 34 was 61% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Despite having a lower unemployment rate than those without tertiary education, graduates' unemployment rate might nevertheless be quite high in some situations (Reddy et al., 2016). One of the most economically disadvantaged provinces, the Eastern Cape, has continuously

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recorded high rates of graduate unemployment, especially in rural municipalities like the OR Tambo District (Mayekiso & Obioha, 2021).

Numerous studies link a mix of institutional, personal, and structural factors to graduate unemployment. A stagnating economy and low labour market absorption are examples of structural issues (Bhorat et al., 2016). Institutional factors include weak university-industry ties, insufficient career guidance, and the calibre and applicability of higher education courses (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). On a human level, poor soft skills and a lack of real-world work experience are frequently mentioned as obstacles to employment (Mseleku, 2022). All these factors interact to produce the problem of "educated yet underutilised" graduates who either choose jobs that do not align with their qualifications and career goals or remain unemployed.

The significant social and psychological repercussions of graduate unemployment, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and social marginalisation, are highlighted by qualitative research (Mlatsheni, 2012). Financial burden on unemployed graduates can worsen household poverty, especially in rural areas where job chances are limited (Mayekiso & Obioha, 2021). According to ecohumanists, this problem impacts social cohesiveness, well-being, and sustainable development, making it not just an economic one but also a human and environmental one (Pepper, 2005). Underutilisation of human capital results in a loss of potential for local economies and communities, which is a crucial aspect of ecohumanism.

Despite extensive literature on graduate unemployment in South Africa, most research has focused on national or urban contexts, leaving rural districts underexplored. With its high rates of poverty, poor infrastructure, and economic marginalisation, the OR Tambo District Municipality offers a distinctive context for studying how recent graduates deal with underemployment and unemployment. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial for designing context-specific interventions that align with principles of social justice and sustainable development.

This study aims to investigate the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of unemployed and underemployed graduates in the OR Tambo District Municipality, with a view to identifying potential strategies for improving graduate employability. The study seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on graduate employability while providing practical insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and local development stakeholders.

## Literature Review

This literature review critically examines existing research pertinent to the experiences and challenges faced by unemployed and underemployed graduates in South Africa, with a specific focus on the OR Tambo District Municipality. The review is structured around the study's objectives: exploring lived experiences, identifying contributing factors to unemployment, understanding socio-economic and psychological challenges, investigating coping mechanisms, and gathering recommendations for interventions and policies.

### *Experiences of unemployed and underemployed graduates*

Graduate unemployment and underemployment in South Africa have been extensively documented, with studies highlighting the dissonance between educational attainment and labour market outcomes. Research indicates that a significant proportion of graduates, particularly from TVET colleges, remain unemployed or underemployed, often in roles unrelated to their qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2022). In the OR Tambo District, this phenomenon is exacerbated by limited local employment opportunities and a lack of infrastructure to support graduate employment initiatives (Ncube, 2018).

### *Factors contributing to graduate unemployment*

Several factors contribute to the high unemployment rates among graduates in South Africa. Graham et al. (2019) identify a mismatch between the skills acquired through formal education and the demands of the labour market. This skills gap is particularly pronounced among TVET graduates, who often find their

qualifications undervalued by employers. Additionally, systemic issues such as inadequate career guidance, limited access to internships, and insufficient industry partnerships further hinder graduates' employability (Papier et al., 2019).

### *Socio-economic and psychological challenges*

The socio-economic and psychological impacts of unemployment on graduates are profound. Studies have shown that prolonged unemployment leads to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among young graduates (Kasa, 2025). In rural areas like the OR Tambo District, these challenges are compounded by social isolation and a lack of community support structures. The stigma associated with unemployment can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth and a feeling of marginalisation within society (Thakoordeen-Reddy, 2024).

### *Coping mechanisms and strategies*

Graduates employ various coping mechanisms to navigate unemployment and underemployment. These include pursuing further education, engaging in informal sector activities, and relying on familial support networks (Coetzee, 2010). However, these strategies are often temporary solutions and may not lead to sustainable employment outcomes. The reliance on informal sector employment can also perpetuate cycles of underemployment, as these roles typically offer limited career progression and job security (Babatunde, 2021).

### *Recommendations for interventions and policies*

To address graduate unemployment, several policy interventions have been proposed. These include enhancing the alignment between educational curricula and labour market needs, expanding internship and apprenticeship opportunities, and fostering stronger collaborations between educational institutions and industries (Shankar, 2012). Additionally, initiatives aimed at improving the psychological well-being of graduates, such as career counselling and mental health support services, are crucial for equipping graduates to cope with the challenges of unemployment (Kasa, 2025).

## **Research Methodology**

### *Research paradigm*

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena through the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). This paradigm was appropriate because the study aimed to explore graduates' lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to unemployment and underemployment within their socio-economic context.

### *Research approach*

A qualitative research approach was employed to capture in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. This approach allows for a rich understanding of social phenomena by focusing on meaning-making rather than numerical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Research design*

The study adopted a phenomenological design, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) principles, to explore the lived experiences of unemployed and underemployed graduates in the OR Tambo District. Phenomenology was suitable because it focuses on individuals' subjective interpretations of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

### *Target population*

The target population consisted of graduates from universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges residing in the OR Tambo District who were either unemployed or underemployed.

### *Sampling methods and sample size*

The study used non-probability sampling techniques, specifically purposive sampling to select participants who met the inclusion criteria, and snowball sampling to reach additional participants through referrals.

The sample size was determined by data saturation principle, which was achieved after interviewing 14 participants. Data saturation was reached when no new themes or insights emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

### *Data collection methods*

Data were collected using an online semi-structured interview guide, distributed via WhatsApp. This method was chosen for its accessibility, affordability, and suitability for participants in rural areas with limited resources. Open-ended questions were developed in line with the research objectives, covering areas such as personal experiences of unemployment, perceived causes, coping mechanisms, and recommendations for policy interventions. Interviews were conducted in text and voice formats, depending on participant preference, and follow-up clarification questions were asked where necessary.

### *Data analysis*

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- i. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of responses.
- ii. Generation of initial codes.
- iii. Searching for patterns and potential themes.
- iv. Reviewing themes to ensure coherence and relevance.
- v. Defining and naming themes.
- vi. Producing the final report, supported by verbatim excerpts.

This method allowed for systematic identification of recurring patterns and themes relevant to the research objectives.

### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria:

- i. *Credibility*: Achieved through member checking, where participants verified their responses.
- ii. *Transferability*: Ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the study context and participant characteristics.
- iii. *Dependability*: Maintained through an audit trail documenting research decisions and processes.

- iv. *Confirmability*: Reinforced by reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to minimise researcher bias.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection and permission to conduct research in the OR Tambo District Municipality. Participants provided informed consent electronically via WhatsApp before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifying information from transcripts. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

## **Results**

### ***Research objective 1: lived experiences of unemployed and underemployed graduates***

This section presents the findings from the participants' narratives regarding their lived experiences after graduation, specifically their journeys in searching for employment. Thematic analysis was employed to organise the responses into coherent themes, reflecting the shared and divergent experiences of unemployed and underemployed graduates in the OR Tambo District. Four dominant themes emerged: persistent rejection and lack of opportunities; mismatches between qualifications and job requirements; limited but valuable temporary or support roles; and structural barriers in accessing employment.

#### **Persistent rejection and lack of opportunities**

A dominant narrative across participants was the consistent rejection they faced when applying for jobs. Graduates repeatedly emphasised the demoralising cycle of sending out applications without receiving positive feedback. For some, this rejection extended across lengthy periods, highlighting the systemic difficulty in securing employment. One participant expressed:

*"I have been applying for a very long time with no luck. Not only for what I've studied for but for any job at the moment"* (P2).

Similarly, another echoed the sense of futility:

*"I did many times but none of the applications went well"* (P4).

This recurring rejection fostered a sense of frustration, discouragement, and a feeling of wasted effort, aligning with wider literature on graduate unemployment and its psychological toll.

#### **Mismatches between qualifications and job requirements**

Several participants described their experiences of facing stringent or unrealistic job requirements, particularly around experience. Employers frequently demanded prior experience, which created a paradox for new graduates. As one graduate explained:

*"They want 3 years' experience"* (P10).

Others noted that advertised positions often targeted overqualified individuals or excluded them altogether because of lack of experience. Participant 9 reflected:

*"I have applied for a few jobs and mostly they are looking for overqualified people or people with no experience at all. I haven't been able to get a job in my field of study"* (P9).

This mismatch between the graduates' qualifications and employers' expectations underscores the disconnect between higher education training and labour market entry requirements.

## Temporary and support roles as transitional spaces

Although unemployment dominated many responses, a subset of graduates reported securing temporary or support roles, often outside their fields of study. These positions, while limited in duration and remuneration, provided exposure to workplace environments and the development of transferable skills.

One participant reflected positively on their engagement as an educator assistant and later in a government support role:

*“My experience was very good because I got to be exposed in the working environment... I can say I am ready to run my own office now without being a learner”* (P5).

Another graduate mentioned working at a call centre (P11), while others took up agricultural or administrative roles, though sometimes underpaid or precarious (P14). Such accounts highlight the dual role of temporary employment as both an avenue for professional growth and a reminder of underemployment.

## Structural and institutional barriers

Some graduates identified structural barriers that prevented them from even entering the job market. For example, Participant 13 shared that they had not applied for positions because they were unable to access their academic results (certificate) due to outstanding fees:

*“No, I haven’t applied for a job in my field because I don’t have my results with me since I owe the institution”* (P13).

Others spoke of limited feedback from employers (P6, P8), or of being confined to low-paying manual work despite holding relevant qualifications (P14). These responses illuminate how institutional, financial, and systemic challenges exacerbate the difficulties graduates face beyond the labour market itself.

## Research Objective 2: Perceptions of the factors contributing to graduate unemployment

Participants provided varied perspectives on what they perceived as the underlying causes of graduate unemployment. Their responses revealed a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and individual-level factors. The thematic analysis generated five dominant themes: limited job opportunities; lack of experience and the experience trap; corruption, nepotism, and unfair hiring practices; retirement and labour market congestion; and systemic and structural challenges.

### Limited Job opportunities

The most recurring theme was the shortage of available jobs, particularly in rural areas such as the OR Tambo District. Many participants emphasised that the sheer scarcity of vacancies hindered their chances of entering the labour market, regardless of their qualifications. As one participant observed:

*“Few job opportunities and people studying courses that are not relevant to modern times”* (P1).

Others echoed this, concisely framing their experiences:

*“Few job opportunities”* (P7, P9).

This sense of saturation and scarcity reflects the broader structural issue of South Africa’s sluggish economy and its inability to absorb the growing number of graduates.

### Lack of experience and the experience trap

Another widely cited factor was the requirement for prior experience, which graduates perceived as an unrealistic barrier to entry. Many participants felt caught in a cycle where they could not secure employment without experience but were unable to gain experience without first being employed. For instance:

*“Basically, lack of experience, few job opportunities... having worked for a year or more in your life, it doesn't matter in the industry” (P8).*

Similarly, Participant 12 noted:

*“Lack of experience” (P12).*

Participant 13 described this dilemma comprehensively:

*“Graduate unemployment... is mainly caused by... the experience trap where employers want 2-3 years' experience but don't give us a chance to gain it.”*

This cycle deepened feelings of exclusion and highlighted the disjuncture between higher education outputs and labour market entry requirements.

### **Corruption, nepotism, and unfair hiring practices**

Several participants attributed graduate unemployment to unethical practices within recruitment processes. Nepotism, bribery, and corruption were frequently mentioned, with participants believing that opportunities were often awarded to individuals with personal or political connections rather than merit. Participant 3 shared:

*“I can say it's nepotism; they employ their relatives who do not qualify for the job opportunities” (P3).*

Another participant highlighted bribery as a systemic barrier:

*“In our days everything is about bribing... what mostly hurts us is that in workplaces you'll find old people... still holding the position instead of retiring so that we can also get something as young youth” (P2).*

Similarly, Participant 4 pointed to a broader culture of corruption:

*“More young people are educated now than before, but corruption is high in our country” (P4).*

These accounts suggest that beyond economic scarcity, governance and fairness issues are seen as significant contributors to graduate unemployment.

### **Retirement and labour market congestion**

Another perceived barrier was the retention of older workers in positions long after the statutory retirement age. Graduates expressed frustration at what they viewed as blocked opportunities caused by individuals unwilling to vacate roles for younger entrants. Participant 5 remarked:

*“In the working fields there are so many officials working at 60 years and not doing anything because they are tired but don't want to retire and open space for youth” (P5).*

This perception underscores graduates' sense that generational turnover in the labour market is too slow to accommodate the growing pool of qualified youth.

## Systemic and structural challenges

A smaller group of participants framed unemployment as a systemic issue rooted in macro-level political and economic conditions. Criticism of government policies was explicit, with one participant stating:

*“ANC government doesn’t create jobs; they chew the money... that’s why the rate of unemployment in SA is so high”* (P10).

Another emphasised the intersection of skills mismatches, geographic disparities, and lack of entrepreneurial support:

*“The problem is not that graduates are unemployable, but that the system doesn’t give us enough opportunities to apply our knowledge and build careers”* (P13).

One participant also noted how owing fees to their institution prevented them from applying for jobs at all (P11), pointing to the role of financial barriers in shaping access to employment.

## Research Objective 3: To identify the social, economic, and psychological challenges faced by unemployed and underemployed graduates

The third objective sought to uncover the challenges faced by graduates as a result of unemployment or underemployment. Two key questions were posed: (1) *What challenges do you face because you are unemployed or underemployed?* and (2) *How has being unemployed or underemployed affected your personal life and future plans?* Thematic analysis revealed several interrelated themes, as outlined below.

### What challenges do you face because you are unemployed or underemployed?

#### ***Financial hardship***

The most prominent challenge identified was severe financial difficulty. Participants reported being unable to meet their daily needs such as clothing, toiletries, data for job applications, or even supporting their families.

*“Financial unstable, stressful and depressing, let alone not able to buy toiletries, data to do online applications... It’s a lot shame”* (P4).

*“I sell sweets to support my family”* (P7).

*“Financial problems I can’t even buy myself clothes”* (P3).

#### ***Psychological distress and mental health strain***

Financial stress was often intertwined with psychological challenges, including stress, depression, and anxiety. Graduates expressed feelings of hopelessness, shame, and low confidence.

*“Financial problems and it cause depression”* (P10).

*“Stress”* (P12).

*“The uncertainty of not knowing when I will find work affects my confidence and motivation”* (P13).

#### ***Social and family pressures***

Unemployment also carried a social burden. Participants described feeling judged or pressured by family and peers, which contributed to stress and feelings of failure.

*“Another challenge is pressure from family and friends... Some think I am not trying hard enough, while others compare me to those who are already working” (P13).*

## **How has being unemployed or underemployed affected your personal life and future plans?**

### ***Disruption of future planning and goals***

Graduates found it difficult to make long-term plans due to their unstable employment situations. This affected aspirations for further study, family support, and financial security.

*“I can’t plan for long-term commitments like further studies, helping my family consistently, or even saving for the future” (P1).*

*“It has changed my goals and routine because I had to live with this unemployment and earn R370 for cosmetics, not to mention poverty” (P5).*

### ***Loss of motivation and disillusionment***

Several participants noted a loss of faith in education and decreased motivation to pursue further studies or career goals.

*“Everything has changed, I no longer have interest to further my studies because of unemployment in South Africa” (P3).*

*“I’m starting to lose faith and not to see the value of education with no connections” (P7).*

### ***Mental health impacts and hopelessness***

Unemployment was described as deeply demoralising, with some participants expressing despair, hopelessness, and even harmful thoughts.

*“It made me lose hope I don’t want to lie the only thing in my mind is to commit the crime” (P10).*

*“A lot has changed, looking at my age and not having a thing at this age it’s very stressful” (P2).*

### ***Adaptation and reconsideration of career paths***

Despite the challenges, some participants demonstrated resilience by adjusting their career plans and exploring alternative opportunities.

*“Being unemployed has disrupted my daily routine... It has also forced me to change my goals instead of aiming only for formal employment and becoming a successful livestock farmer, I am now considering teaching since it has better employment opportunities” (P12).*

## **Research Objective 4: To investigate the coping mechanisms and strategies employed by graduates in navigating unemployment**

This objective explored how graduates manage the difficulties of unemployment and underemployment, with particular attention to their coping strategies and attempts at creating their own opportunities. Two guiding questions were posed: (1) *What are you currently doing to cope with unemployment or underemployment?* and (2) *Have you tried to create your own opportunities?* Thematic analysis produced several themes.

## What are you currently doing to cope with unemployment or underemployment?

### *Engagement in small business activities*

Several participants reported turning to informal entrepreneurship as a way of coping with unemployment. These included selling clothing, perfumes, or engaging in hairstyling.

*“Trying small business-like selling clothes”* (P2).

*“I’m selling perfumes, hairstylist and Forever living distributor”* (P4).

*“Small business”* (P7).

### *Further studies and skills development*

Several participants highlighted education as a strategy to improve employability, with some enrolled in formal programmes such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), while others engaged in short courses or continued higher education.

*“Am currently furthering my studies with the hope I will get employed somehow”* (P5).

*“I am currently studying PGCE. It’s a short course that will give me the opportunity to teach agriculture in high schools”* (P11).

*“I’m just further my studies”* (P6).

### *Temporary or transitional employment*

Some participants relied on short-term or assistant roles while continuing to apply for jobs aligned with their qualifications.

*“Currently working as an assistant teacher and applying for other job opportunities”* (P8).

*“Go to work”* (P9).

### *Spiritual and emotional coping mechanisms*

One participant underscored the role of prayer, reading, and peer support as emotional coping mechanisms, highlighting the importance of resilience and maintaining hope.

*“Spiritually and emotionally, I rely on prayer and support from friends to keep myself motivated”* (P1).

### *Lack of coping strategies*

Notably, some participants admitted to having no coping strategies, reflecting the sense of being overwhelmed by unemployment.

*“Nothing”* (P10).

## Have you tried to create your own opportunities?

### *Small business initiatives*

Many participants indicated that they had attempted to start businesses, including reselling clothes online, offering tutoring, or establishing small enterprises in their communities.

*“Yes, I’ve considered small business ideas, like reselling clothes online and offering tutoring to school learners” (P2).*

*“Yes... I’m selling perfumes, hairstylist and Forever living distributor” (P5).*

*“Starting a small business” (P8).*

### ***Community-based initiatives***

One participant described collective youth efforts to establish opportunities within the community, though these were unsuccessful due to lack of institutional support.

*“Yes, we had small group of youth in the community and started requesting donations from working people and do events to make youth show their talent, but because of lack of support... we stopped” (P6).*

### ***Skill enhancement and self-improvement***

Some participants focused on self-development through short courses and training, recognising that personal capacity-building was a form of creating opportunities.

*“I’m doing short courses to improve my skills” (P4).*

### ***Structural constraints***

Several participants noted that while they had attempted to create opportunities, barriers such as lack of capital, income, or land hindered sustainability.

*“I once did however it needs capital. More income and land, something that I lack at the moment” (P10).*

*“I tried to start a small business but unfortunately I didn’t continue with it because of lack of customers” (P7).*

### ***Non-engagement***

A few participants openly stated they had not tried to create opportunities, reflecting either limited resources or a sense of hopelessness.

*“No” (P1).*

## **Research Objective 5: To gather graduates’ recommendations on possible interventions and policies to address graduate unemployment and underemployment**

The fifth research objective sought to explore the interventions, support mechanisms, and policy recommendations that unemployed and underemployed graduates believe could help mitigate their current situation. The findings reveal that graduates articulated a strong need for holistic interventions spanning financial, professional, and emotional dimensions, alongside systemic reforms by government, universities, and employers. The following themes emerged from their responses.

### **What kind of support do you think unemployed and underemployed graduates need the most?**

#### ***Financial assistance and stability***

A dominant theme across participants’ narratives was the urgent need for financial support to cover basic needs and facilitate job-seeking activities. For instance, one participant emphasised:

*“I think financial support and mentorship are the most important. Many graduates cannot afford to relocate for jobs or attend interviews in bigger cities” (P1).*

Similarly, another added that “*financial assistance*” is key to reducing the burden of unemployment (P10).

This reflects how financial insecurity acts as both a barrier to employment opportunities and a source of psychological distress.

### ***Career mentorship and skills development***

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of mentorship in bridging the gap between formal education and workplace expectations. As (P2) explained:

“*Career mentorship, emotional support and also financial assistance*” are central needs, while (P11) reinforced the importance of mentorship by stating:

“*Skills training and career mentorship are very important to bridge the gap between theory and workplace requirements.*”

This illustrates the value graduates place on structured career guidance to align their skills with market needs.

### ***Job connections and networks***

Many participants stressed the importance of employment networks and direct job connections. (/P8) explained:

“*Job connections, I believe everyone currently facing problems with employment would appreciate being employed because then they'll be able to progress in life.*”

Similarly, (P9) concisely stated:

“*Job connections.*” The repetition of this response underscores the perception that many opportunities remain inaccessible without professional networks or referrals.

### ***Emotional support and well-being***

The psychological toll of unemployment was also recognised. (P6) pointed out the need for “*emotional support*”, while P1 reinforced that such support is essential because “*being underemployed can affect one's confidence and self-esteem.*” This theme highlights the dual need for psychosocial interventions alongside economic and professional support.

**What do you think government, universities, or employers can do to reduce graduate unemployment and underemployment?**

### ***Expanding job and internship opportunities***

A recurring recommendation was the expansion of job opportunities and internships. For example, P2 suggested:

“*By increasing job opportunities and internships so at least we get experience they need.*”

(P7) also echoed: “*More internships.*”

Similarly, (P10) remarked: “*More internships and job opportunities.*”

These perspectives illustrate how participants see structured entry-level opportunities as essential stepping stones into the labour market.

***Aligning university curricula with industry needs***

Several participants recommended stronger university-industry linkages. (P1) argued that:

*“Universities can strengthen partnerships with industries, so that students are prepared with relevant skills.”*

Likewise, (P11) emphasised that universities should:

*“Offer more practical training and internships”* to ensure graduates are not only academically prepared but also workplace ready.

***Employer responsibility and mentorship***

Participants urged employers to adjust their hiring practices. As (P8) noted, employers should:

*“Lower the experience needed for some job opportunities.”*

Similarly, (P1) suggested that:

*“Employers should offer more entry-level roles and mentorship instead of requiring long years of experience from graduates who are just starting out.”*

These perspectives point to structural barriers in recruitment policies that exacerbate unemployment.

***Government-led interventions***

Graduates called for stronger government involvement, especially in funding and programme development. (P4) suggested that government should:

*“Provide funding, free computer skills, business mentorship.”*

(P11) highlighted that government could:

*“Fund small farming projects and job programs”* to stimulate both employment and entrepreneurship.

The emphasis on government support reflects a perceived responsibility of the state in addressing systemic unemployment challenges.

**If you could send a message to leaders about graduate unemployment and underemployment, what would you say?**

***Investment in youth and sustainable jobs***

Graduates appealed to leaders to view youth employment as a national priority. (P1) declared:

*“Please invest in young people. Internships alone are not enough we need pathways into real, sustainable jobs.”*

Similarly, (P11) stressed the urgency of coordinated action:

*“We need action now so that graduates can contribute to the economy instead of being left behind.”*

***Policy reform and structural change***

Some participants suggested reforms to retirement age policies and employment eligibility. (P5) argued:

*“All those you already there must retire at 55 that will open more job opportunities,”*

while another added:

*“They must extend the fact that when we reach 35, we cannot be employed because we finished school long time ago but there is unemployment” (P5).*

These views reflect frustration with systemic barriers in the labour market.

### ***Support for entrepreneurship and self-reliance***

Participants also called for initiatives encouraging entrepreneurship. (P4) suggested:

*“Educate youth to start their businesses than waiting to be employed.”*

Similarly, (P7) recommended:

*“Graduate allowance to all graduates according to their level of education, more internships and create more job opportunities.”*

Such recommendations highlight a desire for government and institutional support in creating self-employment pathways.

### ***Practical support in job-seeking***

Graduates emphasised the need for practical support in navigating job applications. For example, (P8) explained:

*“Government to firstly provide people to help with job applications or training on how to properly apply, e.g., Z83 forms, because some people get rejected due to that.”*

This illustrates how even administrative processes can disadvantage graduates without the necessary support.

## **Discussion**

The study’s findings illuminate the multifaceted experiences of unemployed and underemployed graduates in the OR Tambo District spanning lived realities, perceived causes, psychological and social challenges, coping strategies, and articulated interventions. Through the lens of ecohumanism, these findings intersect human potential, social justice, and regional sustainability.

### *Lived experiences, perceived causes, and structural disconnect*

Graduates’ lived experiences dominated by persistent rejection, skills-market mismatches, and structural barriers resonate with existing South African research. In urban and rural studies alike, similar frustrations emerge where employers demand years of experience, paradoxically cutting off fresh graduates (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). The “experience trap” identified by participants also aligns with broader evidence of structural misalignment between tertiary education outputs and labour market demands a consistent theme in the literature. This underscores that the problem is not graduates’ lack of skills, but systemic disconnects that limit the value of their qualifications, particularly in marginalized or rural regions like OR Tambo.

### *Psychological and socio-economic impacts*

Participants reported financial distress, social shame, anxiety, depression, and disrupted future plans, mirroring international and South African studies. De Witte and colleagues (2010) observed that unemployment generates emptiness, uncertainty, and a sense of social isolation among affected individuals.

Moreover, psychological strain is amplified in rural, economically marginalised settings evident in Mngoma's and Ayonrinde (2022) findings linking mental distress and transitions to work for rural Black youths. The combination of social pressure from family and internalised shame adds layers beyond mere unemployment, emphasising the ecohumanist concern with holistic well-being and community resilience.

### *Coping strategies and resilience*

Coping responses ranged from informal entrepreneurship and further studies to spiritual resilience and emotional support. These align with emerging evidence that entrepreneurship training supports self-efficacy among unemployed youth in South Africa (Mncwango et al., 2024). Similarly, the cultivation of soft skills (e.g., adaptability, self-learning, emotional coping) has been identified as crucial for employability in volatile labour markets. However, participants' experiences also expose the fragility of these strategies due to systemic constraints such as lack of capital or support structures thus reinforcing that resilience exists in tension with structural neglect.

### *Support needs, interventions, and policy implications*

Graduates advocated for multi-dimensional support: financial, career mentorship, job access, emotional support, and structural reforms by universities, employers, and government. This call aligns with broader recommendations in the literature: bridging the competency gap through soft-skill training, enhancing industry-academic partnerships, providing internships, and fostering entrepreneurship (Vezi-Magigaba & Utete, 2023; Mncwango et al., 2024; Shankar, 2012).

Additionally, ecohumanist values prompt attention to policies that decentralise opportunities beyond urban hubs echoing participants' comments that job concentration in cities leaves rural graduates trapped. Promoting rural entrepreneurship and supporting local enterprises align with human-environment systems thinking, suggesting a pathway that revitalises ecosystems through empowered human agency.

### *Contribution to Ecohumanism*

This study contributes to ecohumanism by revealing how ecological marginalisation, social justice deficits, and economic precarity intersect to sap graduate potential. Unlike much existing literature focused on urban and national scales, this research foregrounds place-based, rural-specific insights, providing nuanced understandings indispensable for sustainable, inclusive development core to ecohumanist theory.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to investigate the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of unemployed and underemployed graduates in the OR Tambo District, with the aim of identifying strategies to enhance graduate employability. The findings provide a sobering picture of the structural, social, and psychological dimensions of graduate unemployment in a rural South African context. Graduates' narratives highlighted persistent barriers such as limited job opportunities, the entrenched "experience trap", nepotism, and systemic corruption. These barriers are compounded by a mismatch between higher education outputs and labour market demands, exacerbating the precarity of young graduates in marginalised regions.

The consequences of this unemployment extend beyond economic deprivation. Financial strain, anxiety, social stigma, and disrupted life plans were widely reported, confirming the deeply personal and communal toll of prolonged unemployment. Yet, within these challenges, graduates demonstrated resilience through coping strategies such as informal entrepreneurship, pursuing further studies, or relying on spiritual and social support networks. Nevertheless, these efforts often remain fragile and insufficient in the absence of institutional and systemic support.

Graduates were clear in their recommendations, calling for multi-dimensional interventions: accessible financial support, structured mentorship, enhanced job placement programmes, expanded internship opportunities, and stronger partnerships between universities, government, and industry. These insights

echo existing scholarship on employability enhancement while adding depth to rural-specific contexts where systemic neglect perpetuates cycles of unemployment and underemployment.

From an ecohumanist perspective, the findings foreground the interconnectedness of social justice, community sustainability, and human potential. The exclusion of graduates from meaningful participation in the labour market represents not merely an economic inefficiency but a moral and ecological challenge, as entire communities are deprived of the skills and innovations that could foster sustainable development.

In conclusion, addressing graduate unemployment in the OR Tambo District and similar marginalised regions requires interventions that extend beyond individual skill-building to encompass systemic transformation. Universities must recalibrate curricula towards market-relevant and locally adaptive skills, employers must create entry-level pathways that allow for genuine career building, and government must invest in inclusive rural development and job creation. By situating these efforts within an ecohumanist framework, the potential exists not only to address unemployment but also to empower graduates as catalysts for community resilience, social justice, and sustainable futures.

## Recommendations

Drawing from the study's findings and existing scholarship, several practical and actionable recommendations can be made to address graduate unemployment and underemployment in the OR Tambo District and comparable contexts.

### *Strengthen graduate placement and internship programmes*

Government departments and private sector employers should expand structured graduate placement schemes that move beyond short-term internships to create sustainable employment pathways. Such programmes should include mentorship and skills transfer components, ensuring that graduates acquire meaningful experience rather than temporary exposure.

### *Enhance university-industry partnerships*

Higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape should work closely with industries, local businesses, and government agencies to align curricula with evolving labour market needs. This includes embedding work-integrated learning, career readiness modules, and entrepreneurship training into all degree and diploma programmes. Partnerships should prioritise rural-based opportunities to reduce the need for costly relocation.

### *Invest in rural job creation and local development*

Targeted investment in rural economies, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, digital services, renewable energy, and community infrastructure, can absorb graduate skills while fostering sustainable local development. Public-private partnerships should prioritise projects that employ and train graduates, creating a multiplier effect in communities.

### *Support graduate entrepreneurship*

Financial support mechanisms, such as seed funding, microfinance, and incubation hubs, should be established to assist graduates in launching small businesses and social enterprises. Training in financial literacy, project management, and business development should accompany this support. This approach addresses both the lack of formal jobs and the need for community-driven solutions.

### *Reduce structural barriers to employment*

Policies should address systemic issues identified by graduates, such as nepotism, corruption, and unrealistic experience requirements for entry-level jobs. Enforcing transparent recruitment practices and incentivising

employers to hire new graduates without prior experience could expand opportunities and restore trust in the labour market.

#### *Provide psycho-social and career support*

Given the psychological and social toll of unemployment, counselling services, peer support groups, and career mentorship networks should be made widely available. These services can be coordinated through universities, municipalities, or NGOs, helping graduates build resilience and confidence while navigating prolonged job searches.

#### *Develop graduate support policies*

The government could consider introducing targeted support such as graduate allowances, relocation stipends, or housing subsidies for those seeking work in urban centres. Such measures would reduce financial barriers and expand access to opportunities, especially for graduates from rural households.

#### *Future research recommendations:*

A need for longitudinal studies exploring how coping strategies evolve over time within structural constraints.

In-depth research into emotional and spiritual resilience mechanisms, particularly within African cultural frameworks.

Evaluation of actual interventions (e.g., mentorship, entrepreneurship programmes) and their effectiveness at regional levels

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