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University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Transitioning into and through learnerships for employability: Graduates' experiences of learnership programmes in South Africa

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in fulfilment of the conditions for the Master of Education degree

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Clearance Certificate Protocol Number: H23/06/35

Declaration

I, Brenda Zanele Nyembe, hereby declare that the thesis entitled “Transitioning into and through Learnerships for Employability: Graduates’ Experiences of Learnership Programmes in South Africa” is my own work and has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other university.

I declare that I am the sole author of this thesis, and I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions contained herein.



Signature of Candidate

19 July 2024

Abstract

Youth unemployment in South Africa is a critical issue, with graduate unemployment increasing despite various work-based learning interventions aimed at linking youth to the labour market. This mixed methods study explored the experiences of graduates participating in learnership programmes, focusing on their transition from higher education institutions into these programmes and their progression through and beyond them. Additionally, it examined graduates' understanding and awareness of employability skills developed through the programmes. By analysing graduates' narratives, the study identified the transition and learning experiences that facilitate the development of employability skills necessary for successful entry into the labour market. The study addressed the overarching research question: How do graduates experience the transition into learnership programmes and acquire skills that enhance their employment opportunities upon completion? Findings revealed the motivations driving graduates into learnerships, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to maintain balance. Support structures are crucial for facilitating smooth transitions, and workplaces play a key role in skill development. The transformative effects of learnerships on graduates' personal and professional growth are also highlighted. These insights have significant implications for policymakers, training providers, employers, and other stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of learnership programmes, emphasising the need for well-structured support initiatives tailored to participants' diverse needs.

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List of Abbreviations

CSV file	Comma-Separated Value File
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
ETD	Education, Training and Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GTE	Graduateness, Transition, and Employability
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
MMR	Mixed Methods Research
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NSDP 2030	National Skills Development Plan, 2030
OEQs	Open-Ended Questions
POPIA	Protection of Personal Information Act
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SDA	Skills Development Act
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
WBL	Workplace-Based Learning
WIL	Work Integrated Learning
WP-PSET	White Paper on Post-School Education and Training

Chapter 1. Introduction

This opening chapter serves as a guide to the research study, it provides an overview into the background and contextual framework within which the study is situated. In addition, the chapter articulates the problem statement, research aims, objectives, and delineates the research questions that guide the inquiry. It also emphasises the significance of the study in addressing critical gaps and advancing knowledge in the field. Lastly, the chapter offers a structured overview of the dissertation layout, outlining the subsequent chapters and their respective contributions to the overall discourse.

1.1 Background and Context

Youth unemployment is widely acknowledged in the literature as a global problem (Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mayer et al., 2019). Youth unemployment in South Africa is structural and frequently based on race (Pauw et al., 2008). The bulk of unemployed youth, including those who experience chronic unemployment, are black and belong to historically underprivileged households (Grace Goitsemodimo Tabengwa et al., 2017; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Pauw et al., 2008; Yu, 2013).

The distribution of youth unemployment shows that 63.9% of unemployed youth fall within the 15 to 24 age group, and graduate unemployment is at 42% (Statistics SA [Stats SA], 2022). There are contradictory perceptions regarding graduate unemployment; however, most researchers contend that graduate unemployment is increasing (Grace Goitsemodimo Tabengwa et al., 2017; Mseleku, 2022b; Oluwajodu et al., 2015). This is happening despite various work-based learning interventions such as apprenticeships, internships and learnerships that are aimed at linking youth to industry and the labour market.

Work-based learning (WBL) and its associated experiences enable a transition that is important for skills acquisition and to prepare unemployed youth for secure employment. While this study sought to explore graduate unemployment, its focus was on how graduate unemployment can be addressed through a form of WBL programme, such as a learnership. The study sought to understand the experiences of graduates, predominantly from South African Universities of Technology, who transition from higher education into and through a learnership, and how they develop employability skills.

A learnership is a “dual vocational-training model” (Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010, p. 1). It combines theoretical and practical on-the-job learning, which leads to a recognised occupational qualification over time. As one of the skills development mechanisms in South Africa, it is recognised as a vehicle to achieve the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) 2030’s outcome of linking education and the workplace (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, 2015, 2019).

1.2 Problem Statement

South Africa has a very high rate of youth unemployment, a significant socioeconomic problem that cannot be ignored (Grace Goitsemodimo Tabengwa et al., 2017; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2021; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mayer et al., 2019; Mseleku, 2022b; Oluwajodu et al., 2015; Pauw et al., 2008; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012; Yu, 2013). Researchers have investigated various facets of youth unemployment, including graduate unemployment (Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mseleku, 2022b; Oluwajodu et al., 2015; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Despite being much lower than the general youth unemployment rate, graduate unemployment rates are rising (Grace Goitsemodimo Tabengwa et al., 2017; Mseleku, 2022b; Oluwajodu et al., 2015). This raises questions concerning the output of higher education (Ebekozien et al., 2024) and graduate access into the labour market (Graham et al., 2019; Pauw et al., 2008).

The development of skills is a major justification for tackling youth unemployment (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Grace Goitsemodimo Tabengwa et al., 2017; Visser & Kruss, 2009). According to the DHET (2015), many graduates are unemployed and unable to easily enter the labour market due to a lack of skills and the accompanying workplace experience. In other words, even if graduates have post-high school credentials, possibly at higher intermediate skills levels (5 and 6) of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), they still lack the experience and skills needed to secure jobs. Skills development is viewed as a market entry requirement which enhances economic expansion (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013; Kruss et al., 2012; Kruss et al., 2014).

The DHET in South Africa planned to "create an expanded, efficient and integrated post-school system" in response to youth and graduate unemployment and associated issues (Department

of Higher Education and Training, 2013, p. 3). In the area of developing skills for employability in the workforce, the need to create a smooth transition between education and the workplace has received particular attention (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, 2019). With this vision in mind, the DHET, through the White Paper on post-school education and training, aimed to promote more options for education and learning that are connected to employment through apprenticeships, internships, and learnerships (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). This study focused on learnerships as a means of developing employability skills.

Skills development is at the core of employability. The knowledge problem that the research explored is how learnerships, particularly for university graduates, contribute to employability. While many studies have recognised the significance of learnerships in South Africa (Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2014; Kruss et al., 2014; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010; Visser & Kruss, 2009), the present study aimed to understand transitions from graduate qualifications into learnerships (graduate experience) and transitions through learnerships (learnership experience). This study aimed to analyse university graduates' "experiences" as narratives to comprehend the unique "learning in a learnership" experiences that helped them develop employability skills.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to examine the transition experiences of graduates who were participating or had participated in a learnership programme that aimed to enhance their employment prospects. It explored their transitions from entering, progressing through, and exiting the learnership, analysing their experiences of the actual transition, learning experiences and comprehension of employability skills necessary for a successful transition into the labour market.

The study analysed graduates' narratives to identify transition and learning experiences that facilitated the development of employability skills. In addition, the understanding of these employability skills necessary to move smoothly into the labour market were analysed from these narratives. The study was guided by two research objectives: (i) to gain insight into the journey of graduates into, through, and out of learnership programmes, and (ii) to evaluate graduates' perceived acquisition of employability skills that enhance employment prospects after the completion of the programme.

1.4 Research Questions

The central question asked in this study was: How do graduates transition into, through and out of learnership programmes and acquire skills that correlate with the enhancement of employment prospects after completing the learnership? In other words, how do graduates navigate entry into the programme, progress through and gain the relevant skills that are pertinent to improving their chances of securing employment upon programme completion? To provide a comprehensive exploration on the overarching research question, three complementary sub-questions were asked:

1. How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme that is intended to enhance their employment prospects?
2. What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme?
3. What are graduates' understanding of the employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?

The first question investigated the transition experiences of graduates within learnership programmes; the second question delved into their learning experiences during the learnership programme; and the third question explored graduates' understanding of employability skills, crucial for successful transition into the labour market. Each of the sub-questions directly aligned to the main research question, the aim of the study outlined previously and contributed to understanding how graduates transition into, through, and out of the learnership, acquire skills, and improve their employment prospects.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is underscored by its direct relevance to critical issues such as youth unemployment, skills development, and WBL interventions, all of which are pivotal to achieving the objectives outlined in South Africa's NSDP 2030 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). By focusing on learnership programmes as defined in the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998, the study explored the experiences of graduates, it highlighted the diversity within the youth demographic and emphasised the need for targeted approaches in learnership programmes to cater effectively to different youth groups.

Moreover, the study amplified the voices and perspectives of graduates, a significant stakeholder group in the skills development landscape. This is crucial as their insights are often overlooked in policy discussions and the development and design of learnership programmes. By bringing their experiences to the forefront, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how learnership programmes can better support youth transition from education to the world of work.

The timelines of this study was fitting as it aligned with ongoing efforts by the DHET to establish a national policy framework for WBL in South Africa (Blom, 2015). This alignment positions the study to contribute to these policy developments, ensuring that insights gained from graduates' experiences are integrated into future programme design and implementation strategies.

In conclusion, this study not only addressed critical gaps in current literature but also offers practical implications for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders involved in enhancing youth employability and advancing the goals of the NSDP 2030. It is timely and contributes to ongoing efforts aimed at improving skills development and reducing unemployment among South Africa's youth population.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

This research study explored the complex interplay between education, work, and graduate employability within the context of South Africa, focusing particularly on learnership programmes as mechanisms to enhance skills and employability. The structure of the dissertation is presented below.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This introductory chapter provided an overview of the background and contextual landscape of the study. The problem statement, research aims, objectives, and the research questions were articulated, including the significance of the study in addressing knowledge gaps in the field. A structured overview of the dissertation layout is presented below, serving as a guide to the research study.

Chapter 2: Bibliometric Review

The purpose of the Bibliometric Review is to depict the performance of the study's chosen field, the shifts in research focus, and changes in the theoretical understanding of phenomena. The review also identifies the key authors, institutions and knowledge development patterns in the field of education, work and graduate employability nexus.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The literature review was informed by the understanding gained in the mapping of the field's performance done in Chapter 2. The chapter focuses on the literature that relates to youth and graduate unemployment in South Africa, followed by perspectives on graduate attributes from a higher education's view. Since learnership programmes are education programmes that occur outside of the higher education context, interventions of WBL are explored, giving way to views on South Africa's learnership programmes which aim to enhance employability skills. The literature outlined leads to the adoption of the three theories that make up the study's theoretical framework, culminating in the development of the graduateness, transition and employability (GTE) conceptual framework.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Chapter 4 presents the study's chosen methodology, namely Mixed Methods Research (MMR). In this chapter, the research design in presented, including the data collection and analysis strategies of both quantitative and qualitative. Notes on ethical considerations and the study's trustworthiness and validity conclude the chapter.

Chapter 5: Empirical Data

Both quantitative and qualitative empirical data collected are presented in this chapter. The questionnaire's data analysis is described in line with the three research questions. The quantitative data analysis is then followed by the analysis of the qualitative data derived from the open-ended questions and focus group discussions of the data collected.

Chapter 6: Analytical Framework

With the aim of providing a structured approach for analysing data, the analytical framework developed for the study is presented. Key ideas from the theoretical framework are integrated with the participants' quotes and embedded metaphors of means. This results in an analysis that

is classified into Transition Into, Transition Through and Transition Out. A discussion and synthesis of the analysis concludes the chapter.

Chapter 7: Discussion

In this seventh chapter, five core findings are presented in relation to Transition Into, Transition Through and Transition Out discussed in Chapter 6. Using the lens of existing literature, the chapter identifies areas of convergence and divergence, and where the finding extends current literature. Implications of these findings to stakeholders concerned in the education, work and employability nexus are presented. The chapter is concluded by an account of the study's limitations and future research directions are suggested.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, a summary of the study's key findings is presented. This is followed by an account of how this study contributes to knowledge and how practice is implicated. Again, the study's limitations and suggestions for future research are presented before concluding.

Chapter 2. Bibliometric Review

2.1 Introduction

This study explored the experiences of graduates from higher education institutions (HEIs) as they transition into and through learnership programmes, focusing on how these experiences shape their acquisition of employability skills crucial for securing employment post-learnership. It aimed to understand the nuances of these transitions and the skills gained from the lived experiences of graduates. The main research question revolved around how HEI graduates transition into learnership programmes and acquire skills that enhance their employment prospects upon completion. The research question was further unpacked through three sub-questions centred around 1) the transition experiences into learnership programmes, 2) the learning experience during the learnership programmes, and 3) the graduates' understanding of employability skills needed for transitioning into the labour market. The study was an exploration into graduates' experiences into, through and out of the learnership programmes, as well as their reflections on the employability skills gained from their participation in the learnership programme.

This bibliometric review chapter aims to shed light on the interconnection of education, work and graduate employability by analysing the historical developments of the field and identifying influential contributors to knowledge. As such, it offers quantitative insights into the performance of the field, identifies knowledge gaps and presents suggestions for future research in performance of the field. By performing a bibliometric analysis, this chapter seeks to quantify the field, while tracking relational shifts in research focus over time (Donthu et al., 2021). The bibliometric review spans the past 24 years from 2000 to 2023 and uncovers the performance of the field, delving into the extensive scholarly literature surrounding the education, work and graduate employability nexus. To undertake this endeavour, a search strategy was determined as presented in the next section.

Through an examination of scholarly literature in the field, this review endeavours to firstly identify the key contributors, that is, authors and institutions. Secondly, it identifies patterns in knowledge development that connect education, work, and graduate employability together. Thirdly, through this lens, the chapter aims to provide an understanding of the field, thereby

laying a foundation for the subsequent literature review, analysis and discussion within this study.

2.2 Search Strategy

The Scopus database was chosen as a document source because it features a wide variety of scholarly literature including peer-reviewed journals, and is thus a valuable resource for analysing large volumes of bibliometric data (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023; Donthu et al., 2021). Using Scopus for a bibliometric analysis on the education-work-graduate employability nexus would provide a strong foundation for understanding research trends and knowledge gaps in this area.

For the search strategy, the following retrieval schema were entered into the Scopus catalogue. (transition OR entry OR integration OR onboarding OR adaptation) AND (learnership OR graduate program OR employment program OR vocational training OR internship) AND (employability OR employment readiness OR job readiness OR career readiness) AND (South Africa OR SA OR RSA)) OR ("graduate employability" OR "graduate attributes" OR "graduateness" OR "vocational training" OR "vocational education" OR "skills training" OR "work-based learning" OR "work-integrated learning" OR "learnership" OR "apprenticeship" OR "workplace based learning" OR "employability skills" OR "transitions" OR "pathways" OR "education-work nexus" OR "work experience" OR "skills" OR "graduates" OR "graduate unemployment").

The transition from education to the world of work in South Africa is considered, including literature on transitions, work-based learning programmes, graduate programmes, graduate employability, skills, graduate attributes. These keywords cover the foundational makeup of the GTE Conceptual Framework which will be covered in Chapter 3. The period between 2000 and 2023 was considered for this study. The initial literature search was conducted on October 3rd 2023 at 8.12 pm, and generated 4,084,874 documents. To narrow the dataset, the boundary was limited to the criteria of timeframe, subject area and type of publication. The timeframe selected was 24 years, between 2020 and 2023, Social Sciences was the chosen Subject Area and only Article, Book and Book Chapter were the Type of Document Field chosen. The narrowed dataset yielded 2,237 scholarly documents which were extracted as a comma-separated value (CSV) file and used for the analysis.

Figure 1 The Initial Search Produced over 4,084,000 Documents

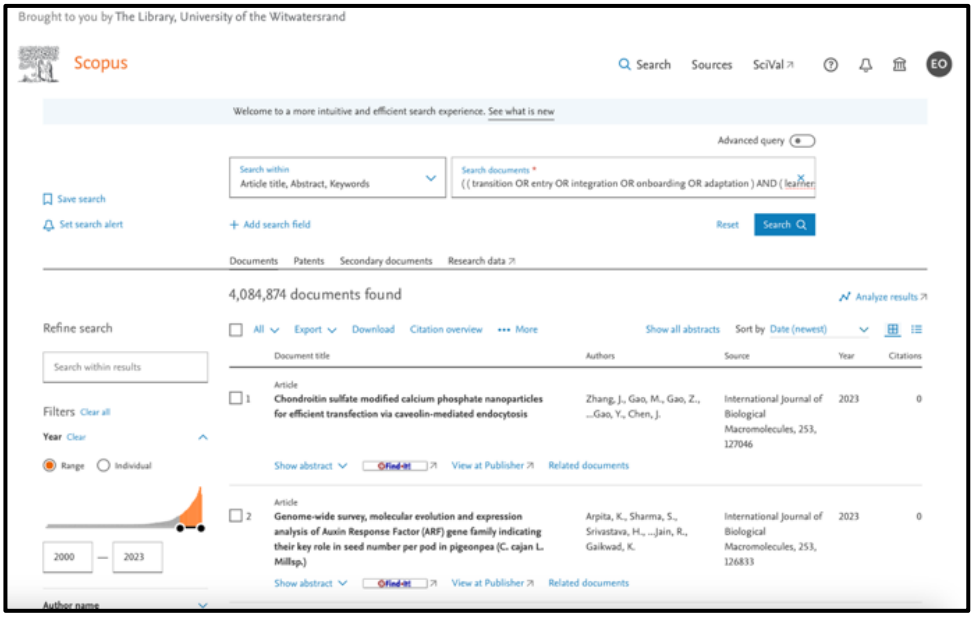
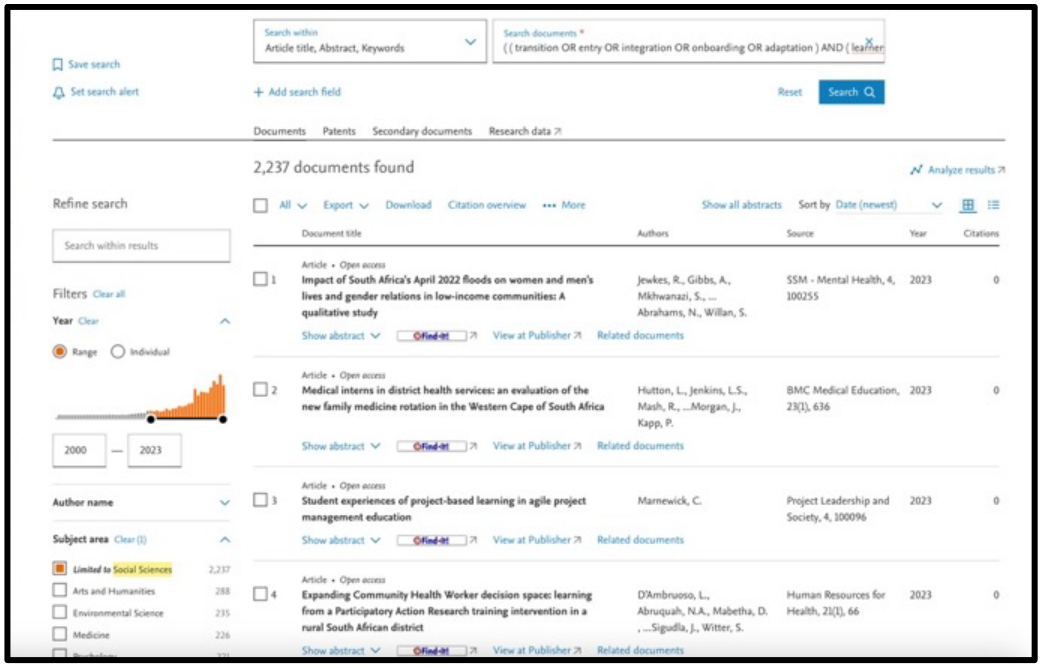


Figure 2 The Narrowed Search Resulted in 2,237 Documents

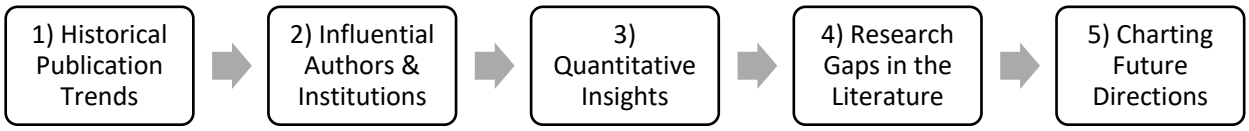


2.3 Bibliometric Analysis

To explore the education-work-graduate employability nexus, Vos Viewer was chosen to analyse the bibliometric connections according to the five focus areas. These included: 1) the 24-year publication trends analysis; 2) an analysis of the influential authors and institutions; 3) quantitative insights, including analysis of the number of publications, publications per country, publications per document source and an analysis of co-occurrence of keywords; and 4) a

research gap analysis. The sweep of the state of the literature assisted with understanding how the field has performed over time so that 5) suggestions for future research direction could be made.

Figure 3 The five focus areas of this Bibliometric Review



According to Donthu et al. (2021), bibliometric analysis techniques can be broadly categorised into two groups: (1) performance analysis and (2) science mapping. Performance analysis primarily assesses the contributions of research constituents, while science mapping concentrates on revealing the relationships between these constituents. In other words, the bibliometric focus areas 1 and 2 will provide a performance analysis lens. As such, how the field has developed and who contributes to the development will be presented. Focus areas 3 and 4 will provide perspective based on science mapping, that is, how research constituents connect. The last focus area will be a discussion that is aimed at providing suggestions for future research.

In the next section, the first bibliometric focus is presented, that is, the presentation of historical publication trends, followed by an analysis thereof.

2.4 Historical Publication Trends

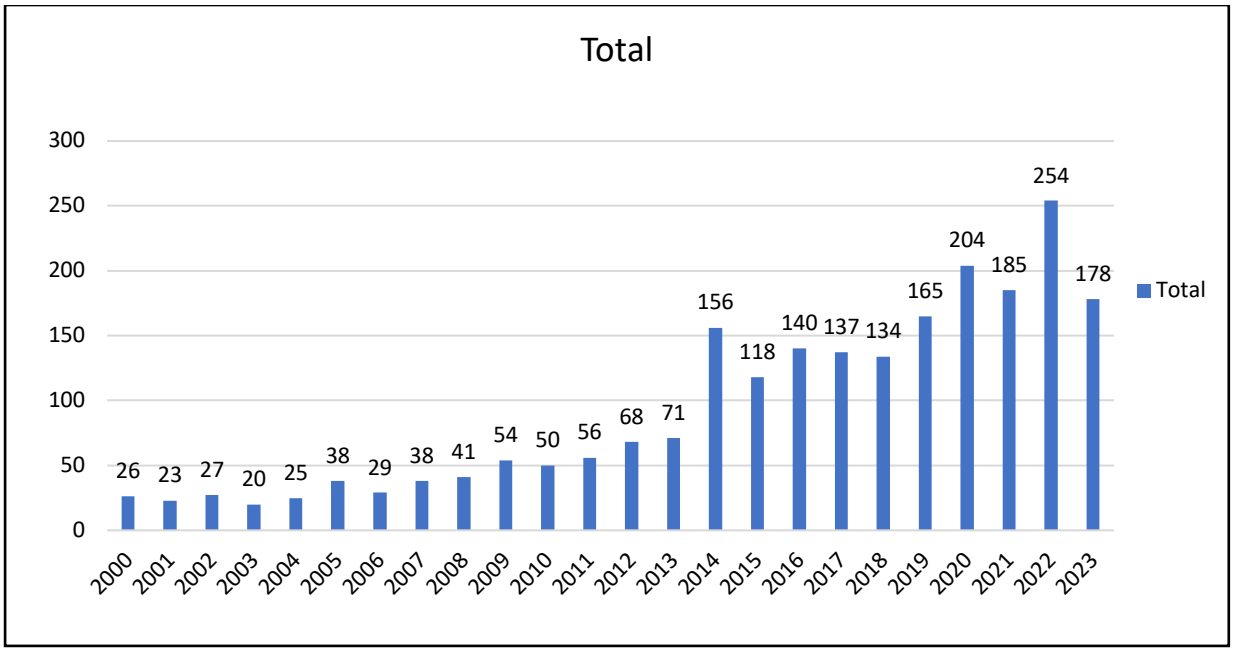
In this section, an analysis of the publication growth from the year 2000 to 2023 is presented. In addition, significant research activities are highlighted in the analysis. The table below categorises the 24-year time into three eight-year categories, so that each year's publication count within the field is depicted. These are years 2000 to 2007, 2008 to 2015 and 2016 to 2023.

Table 1The 2,237 Publication Trends over 24 years

First 8-year analysis between years 2000 to 2007 yielding 226 publications								
Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Count of Year	26	23	27	20	25	38	29	38
Second 8-year analysis between years 2008 to 2015 yielding 614 publications.								
Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Count of Year	41	54	50	56	68	71	156	118
Third 8-year analysis between years 2016 to 2023 yielding 1397 publications.								
Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Count of Year	140	137	134	165	204	185	254	178

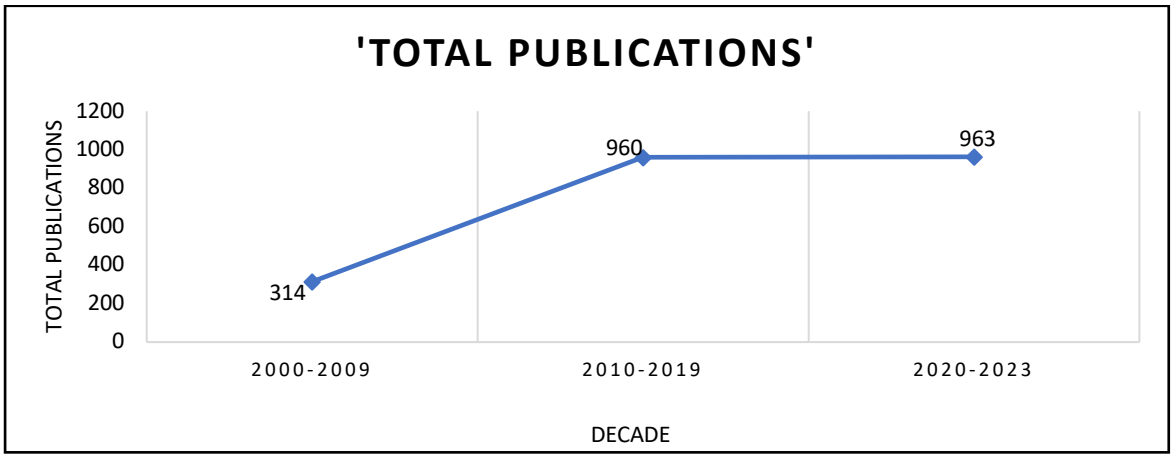
As tabulated above, there has been a trend of increasing research output from the lower double-digits to a jump into the triple digits over the past 24-year period. The number of publications increased significantly over the three periods analysed: from 226 publications in the first 8 years (2000-2007) to 614 in the second 8 years (2008-2015), and rapid growth of 1397 publications in recent years (2016-2023). There was modest growth in the first period, averaging 28.25 publications per year, while the second period saw a notable increase, with an average of 76.63 publications per year. Rapid growth took place in the third period where an average of 174.63 publications per year was achieved. The above suggests a growing interest and investment in the field of education, work and graduate employability and related areas.

Figure 4 Graphical Illustration of Publication Trends (2000-2023)



The above representation depicts a comprehensive overview of the cumulative research output of the 2,237 publications across the 24-year period. The distribution of publications per year emphasises specific years where there were notable increases in research publications. Increases are observed from 2014 onwards, reaching a peak in 2022. The years 2014, 2020, and 2022 emerge as high-impact periods, marked by a substantial number of publications. An interesting observation is a slight decrease in the number of publications from 2022 to 2023; this signals a potential shift in the research landscape. While this analysis provides valuable insights into the overall trends, understanding the factors contributing to these peaks and the 2023 decrease require further investigation. Exploring the themes or topics of research, changes in funding dynamics, and external events could shed light on the dynamics behind these notable fluctuations.

Figure 5 Decadal Representation of Publication Trends



The decadal representation above reveals evolution in the output of academic research publications over 24 years. Initially characterised by a relatively stable output in the early 2000s, there was a marked shift in the following decades. The 2010s emerged as a turning point with a significant escalation in publications that continued into the 2020s. The current decade (2020-2023) has sustained this high level of research output, with 2022 showing outstanding volumes. This pattern suggests a dynamic and accelerating trend in academic research, possibly influenced by factors such as technological advancements, shifts in research priorities, and changes in academic practices. The observed fluctuations, including the recent decrease in 2023, underscore the need for continued examination to unravel the complex dynamics driving these trends.

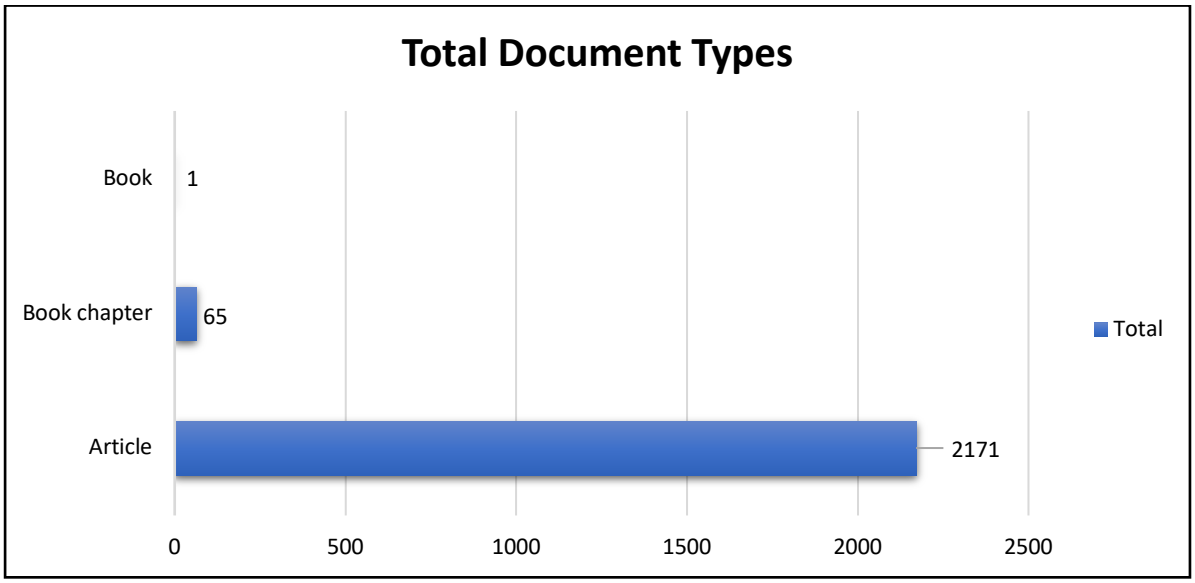
This section analysed the field's scholarly productivity over the past 24 years, revealing publication trends and identifying periods of particularly high research output. Considering this surge, the following section will delve deeper to explore the key contributors to this productivity, focusing on the most influential authors and institutions within the field.

2.5 Influential Authors and Institutions

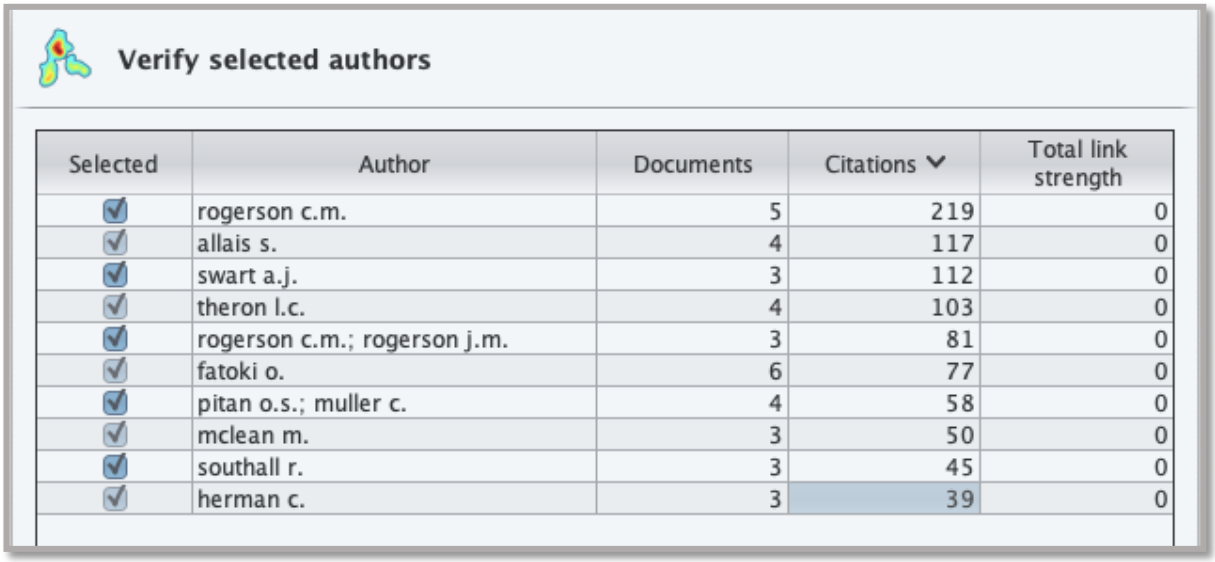
Having established the field's publication trends over the past 24 years, it is crucial to delve deeper and identify the driving forces behind this scholarly output. This section will present the most influential authors and institutions responsible for the advancement of knowledge in the field connecting education, work and graduate employability.

However, before exploring the key players, a closer look at the publication types themselves proves insightful. The bar graph below reveals that journal articles dominate the field, constituting a significant 97.05% of the total publications. Book chapters, though less frequent, are still present at 2.91%, suggesting a focus on disseminating research in readily accessible formats. Standalone books, however, make up a minor portion of 0.04%. This distribution indicates a clear preference for scholarly articles, likely for their ability to rapidly share and advance research findings within the field.

Figure 6 Document Type Analysis



Having employed Vos Viewer, a bibliometric analysis software, the study explored the most influential authors in the South African education-work-graduate employability nexus. The analysis focused on scholars who have made significant contributions to research on graduate programmes, graduate employability, vocational training, work-based learning programmes, skills development, and the transition from higher education. These key areas were identified as some of the crucial elements of the education-work nexus. The findings, including the top 10 authors and their affiliations with the top 10 institutions, are presented in Figure 7 and Table 2.



Selected	Author	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
☑	rogerson c.m.	5	219	0
☑	allais s.	4	117	0
☑	swart a.j.	3	112	0
☑	theron l.c.	4	103	0
☑	rogerson c.m.; rogerson j.m.	3	81	0
☑	fatoki o.	6	77	0
☑	pitan o.s.; muller c.	4	58	0
☑	mclean m.	3	50	0
☑	southall r.	3	45	0
☑	herman c.	3	39	0

Figure 7 T op 10 Authors Based on the Number of Publications and Citations

The top 10 authors presented were selected based on the highest number of citations received in relation to the documents published. A minimum of three and maximum of five documents per author were generated, with the top author having five documents and 219 citations.

The table below provides information on the top 10 authors, their affiliations, citation counts, and the number of documents they have published. The authors are affiliated with various universities, including the University of Johannesburg, University of Witwatersrand, Central University of Technology, University of Pretoria, University of Limpopo, Lead City University, and the University of Nottingham. The highest number of citations is 219 from Rogerson, C.M. of the University of Johannesburg. The fewest citations in this group were 39 from Herman, C. of the University of Pretoria.

Table 2 Summary of Top 10 Authors from Bibliometric Results.

Author	Affiliation	Citations	Number of documents	Research Area
Rogerson, C.M.	University of Johannesburg	219	5	Tourism Development, Local Economic Development, Small Enterprise Development.
Allais, S.	**University of Witwatersrand**	**117**	**4**	**Education and Work, Sociology of Education, Political Economy of Education, Education Policy, National Qualifications Frameworks.**
Swart, A.J.	Central University of Technology	112	3	Energy Monitoring, Student Engagement, Engineering Education Development.
Theron, L.C.	**University of Pretoria**	**103**	**4**	**Youth Resilience, Social Ecology of Resilience Theory, Culture & Resilience, African Youths' Resilience Processes.**
Rogerson, C.M; Rogerson, J.M.	University of Johannesburg	81	3	Urban Geography, Economic Geography, Tourism and Sustainability.
Fatoki, O.	**University of Limpopo**	**77**	**6**	**Financial Management, Entrepreneurship, Strategic Management, Business Ethics.**
Pitan, O.S.; Muller, C.	**Lead City University**	**58**	**4**	**Economics of Education, Higher Education, Employability**
Mclean, M.	University of Nottingham	50	3	Higher Education
Southall, R.	University of Johannesburg	45	3	Black Middle Class, Development Studies, Sociology
Herman, C.	University of Pretoria	39	3	Doctoral Education, Education Policy, Higher Education

Note: The authors highlighted are the most relevant to the research study

It was also important to decipher the authors that link closely with respect to the research study. Allais, S. from the University of Witwatersrand is notable for having 117 citations. Allais' research focus is on education and work relations, among others. Theron, L.C. from the University of Pretoria has 103 citations; her work is on youth and their resilience. Both Allais

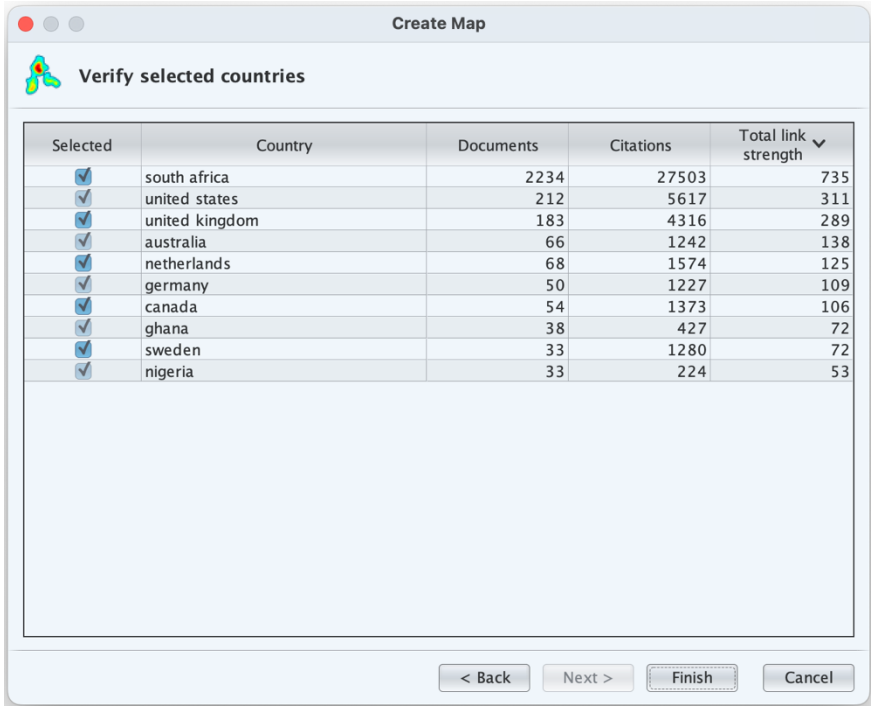
and Theron demonstrate significant scholarly influence. Fatoki, O. from the University of Limpopo has 77 citations, with 6 publications, indicating a substantial impact in their field of research. Fatoki's research area, among others, is entrepreneurship, more specifically graduate entrepreneurship matters. Authors Pitan, O.S., and Muller, C. from Lead City University and University of KwaZulu Natal have 58 citations, and 4 documents published that relate to employability. They show a moderate level of impact and a consistent research output. As per the search strategy, it is no surprise that nine out of 10 universities are based in South Africa, as the analysis focused on South African scholarship within the education-work-graduate employability nexus.

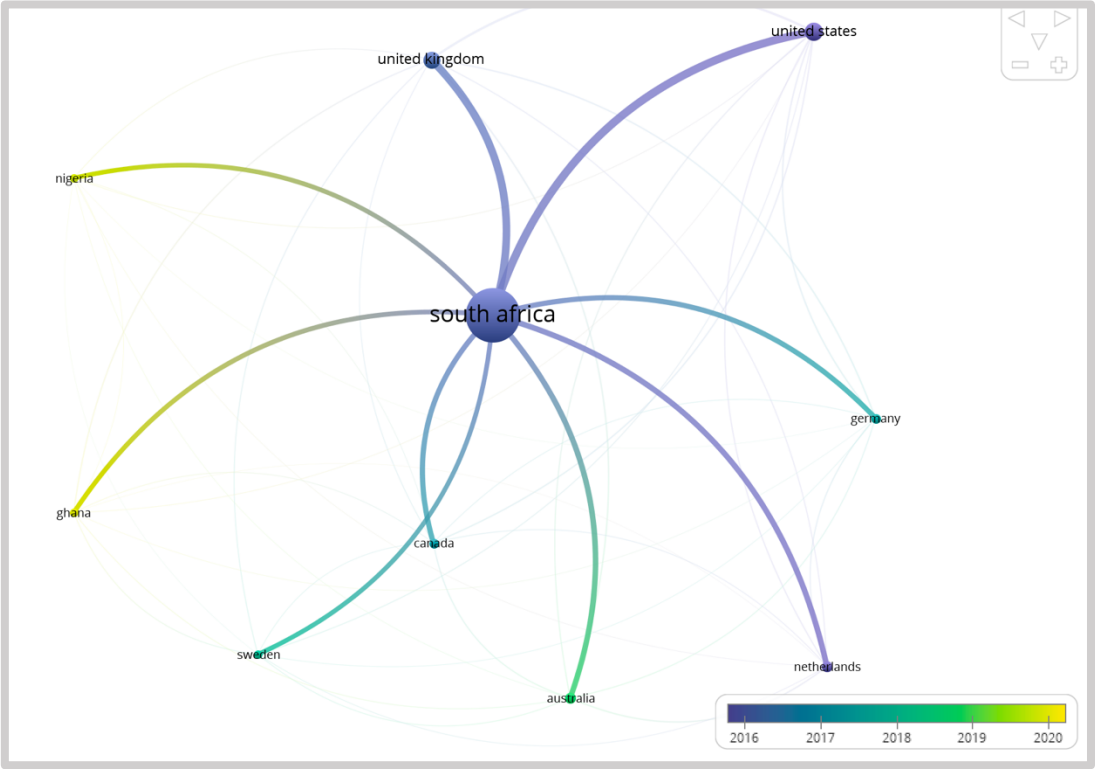
The next section provides an analysis of the qualitative insights starting with the highest co-authorship per country, the most cited publication, and keyword co-occurrence analysis.

2.6 Qualitative Insights

To analyse global research output per co-authorship, the search required the top 10 countries with the highest co-authorship, a minimum of 25 documents and 120 citations. The results show that South African authors collaborate mostly with scholars from the United States of America and the United Kingdom. It is worth nothing that most of the South African collaborations occur with scholars in the Global North; only two country co-authorships took place with countries within the African continent, namely Ghana and Nigeria. Another interesting observation is how these African collaborations occur around the 2020s. This suggests a shift in co-authorship research that sees more partnerships within the continent.

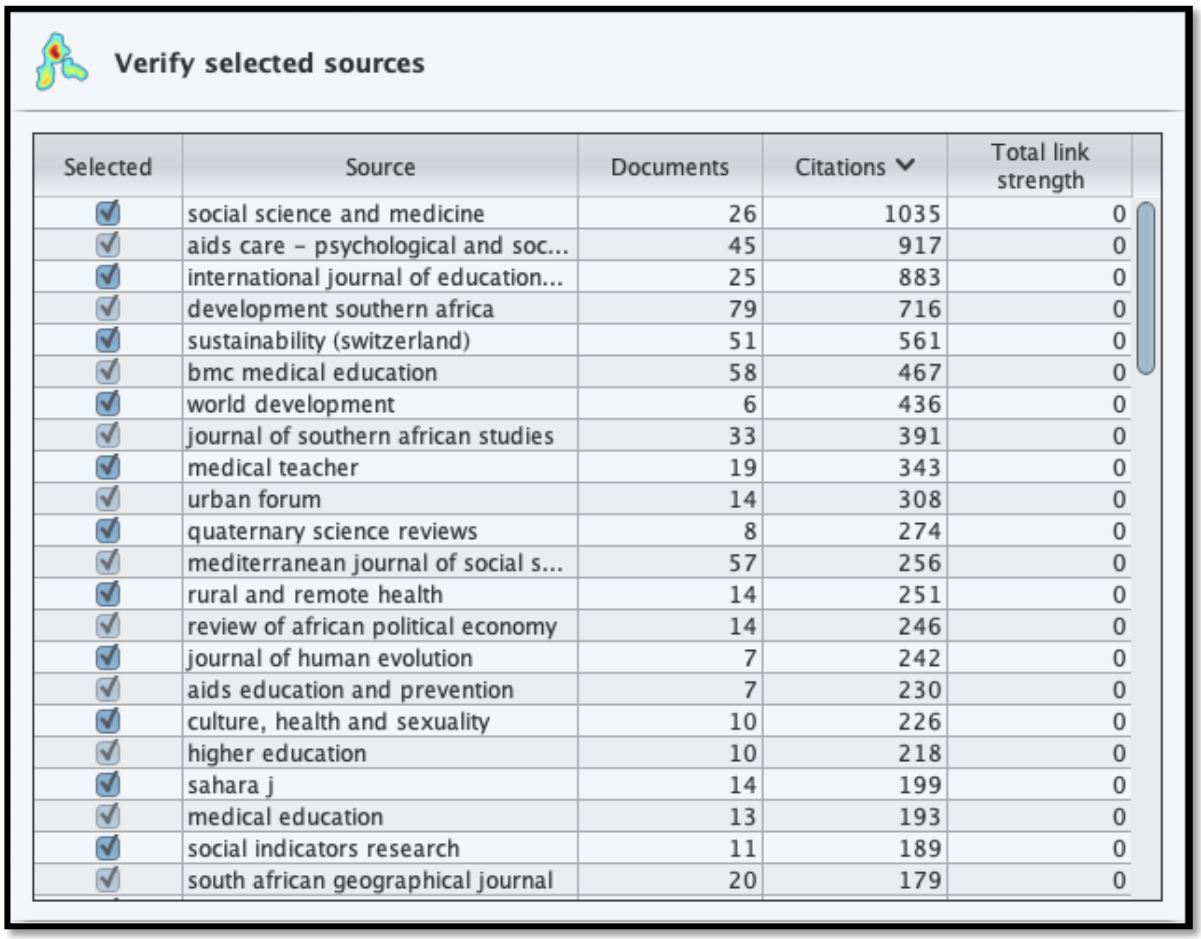
Figure 8 The Top 10 Countries with the Highest Co-Authorship with South Africa





When analysing the top academic sources by number of documents and citations, the results show that of the 781 sources evaluated, 22 sources stand out in the analysis, each with at least five documents published and five citations.

Figure 9 The academic sources



Verify selected sources

Selected	Source	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
☑	social science and medicine	26	1035	0
☑	aids care - psychological and soc...	45	917	0
☑	international journal of education...	25	883	0
☑	development southern africa	79	716	0
☑	sustainability (switzerland)	51	561	0
☑	bmc medical education	58	467	0
☑	world development	6	436	0
☑	journal of southern african studies	33	391	0
☑	medical teacher	19	343	0
☑	urban forum	14	308	0
☑	quaternary science reviews	8	274	0
☑	mediterranean journal of social s...	57	256	0
☑	rural and remote health	14	251	0
☑	review of african political economy	14	246	0
☑	journal of human evolution	7	242	0
☑	aids education and prevention	7	230	0
☑	culture, health and sexuality	10	226	0
☑	higher education	10	218	0
☑	sahara j	14	199	0
☑	medical education	13	193	0
☑	social indicators research	11	189	0
☑	south african geographical journal	20	179	0

The first two journals focus on the social sciences and health and lead the pack, however, since this study touches on education, The *International Journal of Educational Development* follows with 883 citations, while the *Higher Education* journal sits at number 18.

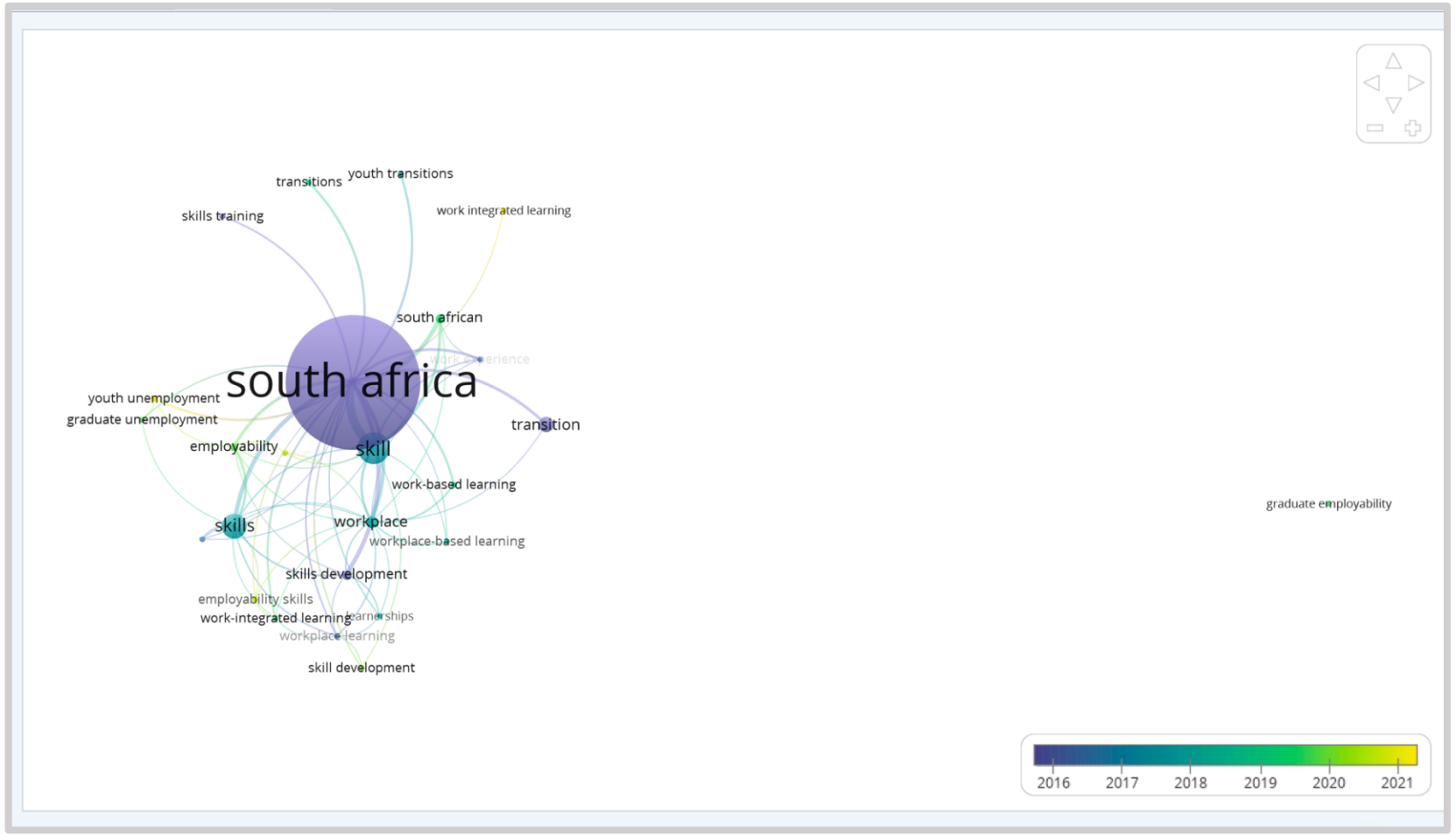
This study was situated within the education-work-employability nexus; as such, it was imperative to locate keywords that link to the study within the literature. The keywords and alternative terms are tabulated below.

Table 3 A Selection of the Education-Work-Employability Nexus Keywords.

Transition	Learnership	Employability	Graduateness
Graduate attributes	Skills training	Skills development	South Africa
Work-based learning	employability skills	graduate unemployment	

To gain an understanding of research trends within the field, this study employed a co-occurrence analysis by identifying how frequently keywords and their alternative terms appear together in the literature. A minimum occurrence threshold was set at 2; this enabled a broad range of relevant terms to be included, expanding the chances of the keywords relating to this study. This resulted in a dataset of 2,942 keywords with 25 keywords exhibiting co-occurrence. The visual map below utilises node size to represent keyword frequency. Larger nodes indicate keywords that appear more frequently within the data. Additionally, the thickness of the lines connecting these nodes reflects the strength of their co-occurrence relationship. Thicker lines signify keywords that tend to appear together more often (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023).

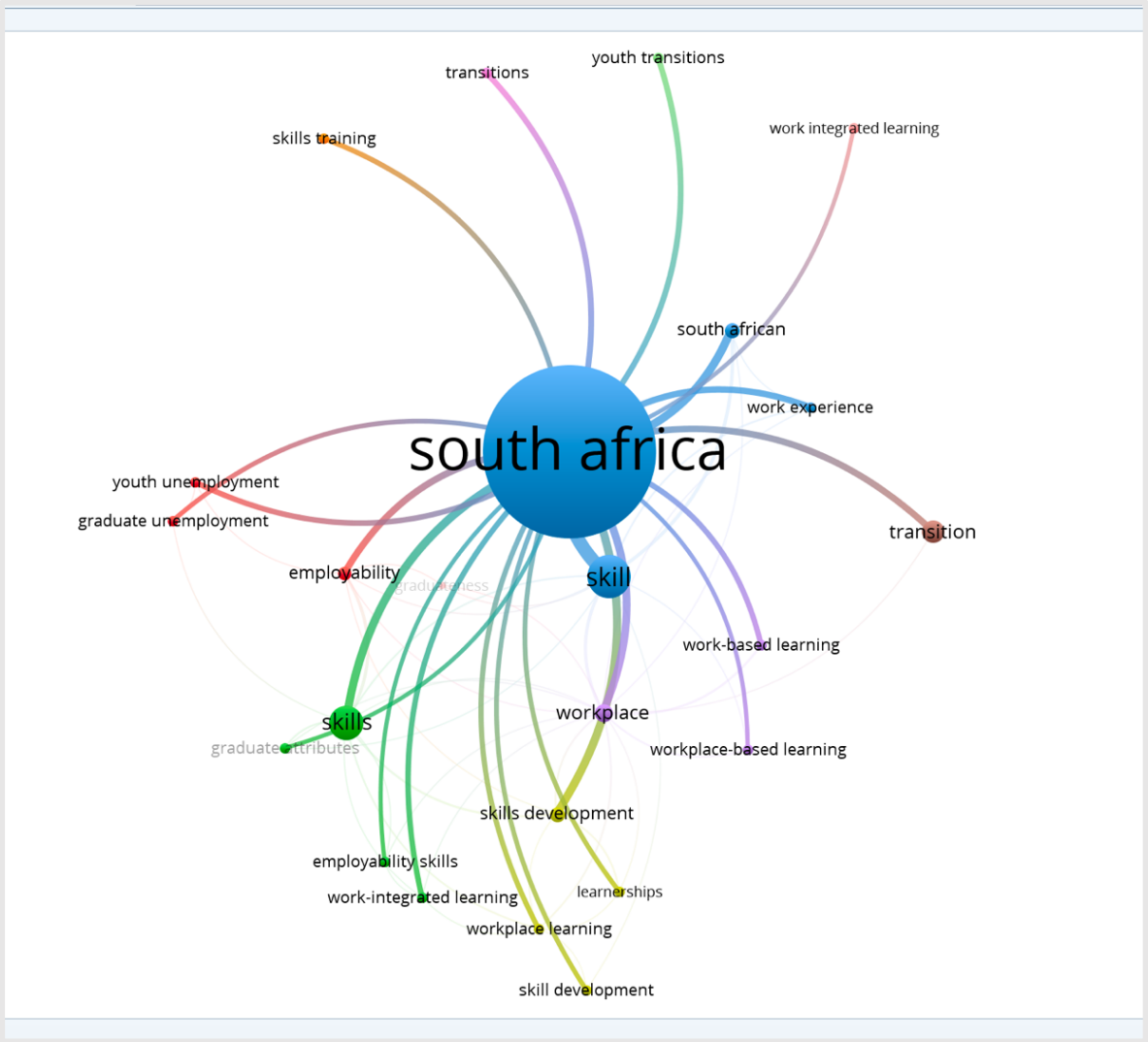
Figure 10 All 25 Selected Keywords: 24 Keywords Link with each other with Graduate Employability as a Standalone Non-Connected Keyword



Out of the 25 keywords, 24 keywords connected with each other. The network of keywords shows the keywords South Africa, workplace, skill(s), workplace learning and transition appearing frequently in the data and having strong links with each other. Publications of late seem to focus on graduate unemployment, work integrated learning and employability. The analysis shows graduate employability as a standalone keyword.

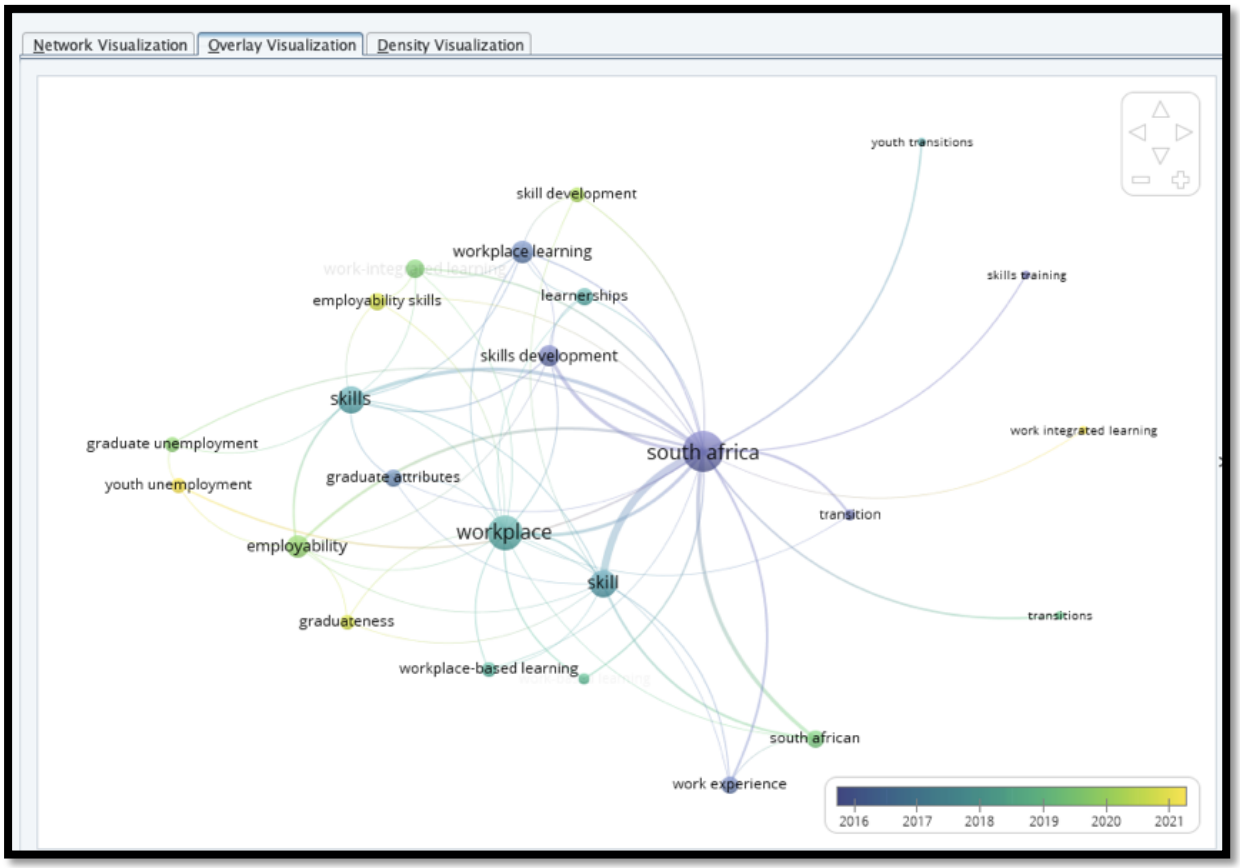
A focused analysis on the 24 connected keywords (Figures 11, 12 and 13) provides information about the changes in the landscape. The network of keywords shows that South Africa has the strongest link, followed by workplace, skill(s), workplace learning and employability.

Figure 11 Network of Selected Keywords



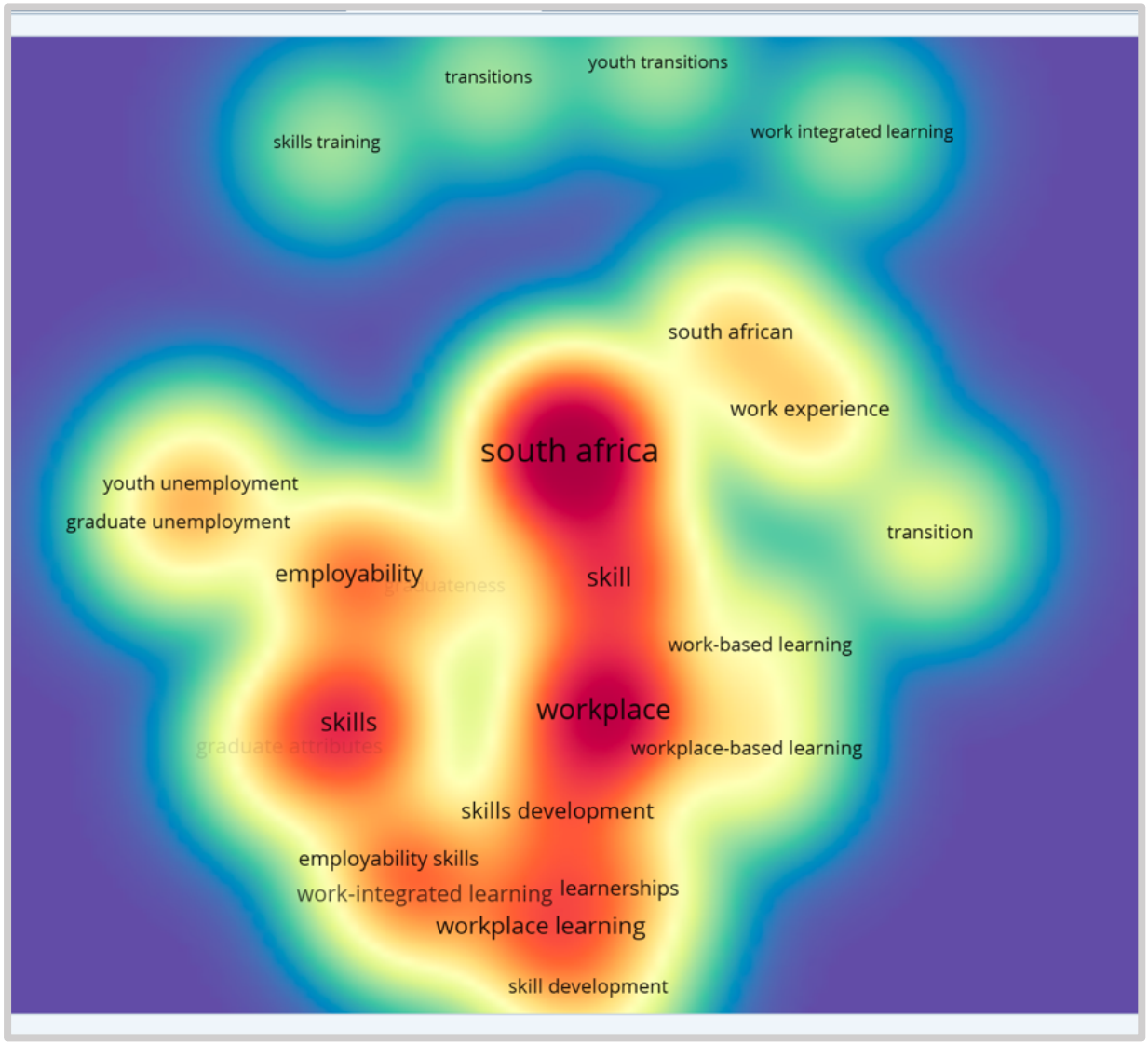
The overlay visualisation shows the trends in keywords. The colour gradient represents the timeline of the research output. Research contribution shifted focus from South Africa, Skills Development and Workplace Learning around the 2016s. The focus in the last 3 years has been on Youth Unemployment, Graduateness, Work Integrated Learning and Employability Skills.

Figure 12 Topical Keywords in the Literature Across Time



The heatmap showcases the concentration of research on various keywords such as South Africa, skill(s), workplace, and employability being prominent topics of research.

Figure 13 Topical Keywords Heatmap Visualisation



From the 25 keywords that met the threshold of a minimum of two co-occurrences, five clusters were generated.

Table 4 Keywords clusters

Cluster 1	**Keywords**	**Occurrences**	**Total link strength**
South Africa's Youth Employment and Skills	Graduate unemployment	5	3
	Skill	148	9
	Skills training	3	3
	South Africa	1468	179
	South African	23	26
	Transition	49	9
	Transitions	6	5
	Work experience	12	11
	Work integrated learning	2	1
	Youth transitions	5	5
	Youth unemployment	5	6
Cluster 2	**Keywords**	**Occurrences**	**Total link strength**
Workplace and Learning	Employability skills	4	3
	Work-based learning	7	7
	Work-integrated learning	11	7
	Workplace	33	38
	Workplace-based learning	3	4
Cluster 3	**Keywords**	**Occurrences**	**Total link strength**
Employability, Graduate Skills and Attributes	Employability	19	14
	Graduate attributes	8	3
	Graduateness	2	3
	Skills	99	36
Cluster 4	**Keywords**	**Occurrences**	**Total link strength**
Learnerships & Skills Development	Learnerships	2	6
	Skill development	4	4
	Skills development	21	23
	Workplace learning	6	9
Cluster 5	**Keywords**	**Occurrences**	**Total link strength**
Graduate Employability	Graduate employability	2	0

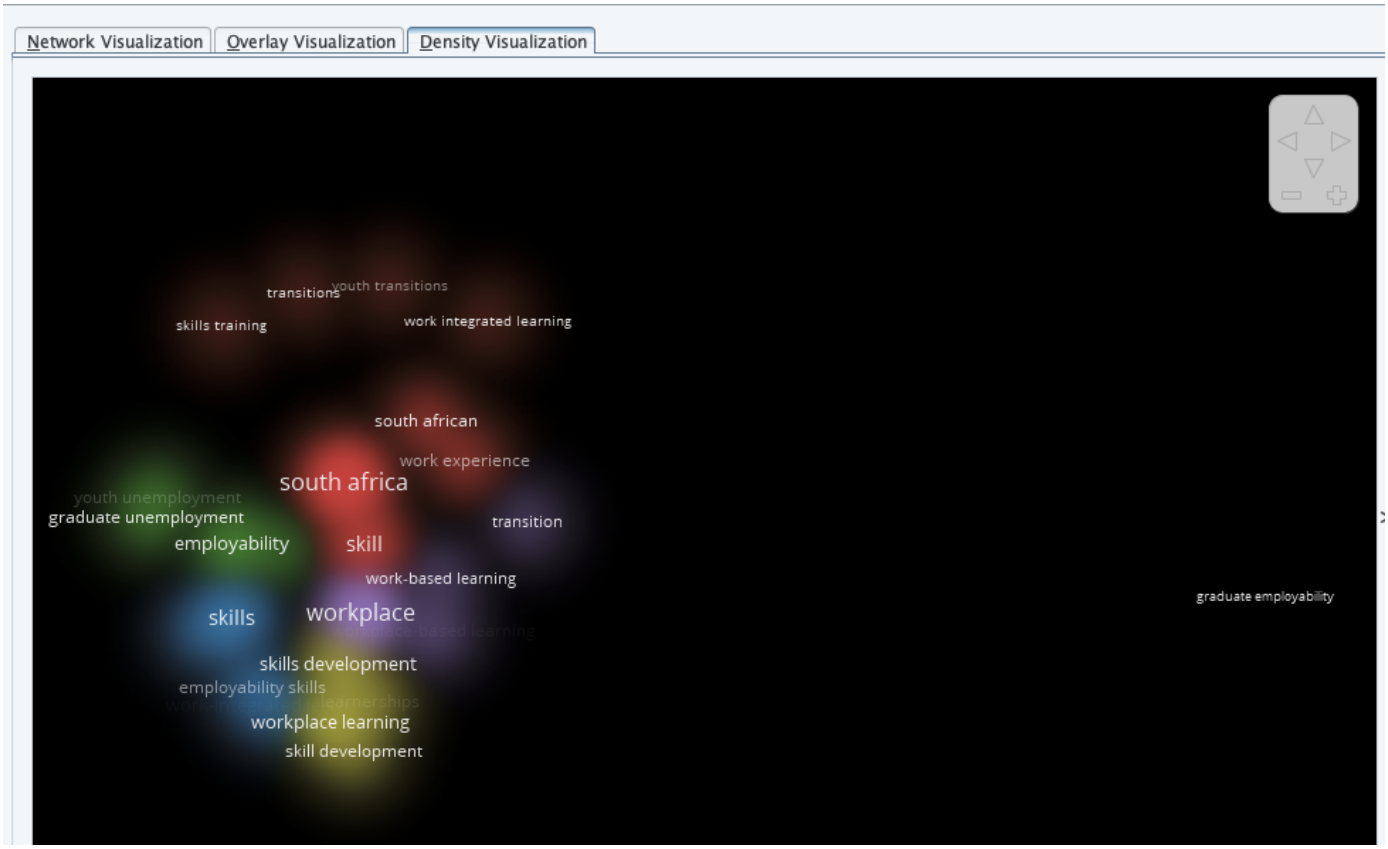
The table above categorises key linked themes in research related to the education-work and graduate employability nexus, with each cluster showing the complexities in the landscape.

Cluster 1: South Africa's Youth Employment and Skills highlights foundational themes related to the South African youth unemployment crisis and various avenues initiated to assist youth transition and enter the world of work. Opportunities include skills and work-integrated learning (WIL) and work experience programmes. **Cluster 2: Workplace and Learning** focuses on the connection between workplaces and learning opportunities. Workplaces as sites of learning for the development of employability skills. This cluster also highlights the structured learning programmes that integrate work experience with academic learning. **Cluster 3: Employability, Graduate Skills and Attributes** is based on the development of skills and attributes necessary for employment post-graduation. **Cluster 4: Learnerships and Skills Development** highlights a specific type of skill development programme - a learnership including formal learning with workplace learning to improve skills. Finally, **Cluster 5: Graduate Employability,** currently a standalone concept that is a central theme but lacks connections to other keywords.

The cluster analysis above covers various aspects related to the education-work-graduate employability nexus in South Africa. The focus is on the challenges faced by South Africa's young people. Cluster 1 provides a broad national context, while Clusters 2, 3, and 4 highlight specific strategies and approaches to improve employability through skills development and workplace learning. The lack of connections for "Graduate Employability" in Cluster 5 might indicate the lack of a well-defined concept within the analysed literature.

2.7 Research Gaps in the Literature

Figure 14 Selected Keywords and how they Link, with Graduate Employability as Standalone



Based on the analysis of the co-occurrence tables, there are some potential gaps in the literature related to the education-work-graduate employability nexus in South Africa. First, Cluster 5's isolation of "Graduate Employability" suggests a potential lack of well-established connections with other relevant themes in the literature. This could indicate a need for research that explicitly explores the factors contributing to graduate employability and how they interact. Secondly, skills-specific programmes like learnerships play a role in the skills development arena. Research could explore the effectiveness of various skills development programmes in enhancing graduate employability. Third, the omission of keywords such as "higher education institutions", "the labour market", "employers" which are related to HEIs' output of non-degreed graduates. Research could investigate how both supply and demand sides can better

prepare graduates for the workforce through curriculum design, career guidance, and WIL opportunities.

2.8 Charting Future Directions

The co-occurrence analysis offers valuable insights for charting future research directions focused on the interconnectedness of education, work and graduate employability in South Africa. While the centrality of "youth employment and skills" and the connection between "workplace and learning" are well established, a deeper understanding of the specific skills needed for employability by mapping the transitional experiences is crucial.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of various skills development programmes, particularly learnerships programmes. Additionally, a surprising gap exists in the well-defined connection between "graduate employability" and other relevant concepts. Research that explicitly explores the factors influencing graduate employability and how they interact with higher education, the labour market, employers, curriculum design and work-integrated learning opportunities would be valuable. By addressing these potential gaps, future research can significantly contribute to enhancing graduate employability and bridging the critical gap between education and work.

2.9 Conclusion

Drawing on the insights obtained from the bibliometric analysis, this chapter has shed light on the dynamic and evolving landscape of research surrounding the education-work-graduate employability nexus in South Africa. The analysis revealed a surge in scholarly output over the past 24 years, with a particular concentration in recent years. Furthermore, it identified prominent authors and institutions shaping the field, alongside key research themes such as youth employment, skills development, and workplace learning.

The co-occurrence analysis brought to light potential gaps in the literature. The isolated nature of "graduate employability" as a keyword suggests a need for research that delves deeper into the factors influencing employability and how they connect with other themes. Additionally, a focus on specific skills development programmes, particularly learnerships, could provide valuable insights. Finally, the lack of emphasis on HEIs, the labour market and employers highlight the need to explore how both demand and supply sides can better prepare graduates for the world of work.

By addressing these knowledge gaps, future research can make significant contributions to the field. Investigating the effectiveness of skills development programmes, exploring the interplay between graduate employability and other relevant concepts, and examining the role of HEIs, the labour market and employers are all crucial areas for further exploration. Through such endeavours, research can play a vital role in bridging the critical gap between education and work, ultimately enhancing graduate employability in the South African context.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the literature review provides a comprehensive exploration into the education-work-graduate employability nexus, with a specific focus on graduates' experiences transitioning into learnership programmes in South Africa. The chapter begins by addressing the pervasive issue of youth unemployment in South Africa, followed by an examination of graduate unemployment and the role of higher education in shaping graduate attributes. It then explores work-based learning interventions and the unique context of learnership programmes in South Africa. This is followed by an analysis of the transition process from higher education to learnerships and the development of employability skills among graduates. The discussion then shifts to a review of key theories in the field, which form the theoretical framework around the areas of graduate attributes, transition, and graduate employability. Lastly, the chapter introduces the conceptual framework that guides this study.

3.2 Youth Unemployment in South Africa

Statistics South Africa (2022) places the official unemployment rate at 32,9% in its first Quarterly Labour Force Survey report of 2024 (Q4: 2024). In a country of 62 million, most of the youth population is approximately 20,6 million, that is, more than half of the 40+ million working age population. The first Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) conducted by Stats SA in 2022 indicates an unemployment rate of 63.9% for individuals aged 15–24 and 42.1% for those aged 25–34 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). These figures are indicative that unemployment in South Africa has indeed been a persistent issue, with young people often experiencing higher unemployment rates compared to other age groups. In their latest "Unemployment in South Africa: A Youth Perspective" report, Stats SA (2024) reports the unemployment rate to be at 45.5% for individuals between 15–34 years. Indeed, South Africa's youth face ongoing struggles in accessing the labour market (De Lannoy et al., 2018). Youth unemployment is an issue of great concern, not only an economic and development issue (Adams & Yu, 2024; Mayer et al., 2019; Mseleku, 2022b), but also a moral problem robbing people of their dignity (Cloete, 2015).

In their anthology, Mayer et al. (2019, p. 2) highlight the characteristics of youth unemployment at its global and national levels, stating that the persistent nature of global youth unemployment

is not a unique feature to just a few countries; what is unique are the inconsistencies of the phenomena across different countries. As such, these create what the authors refer to as "laborscape." This means that the complex and multifaced character of global youth unemployment does not land itself as a one-size-fits all phenomena (Mayer et al., 2019). Different countries experience youth unemployment very differently—economically, politically and culturally. Unemployment factors such as youth's educational levels, gender, race and ethnicity, ability and religion also play out differently and, as such, addressing it is also very different.

In South Africa, the exploration of the youth unemployment problem is studied from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. From these perspectives, youth unemployment is attributed to the government's emphasis on skills growth strategies, inherent structural features of the economy, and the inadequacies of the country's education system in imparting the necessary skills in a globalising knowledge economy (Webb, 2021). The solutions proposed by these perspectives typically involve addressing either the supply side, that is, developing human capital, or the demand side, by offering incentives for employers to employ young people. In recent years, research continues to focus on youth unemployment. Focus areas include but are not limited to the following:

(i) Webb (2021) focus on the interplay between location and labour markets underscores the importance of spatial context in shaping the experiences of youth in the job market. (ii) De Lannoy et al. (2018) delve into the evidence and interventions, posing fundamental questions about the drivers of youth unemployment. (iii) Graham and Mlatsheni (2021) broaden the scope by investigating macro-level factors, such as economic growth and structural elements. (iv) Mseleku (2022b) attention to youth unemployment among graduates adds a developmental perspective, while (v) Adams and Yu (2024) draw attention to the societal implications of prolonged high unemployment.(vi) Ingle and Mlatsheni (2017) exploration of employment and unemployment transitions provides a comprehensive view, emphasising the role of these transitions in contributing to the overall instability in youth employment.

On a global perspective, the precarity of work has affected youth, rendering them feeling excluded from classical understandings of work and its benefits. Young people's perceptions, meaning and significance of having work have been dislocated (Mayer et al., 2019). With this dislocation, feelings of "chronic insecurity and rising inequalities" are a constant cloud hanging

over their heads (Standing, 2014). Another perspective to the global perspective on precarious work is from the Global South. Scully (2016) renders an account that warns against treating the precariat as a new phenomenon caused by globalisation within labour market discourses. He argues that chronic job insecurities and inequalities had been enduring features in the history and politics of the fight against precarious work in the Global South ages before Standing's globalisation wave. This account highlights the importance of viewing unemployment from a historical and geographical lens.

The dynamics of youth unemployment in South Africa's labour market are influenced by multifaceted factors explored in recent literature. Webb (2021) argues that understanding labour markets requires considering their social and spatial contexts, where societal and geographic disparities play crucial roles alongside traditional supply and demand forces. This perspective underscores how youth, often marginalised by these socio-spaces and identities, face exclusion from employment opportunities. Adams and Yu (2024) highlight the insider-outsider mechanisms within South Africa's labour market, where employed "insiders" can negotiate higher wages, creating barriers for the unemployed "outsiders", particularly impacting black Africans, females, and those with lower education levels, as evidenced by their decadal analysis. Geographical factors also contribute significantly to youth unemployment, as noted by Webb (2021). In addition, Ingle and Mlatsheni (2017) have contributed to this understanding by examining labour market churn among youth, identifying employer cutbacks and layoffs as key drivers of youth unemployment over time. These insights collectively illustrate the complex landscape of youth unemployment in South Africa, shaped by social, spatial, and institutional dynamics that warrant comprehensive consideration in policy and research efforts.

3.3 Graduate Unemployment

Even with the growing need for skilled workers in South Africa, ironically, there has been a rise in unemployment among graduates (Mseleku, 2022a). Debates about who is a graduate are not within the scope of this study. Although running the risk of "inflating" the term by not differentiating between degree-holding graduates and non-degree holding graduates (Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012, p. 7), a broad definition of the term was used in this study to capture individuals with a post matric (Grade 12) qualification at NQF 5 and above from either a college, university of technology and university, that is, those is possession of a certificate, diploma, degree and above (Mseleku, 2022a).

Debates on graduate unemployment are complex. Graduate unemployment is not at crisis point, according to Van der Berg and Van Broekhuizen (2012). They argue that degreed youth have the lowest rates of unemployment that are on a par with international levels. Although degreed graduates' unemployment is lowest in the category of youth, the rate is still rising across the board (Mseleku, 2022a). Structural issues and policies that pertain to the quality of education, curricula, affirmative action policies and immigration to name a few influences of graduate unemployment in South Africa (Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012).

Linked to the structural causes of youth unemployment, the massification of higher education resulted in an oversupply of graduates thereby exacerbating graduate unemployment (Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mseleku, 2022b; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Oluwajodu et al. (2015) studied the causes of graduate unemployment in South Africa within the Banking sector and found that technical and soft skills, employer bias towards HEIs, a mismatch in expectations from employers and graduates are driving factors. There is agreement that a qualification alone is not sufficient to secure employment, Mseleku (2022a) also found that even coupling the qualification with work experience, may also not be enough.

3.4 Higher Education and Graduate Attributes

Graduate attributes play a pivotal role in preparing students for the workforce and society at large. They are defined by HEIs as encompassing those qualities, skills, and understandings that students should develop during their academic tenure to contribute effectively to their profession and society. Graduate attributes are beyond the technical and specialised discipline knowledge that institutions originally focused on as output (Ncube & Matlala, 2023; Staunton et al., 2021). According to Ncube and Matlala (2023), attributes tend to be directed as means of communication between HEIs and various stakeholders, including students, industry, and government, mainly to differentiate their offering from competitors.

Ncube and Matlala (2023) have noted a shift from implicit to explicit emphasis on these attributes in the realm of higher education. This shift was due to pressures from the labour market that HEIs produced graduates that were not suited to fill the jobs in the labour market. They claimed that graduates coming out of HEIs did not have the skills that were demanded by the labour market. From this, it was evident that HEIs needed to promote graduate attributes as skills that over and above the disciplinary knowledge can be generic and transferable enough to function and use in different and evolving job markets. These encompass qualities like

intellectual creativity, problem-solving abilities, effective communication, conflict resolution, teamwork, and more (Ncube & Matlala, 2023). According to Staunton et al. (2021), being a graduate is all about possessing qualities that will eventually open work opportunities.

Graduates often leave HEIs in their graduateness only to realise that their qualification alone is not sufficient (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mseleku, 2022a; Yu, 2013). A notable challenge lies in the disconnect between what HEIs teach and what employers seek in graduates. According to Ncube and Matlala (2023), the influence of graduate attributes on student success in the labour market reveal an existing relationship between these attributes and student success. They argue that a correlation exists between graduate skills and attributes and general employability in the labour market. This underscores the need for HEIs, industry partners and government to not operate in silos but create opportunities to work together, perhaps through WBL programmes.

3.5 Work-Based Learning Interventions

According to Clarke (2018), graduates stand out from the general youth cohort because of graduate qualities that came about through their higher education experiences. Where graduate attributes were also prioritised, graduates come out in possession of both technical skill sets and non-technical abilities, both of which are significant to graduates (Staunton et al., 2021). However, due to a lack of the desired work experience, graduates continue to be unemployed (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Mseleku, 2022a).

In their study, Ncube and Matlala (2023) found that WBL programmes offer students exposure to requirements and partners, thus enhancing their employability. They argue that developing graduates with high self-perceived graduateness increases the graduates' chances of being viewed as high-potential employees by organisations. Therefore, graduate attributes' development coupled with work exposure provides students with an advantage in the job market.

It must be noted that a WBL intervention is not an all-encompassing solution, as noted by Mseleku (2022a). In his study of graduates who had undergone a form of workplace-based programme, Mseleku (2022a) found that although graduates were exposed to 2 years of workplace experience through an internship, graduates remained unemployed after the internship. The exploratory study investigated the determinants of unemployment amongst this group through the lens of mismatch theory. Skills mismatch, massification of higher education,

slow or no economic growth, little to no relevant work experience and labour market demand as well as graduates' negative dispositions and attitude were key determinants of graduate unemployment even after 2 years of work experience (Mseleku, 2022a).

3.6 Learnerships in South Africa

The Skills Development Act 97 of 1998, as amended, plays a vital role in promoting skill development, increasing employment opportunities, and addressing inequalities within the labour market. Several of its key purposes are aimed at addressing various challenges within the country's human capital. These include developing and enhancing the overall skills level of the South African workforce, promoting workplace learning, providing work experience opportunities for new entrants to the labour market and addressing barriers to employment, particularly for those previously disadvantaged by unfair discrimination (Republic of South Africa, 1998).

The Act establishes Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) with the mandate to identify sectoral skills needs, develop sector skills plans, and implement learning programmes to address these needs. Additionally, SETAs promote these programmes by facilitating practical work experience in identified workplaces. In line with this objective, the Act introduces learnership programmes as a means of supporting skills development within SETAs. These learnerships comprise structured learning and work experience components, leading to a qualification registered by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and associated with a specific trade, occupation, or profession. Furthermore, the Act stipulates that learnerships must be registered with the Director-General. They involve a tripartite agreement between the learner, the host employer, and the skills development training provider, each responsible for fulfilling their obligations as outlined in the learnership agreement (Republic of South Africa, 1998).

Learnerships are a form of WBL programmes; they blend disciplined learning of theoretical content with learning relevant to and on the job, helping participants acquire skills, knowledge, real-work experience, and a credential upon successful completion of the programme (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Grewe et al., 2012; Kanyane et al., 2017; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010). As a form of WBL programmes, learnerships are an opportunity to "learn for work, learn at work, and learn through work" (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015, p. 4).

Since their implementation in 2001, Visser and Kruss (2009) highlight learnerships' focal point over time, namely, their establishment and agenda phase under the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) 1 between 2001 and 2005. The next phase was the efficiencies and effectiveness under the NSDS 2's of 2005–2010. The NSDS 3 period 2011–2016 focused on addressing inequalities by facilitating meaningful participation in the economy and society for all South Africans (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The strategies were replaced by the National Skills Development Plan 2023 (NSDP) in 2019; it came about within the midst of the National Development Plan (NDP) and the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (WP-PSET). The NSDP 2030 goal is to enhance access to occupations in high demand and priority skills that support economic growth, foster employment, and contribute to social development, while also addressing systemic factors (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019).

In their study, Visser and Kruss (2009) found that in the first seven years of the learnership programme inception, the majority of learnership participants were enrolled in a learnership programme at NQF 1–4 with the goal of obtaining an occupational and work-related qualification. However, there have been concerns about the value of learnership qualifications at this level for the labour market. The role of various stakeholders has been highlighted (Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010; O'Neil et al., 2023), and concern over the programmes is the integration and alignment of the learnerships' theoretical and practical skills development components have been raised (Cornelissen & Rabie, 2023; Visser & Kruss, 2009).

3.7 Transition from Higher Education to Learnerships

In this study, the term "graduateness" specifically pertained to the group of individuals under investigation, who had either previously participated in a learnership programme or were currently engaged in one. Traditionally, learnership participants are described as individuals with low skill levels and qualifications at NQF levels 1–3, including school dropouts with mid-level qualifications like a Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC) (Visser & Kruss, 2009). However, the individuals in this study hold post-high school qualifications at level 5 and higher in the NQF, setting them apart from this traditional learnership participant component profile.

These participants have transitioned from their experiences in higher education to their next phase, namely, a learnership, with the aim of gaining practical work exposure, professional development and ultimately securing employment. By virtue of their qualifications, they find

themselves in a graduate state, characterised by attributes cultivated through their higher education endeavours, including both technical competencies and non-technical skills, which are deemed crucial for graduates (Clarke, 2018; Staunton et al., 2021). However, despite possessing these qualifications, their lack of desired job experience has resulted in ongoing unemployment (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Mseleku, 2022b).

The anticipation that a higher education qualification guarantees improved employment prospects and employability has long been held (Kruss et al., 2012). Nonetheless, global concerns persist regarding graduate unemployment, a significant issue worldwide (Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mayer et al., 2019). This issue is particularly pronounced in South Africa, where youth unemployment escalates annually (Grace Goitsemodimo Tabengwa et al., 2017; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Pauw et al., 2008; Yu, 2013). Graham et al. (2019) suggest that youth unemployment in the country is multifaceted, influenced by varying levels of skills among young people, ranging from foundational literacy to post-secondary education credentials. Even graduates from South African tertiary institutions, equipped with requisite abilities and qualifications, encounter challenges in securing employment (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mseleku, 2022a; Yu, 2013).

The focus of this study was on this demographic group, arguing that the development of work capabilities forms the bedrock of employment potential. Merely possessing academic credentials is inadequate; graduates must also acquire relevant skills to enhance their readiness for the job market. The study advocates the importance of learnerships in skill development, emphasising the experiences of graduates as they transition from graduateness to employability since employers value work experience highly when assessing graduates for employment opportunities (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Graham et al., 2019; Grewe et al., 2012; Marock, 2008). Through on-the-job training, learnerships not only facilitate skills development but also enhance employability. Consequently, graduates can utilise learnerships to enhance their employability. The decision of graduates to enrol in this learning pathway, as well as their expectations at the outset of the learnership, were examined as they embarked on this journey. Graham et al. (2019) suggests that graduates opt for learnerships to enhance their employment skills.

3.8 Graduates' Experiences

Understanding graduates' experience of employment is crucial for better curricular alignment in higher education and the creation of interventions that are meant to get students ready for the workforce. Graham's (2019) study showed that graduates distinguished between skills gained via formal education and those gained through real-world work experience. They believed the qualifications' skills were less valuable than those they could learn from their jobs (Graham et al., 2019).

Graduating students experience diverse transitions because, as noted by Graham et al. (2019, p. 361), they are "not a homogeneous population." This implies that two graduates with comparable levels of intellect, commitment, exposure to higher education, course and qualification will have very different experiences moving on to their next stage of life. Structures in the larger world and internal, small-scale elements influence and are influenced by these experiences (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019).

In her research on graduates' perceptions following an internship programme, Mseleku (2022a) discovered that lack of work experience, mismatched skills, and prejudice were some of the issues graduates encountered when they made the transition from internship to employment. Additionally, because the experience gained via programmes like learnerships that aim to increase employability is sometimes insufficient and inappropriate, they are likely to be disregarded (Mseleku, 2022a). In the creation of policies and programmes intended to increase participants' employability, graduates' experiences are frequently concealed or ignored. Edziwa and Blignaut (2022) identify graduates as crucial stakeholders and claim that they are frequently absent from discussions that affect them.

3.9 Employability Skills

The main research question asked: How do graduates transition into, through and out of learnership programmes and acquire skills that correlate with the enhancement of employment prospects after completing the learnership? The idea that graduates acquire employable skills during a learnership is implicit in this question. But what exactly is employability and how does it relate to graduateness? In the sections that follow, I demonstrate how employability can be seen as a flexible idea that is understood in context. Literature that portrays graduates' perspectives from many angles will also be explored.

Fifteen years ago, Marock (2008) examined the idea of employability of youth in schools and what capabilities were at least sufficient to enter the job market. She pointed out that the term "employability" is a relative one that depends on its context. This indicates that there is no single universally accepted definition of employability, and that various interpretations of the concept result from historical, sociocultural, and economic settings. According to McGrath (2009, p. 1), three historical occurrences can be linked to employability: the growth of the service/knowledge economy, the neo-liberal idea that views education as an investment in future employment possibilities, and the concept of lifelong learning, considering the precarious employment situation that is so widespread. Additionally, theories concerning the way that skills for employability are created, are influenced by the beliefs held by the theorists, policymakers, and employability programme designers regarding the concept (Marock, 2008; McGrath, 2009).

One definition of employability comprises aptitudes transformed into talents and information that permit a person to enter, maintain, and change work as necessary (Marock, 2008). Consequently, while a graduate degree alone is insufficient, there are certain talents that are required to land a job. Having employability skills distinguishes between graduates who are employed and graduates who are not, according to the study. According to Marock (2008), workplace experience is one of the numerous methods to acquire employable skills. For this reason, graduates looking to improve their employability are drawn to learnerships as workplace learning programmes. McGrath (2009) also identifies important elements seen in the literature on employability. These include outside variables in the macro- and micro-environment.

HEIs, which support the development of employable skills, employers who provide learning environments and benefit from having human capital with these skills, and students themselves, all play important roles in this process (McGrath, 2009; Taylor & Govender, 2017). From the perspective of higher education, Taylor and Govender (2017) examined how students who were enrolled in an employability programme run by a university in collaboration with an employer—a WIL partnership model—developed their employability. They discovered that despite the limited (one week) time frame, university students believed the work exposure experiences boosted their employability skills and gave them confidence (Taylor & Govender, 2017).

According to Edziwa and Blignaut (2022), literature frequently portrays graduates as having improved employable abilities. According to TVET graduates who have completed their studies, this is not the case. Graduates are important stakeholders in discussions about employability, according to Edziwa and Blignaut (2022), but they are underrepresented in the literature. Their research revealed that graduates believed the elements that make up employability skills lacked "entrepreneurial sensibility." Graduates believed that self-employment, as opposed to employability skills, was more beneficial in developing nations. Students claimed that because they are from a developing continent with few jobs, they should concentrate on honing their entrepreneurship talents (Edziwa & Blignaut, 2022).

The opinions expressed here demonstrate how diverse higher education graduates regard employability. The perspectives should be considered and integrated into the curriculum and employability programmes that expose students to the job (Edziwa & Blignaut, 2022; Taylor & Govender, 2017). As was previously indicated, there is a gap in the literature on employability that does not adequately account for the experiences and perspectives of the people about whom discussions on employability skills are taking place (Edziwa & Blignaut, 2022; Taylor & Govender, 2017). However, this study, which examined conceptions of graduates in a learnership programme, aimed to fill this vacuum with the use of a mixed methods study including empirical data.

The preceding sections have explored the intricate landscape of youth and graduate unemployment in South Africa, emphasising the multifaceted factors influencing these phenomena. Youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge, exacerbated by structural issues within the economy and shortcomings in educational systems. Meanwhile, graduate unemployment highlights the mismatch between qualifications and the demands of the labour market, despite efforts to enhance skills through higher education. Recognising the importance of preparing graduates for employment, the discussion shifted towards the concept of graduate attributes and the role of higher education in developing these essential skills. Furthermore, work-based learning interventions, such as learnerships, emerged as critical pathways to bridge the gap between academic learning and workplace requirements. These insights laid the groundwork for the theoretical framework that guided this study, which sought to explore how graduates transition into learnership programmes and acquire employability skills that enhance their prospects in the job market.

3.10 Theoretical Framework

This section of the study presents a theoretical framework that underpins the exploration of graduates' transition into learnership programmes aimed at enhancing their employment prospects. The overarching research question is complemented by three specific sub-questions, which inquire into the transition experience into learnerships, the learning experiences within these programmes, and the understanding of employability skills necessary for post-learnership programme employment. To address these inquiries, the study drew upon insights from three distinct theoretical perspectives: the Graduate Attribute Framework by Staunton et al. (2021); the conceptualisation of transition as induction, development, and becoming by Gale and Parker (2014); and the integrated model of graduate employability by Clarke (2018). These frameworks collectively provided a structured lens to examine how graduates navigate the critical phase between higher education and the world of work, shedding light on the attributes, transitions, and employability dynamics essential to their professional journey.

3.10.1 Graduate Attribute Framework (Staunton et al., 2021)

In this study, the term graduate referred to someone who possesses a higher education qualification higher than the school leaving qualification sitting at NQF 4. The study did not differentiate whether the qualification was a diploma or degree, however, it covered those with registered post-school qualifications above NQF 5. The graduates in this study were in transition, having completed higher education and moving into their next phase, in this case a learnership. The way they entered the learnership was through the labour market. Graduates enter the learnership through an advertisement like that of a job advert. A key limiter to entry into the learnerships in this study was “in possession of a 3-year tertiary qualification” for one, and “a post-school qualification” in the other. As such, this typical way of recruiting enables the recruiters (employers) to use graduates’ educational credentials as markers (Blom, 2019), but not a guarantee of employment (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mseleku, 2022a; Yu, 2013). Embedded in this practice is the assumption that possession of a higher education qualification means accessing potential employees that bring with them knowledge and understandings that relate to technical knowledge and skills and qualities developed throughout the higher education journey.

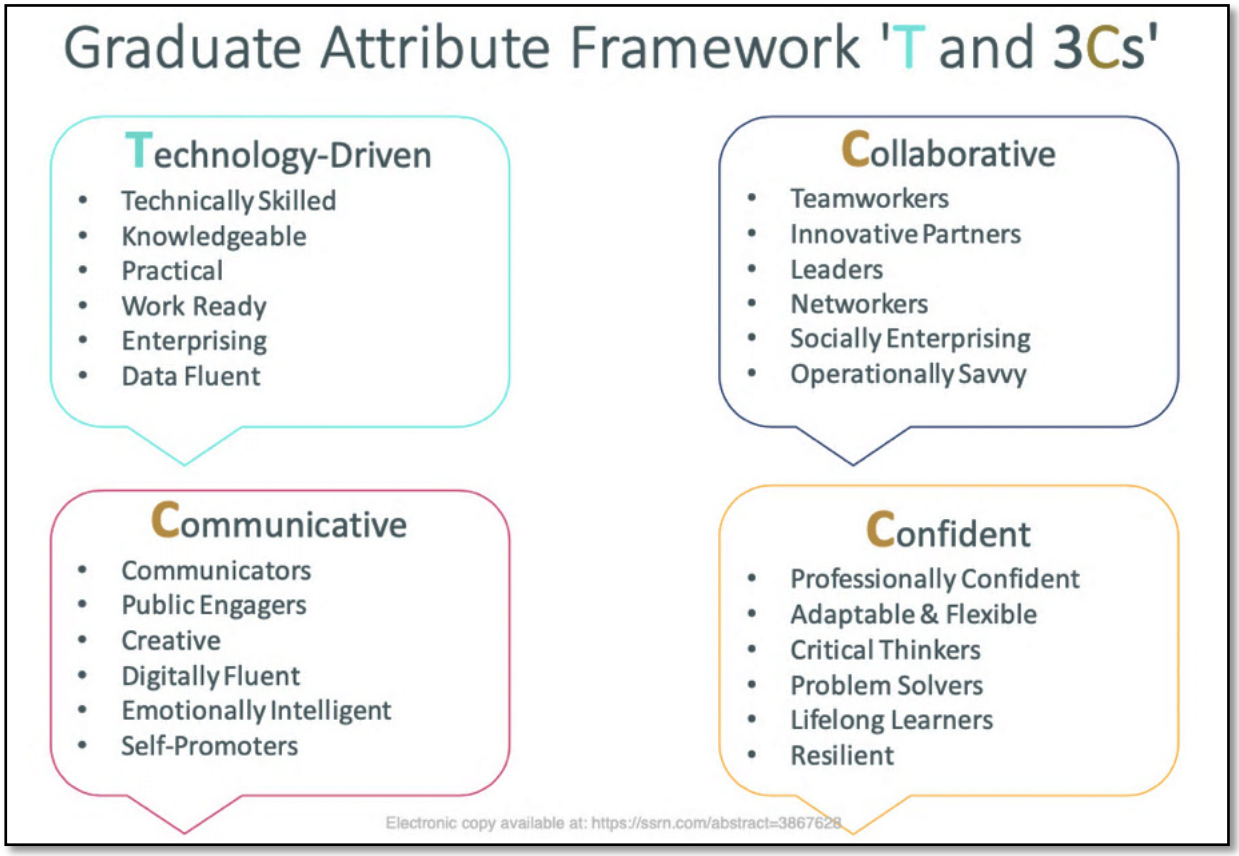
In this study it was important to explore what is it about graduates that is appealing to employers looking to run learnership programmes. Of course, graduates bring with them the technical knowledges of their chosen fields, whether be it Marketing, Finance, Accounting etc. Graduates also bring non-academic qualities that HEIs invest in embedding into their mission statements, marketing material and teaching and assessment practices (Staunton et al., 2021). Graduates come out of higher education with both explicit and implicit graduate attributes; these attributes position them in a state of graduateness.

To unpack graduate attributes from a higher education perspective, I looked at the Graduate Attributes Framework developed by Staunton et al. (2021) to frame and organise their ideas about the qualities graduates should develop. As the pressures from employers mount that HEIs should develop graduates that possess the skills and knowledges that are required by employers, every HEI is to some degree concerned about their graduates' output destinations. Graduate attributes are the qualities that members of the higher education community agree that graduates must develop during their time in college or university (Staunton et al., 2021, p. 6). In addition, they encompass technical abilities and more that employers regard as crucial for success in the labour market and the knowledge economy. In this sense, higher education's educational provision is seen as good and for a skilled workforce.

Indeed, graduateness is possessing the qualification and qualities that will eventually open work and other labour market opportunities. Staunton et al. (2021) graduate attribute framework was theorised with employability in mind where, as the attributes are developed, leading the student to a state of graduateness, employability is enhanced. In this framework, a narrow definition of employability is used, that is, a set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes possessed by an individual (Yorke and Knights, 2006 cited in Staunton et al., 2021, p. 6). This understanding reflects employability as an intrinsic personal state within an individual and graduate attributes as aiming to optimise this state for successful transitions into the labour market.

Staunton et al. (2021) graduate attribute framework is divided into four categories: Technology-driven, Communicative, Collaborative, and Confident. This is known as the Graduate Attribute Framework T and 3Cs (Staunton et al., 2021, p. 9).

Figure 15 The Graduate Attribute Framework T and 3Cs



This framework is useful in that the attributes desired for graduates leaving higher education are listed and categorised into bundles that hold them together. The T and 3Cs graduate attributes framework comprise the T for Technologically Driven component. Qualities that relate to technical knowledge and abilities that are linked to the fields of study the graduates have chosen—be it Accounting, Marketing, Finance etc.—fall into this category. The three-Cs of Collaborative, Communicative and Confident are indicative of soft skills. The Collaborative components relate to ideas of teamwork and networking; the Communicative component relates to the ability to communicate verbally and articulate ideas digitally and creatively. Highlighting Communication skills; relating to an individual's innate disposition is the Confident component. This relates more to embodying a chosen professional identity, flexibility, and problem solving which requires critical thinking.

This study assumed that the T sets graduates apart from a qualifications perspective and is useful for transitioning into the learnership programme. It is the qualification that gives the

individual the graduateness identity and, as such, the graduate attribute framework enables an understanding of the concept of graduateness. As the graduate's selection into the learnership programme takes place, attributes that relate to not only the T but the 3Cs come to the fore as graduates demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of communicative, communication and confident qualities at different levels.

In relation to the learnership programmes in this study, I argue that the learnership pathway as a form of WBL serves the dual nature of theory and practical workplace learning; it is intended by design to serve. As such, as a type of learning programme that leads to a qualification, transitioning pathways inherent in learnership formats are worth considering.

Transitions are usually studied from an individual's life stages, that is, from childhood to adulthood. Where educational transitions are studied, they encompass transition from one grade, phase or band to another as in primary education, to high school to higher education and into work. The study aimed to understand transitions of graduates into, through and out of a learnership programme since a learnership is framed within the context of post-school education and training (PSET) in South Africa. The works of Gale and Parker (2014) will be unpacked to uncover the transitions from a higher education perspective. Understanding transition from this perspective offers an opportunity to understand graduates' experiences within the learnerships context.

3.10.2 Transition as Becoming (Gale & Parker, 2014)

Gale and Parker (2014) investigated how the concept of transition as it relates to students is conceptualised in the context of higher education practice, policy and research. Transition is the "capability to navigate change"; it is the process of change that students navigate as they progress into, within and through educational contexts (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 737). Gale and Parker (2014) believe that a student's capability to navigate change include acquiring the tools to actively address changing circumstances and acknowledging the interplay of individual agency and structural forces. There is a need to give way to individual mobility, aspirations and voice. With this understanding, transition is not just a simplistic journey of change over time.

Upon analysing how academic literature on higher education view transitions, three themes emerged, namely, transition as induction, transition as development, and transition as becoming.

Gale and Parker (2014) use the codes T1, T2 and T3 respectively. Of the three themes, transition as becoming seemed to be less understood within the higher education landscape. The authors argue that this is so, not because the concept of transition is not critically analysed, but also because it requires the institutions of higher education to shift position and really consider the lived experiences of students.

Gale and Parker (2014, pp. 737-738) identify the three ways that student transition is conceptualised in higher education research, policy, and practice literature: (1) as induction (T1); (2) as development (T2) and (3) as becoming (T3).

Table 5 Various conceptions of transition)

Transition		Conceptual understanding
As Induction	(T1)	▪ Conceived as a period of adjustment. ▪ An individual moves from one institutional or disciplinary context to another. ▪ This could be seen as a start of a sequential process.
As Development	(T2)	▪ Conceived as involving stages of evolvement. ▪ Individuals change in identity, from one identity to another. ▪ This could be seen as characterised by trajectories and changes over time.
As Becoming	(T3)	▪ Conceived as ongoing series of fragmented movements. ▪ The individual undergoes fluctuations in lived reality. ▪ Influenced and transformed by subjective experiences. ▪ It suggests that transition is an ongoing process rather than a series of distinct stages.

Transition as induction (T1) occurs at a predetermined time and location. This typically signifies the transition from secondary school to tertiary education. It also encompasses students transitioning to HEI from various backgrounds and circumstances, as in the case of adult students. Transition as development (T2) is in a sense localised; it is understood as a transformation from one identity to another. For higher education students, it is seen as a period during which students not only shape their identity as students, but also prepare themselves for a specific role or profession such as an IT technician. This transition represents a phase of personal evolution or growth, imprinting the progression from one life stage to the next. According to Gale and Parker (2014) analysis, both conceptualisations of T1 and T2 represent student transitions as occurrences that happen at specific moments of challenge, as part of sequential progression and as universally encountered and accepted. However, HEIs know that

transitions are complex, revolving between the ideas of public issues and private troubles (Mills, 1959 cited in Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 744).

The conceptualisation of transitions as becoming (T3) does not see transitions as a crisis, with a liner, path but recognises the anxiety and uncertainty felt by individuals when faced with the difficulties of navigating unfamiliar situations in higher education journeys. In addition, the crossing of different identities that students own must be negotiated every day, including the to-and-fro movements that happen in life's experiences.

Transitioning into higher education is not characterised by isolated and abrupt movements from one context or identity to another, but rather by a fluid and nuanced process. Gale and Parker (2014) note the absence of students' experiences and perspectives in higher education policy and practices. They emphasise how conventional perspectives on student transition do not capture the diversity of student lives, their experiences of university or of universities themselves. They regard deviations from the norm as shortcomings or inadequacies. According to Gale and Parker (2014), this adds to the challenge of student transitions.

Transition as Becoming (T3), that is, the cumulation of everyday experiences, emphasises that transition is an ongoing and everyday aspect of life, ongoing negotiation of identities and not moments or phases. Transition as Becoming (T3) is not an event, but the transition involves ongoing changes, transformations, and movements.

These conceptual understandings of transition within the higher education landscape derived from Gale and Parker (2014) work underpin the understanding of transitions in this study. For purposes of this study, and to be able to answer the research question: How do graduates transition into, through and out of learnership programmes and acquire skills that correlate with the enhancement of employment prospects after completing the learnership? In other words, the stated research question asks about transitions into and through a learnership.

Transition as identified by Gale and Parker (2014), although perceived from literature from HEI contexts is particularly important because this study is in the post-school context in South Africa, where a form of WBL educational programme provides the base for the transition experiences to be lived.

3.10.3 Model of Graduate Employability (Clarke, 2018)

Employability is a notion that has been theorised by several authors over the years and has been used relatively frequently in the literature. Various theorists attribute different meanings to the concept (Marock, 2008; McGrath, 2009). Clarke (2018) idea of graduate employability as a higher education paradigm was considered in this study as it highlights multiple dimensions that explore and explain employability. In addition, Clarke (2018, p. 1934) highlights the roles that various stakeholders play in facilitating employability in "individual, institutional, and contextual" contexts. The investigation into employability resulted in varying views of employability. Some views include an individual quality, a consequence of the conditions in the labour market, a gauge of employment status, or an attitude attributed to activities that enhance employability (Clarke, 2018).

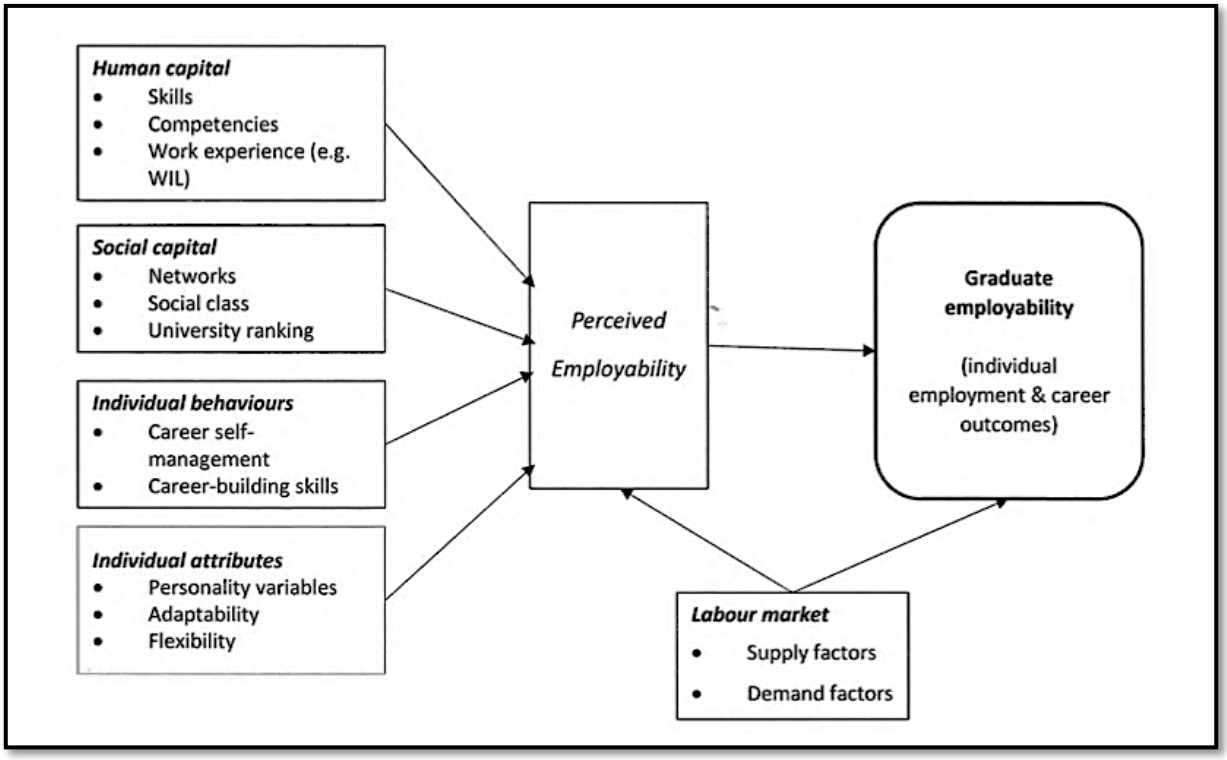
This research used Clarke (2018) model of understanding of employability which moves away from a personal state as observed by (Staunton et al., 2021, p. 9), that is, the higher education model to a broader understanding that views employability as the interconnection of the labour market supply and demand factors, access to different forms of capital and individual behaviours and their perceived employability.

According to Clarke (2018), these elements influence employability; however, having them alone does not necessarily equate to a job. Although important, human capital alone does not ensure positive employment outcomes. Social capital factors such as social class, institutional reputation, and networking can affect employment outcomes. Individual attributes and behaviours play a foundational role in career success. Adaptability, flexibility, and career management skills are essential for coping with change and preparing for future work challenges. Perceived employability, which is influenced by personal and structural factors, reflects individuals' evaluation of their chances in the labour market and affects their approach to the job search. Regarding labour market variables, graduates face challenges in the labour market due to oversupply from mass higher education, leading to longer job searches and underemployment. Even highly qualified graduates may struggle to find suitable employment immediately after graduation.

Through the integrated model of employability, Clarke (2018) conceptualises graduate employability as comprising the human capital, social capital, and individual behaviours and attributes, these influences underpin an individual’s perceived employability in a labour market

context. Those combined factors combined influence employment outcomes of an individual (Clarke, 2018).

Figure 16 An Integrated Model of Graduate Employability (Clarke, 2018, p.1931)



This paradigm of graduate employability was adopted because it added to the work of Staunton et al. (2021) to make the case for the significance of employability outside of higher education. To put it another way, possessing graduation attributes should only result in employment if other aspects are considered. According to Clarke (2018, p. 1931), obtaining employment involves developing "human capital, social capital, and individual behaviours." Increasing personal views of employability drives behaviour and spurs action and agency. It recognises that elements related to the labour market influence employability success (Clarke, 2018; Rankin et al., 2015). The idea of skills, namely the ability to gainfully become employed and create a career from that employment, is at the core of this concept. The dimensions that together comprise graduate employability raise many practical implications for stakeholders and their roles in the development of employability skills.

In conclusion, the theoretical frameworks of Staunton et al. (2021), Gale and Parker (2014) and Clarke (2018) offered a comprehensive understanding of the complex processes at play during the transition of graduates into learnership programmes and subsequently into the world of work. Together, these frameworks provided a strong foundation for examining how learnership programmes, as skills development mechanisms, serve as essential pathways for bridging academic attainment with practical workplace readiness. Staunton et al. (2021) Graduate Attribute Framework elucidates the essential qualities graduates bring to learnerships, emphasising technical prowess and soft skills crucial for employability. Gale and Parker (2014) exploration of transition as induction, development, and becoming enriches this understanding by contextualising these transitions within broader educational and personal growth trajectories. Finally, Clarke (2018) model of graduate employability underscores the multifaceted nature of employability, integrating human and social capital considerations alongside individual behaviours and their perceptions of labour market dynamics. From these perspectives, the concepts of graduateness, transition, and employability were integrated to develop a conceptual framework known as the Graduateness, Transition, and Employability (GTE) conceptual model, which will be presented in the next section.

3.11 Conceptual Framework: GTE Model

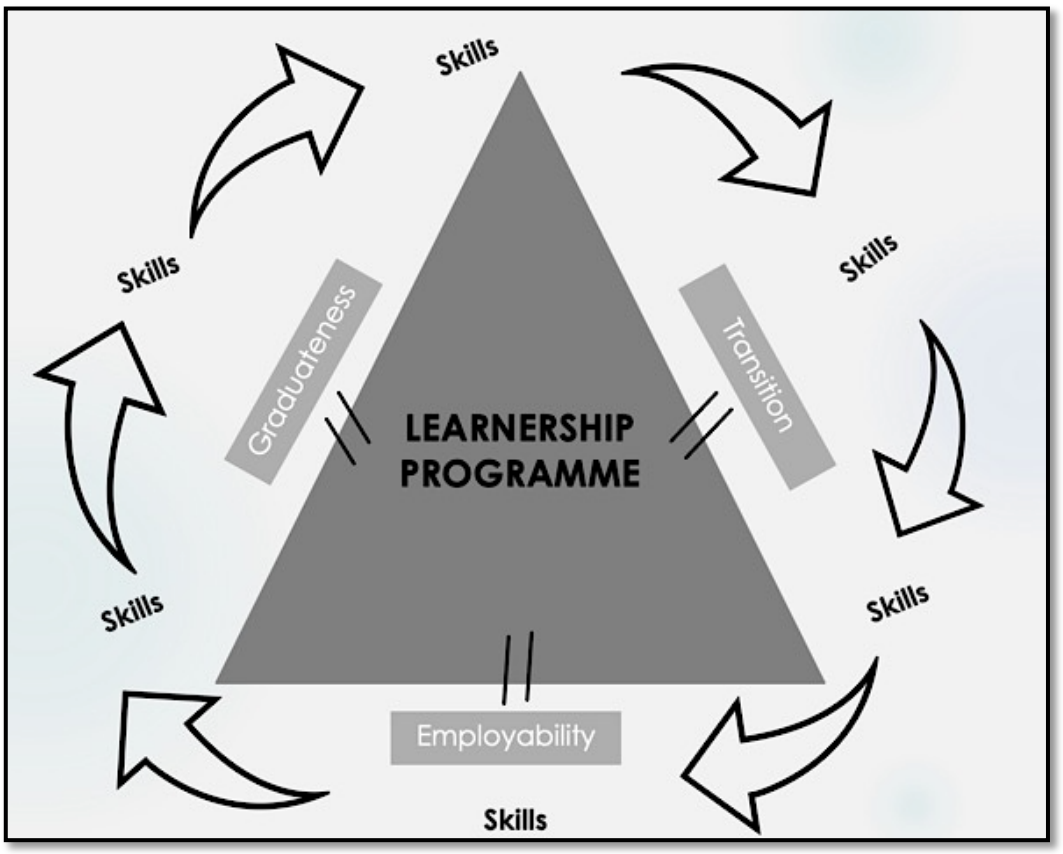
Three key concepts run through the theoretical framework. These are: (i) 'transition' as capabilities to navigate change; (ii) the notion of 'graduateness' as it relates to a state of exiting HEI with disciplinary and degrees of generic skills and (iii) the notion of employability, understood as the competencies acquired during higher education that contribute to graduates' prospects in the job market. These concepts were applied as connected elements, helping to understand graduate experiences and perceptions of employability skills development within learnership programme contexts.

From the above we can arrive at an understanding that a learnership programme is an intervention that facilitates both theoretical and workplace-based learning. As such, it provides the space and context for transitions to take place. Graduates enter learnerships in their graduateness in two fronts: first, as bringing their graduateness (Staunton et al. (2021) attributes and human capital (Clarke (2018) technical and generic skills into work contexts, thus aiming to showcase their skills and abilities. Second, as learning participants in the learnership, they acquire experiences and solidify their human capital through the learnership's theoretical and workplace-based learning experiences. The learnership programme provides for the

development of social capital, regulates their individual attributes and behaviours, which provides access (insights) into the labour market through contracting as an employee for a certain period. In sum, graduate experiences of their transitions are bound inwardly by the foundations provided by the learnership programme, and outwardly by the development of skill at the various transition stages. These converge to enhance employability prospects.

Thinking through and theorising these three concepts brings about the Graduateness (G), Transition (T) and Employability (E) Conceptual Framework known henceforth as the 'GTE Conceptual Framework.' This conceptual framework is developed through the understanding of the literature and key theories relevant to answering the main research question and the three sub-questions. Figure 17 below illustrates the conceptual framework as an equilateral triangle, placing equal value on the quality of each concept and arguing that these three concepts are bounded outwardly by skills for employability and enabled inwardly by a WBL programme in the form of a learnership programme

Figure 17 The Bounded Ecosystem of Graduateness, Transition and Employability (GTE) Model



According to Figure 17, being a graduate precedes being accepted into a learnership, which offers the opportunity for learning for, at and through work (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). However, moving into, through and out of the learnership programme is a transition experience and skills development experience thus, contributing to graduate employability by the end of the programme. This conceptual framework helps to make sense of the logic of progression from being a graduate to becoming employable through the learnership programme.

The GTE Conceptual Framework provides a framework for understanding the interplay between Graduateness, Transition, and Employability within learnership programmes. It highlights how graduates leverage their academic knowledge and skills in practical work environments and navigate transitions in the learnership programme to enhance their employability prospects. In the chapters to follow, this framework will serve as the cornerstone of my analytical approach, guiding the interpretation of empirical data to explore in depth how these concepts shape graduates' experiences and development. By integrating the GTE Conceptual Framework into my analytical framework, I aim to uncover deeper insights into the complex dynamics of the education-work-employability nexus.

3.12 Conclusion

The literature review revealed a complex interplay of factors shaping the transition of graduates into learnership programmes in South Africa. Beginning with the critical context of youth and graduate unemployment, the review underscored persistent challenges instigated by economic structures and educational system limitations. It highlighted higher education's role in cultivating essential graduate attributes and the evolving landscape of WBL interventions, particularly learnerships, as pivotal in bridging academic knowledge and labour market demands.

Theoretical perspectives from Staunton et al. (2021), Gale and Parker (2014), and Clarke (2018) provided an understanding of graduateness, transition, and employability as interconnected concepts. These frameworks revealed how graduates bring their skills into learnership contexts, undergo transformative transitions, and develop crucial employability skills. The resulting GTE Conceptual Framework provides a structured lens through which to analyse how learnership

programmes facilitate this transitional journey, ultimately enhancing graduates' experiences and readiness for the job market.

In conclusion, this chapter has established a foundation for the empirical investigation that follows, aiming to explore in depth how graduates navigate and benefit from learnership programmes in South Africa. By integrating theoretical insights with practical realities, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights into optimising educational and policy interventions that support graduate employability.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology employed to explore the transition experiences of graduates participating in learnership programmes aimed at enhancing their employment prospects. Building on the literature review, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual discussions in the preceding chapters, this section delves into the research approach, design, and methods used to address the central research question: How do graduates transition into, through and out of learnership programmes and acquire skills that correlate with the enhancement of employment prospects after completing the learnership?

A comprehensive understanding of how graduates transition into, through, and out of these learnership programmes required a methodological approach that could capture both the qualitative and quantitative richness of their experiences. As such, a mixed methods research (MMR) approach was employed because it effectively integrates the two, providing a holistic view which neither qualitative or quantitative methods could alone (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The motivation for selecting MMR emerged from insights shared by Prof. Anthony Onwuegbuzie, who advocated for a research paradigm that transcends traditional qualitative-quantitative dichotomies. His argument for MMR, is supported by literature (Creswell, 2016; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) highlighting its potential to yield richer, more comprehensive results by leveraging the strengths of both approaches. This resonated with the aim of this study which was to capture the dynamic and multifaceted experiences of graduates in learnership programmes.

According to Creswell (2016) MMR allow researchers to combine quantitative data, which provides statistical insights, with qualitative data, which offers depth and contextual understanding. Creswell (2016) also notes that MMR is particularly advantageous in complex social science research, as it captures the multifaceted nature of participants' experiences across different phases of program engagement. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) further support this approach, noting that MMR's flexibility and inclusiveness make it ideal for studies requiring both breadth and depth, such as examining graduates' transitions through educational programs.

In addressing the research question, this chapter will unfold in sections. It begins with an exploration of the MMR approach and its alignment with the study's objectives, then it elaborates on the research approach, detailing the strategies for data collection and analysis. Each methodology is examined for its contribution to the study's validity and trustworthiness. Finally, a discussion on the ethical considerations concludes the section, highlighting the integrity and ethical soundness of the research process.

4.2 Research Approach: Mixed Methods

4.2.1 Research Approach: Mixed Methods

According to the definition offered by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), MMR is defined as a category of research whereby the researcher integrates quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, or language within a single study. The term "integrates" is an important "characteristic" of MMR" is it goes beyond just adding qualitative approached to quantitative (Creswell, 2016). MMR aims to remove barriers that restrict researchers' choice of research approach; as such it is characterised by inclusive, pluralistic and complementary principles (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Through the integration of both qualitative and quantitative components, a more comprehensive and profound understanding of a phenomenon is gained (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Johnson et al., 2007; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). MMR is the ideal approach to choose because it gives the researcher the best chance to respond to the research questions asked (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Scott & Morrison, 2005). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) concluded that the research questions guide the methods to be used in the research.

4.2.2 Philosophical Underpinnings: Pragmatism

MMR is usually associated with a pragmatist epistemological stance. Indeed, in their 2004 paper, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 16) propose "Pragmatism as the Philosophical Partner for Mixed Methods Research," suggesting that MMR should utilise an approach and philosophy that strives to integrate the insights derived from both qualitative and quantitative research into a practical and viable solution.

Pragmatism, as a worldview, emerges from actions, situations, and consequences rather than pre-existing conditions. The emphasis is on applications, on what is effective, and finding solutions to problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Rather than being rigid regarding a specific method, pragmatic researchers prioritise the research problem and question, employing all available approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The significance of pragmatism lies in its ability to direct attention to the research problem in social sciences, advocating a pluralistic approach to gaining knowledge about the problem.

Pragmatic researchers can combine positivist and constructivist elements to address research questions in a comprehensive manner (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). By utilising quantitative and qualitative techniques within the same study, pragmatic researchers can capitalise on the strengths of each approach, providing a more robust understanding of complex phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

4.3 Research Design

This study employed an MMR approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the transition experiences of graduates in learnership programmes. This dual approach is rooted in the necessity to capture the objective relationships between variables (quantitative) as well as the subjective meanings constructed by participants (qualitative). By combining these methodologies, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the transition process, thus enriching our understanding beyond the capabilities of a singular method.

4.3.1 Perspectives on Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is grounded in the positivist and post-positivist paradigms, which emphasise the empirical and systematic exploration of phenomena through numerical data. In this approach, theory drives the identification of problems and formulation of hypotheses. Researchers employ instruments to measure variables objectively, and the collected data are subjected to statistical analysis to test these hypotheses. This method allows for the examination of relationships between variables and facilitates the drawing of conclusions that are generalisable.

For this study, quantitative data were gathered through an online questionnaire distributed to databases of learnership participants. The questionnaire was designed to capture numerical data

regarding various aspects of the participants' transition experiences. A total of 64 participants completed the questionnaire, with all responses being fully recorded and no data discarded. The data was analysed using exploratory data analysis (EDA) and descriptive statistics, which provided insights into patterns and trends relevant to the research questions.

4.3.2 Perspectives on Qualitative Research

Qualitative research aligns with constructivist and interpretivist paradigms and focuses on understanding how individuals construct and interpret meanings in their interactions with the world. This approach values the complexity and variability of human experiences, prioritising participants' subjective perspectives. Researchers in this tradition seek to uncover the richness of experiences by exploring diverse and multifaceted views.

In the context of this study, qualitative data were collected from responses to open-ended questions (OEQs) included in the online questionnaire and through three online focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted via Microsoft Teams. This approach allowed participants to express their experiences and perceptions in their own words, providing depth to the quantitative findings. The qualitative data, comprising responses from the 64 participants to the open-ended questions and the FGDs, were analysed using thematic analysis. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and themes, offering nuanced insights into the graduates' experiences.

4.3.3 Integrated Mixed Methods Design

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study were designed to leverage the strengths of both approaches, aligning with the MMR strategy discussed in the previous section (4.2). Quantitative data provide a broad overview of trends and relationships, while qualitative data add depth and context, offering a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the graduates' transition experiences.

Data collection involved a sequential process where the quantitative phase informed the qualitative phase. The online questionnaire's numerical data highlighted areas for deeper exploration, which were subsequently examined through OEQs and FGDs. This process ensured that the qualitative insights could contextualise and be expanded in the quantitative findings, allowing for a holistic analysis of the research questions.

The data analysis approaches are detailed in section 4.5, where the specific methods and procedures for analysing quantitative and qualitative data are discussed. This design framework underscores the value of MMR in addressing the complexities of the research problem, aligning with the study's objective to enhance understanding of the learnership experience from multiple perspectives.

4.4 Data Collection Strategies

Many of the previous studies on skills development as it relates to learnerships have been conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and were generally quantitative (Kruss & Wildschut, 2016; Wildschut et al., 2012). In contrast to these studies, an MMR approach was used in this study to collect empirical data. Two data collection strategies were implemented at two levels: first, the quantitative research approach consisting of an online questionnaire and, second, a qualitative research approach using FGDs and OEQs from the online questionnaire.

4.4.1 Recruitment and Sampling Process

The population in this study comprised graduates from two organisations who had participated or were participating in learnerships at different periods between 2020 and 2023. An interesting and unique feature of these learnerships was that they were targeted at unemployed graduates of HEIs, which was contrary to the normal practice of targeting learnerships to youth that have up to a matric (Grade 12) qualification, assisting them to gain a post-school qualification. Instead, the two organisations hosted learnership programmes that were specifically aimed at youth with a matric and a post-school qualification at an NQF higher than the National Senior Certificate from a HEI, hence, in this study they were referred to as graduates.

The study employed a purposive-convenience sampling approach. The target population consisted of graduates from two organizations, Organisation A (in the Financial Services sector) and Organisation B (in the Education and Training sector), who had participated in learnerships from 2020 to 2023. All participants held qualifications beyond high school, specifically at NQF Level 5 or higher.

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Access to the initial graduate databases from both organizations was possible due to my professional role. Organisation A had contracted Organisation B to manage its learnership project, thus facilitating database access through my involvement in the project administration. Permission to access the graduate databases and conduct research was granted in writing by both organizations.

The initial database from Organisation A was of the 2020-2021 learnership programme intake which had 347 graduates in total. The database from Organisation B was for their 2022 learnership programme intake with 12 graduates, and 9 graduates in their 2023 intake. The first round of data collection comprised a population of 368 graduates. On 8th September 2023, a "request to participate in the research study" communication was sent to all 368 graduates via SMS and email, followed by reminders on 17th September 2023.

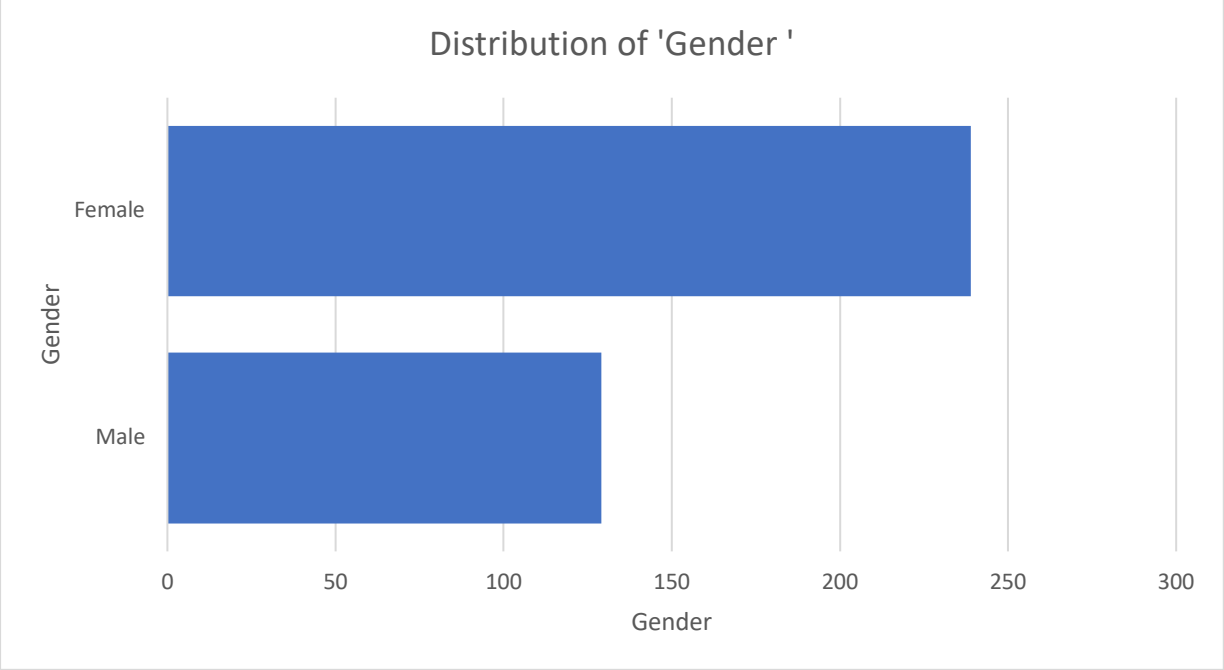
Table 6: The population distribution by location

% distribution of 'LOCATION'

LOCATION	Count of LOCATION
Gauteng	88.86%
Kwa-Zulu Natal	5.98%
Western Cape	5.16%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

The distribution of participants by location shows a large concentration in Gauteng, with 88.86% participation in the province. KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape had much smaller representations, accounting for 5.98% and 5.16% of the participants, respectively.

Figure 18 Gender distribution of population



The database displayed clear gender disparities, with females representing most of the participants at 239 out of a total of 368 participants. Males accounted for a smaller portion, at 129 participants.

4.4.2 Representation Limitations in recruitment

To address limitations in representativeness and increase the sample size, additional learnership databases from similar organizations in different sectors were requested, but none agreed due to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). Organisation A was approached again, and, while direct database access could not be granted, they agreed to disseminate the study invitation on my behalf. Consequently, on 16th October 2023, Organisation A sent the questionnaire email to 665 additional graduates from their 2021–2023 intakes.

To accommodate Organisation A's second dataset and ensure clarity in response tracking, a second online questionnaire was developed as an adaptation of the initial questionnaire. This version excluded any references to Organisation B to focus exclusively on Organisation A's expanded database. The adaptation was necessary to manage the separate datasets effectively,

allowing for the comparison of responses across phases and enabling later integration of data from both questionnaires.

4.4.3 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The online questionnaire used in this study was developed from scratch to specifically address graduates' experiences across the three stages of transition—before, during, and after their learnership programmes. Due to the limitations in the availability of off the shelf questionnaires, an original design was necessary (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). Existing studies and questionnaires normally focused on other learnership stakeholders rather than on graduates themselves, see (Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010; O'Neil et al., 2023). Furthermore, most research on learnership participants primarily assessed the impact of the learnerships post-completion, rather than examining the transition into, within, and beyond the programme (Wildschut et al., 2012).

The developed questionnaire consisted of five sections designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights:

- **Section 1:** Introduced participants to the study with an information sheet linked to a consent form. A tick box allowed participants to confirm their understanding and willingness to participate, while demographic information, such as learnership category and highest qualification, was also collected. This information was obtained to provide a profile of the population, in terms of their educational background and the activities they engaged in prior to entering the learnership. Personal information such as race, gender and region were not important because over 99.9% of graduates on the database were black African.
- **Section 2:** Explored graduates' experiences transitioning into the learnership programmes.
- **Section 3:** Focused on their learning experiences within the programme itself.
- **Section 4:** Examined participants' understanding of employability skills and their readiness to transition into the labour market.
- **Section 5:** Contained open-ended questions (OEQs) that allowed graduates to share personal reflections on their learnership journey. Section 5 also asked participants if they were interested in joining a focus group, with a "Yes" or "No" option. Those who selected "Yes" were prompted to provide contact details, such as their cell phone number and/or email address, to facilitate follow-up.

Sections 2, 3, and 4 each contained five Likert Scale questions for quantitative analysis, while Section 5 had seven open-ended questions to capture in-depth qualitative insights.

This questionnaire structure was tailored to provide a holistic view of graduates' transitional experiences, setting it apart from existing tools that either targeted different stakeholder perspectives or focused exclusively on post-learnership outcomes.

4.4.4 Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data were collected using FGDs and OEQs. The focus group discussions were conducted over a period of 4 weeks between 15 September and 06 October 2023 using Microsoft Teams. As indicated above, Section 5 of the online questionnaire had OEQs Six out of the seven questions related to the Research Questions 1, 2 and 3, and 64 participants completed the OEQs of the online questionnaire.

Table 7 Focus Group Discussions' Representation

Participants' number per Focus Group Discussion			
Focus Group	**FGD1**	**FGD2**	**FGD3**
Date of FGD	15.09.2023	22.09.2023	06.10.2023
Number of participants	2	3	5

Qualitative data were collected from the FGDs. Three focus groups were conducted using Microsoft Teams. Permission to record was obtained from the participants. Auto-transcription also happened on Microsoft Teams. I studied each of the three transcriptions carefully to seek out recurring patterns and trends from the participants' responses. Qualitative data from the OEQs were also downloaded and carefully studied. Using thematic analysis, four themes emerged from the analysis; these are discussed in Chapter 6.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Voluntary consent was obtained from the participants and was obtained through the link (see https://bit.ly/45boLy6).

All 64 participants confirmed they had read and fully understand the consent form, and willingly chose to participate in this research study.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Validity

The trustworthiness and validity of the data collection process in this study were ensured through several rigorous measures. First, a mixed methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative data from online questionnaires with qualitative insights from FGDs and OEQs. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the study's validity by cross-verifying findings across different methods. The quantitative questionnaire was carefully designed to address three levels of graduate transitions—into, through, and out of the learnership programmes—with sections dedicated to capturing demographic information, transition experiences, learning experiences, and employability skills. The adaptation of the questionnaire for Organisation A ensured relevance and context-specific insights, and responses were collected in two phases to track variations and ensure comprehensive coverage.

In the qualitative phase, FGDs were conducted online, utilising both recordings and auto-transcriptions to capture data at two levels for accuracy. This method provided a platform for participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, enriching the quantitative findings with depth and context. The OEQs in the questionnaire further allowed for elaboration on individual experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify and analyse patterns within the qualitative data, adding to the robustness of the findings.

Additionally, ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to, with voluntary informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring their rights and autonomy throughout the research process. The adherence to ethical guidelines and the use of multiple data collection methods contribute to the reliability, validity, and overall trustworthiness of the study's findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of graduates' transition experiences in learnership programmes.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the methodology employed to explore the transition experiences of graduates in learnership programmes designed to enhance their employment prospects. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods through an MMR approach, the central research question was addressed.

A justification for the use of an MMR approach was presented, highlighting its alignment with the study's objectives. The duality of the MMR methodology allowed for a nuanced exploration of graduates' experiences, combining the statistical rigour of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insights.

The research design included quantitative data collection through online questionnaires, providing broad statistical trends, and qualitative data collection via FGDs and OEQs, offering rich, detailed perspectives. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data, I employed triangulation and rigorous ethical standards, including informed consent and adherence to privacy regulations.

Chapter 5. Empirical Data

5.1 Introduction

Building on the methodology outlined in the preceding chapter, this chapter delves into the empirical findings derived from the MMR approach employed to examine the transition experiences of graduates in learnership programmes. Chapter 4 detailed the integration of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, emphasising their complementary strengths in addressing the central research question. Specifically, the quantitative component provided broad statistical insights through online questionnaires, while the qualitative component offered nuanced understandings through FGDs and open-ended responses.

In this chapter, the empirical data collected from both methodological components are presented. Section 5.2 focuses on the quantitative data analysis, beginning with an overview of the demographic information of the participants, followed by detailed analyses aligned with the study's research questions. Each subsection will systematically address these questions, drawing on the statistical trends identified in the survey responses.

Subsequently, Section 5.3 focuses on the qualitative data analysis, where insights from FGDs and OEQs are synthesised. This section aims to provide a deeper, context-rich exploration of the graduates' experiences, complementing the quantitative findings and adding depth to our understanding of their transition journeys.

The chapter concludes with a synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative findings, reflecting on how the empirical data addresses the research objectives and contributes to the broader discourse on enhancing employment prospects through learnership programmes.

5.2.1 Quantitative Data Presentation and Analysis

5.2.1 Background Insights

As outlined in the methodology chapter, this study utilised a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data were collected via an online questionnaire sent to two databases, with 64 participants completing it fully. These responses were analysed using EDA and descriptive statistics. The qualitative data included the same 64 participants' answers to open-ended

questions and insights from three online FGDs conducted via MS Teams. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes.

Quantitative data were collected from 64 participants across two organisations conducting annual learnership programmes. Organisation A provided data from graduates who had completed their programmes between 2020 and 2022. Specifically, dataset-1 covered 2020–2021, while dataset-2 included 2021–2022. Organisation B's data included graduates from 2022 and 2023 intakes, with the 2023 participants still enrolled in the learnership at the time of data collection.

This research study asked how graduates transition into, through and out of a learnership programme and acquire skills that correlate with the enhancement of the employment prospects after completing the learnership. For purposes of this study, the term graduate is used to refer to an individual who at the time of enrolling or start of the learnership had already finished a minimum of a diploma qualification from an HEI, over and above having a high school Grade 12 certificate. To endeavour to receive answers about research question, three complementary questions were asked. These are presented below:

1. How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme that is intended to enhance their employment prospects?
2. What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme?
3. What are graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?

The first question examines the changes graduates undergo as they move from higher education into and through a learnership programme. The second question investigates the knowledge acquired and the overall learning experience within the learnership. The third question explores graduates' perceptions of the employability skills essential for successfully entering the job market after completing the learnership.

5.2.2 Demographic Information

Sixty-four graduates from two organisations participated in the study, anonymised as Organisation A and Organisation B. Forty-eight participants were from Organisation A and 17 were from Organisation B.

Table 8 Number of Participants from each Organisation

Learnership Category	Organisation A	Organisation B
Count	48	17

All participants held qualifications above the NQF 4 NSC, with most possessing an NQF 6 qualification (Diploma or Higher Certificate).

Table 9 Participants' Qualifications

NQF Level	Qualification Type	Count
Level 6	**Diploma / Higher Certificate**	**30**
Level 7	Bachelor's Degree / Advanced Diploma	17
Level 5	Higher Certificate	8
Level 8	Bachelor Honours Degree / Postgraduate Diploma	7

Sources of Learnership Information

The internet serves as the main source of information for the participants.

Table 10 Sources of Learnership Information

Source	Count
Internet	**30**
Friends/Family	9
Other Internet Sources	8
Other	5
Facebook	4
Facebook & Other	2

The majority of respondents were job-seeking before enrolling in the learnership.

Figure 19Participants' Activities Pre-Learnership (Dataset 1)

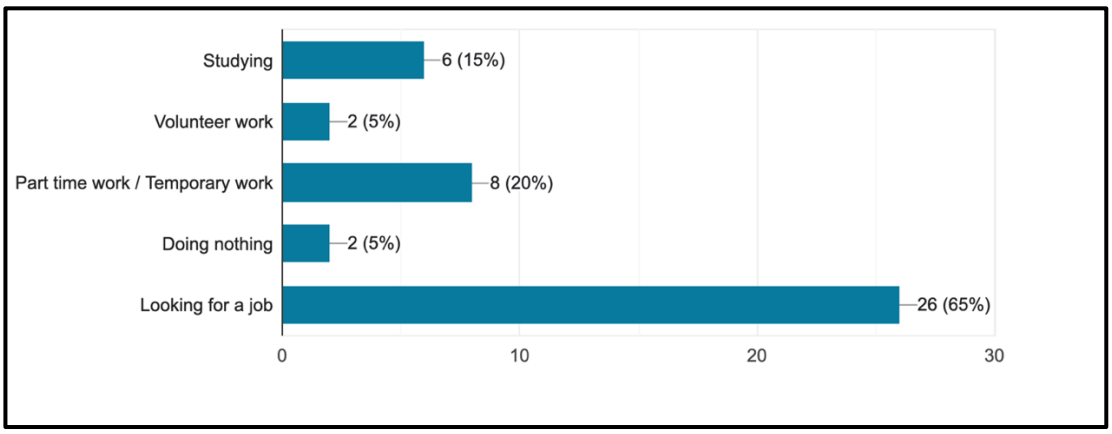
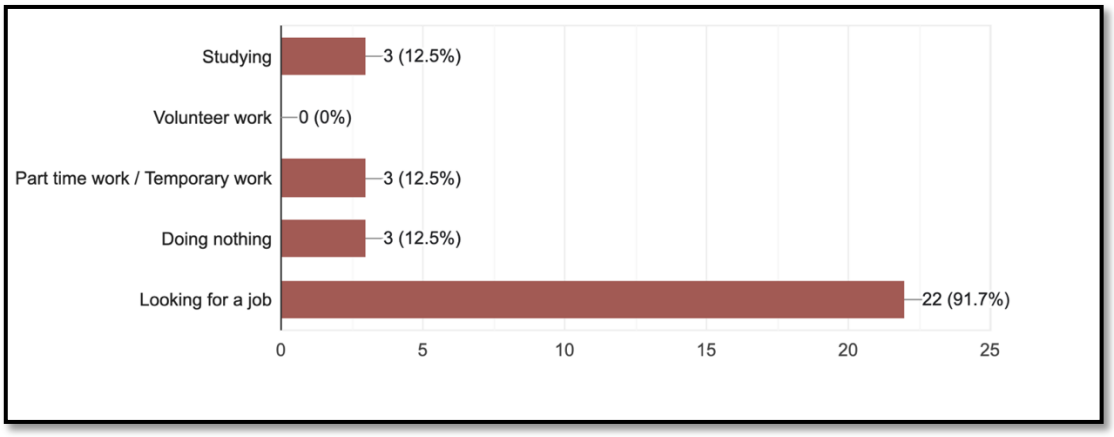


Figure 20 Participants' Activities Pre-Learnership (Dataset 2)



Reasons for Enrolling in the Learnership:

Gaining work experience was the driving reason why graduates enrolled in the learnership. This is followed by a chance to gain employment and improve work skills.

Table 11 Participants' Reasons for Learnership Enrolment

Reason	Count
Gain work experience	**55**
Gain employment	**48**
Improve generic work skills	**36**
Gain a qualification	30
Met entry requirements	29
Improve technical skills	25
Earn a stipend/allowance	23
Access free study	13

Perceived Selection Factors:

Graduates believed that their personality traits were mainly what got them selected into the learnership—their confidence, communication and interpersonal skills.

Table 12 Participants' Perceived Selection Factors

Factor	Count
Confidence and personality	**48**
Communication skills	**48**
Relational and interpersonal skills	**36**
Thinking skills	28
Knowledge about the field	22
Technical skills	20

This next section discusses the descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, correlation analysis, and reliability analysis for the quantitative data. These analyses measure the central tendency, dispersion, and shape the distribution of responses for each cluster of Likert Scale questions. A discussion interpreting these findings follows thereafter.

5.2.3 Quantitative Data Presentation: Research Question 1

Research Question (RQ) 1: *How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme intended to enhance their employment prospects?*

This section presents the quantitative data analysis for Likert Scale statements related to Research Question 1. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, correlation analysis, and reliability analysis to evaluate the transition experience of graduates in the learnership programme.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provide a summary of the central tendency, variability, and overall pattern of responses for each Likert Scale statement.

Table 13 RQ 1 Descriptive Statistics

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. The learnership programme met my initial expectations and positively influenced my transition into the job market.	3.44	1.55	Average response is neutral to positive, with high variability
2. The learnership reshaped my understanding of the job market and clarified my role within it.	3.53	1.40	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability
3. The learnership programme improved my employment prospects by offering valuable opportunities for growth and development.	3.62	1.31	Average response is positive, with moderate variability
4. The learnership programme improved my employment prospects by offering valuable opportunities for growth.	3.48	1.30	Average response is positive, with moderate variability
5. I believe that the transition experience through the learnership programme has positively impacted my future career.	3.50	1.42	Average response is positive, with moderate variability

Interpretation: The mean values suggest that participants generally agreed that the learnership programme positively impacted their transition into the job market and future career prospects.

The variability (standard deviation) indicates that there is some diversity in opinions among participants.

Frequency Distribution

Frequency distribution highlights how often each response option was chosen, indicating the distribution of responses for each statement.

Table 14 RQ 1 Frequency Distribution

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	9 (14.1%)	6 (9.4%)	14 (21.9%)	**18 (28.1%)**	**17 (26.6%)**
2.	9 (14.1%)	7 (10.9%)	9 (14.1%)	**19 (29.7%)**	**20 (31.2%)**
3.	7 (10.9%)	5 (7.8%)	14 (21.9%)	**17 (26.6%)**	**21 (32.8%)**
4.	8 (12.5%)	5 (7.8%)	16 (25%)	**18 (28.1%)**	**17 (26.6%)**
5.	10 (15.6%)	6 (9.4%)	10 (15.6%)	**18 (28.1%)**	**20 (31.2%)**

Interpretation: The frequency distribution shows that the majority of respondents (between 54.7% and 61%) chose "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" across all statements, indicating a generally positive perception of the learnership's impact on their transition into the job market. However, a notable proportion (average of 27 participants) selected “Neutral,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree,” suggesting some variability in experiences.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis examines the relationships between responses to different statements to identify if positive perceptions in one area are associated with similar perceptions in another.

Table 15 RQ 1 Correlation Analysis

Statements Compared	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
1 & 2	0.74	Strong positive relationship
1 & 3	0.68	Moderate positive relationship
2 & 4	0.72	Strong positive relationship
3 & 5	0.66	Moderate positive relationship
4 & 5	0.69	Moderate positive relationship

Interpretation: The correlation coefficients indicate moderate to strong positive relationships between the statements. Participants who agreed with one statement were likely to agree with others, showing a consistent positive perception of the learnership programme.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis measures the internal consistency of responses to the Likert Scale statements using Cronbach's Alpha.

- **Cronbach's Alpha for Statements 1–5:** 0.966

Interpretation: A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.966 indicates excellent internal consistency; the responses to the statements are highly reliable and measure a coherent construct related to the transition experience through the learnership programme.

Discussion: Insights from the Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis for Research Question 1 reveals that graduates generally had a positive transition experience in the learnership programme:

- **Descriptive Statistics**: The average responses were positive, suggesting that the programme met expectations and enhanced job market readiness.
- **Frequency Distribution**: A significant proportion of participants agreed that the programme positively influenced their transition and career prospects.
- **Correlation Analysis**: Positive correlations between statements indicate consistent and favourable perceptions across different aspects of the programme.
- **Reliability Analysis**: High internal consistency confirms that the statements reliably measure the graduates' transition experience.

Overall, the data suggest that the learnership programme effectively supports graduates in transitioning to the job market, reshaping their understanding of the job market, and enhancing their employability skills.

5.2.4 Quantitative Data Presentation: Research Question 2

Research Question 2: *What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme?*

This section presents the analysis for Likert Scale statements related to Research Question 2. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, correlation analysis, and reliability analysis to evaluate the learning experience of graduates in the learnership programme.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provide a summary of the central tendency, variability, and overall pattern of responses for each Likert Scale statement.

Table 16 RQ 2 Descriptive Statistics

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. The learnership programme provided meaningful learning activities that contributed to my personal and professional development.	3.66	1.21	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability.
2. The structure and content of the learnership programme were well-designed to foster effective learning and skill development.	3.78	1.20	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability.
3. I found the learning experiences in the learnership programme to be engaging and relevant to my career goals.	3.58	1.29	Average response is neutral to positive, with moderate variability.
4. The learnership programme presented challenging situations that encouraged me to expand my knowledge and skills.	3.64	1.33	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability.

5. Overall, the learning experience in the learnership programme has positively influenced my professional growth and preparedness for the world of work.	3.64	1.26	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability.

Interpretation: The mean values suggest that participants generally agreed that the learnership programme offered meaningful learning experiences that contributed to their development. The variability (standard deviation) indicates some diversity in opinions among participants, but with a general trend toward positive responses.

Frequency Distribution

Frequency distribution shows how often each response option was chosen, indicating the distribution of responses for each statement.

Table 17 RQ 2 Frequency Distribution

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	5 (7.8%)	6 (9.4%)	13 (20.3%)	**22 (34.4%)**	**18 (28.1%)**
2.	5 (7.8%)	4 (6.3%)	12 (18.8%)	**22 (34.4%)**	**21 (32.8%)**
3.	7 (10.9%)	5 (7.8%)	15 (23.4%)	**18 (28.1%)**	**19 (29.7%)**
4.	8 (12.5%)	3 (4.7%)	14 (21.9%)	**18 (28.1%)**	**21 (32.8%)**
5.	7 (10.9%)	4 (6.3%)	12 (18.8%)	**23 (35.9%)**	**18 (28.1%)**

Interpretation: The frequency distribution shows a majority of responses in the "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" categories across all statements, indicating a generally positive perception of the learning experience. However, there are still notable numbers of “Neutral,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree” responses, suggesting room for improvement in the learning experiences provided by the programme.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis examines the relationships between responses to different statements to identify if positive perceptions in one area are associated with similar perceptions in another.

Table 18 RQ 2 correlation analysis

Statements Compared	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
1 & 2	0.71	Strong positive relationship
1 & 3	0.65	Moderate positive relationship
2 & 4	0.73	Strong positive relationship
3 & 5	0.67	Moderate positive relationship
4 & 5	0.69	Moderate positive relationship

Interpretation: The correlation coefficients indicate moderate to strong positive relationships between the statements. This suggests that participants who viewed the learning activities positively also viewed the overall structure and challenges of the programme positively, showing a consistent perception of the programme's learning experiences.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis measures the internal consistency of responses to the Likert Scale statements using Cronbach's Alpha.

- **Cronbach's Alpha for Statements 1–5:** 0.6782

Interpretation: A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.6782 suggests moderate internal consistency. This indicates that while the items within the scale are somewhat interrelated, there are inconsistencies in the responses, and further refinement or investigation of the scale might be needed to improve reliability.

Discussion: Insights from the Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis for Research Question 2 reveals that graduates generally had a positive learning experience in the learnership programme:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** The average responses were positive, indicating that the programme provided meaningful learning activities that contributed to graduates' personal and professional development.
- **Frequency Distribution:** A significant proportion of participants (above 62%) agreed or strongly agreed that the programme offered engaging, relevant, and challenging learning experiences.

- **Correlation Analysis:** Positive correlations between statements suggest that graduates who found the learning activities meaningful also appreciated the programme's structure and its ability to foster skill development.
- **Reliability Analysis:** Moderate internal consistency suggests that while the scale captures related aspects of the learning experience, it may benefit from further refinement for more reliable measurement.

Overall, the responses indicate that the learnership programme effectively facilitated engaging and relevant learning experiences, providing opportunities for skill expansion and professional growth. Graduates reported that the programme positively influenced their preparedness for the job market, although there is room for improvement in tailoring the learning experiences to better meet individual needs and career aspirations.

5.2.5 Quantitative Data Presentation: Research Question 3

Research Question 3: *What are graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?*

This section presents the analysis for Likert Scale statements related to Research Question 3. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, correlation analysis, and reliability analysis to evaluate graduates' understanding of employability skills.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provide a summary of the central tendency, variability, and overall pattern of responses for each Likert Scale statement.

Table 19 Descriptive Statistics

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. The learnership programme fostered a strong sense of professional identity and preparedness for the job market.	3.23	1.31	Average response is neutral to slightly positive, with moderate variability

2. The learnership programme's emphasis on practical skills development has been integral to my employability.	3.45	1.26	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability
3. The learnership programme has effectively bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the workplace.	3.53	1.31	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability
4. The learnership programme has increased my confidence in my ability to succeed in the job market.	3.80	1.14	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability
5. The learnership programme has equipped me with a competitive edge in the job market through comprehensive skills training.	3.59	1.24	Average response leans towards agreement, with moderate variability

Interpretation: The mean values suggest that participants generally agreed that the learnership programme positively influenced their professional identity, skills development, and readiness for the job market. The variability (standard deviation) indicates moderate diversity in opinions among participants.

Frequency Distribution

Frequency distribution shows how often each response option was chosen, indicating the distribution of responses for each statement.

Table 20 RQ3 frequency distribution

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	10 (15.6%)	8 (12.5%)	13 (20.3%)	**23 (35.9%)**	**10 (15.6%)**
2.	9 (14.1%)	2 (3.1%)	17 (26.6%)	**23 (35.9%)**	**13 (20.3%)**
3.	8 (12.5%)	5 (7.8%)	13 (20.3%)	**21 (32.8%)**	**17 (26.6%)**
4.	4 (6.3%)	4 (6.3%)	13 (20.3%)	**23 (35.9%)**	**20 (31.3%)**
5.	6 (9.4%)	5 (7.8%)	16 (25.0%)	**19 (29.7%)**	**18 (28.1%)**

Interpretation: The frequency distribution indicates a majority of responses in the "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" categories across most statements, suggesting a generally positive perception of the learnership's impact on employability skills. However, there are still notable

numbers of “Neutral,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree” responses, highlighting areas where the programme may not have fully met all graduates' expectations.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis examines the relationships between responses to different statements to identify if positive perceptions in one area are associated with similar perceptions in another.

Table 21 RQ 3 correlation analysis

Statements Compared	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
1 & 2	0.61	Moderate positive relationship
1 & 3	0.68	Moderate to strong positive relationship
2 & 4	0.70	Strong positive relationship
3 & 5	0.67	Moderate to strong positive relationship
4 & 5	0.73	Strong positive relationship

Interpretation: The correlation coefficients indicate moderate to strong positive relationships between the statements. This suggests that participants who viewed the programme positively in fostering professional identity also recognised its emphasis on practical skills development and bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application, showing a consistent perception of the programme’s impact on employability skills.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis measures the internal consistency of responses to the Likert Scale statements using Cronbach’s Alpha.

- **Cronbach’s Alpha for Statements 1-5:** 0.792

Interpretation: A Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.792 suggests good internal consistency. This indicates that the items within the scale are interrelated, and the scale reliably measures the graduates' understanding of employability skills required for transitioning into the workforce.

Discussion: Insights from the Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis for Research Question 3 reveals that graduates generally have a positive understanding of the employability skills required for transitioning into the workforce.

- **Descriptive Statistics:** The average responses are generally positive, indicating that the programme effectively fostered a strong sense of professional identity and preparedness for the job market.
- **Frequency Distribution:** A significant proportion of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the programme enhanced their practical skills, bridged theoretical and practical knowledge, and increased their confidence and competitiveness in the job market.
- **Correlation Analysis:** Positive correlations between statements suggest a consistent perception of the programme's impact across different aspects of employability, reinforcing the view that practical skills development and professional identity are closely linked in participants' experiences.
- **Reliability Analysis:** Good internal consistency suggests that the scale reliably measures the understanding of employability skills among graduates.

Overall, the responses indicate that the learnership programme was effective in enhancing graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition into the workforce. Graduates reported that the programme fostered a strong sense of professional identity, emphasised practical skills development, effectively bridged theoretical knowledge with practical application, and increased their confidence and competitiveness in the job market. While the majority of responses were positive, the presence of some neutral and negative responses highlights areas where the programme could further enhance its effectiveness in meeting graduates' diverse needs and expectations.

5.2.6 Analysis of the Quantitative Data

This section delves into the quantitative data to examine patterns and correlations within the survey responses. The quantitative analysis aims to contribute to the qualitative findings by providing measurable evidence on the effectiveness of the learnership programmes.

Survey Demographics

The online survey was completed by 64 participants, with representation from both Organisations A and B. The survey collected data on various aspects of the learnership

experience, including the participants' background, the effectiveness of the learnership components, and the development of employability skills.

Participants' Backgrounds

The survey participants were aged between 22 and 30 years, with a mean age of 25.4 years. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, comprising 36 females (56%) and 28 males (44%). Regarding educational qualifications, most participants held national diplomas (45%), while 35% had bachelor's degrees, and the remaining 20% possessed other types of qualifications.

The effectiveness of learnership programmes

The overall satisfaction of graduates with the learnership programmes was moderately high, with an average rating of 3.8 out of 5, where 5 represents the highest level of satisfaction. Seventy percent of respondents rated the effectiveness of the learning resources as either "effective" or "very effective." In terms of employability skills development, 60% experienced enhancement in their technical skills, and 75% observed growth in soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These findings highlight the programmes' positive impact on both technical and interpersonal competencies, essential for enhancing employability.

The quantitative analysis reveals several crucial insights into the effectiveness of the learnership programmes. First, these programmes significantly enhance employability by developing both technical and soft skills in graduates. Second, the quality of learning resources plays a pivotal role in predicting overall satisfaction, highlighting the importance of providing high-quality materials. Finally, there is a strong correlation between satisfaction levels and perceived improvement in employability skills, indicating that participants who are more satisfied with the programme tend to report greater gains in their employability. The above illuminates the need for well-received and well-structured programmes to foster meaningful skill development in graduates.

The next section will present the qualitative data derived from the questionnaire's OECs and FGDs. The questions asked in both sources will be presented first, followed by the presentation of the data and the analysis.

5.3 Qualitative Data Presentation and Analysis

This research investigated the education-work-graduate employability nexus, specifically focusing on unemployed graduates participating in learnership programmes. These programmes are critical mechanisms for developing employability skills and enhancing employment prospects. The study explored the graduates' transitions into, through, and out of the learnership, identifying factors influencing their journey at each stage. Three main types of transitions were examined: from HEIs to transition in, transition through, and transition out of the learnership programme. While these transitions typically follow a sequential order, overlaps were observed.

The qualitative data comprise response from OEQs included in an online questionnaire and insights from three online FGDs with graduates from both Organisations A and B. This data was analysed thematically to identify patterns and themes, providing a deeper understanding of graduates' experiences and perspectives. The thematic analysis offered rich insights into the factors influencing graduates' transitions and the development of employability skills within the learnership programmes. Tabulated below are OEQs asked in the online questionnaire, followed by an analysis and discussion of the graduates' responses.

5.3.1 Qualitative Data: Open-Ended Questions

The qualitative data from the study was structured around seven OEQs, designed to align with the three primary research questions. These questions aimed to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of graduates regarding their transitions into, through, and out of the learnership programmes. The table below delineates each research question and the associated open-ended questions, providing a structured overview of how the qualitative data collection was organised.

Table 22 Open-Ended Questions in Relation to the Three Research Questions

Research Question (RQ)	Open-Ended Questions (OEQ)
RQ 1: How is the transition experience of SA graduates into a learnership programme intended to improve their transition from HEIs into the learnership programme?	1. Please describe a specific challenge you encountered during the transition from acquiring your higher education qualification to entering the learnership programme. How did you navigate and overcome this challenge? 2. Were there any particular learning resources or methods utilised in the learnership programme that you found especially effective or ineffective? Please elaborate on your experience with these resources or methods.

RQ 2: What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme?	3. In your opinion, what aspects of the learnership programme could be improved to better support graduates' employability prospects during the transition period? Please provide any suggestions or recommendations you may have. 4. Reflecting on your learning experiences within the learnership programme, could you share a particular moment or activity that significantly enhanced your skills and knowledge? How did this contribute to your overall development?
RQ 3: What are graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?	5. Thinking back to your time in the learnership programme, can you provide an example of a situation where you successfully applied one of the employability skills you acquired? How did this skill contribute to your performance and professional growth? 6. In your opinion, which employability skill(s) do you believe are most crucial for a smooth transition from the learnership programme into the world of work? Please explain your reasoning and any personal experiences that shaped this perspective.
General Comments	7. Please provide any general comment that you think might be useful to share.

5.3.2 Qualitative Data: Focus Group Discussions

Graduate participation in FGDs took on a random sampling approach. Added to the online questionnaire was an invitation to participate in the FGDs. The statement asked participants to indicate either "Yes" or "No" their willingness and availability to volunteer for an online FGD.. Those that selected "Yes" were then asked to provide either their cell phone number and/or email address. In total 25 responses were received. At the time of scheduling the FGDs, 10 participants took part, as explained in Table 22.

Table 23 Number of Participants per FGD

Number of Participants per Focus Group Discussion			
Focus Group	**FGD 1**	**FGD 2**	**FGD 3**
Date of FGD	15.09.2023	22.09.2023	06.10.2023
Number of participants	2	3	5

The focus group discussions were conducted over a period of 4 weeks between 15 September and 06 October 2023.

Overview of Participants

The participants in the FGDs were from Organisation A and Organisation B, representing a range of educational backgrounds and placements within various units. Their intake years spanned from 2021 to 2023. Below is a detailed breakdown of the participants:

Table 24 FGD1 - Overview of Participants

Focus Group Discussion Number 1				
Learnership	**Graduate intake/year**	**Pseudo code**	**Educational Background**	**Placement**
Organisation B	Graduate 2022	FG1P1	National Diploma: Business Information Technology	IT Unit
Organisation B	Graduate 2023	FG1P2	LLB Degree	Legal Unit

Table 25 FGD2 - Overview of Participants

Focus Group Discussion Number 2				
Learnership	**Graduate intake/year**	**Pseudo code**	**Educational Background**	**Placement**
Organisation A	Graduate 2021-2022	FG2P1	National Diploma: Business Information Technology	IT Unit
Organisation B	Graduate 2022	FG2P2	Diploma: Marketing	Marketing Unit
Organisation B	Graduate 2023	FG2P3	BCom: Accounting	Learning Services Unit

Table 26 FGD3 - Overview of Participants

Focus Group Discussion Number 3				
Learnership	**Graduate intake/year**	**Pseudo code**	**Educational Background**	**Placement**
Organisation A	Graduate 2021–2022	FG3P1	BSC: Construction Management BTech: Project Management	Client Support Unit

			MSC: Quality Survey - current	
Organisation B	Graduate 2022	FG3P2	Diploma: Business Management	ETQA Unit
Organisation B	Graduate 2022	FG3P3	National Diploma Credit BTech: Credit Management	Finance Unit
Organisation B	Graduate 2023	FG3P4	BCom: Accounting	Finance Unit
Organisation B	Graduate 2023	FG3P5	National Diploma: Public Management Advanced Diploma: Local Government & Public Affairs	Projects & Tertiary Unit

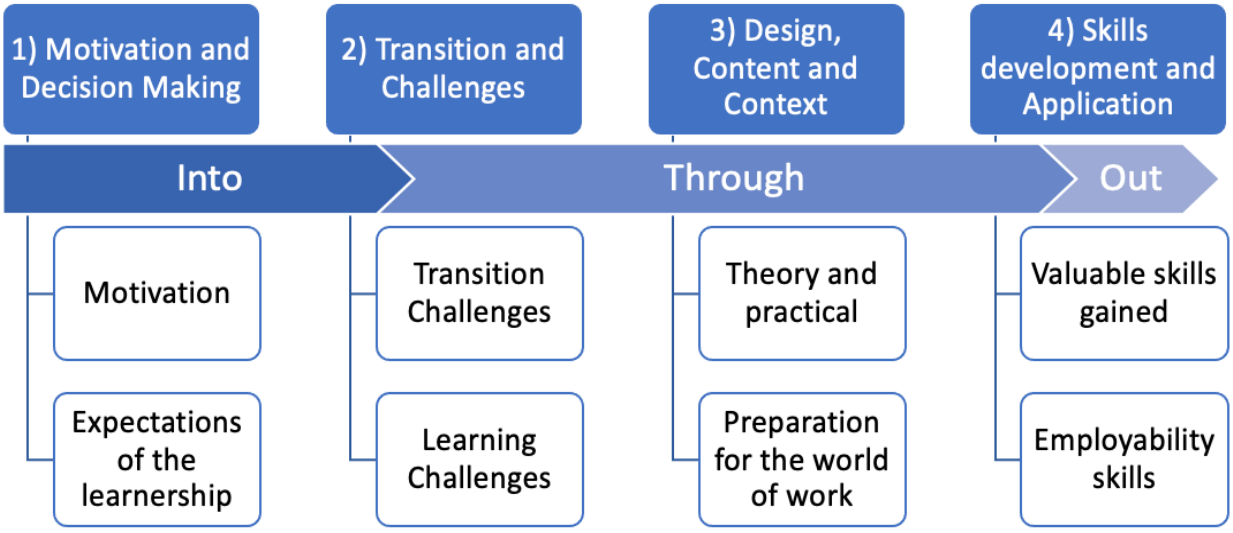
5.3.3 Qualitative Data: Thematic Representation of OEQs and FGDs.

Graduates' responses to the OEQs were exported into an excel file for better organisation and analysis of the data. The transcripts from the FGDs were also downloaded. The initial reading and data familiarisation process was crucial for understanding the nuances in the data and identifying recurring themes and patterns. This step was followed by the process of coding and thematic analysis.

The section that follows aims to thematically depict the recurring ideas from graduates' responses. These represent voices in the form of narratives from graduate experiences of learnership programmes and their journeys to developing employability skills. In other words, the findings below shed light on graduates' experiences of transitions into, through and out of the learnership programme that aimed to enhance their employability skills.

In analysing the data collected, trends in responses emerged and as a result themes were developed that could be linked to each research question asked in this study. Four themes were identified, and, in each theme, two subthemes were also found. Theme 1) Motivation and Decision Making (Subthemes: Motivation and Expectations of the learnership); Theme 2) Transition and Challenges (Subthemes: Transition Challenges and Learning Challenges); Theme 3) Design, Content and Context (Subthemes: Theory and practical and Preparation for the world of work); and Theme 4) Skills development and Application (Subthemes: Valuable skills gained and Employability skills). The themes are graphically represented in Figure 20.

Figure 21 Qualitative Data Thematic Representation



presented in the section

Table 27 Integrated Quantitative Findings from FGDs and OEQs: Transition Into: Motivation, Decision-Making, and Expectation Mismatches in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Perspectives and Experiences

Transition Into: Transition Into: Motivation, Decision-Making, and Expectation Mismatches in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Perspectives and Experiences	
Theme: **Motivation & Decision Making**	The qualitative data suggest the motivation behind the learnership programme decision-making process is multifaceted and individual specific.
Meaning Making (Graduates' voices)	FG2P1: "Mostly because it was a business analyst, because that's one of my dream jobs ... it was going to be a good exposure for my work career experiences because it was related to what I qualified for".
	FG3P3 "For me, I wanted to instil new skills, especially in finance ... So, I wanted something related to my qualification which is credit management and so far, I'm happy because I'm getting that practically".
	FG2P3: "I just have to be honest. I became independent at a very young age … I couldn't just stay home … I just had to do something … I just decided to have the courage to stay up until something better comes out".

	FG2P1: “I chose the learnership instead of the internship. It was because I didn't wanna stay at home … So, for me, it's better [the learnership] than just sitting at home.”
	FG2P2: "Even though I wanted an internship. I was looking for any opportunity just so that I don't stay at home and do nothing. So, I think that's my reason to say a learnership opportunity came and I took it because I didn't want to stay at home.”
	OEQ25: “Firstly I wanted a job not a learnership, so it was challenging for me to take a learnership of something I didn't not study for. But due to high employment rate in SA I had to think about myself and what opportunities I will gain from this learnership.”
Subtheme’s Analysis: **Motivation**	A dual motivation structure is behind learnership enrolment. Participants proactively seek learnerships to enhance career prospects and skill development on one hand. Alternatively, they opt for learnerships when no other employment options exist, viewing learnership programmes as practical solutions to unemployment. The use of quotes from FGDs and OEQs supports these findings by illustrating firsthand perspectives on why learnership programmes are chosen. This approach enriches the understanding of motivations, showing both aspirational and necessity-driven reasons behind participants' decisions.
Theme: **Motivation & Decision Making**	The qualitative data suggest the motivation behind the learnership programme decision-making process is multifaceted and individual specific.
Meaning Making (Graduates’ voices)	FG3P5: “I also didn't have any motivation to apply for the leadership. But of course, when the opportunity did come along, I had certain expectations or a certain idea of what it would be and what I received was way more than what I expected ... So, I worked in like 3 departments... it's passed my expectations, and I enjoyed it thoroughly.”
	FG3P4: “My expectations were actually high, and I am I am disappointed in a way because I was expecting to as it's like an accounting student ... you want to learn more, and accounting is quite broad ... I wanted to learn all of these and get to experience all these different positions under

	finance. Yet I only got a certain portion which is the debtor's side ... it's a small portion."
	FG2P2: "My expectations when I joined ... I would be exposed to the marketing field. ... And I had also expected that on the theory side ... I was expecting it to also be Marketing related, but it was not so. We were doing business administration."
	FG1P1: "Oh my God, this is not what I signed up for!"
	OEQ1# 2 6 "[Finding] employment … learnership was a dream come true."
Subtheme's Analysis: **Expectations**	Participants encounter mismatch in expectations, that is, what they anticipated (such as skill development, career advancement, or work environment) and the actual experiences within the learnership. This mismatch leads to varied outcomes, including satisfaction from unanticipated positive experiences or disappointment stemming from unmet expectations. The inclusion of qualitative data from FGDs and OEQs offers nuanced insights into the factors contributing to the gap between expectations and reality. It provides a deeper understanding of how participants perceive their learnership experiences based on their initial expectations. Therefore, the Expectations subtheme within learnership programmes emphasises the importance of managing and aligning participants' expectations to learnership programme outcomes.

Summary of Subthemes: Motivation and Expectations

Motivation: Graduates' motivations for enrolling in learnership programmes are multifaceted and personalised. They are primarily driven by two factors: career alignment and necessity. For many graduates, learnerships represent a strategic opportunity to gain relevant work experience and advance towards their career goals. These programmes offer practical exposure that complements their academic qualifications and helps in developing new skills pertinent to their chosen fields. Conversely, some graduates join learnerships out of necessity, often due to the lack of other employment opportunities. For these individuals, learnership programmes serve as a crucial alternative to unemployment, providing a means to stay active and gain any form of employment during challenging job markets.

Expectations: Graduates' expectations of learnership programmes often vary significantly and tend to evolve as they experience the reality of the workplace. Initially, graduates may anticipate a certain level of professional exposure and skill development that aligns with their academic background. However, their actual experiences can differ, leading to a mix of positive surprises and disappointments. Some graduates find that the learnership exceeds their expectations, offering more comprehensive engagement and independence than expected. Others, however, encounter mismatches between their anticipated roles and the tasks they are assigned, leading to feelings of disillusionment and frustration. This discrepancy between expectations and reality highlights the need for better alignment of programme objectives with graduate aspirations to enhance satisfaction and outcomes.

Table 28 Integrated Quantitative Findings from FGDs and OEQs: Transition Through: Transitions and Challenges in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Adjustment and Workplace Integration Experiences

Transition Through: Transitions and Challenges in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Adjustment and Workplace Integration Experiences	
Theme: **Transitions & Challenges**	The data points to the manner in which graduates are integrated into the programme and in the workplaces as enabling transitions. The workplace component of the learnership forces the graduates to "become" a skilled worker. In certain contexts, graduates were not allocated to workplaces. There is a need for opportunities to develop an identity that relates to the work.
Meaning Making (Graduates' voices)	FG3P5: "Upon starting internship, I remember when interviewed, my manager and the head of department that I work said very clearly that they will not micromanage. I'm going to be working alone … it turned out to be a success. And that showed me that in as much as I wasn't micromanaged or told step by step how to do something, I was still able to pull it off and very well."
	FG1P2: "The mixture of theory and practical was a wakeup call … What you do has real world implication. Is not just if you don't necessarily get something right, you going to come out with a lower

	mark? That's not the case. It's an interconnected market whereby if you send the wrong document to the finance department and for you, it's not just you. You made a mistake … there's lives of those people that that thing actually affects … those people have faces.”
	OEQ2# 16 “I believe my academic life prepared me for corporate. I had the necessary skills to smoothly transition and also pick up any new competencies, e.g. use of various systems.”
	OEQ1# 21. “When entering the learnership programme I had some anxiety about moving to a new city and working with people I don't know, it helped a lot having a good supervisor available to answer any questions I had about the learnership programme and any work-related issues, He was also helpful when it came to the required documentation needed to complete my qualifications.”
	OEQ1# 9: “There were resources, and I had my own PC from the learnership programme team, and I did not have to share the PC with anyone, so I was able to finish the work on time.”
	FG2P1: “On my side … the biggest challenge … is that you feel inferior ... feeling like you have to shrink yourself ... they just dump it [administration] ... because they're trying to, I guess yeah, introduce you to the workplace.” FG2P2: “Obviously when you’re new to the workplace, you don't really know how things are done.”
	FG1P2: ”I believe there has been some paradigms shift so to say, and the job market … when you get to in the legal field or undergrad field, there's a lot of research. Then when you get to the job market … there's a lot of administration … That was not necessarily prepared for … So, I think the mixture of theory and practical was a wakeup call.”
	FG2P2: “We were doing business administration … I would say maybe 60% of it isn't what I expected to be doing communication … I don't know how in the workplace we communicate. You know, when you're sending emails, when you're communicating with your colleagues.”

	OEQ1# 17 “Accepting that your qualification does now communicate with your job title … administration skills I overlooked … I have gained all-round skills.”
Subtheme’s Analysis: **Transition Challenges**	Graduates experienced varying levels of support and autonomy in their new roles. Some were given significant independence, which contributed to their sense of success and capability. The transition from theoretical knowledge to practical application in a workplace context was a significant realisation for many graduates, highlighting the direct impact of their work. Some graduates felt well-prepared by their academic experiences to transition smoothly into corporate environments, adapting quickly to new systems and competencies. Effective support systems, such as accessible supervisors and adequate resources (like personal workstations) were critical in helping graduates overcome anxieties and perform well in their roles
Theme: **Transitions & Challenges**	The data point to the manner in which graduates balance the demands of learnership theory and work demands. self-perceptions and feeling misaligned/mismatch to chosen career field.
Meaning Making (Graduates’ voices)	FG1P1: “When it began, it was quite a challenge, because now I had to juggle between, like, work and studying and completing assessments.”
	FG2P2: “The way the leadership is structured, the amount of work that is required ... It was a lot ...” p.15 “so I had to make sure that after work then I do my learnership work … think what caused me to not complete was because I was not really interested because it didn't, most of the things in it didn't relate to what I was doing on a daily basis. So, I think that's why I couldn't complete it [learnership theory].”
	OEQ1# 11. Learnership programmes should be better aligned to one’s career prospects rather than a generic one.”
	OEQ2# 21. “I feel like learners would be more motivated if they were doing a learnership that was related to their field of study.”

	OEQ1 # 36. “It was overwhelming for me to deal with both the department work tasks and the tasks from the course I have been enrolled in. But eventually, I overcame this challenge by keeping an open line of communication with the manager of the department and seeking clarity of what is expected of me and how will I manage my time to accommodate both.”
	OEQ2 # 2 “Working and studying. I had to balance the academic component and job experience.”
	OEQ2# 14 “Back-to-back assessments, having little time to prepare was a challenge, but I learned to manage my time.”
Subtheme’s Analysis: **Learning Challenges**	Graduates face initial challenges in understanding workplace dynamics and expectations. For many, this is their first exposure to a professional environment, leading to feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. In addition, graduates are in a process of developing a professional identity that aligns with their job roles and responsibilities. Addressing unspoken anxieties and providing emotional support can ease the transition into the workplace. Graduates benefit from understanding how to navigate workplace communication and administration, which they may not have been fully prepared for during their academic training. The transition from academic learning to practical application in the workplace is a significant shift, often requiring adaptation to administrative tasks and communication practices not fully anticipated by the graduates.

Summary of Transitions and Learning Challenges

The findings from the Transitions and Challenges theme highlight the significant hurdles faced by graduates participating in learnership programmes as they navigate the transition into professional roles. These challenges are multifaceted, encompassing both transition challenges and learning challenges.

Transition challenges are evident as graduates encounter initial difficulties in acclimating to workplace dynamics and expectations, often feeling inadequate or uncertain in their new

professional environments. The shift from academic settings to corporate settings necessitates the development of a coherent professional identity that aligns with job responsibilities, including mastering workplace communication and administrative protocols that may not have been fully covered in academic training.

Emotional support emerges as a critical factor in easing this transition process. Providing guidance and addressing unspoken anxieties can significantly aid graduates as they adjust to their roles, highlighting the importance of supportive supervisors and accessible resources in fostering a positive work environment. Those who received adequate support reported higher levels of confidence and success in their new positions.

Learning challenges revolve around the integration of theoretical knowledge gained from academic studies with practical application in the workplace. Many graduates feel a mismatch between their specialized HEI qualifications and the generic nature of some learnership programmes, impacting their ability to apply theoretical concepts to real-world job demands effectively. Balancing work tasks with learner assessments proves challenging for many, yet some navigate this by prioritising tasks and seeking clarity from supervisors.

Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for learnership programmes to better align with graduates' career aspirations and provide targeted support to enhance their transition experience. This alignment not only boosts motivation and engagement but also optimises learning outcomes and professional development. Moving forward, addressing these challenges through tailored programme designs and robust support structures can ensure smoother transitions and better preparedness of graduates for the complexities of the professional world.

Table 29 Integrated Quantitative Findings from FGDs and OEQs: Transition Through: Design, Content, and Post-Programme Transitions in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Reflections on Practical Preparation and Employment Readiness

Transition Through: : Design, Content, and Post-Programme Transitions in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Reflections on Practical Preparation and Employment Readiness	
Theme: **Design, Content and Context**	This theme looks at design of the learnership programme.

	Careful design of the learnership programme should cater for an induction process that clarifies what the programme is and what it is not. During the interview and induction phases, the difference between internships and learnerships need to be clarified.
Meaning Making (Graduates' voices)	FG3P3: "I feel like a learnership, and internship are almost similar ... they both offer practical experience."
	OEQ2# 20: "More information must be provided on the difference ... learnerships are underrated but very helpful."
	FG2P2: "I think an internship ... there's like a theory pathway..."
	FG3P1: "Learnerships are more of a government skills development thing ... very strict on criteria ... internships are more flexible."
	OEQ2# 12: "Learnership ... gain more understanding of the working environment."
	OEQ1# 21: "All the learning resources were effective."
	OEQ1# 20: "My supervisor ... guiding me through each project or task ... these methods really helped."
	OEQ1# 27: "Work from home exposure ... effective and ineffective."
	OEQ2# 22: "Materials to reflect on and equipment like routers and laptops."
	OEQ1# 20: "I never applied the employability skills due to lack of work experience. We were never placed, and that makes the learnership useless."
	OEQ1# 4: "Lack of job experience ... companies keep moving the goalposts."
Subtheme's Analysis: **Practical vs. Theory**	In the design of learnership programmes, a key issue is the common confusion among graduates between learnerships and internships. This confusion is evident as many graduates use the terms interchangeably or attach varied meanings to each, even when they recognise the differences. This underscores the importance of clearly distinguishing between the two during the induction phase, ensuring that participants fully understand the specific nature and expectations of the learnership programme. Additionally, while the content of the learnerships,

	including resources like laptops and learning guides, is generally appreciated, opinions on their effectiveness vary. The context of workplace placement is critical; those placed in workplaces gain valuable experience, while those without placements often find the learnership experience less meaningful, highlighting the need for effective allocation to ensure the programme's overall success.
Theme: **Design, Content and Context**	This theme looks at context also as graduates exit the learnership programme; that is, their stage after the learnership programme.
Meaning Making (Graduates' voices)	OEQ1# 9: "These learnerships are so important to anyone who has no work experience."
	OEQ2# 17: "Difficult to get employment."
	OEQ1# 8: "Learnership was my foot in the door."
	OEQ1# 19: "Every skill I learned I'm applying now because I now work for the organisation full time."
	FG3P4: "Honestly, I feel like you can never be ready for the future because you don't know what it has in store for you; but from what I've learned this year, I think I'm a different person compared to the last. The person I was when I was still a student, I know more about the corporate world than I used to, you know, actually having to put in the practical to the theoretical work that you've been learning is actually mind blowing and it's different and I think I am ready."
	FG3P5: "I think my readiness comes from the fact that I obviously do want to work, don't want to sit at home like I'm ready to work and be in a workplace. Yes, but I'm not ready in a sense of what do I do to, I don't know meet employment finding me halfway. Like what can I further do besides applying besides networking, besides trying to beat the algorithm? Like what steps do I need to take to meet? We're now ready for the reality that comes with that, but I'm ready to work. I don't know if I'm making sense."
	FG3P1: "I am fully ready. As I mentioned, I do have work experience, so for me in terms of the transitioning from a learnership to full time employment, I don't think it's going to be too much of a hassle for me."

	FG3P1: “I agree with what FG3P2 is saying. It's quite tough getting job placement … especially now when systems are just made online … I agree with the systems are just these 5,000 of us applying and then chances of just that one person that they're looking for are very slim … so it's quite it's quite tough in South Africa. It's a very tough industry to actually get any placement. I think that's also why I am still here today.”
	FG3P2: “Mostly what I'd say is, since we normally apply on, you know, the websites, it's not like 100% chance that your e-mail would be responded to.”
	OEQ2# 19: “I believe the learnership programme was effective enough because after graduation almost everyone in the Teams chat was posting their employment, everyone celebrating, congratulations everywhere.”
	OEQ2# 17: “Create more platforms that will connect graduates to employment and recruitment agencies to help alleviate the issue of unemployment.”
	OEQ2# 15: “I was able to secure employment after the programme.”
Subtheme’s Analysis: **Preparation for World of Work**	The subtheme "Preparation for World of Work" highlights the varied experiences of graduates transitioning from learnerships to employment. While some successfully secure jobs, others face challenges navigating the labour market. Many graduates express the importance of learnerships in gaining work experience and preparing them for employment opportunities. However, they also emphasise the ongoing need for career management support and strategies to improve their chances of securing employment. Key insights include the positive impact of learnerships as a stepping stone to employment, the difficulties graduates encounter in finding jobs, and suggestions for creating more platforms to connect graduates with job opportunities and recruitment agencies.

Summary of Practical vs. Theory and Preparation for World of Work subthemes

The overarching theme of "Design, Content, and Context" within learnerships encompasses two significant subthemes: "Practical vs. Theory" and "Preparation for World of Work." Graduates often blur the distinction between learnerships and internships, indicating a need for clearer programme differentiation and understanding among participants. Despite this confusion, the content of learnerships, such as provided resources and learning opportunities via platforms like MS Teams, generally receives appreciation. However, there is mixed feedback on the effectiveness of these resources, suggesting room for improvement in their design and implementation.

Regarding preparation for the world of work, graduates exhibit varied experiences transitioning from learnerships to employment. Some successfully secure jobs, underscoring the learnership's role in providing practical work experience. However, others encounter challenges in navigating the labour market, highlighting gaps in career management and development planning. Many graduates stress the ongoing need for support systems to enhance their employability and connect them with job opportunities.

In conclusion, while learnerships offer valuable learning resources and practical experience, there is a critical need for clearer programme distinctions, more effective resource allocation, and enhanced career support to optimise graduates' transition into sustainable employment. These insights underscore the importance of refining both the design and context of learnerships to better meet the diverse needs and expectations of participants in preparing them for successful careers.

Table 30 Integrated Quantitative Findings from FGDs and OEQs: Transition Out: Skills Development and Application in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Reflections on Practical Skill Application and Employability Growth

Transition Out: Skills Development and Application in Learnership Programmes: Graduates' Reflections on Practical Skill Application and Employability Growth	
Theme: **Skills Development and Application**	The Skills Development and Application theme focuses on how learnership programmes provide graduates with opportunities to apply skills and develop employability skills.
Meaning Making (Graduates' voices)	OEQ1# 3: "I was placed in HR department, and we dealt with lots of things like interviews, back-to-back meetings and some disciplinary

	hearings so I felt very important to know that my superiors wanted my input since I was new to the department they didn't exclude my opinions. That contributed a lot to my self-esteem as an individual and gain better knowledge on approaching different situation. That really humbled me."
	FG3P4: "You want to learn more, and accounting is quite broad … So, I wanted to learn all of these and get to experience all these different positions under finance. Yet I'll only got a certain portion which is the debtor's side, which is really not that ok, there's no growth in a way I would like to say it, it's a small portion that I was focusing on and not the bigger picture."
	OEQ1# 16: "I would like to say, I personally actually enjoyed the administration part, just because as an admin, people think you don't do much until they must attach all these different types of documents and evidence that goes with admin. This helped me improve my own role in the company as the programmes are tailored to equip every type of business."
	FG1P1: "So we, you know, in in an LLB degree you, it's quite a diverse field. You touch on criminal law; you touch on commercial law so on and so on … my initial thought of what I was gonna get. But what I got within the field. I realised that because I was in a commercial or corporate space it was a heavy focus on the commercial modules which I did, for example, law of Business law, Contractual law."
Subtheme's Analysis: **Valuable Skills**	Participants highlighted the significance of hands-on experience, collaboration with senior colleagues, and involvement in projects or operational tasks. These experiences not only enhanced their technical skills but also fostered a sense of belonging and professional growth. Graduates expressed satisfaction in contributing meaningfully to their teams, which boosted their self-confidence and provided insights into real-world applications of their academic knowledge. However, some participants noted limitations in the breadth of exposure within their specific fields of study, emphasising the need for

	learnerships to align more closely with graduates' career aspirations to maximise the impact on skill development and career readiness.
Theme: **Skills Development and Application**	The Skills Development and Application theme focuses on how learnership programmes provide graduates with opportunities to apply skills and develop employability skills.
Meaning Making (Graduates' voices)	OEQ2# 20: "Communication skills. I had an opportunity to do investigation at a client and successfully used my communication skills with the people at that company and that's when I noticed that I have a professional growth in the way I articulated myself and carried myself."
	OEQ1# 10: "When a project at hand, I had to use the following skills: analytical skills, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and communications skills which helped me to do my requirement analysis and develop the required documentations."
	OEQ2# 6: "No skills acquired; I came out of the learnership same way I entered."
	FG2P2: "'Cause honestly, when I joined, I was clueless of what goes on in the workplace. Now, even the confidence in myself is there to say, you know, when maybe I'm to go for an interview for another job. The way I would express myself at it would be way different than the way I did when I was when I was being interviewed to get into a learnership."
	OEQ2# 5: "Unfortunately I never got the opportunity to apply anything I learned since I was never given the opportunity to be at workplace."
Subtheme's Analysis: **Employability Skills**	Participants emphasised the acquisition and enhancement of employability skills such as communication, time management, project management, decision-making, and professionalism. Many noted significant personal growth, citing improvements in how they articulate themselves professionally and handle workplace challenges. For instance, one participant highlighted the transformation in their confidence and communication abilities, which they attributed to practical experiences gained during the learnership.

	However, not all experiences were positive; some graduates expressed frustration at not having opportunities to apply their newly acquired skills in real workplace settings. This discrepancy underscores the importance of robust workplace integration within learnerships to maximise the development of employability skills and ensure graduates are adequately prepared for future career endeavours.

Summary of the subthemes: Valuable skills and Employability skills

The Skills Development and Application theme within the learnership programmes is pivotal in shaping graduates' professional capabilities and employability. Participants across both open-ended questions and focus group discussions underscored the transformative impact of these programmes on their skill development and career readiness. Through hands-on experiences, collaboration with senior colleagues, and involvement in diverse projects, graduates reported significant enhancements in technical skills and a deeper understanding of workplace dynamics. This practical exposure not only boosted their confidence but also facilitated personal growth, fostering a sense of belonging within their teams.

However, the theme also reveals challenges, particularly regarding the alignment of learnership content with graduates' career aspirations. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the limited scope of their exposure within their fields of study, highlighting the need for more tailored programmes that closely align with their professional goals. Moreover, while many participants highlighted the acquisition of essential employability skills such as communication, time management, and decision-making, others lamented missed opportunities to apply these skills in real workplace settings. This disparity underscores the importance of robust workplace integration within learnerships to maximise the developmental impact on graduates' professional competencies.

In summary, while learnership programmes effectively equip graduates with valuable skills and practical experiences, there is a clear call for better alignment with career paths and enhanced opportunities for practical application. Addressing these aspects can significantly enhance the overall effectiveness and impact of learnership programmes in preparing graduates for successful transitions into the professional world.

5.4 Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of graduates' experiences of learnership programmes. The qualitative themes offer nuanced insights into the experiences and challenges faced by graduates, while the quantitative data corroborates these findings and quantifies the impact on employability skills.

Motivation and Decision Making: The decision to join the learnership was influenced by personal motivations and career aspirations, a theme supported by survey data showing diverse educational backgrounds and career goals among participants.

Transitions and Challenges: Qualitative data revealed challenges in transitioning into the learnership, which aligns with quantitative findings showing varying levels of satisfaction and perceived improvement in skills.

Design, Content, and Context: Both data sets highlight the importance of well-structured programmes and effective learning resources, as demonstrated by the significant correlation between satisfaction and learning resource effectiveness.

Skills Development and Application: The development of both technical and soft skills was a key outcome, confirmed by quantitative reports of significant skill enhancement and qualitative narratives describing the application of these skills.

By combining these insights, the study has provided a holistic view of how learnership programmes contribute to graduate employability, informing future improvements and policy recommendations.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented an analysis of the data collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Section 5.2 explored the quantitative data, revealing insights into the demographics of participants and their experiences with the learnership programmes. Statistical trends identified in the questionnaire responses were systematically analysed in relation to the research questions. The qualitative data were presented in section 5.3, offering a rich context through analysis of focus group discussions and open-ended survey responses. These findings provided

a deeper understanding of the graduates' experiences, complementing the quantitative data and enriching our comprehension of their journeys through the learnership programmes.

By synthesising both quantitative and qualitative findings, this chapter addressed the research objectives and provided valuable insights into how graduates experience learnership programmes that contribute to enhancing their employment prospects. The analysis revealed key areas for improvement, offering valuable direction for future programme development and implementation.

In conclusion, this chapter has underscored the importance of a multifaceted approach to understanding the effectiveness of learnership programmes. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, we gain a more holistic picture of the graduates' experiences and the programme's impact on their employability. The findings presented here contribute to the ongoing dialogue on optimising learnership programmes to best prepare graduates for successful careers.

Chapter 6. Analytical Framework

6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to examine the transition experiences of graduates who had participated in a learnership programme that aimed to enhance their employment prospects. It explored their transition from entering, progressing through, and exiting learnership programmes, analysing their experiences of the actual transition, learning experiences and comprehension of employability skills necessary for a successful transition into the labour market. The central research question asked was: How do graduates transition into and through a learnership programme and acquire skills that correlate with the enhancement of the employment prospects after completing the learnership? In other words, this study aimed to address how graduates navigate entry into and progression through a learnership and acquire relevant skills that are pertinent to improving their employment prospects upon programme completion. To provide a comprehensive exploration on the overarching research question, three complementary questions were posed:

1. How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme that is intended to enhance their employment prospects?
2. What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme?
3. What are the graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?

The three complementary questions correspond to the main research question and the aim of the study outlined previously. Each of the questions directly contributes to understanding how graduates transition the learnership, acquire skills, and improve their employment prospects. They align closely with the study's aim to analyse the impact of learnerships on graduates' transition into the labour market.

In this chapter, the analytical framework that covered graduates' experiences within learnership programmes is presented and specifically aligned with the conceptual framework of GTE. Each stage of transition is examined through the lens of the GTE framework. Then the discussion and synthesis section summarise the key findings, highlighting overarching themes and patterns that emerge to better understand graduates' experiences and perceptions of learnership

programmes. This section ends with a reflection of the effectiveness of the GTE conceptual framework in illuminating the empirical data.

6.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework that captures the essence of graduates' experiences within learnership programmes is presented. This framework aligns the study's enquiry of graduates' transitions into, through and out of the learnership programme with the conceptual framework of GTE and the overarching research questions. Graduates' voices are presented as representative quotes; these perceptions and experiences bring about metaphors of meaning underscoring the complexities of graduate transitions into the world of work.

Table 31 The analytical framework

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK				
Transition Stage	**Key Concepts**	**Metaphors of Meaning**	**Representative Quotes**	**Research Question**
Transition Into	Graduateness (Staunton et al., 2021) Transition as Development and Becoming (Gale & Parker, 2014)	"Stepping stone" or "Foot in the door" "Better than nothing" "Something related to my qualification" "Not what I signed up for!"	"I didn't wanna stay at home … So for me, it's better [the learnership] than just sitting at home." "Mostly because it was a business analyst ... my dream jobs … it was going to be a good exposure for my work career experiences because it was related to what I qualified for." "I was expecting it to also be Marketing related, but it was not so. We were doing business administration."	RQ 1

Transition Through	Graduateness (Staunton et al., 2021) Transition as Development and Becoming (Gale & Parker, 2014) Work as Learning (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015) Graduate Employability (Clarke, 2018)	"I had my own PC" "Juggling act" or "Balancing act" "Reality check" or "Wake-up call" "Gaining all-round skills" "Professional growth"	"The mixture of theory and practical was a wakeup call ... What you do has real world implication." "We were doing business administration ... I would say maybe 60% of it isn't what I expected to be doing communication." "I noticed that I have a professional growth in the way I articulated myself and carried myself."	RQ 2
Transition Out	Graduate Employability (Clarke, 2018) Work as Learning (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015)	"Launching pad" or "Springboard" "Toolkit" or "Arsenal" "Ready to work" "Securing employment"	"Honestly, I feel like you can never be ready for the future because you don't know what it has in store for you, but from what I've learned this year, I think I'm a different person compared to the last." "I am fully ready. As I mentioned, I do have work experience, so for me in	RQ 3

			terms of the transitioning from a learnership to full time employment, I don't think it's going to be too much of a hassle for me." "I was able to secure employment after the programme"	

6.3 Transition Into: Navigating the Path to Learnership Programmes

A learnership is one of the key mechanisms for developing skills and enhancing employability to unemployed youth. From their establishment, however, and unlike other WBL programmes such as internships, learnerships span all sectors, NQF levels and are tied to a SAQA registered qualification. Youth not in education, employment, or training looking to obtain a qualification may be drawn to learnership programmes.

The case study under enquiry was unique in that the learnership programmes were aimed at graduates. Individuals participating had to be in possession of an HEI qualification. The analysis of the "Transition Into" stage, requires an understanding of why graduates enrol in learnership programmes in the first place. In addition, graduates' expectations are linked to what they bring into the programme. Therefore, their motivation and expectations address "Transition Into" as they move from HEIs into the learnership programme in their graduateness. As such, Research Question 1 asked: How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme that is intended to enhance their employment prospects? This question aimed to gain insights into the changes that individual graduates go through as they transition from being graduates and progress into and through a learnership programme.

As stated in Chapter 3, the use of the concept of graduateness in this study was directed at individuals who held post-high school qualifications at level 5 and higher of the NQF. These individuals had transitioned from higher education, having obtained a qualification and certain graduate attributes, and were navigating change into their next stage, namely, a learnership programme.

In line with the literature on graduate unemployment and skills mismatch, which argues that a qualification alone is not sufficient to secure employment (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Marumo & Sebolaaneng, 2019; Mseleku, 2022a; Yu, 2013), the data show that unemployment drives graduates into enrolling for learnership programmes. Avoiding staying at home unemployed echoed through the responses of graduates, as stated by graduate FG2P1:

"I didn't wanna stay at home … So, for me, it's better [the learnership] than just sitting at home…".

It is clear that this type of transition into a learnership from higher education is not their most preferred. However, as they weigh their options, graduates perceive the learnership being "better than nothing." See how graduate OEQ25 chose to transition from HEI into the learnership, rather than transition into unemployment.

OEQ25: "Firstly I wanted a job not a learnership, so it was challenging for me to take a learnership of something I didn't study for. But due high employment rate in SA I had to think about myself and what opportunities I will gain from this learnership."

Although a learnership programme may have not been the first option for some of these graduates, transitions into learnerships have positive anticipated benefits. This was noted in the last section of the quote above: "I had to think about myself and what opportunities I will gain from this learnership." Learnership programmes are not only to avoid being unemployed, work exposure and career enhancement benefits can be derived, especially when the learnership is directed to a career in the graduate's field of study and interests. Below are delightful sentiments shared by an IT graduate (FG2P1) as they start their Business Analysis learnership journey.

FG2P1: "Mostly because it [the learnership] was a Business Analyst … that's one of my dream jobs … it was going to be a good exposure for my work career experiences because it was related to what I qualified for."

This is an ideal situation where IT graduateness meets an opportunity to acquire a business analyst's skills. This transition can be seen in Gale and Parker (2014) transition as development

(T2), the graduate's status evolves from that of IT graduate to that of an emerging business analyst.

Transitions cannot be the same for all graduates. Since motivations are different, it should follow that expectations are also different. Where some graduates transitioned into a learnership that was in line with their HEI qualifications, some were shocked to learn that they entered a learnership outside their field of study and interests. A marketing graduate (FG2P12) seemed surprised at what they had transitioned into—a Business Administration learnership programme.

FG2P2: "I was expecting it [the learnership] to also be Marketing related, but it was not so. We were doing Business Administration."

This mismatch in graduates' expectations related to the learnership qualification on offer. Another mismatch in graduates' expectations related to the type of WBL programme. Some graduates thought they were transitioning into an internship programme, hence the metaphor of meaning "This is not what I signed up for." The mismatch in qualification and type of programme brought about feelings of shock, dissatisfaction, frustration, stress and anxiety. These negative experiences of transitions require graduates to deal with unfamiliar situations. A Marketing graduate, for example, surprised to be in a Business Administration learnership programme requires us to understand transition as becoming (T3). Gale and Parker (2014) recognise transition as becoming (T3) as characterised by the stress and anxiety of dealing with new contexts. This transition is influenced by one's subjective experiences and day to day negotiations with oneself to accommodate the new developing identity.

The views expressed above, and the empirical data help us to answer Research Question 1 (RQ 1), which asked: How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme that is intended to enhance their employment prospects? Graduates expressed diverse perspectives on what motivated them from the onset and what they expected as they transitioned into the learnership as opposed to what the learnership was about.

From the above quotes, we can conclude that the data provided insights into graduates' motivations for enrolling in learnership programmes and the expectations they held as they transitioned into the programme. Graduates' experiences of their transitions into learnerships are diverse, and the diversity is influenced not only by their motivations and/or expectations,

but by the need to avoid transitioning into unemployment after they complete their HEI studies. Graduates choose learnerships because they are a better alternative to staying at home unemployed.

Learnership programmes also provide an opportunity for the acquisition of additional skills and the development of a professional identity, more so when they align to the qualifications and technical knowledges brought by the graduates. The type of workplace learning programme and the learnership qualification are important considerations. Full programme information could be made explicit from the onset to help graduates understand what they are getting themselves into as they make the transition.

6.4 Transition Through: Learning and Growth within the Learnership Programmes

The second research question (RQ 2) related to graduates' learning experiences during the learnership programme. The research question asked: What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in the learnership programme? The focus of the question aimed to uncover the learning opportunities and challenges experienced by graduates. At this stage, it is important to remember that the learnership is designed to be a dual-learning programme. Its duality speaks to learning the theoretical component of the learnership qualification—which is facilitated by the training provider— as well as the practical workplace learning component—which is managed by an employer, who as employers and hosts open their organisation to be sites of workplace learning.

Transition Through encompasses graduates' learning and growth experiences within the learnership programmes on both the theoretical and practical workplace aspects. The empirical data connect graduate experiences with the key concepts of Graduateness, Transition as Development and Becoming, Work as Learning, Graduate Employability through the metaphors of meaning (to be discussed later) and graduates' representative quotes.

Transition Through should not be seen as a separate event that occurs in graduates' lives in isolation. Instead, it should be viewed as a continuation of what came before. This view helps us look at the interplay between Staunton et al. (2021) graduateness and Gale and Parker (2014) T3, especially at the early stages of the learnership where mixed emotions from expectations created define graduates' experiences. The data point to the way graduates are integrated into the learning programme and in the workplaces enables a smooth transition to take place. The

individual being integrated is as important as the integration that is taking place. See quotes from FG3P5:

“I remember when interviewed, my manager and the head of department that I worked with said very clearly that they will not micromanage. I'm going to be working alone … it turned out to be a success.”

The above recollection is interesting in that, firstly, the manager and head of department in question set the rules of engagement from the onset (not micromanaging). Secondly, the assumptions and trust to let the graduate work alone is foregrounded by their Graduateness. Staunton et al. (2021) framework argue graduates leave HEIs with both technical and non-technical attributes.

OEQ2# 16 “I believe my academic life prepared me for corporate. I had the necessary skills to smoothly transition … also pick up any new competencies, for example use of various systems.”

The confidence shown above demonstrates individuals who are armed with certain qualities that were developed from HEI. Graduates know that they can activate the necessary attributes to ensure smooth transitions amidst their initial anxieties.

Early support makes a difference in how graduates overcome their anxieties of expectations and learning challenges they face. The availability of support resources makes “transition through” manageable when graduates receive induction to the learnership and workplace, are allocated to a supervisor, mentor and a workstation with devices such as laptops at work.

OEQ# 21. “When entering the learnership programme I had some anxiety about moving to a new city and working with people I don't know, it helped a lot having a good supervisor available to answer any questions I had about the learnership programme and any work-related issues.”

OEQ# 9: “I had my own PC … I did not have to share the PC with anyone, so I was able to finish the work on time.”

Providing induction and early resource allocation is an important step in enabling a positive transition experience because it assists graduates to focus on experiences that relate to their learning.

Any learning programme has its own demands, that is, preparation for class, attendance and participation in the learning of theoretical knowledge. Due to the duality of the learnership programme, the demands are twice as much because the practical workplace learning component also comes with its own demands. Real work must be done. Amongst the early lessons learnt by graduates are what it meant to be in a dual learning programme which called for "Juggling act" skills and a "Reality check" or "Wake-up call" on the part of the graduates.

These metaphors of meaning are representative learning experiences that take place during the learnership. They represent a state of mental adjustment, where what was is being shifted to what is and a proper response is required. The empirical data suggest that Transition Through encompasses a process of learning new ways and creating new perspectives as explained by graduates below.

FG2P2: “Obviously when you’re new to the workplace, you don't really know how things are done.”

FG1P2: “I believe there has been some paradigm shift … when you get to in the legal field or undergrad field, there's a lot of research. Then when you get to the job market… there's a lot of administration … That was not necessarily prepared for … the mixture of theory and practical, was a wake-up call … What you do [at work] has real world implication. Is not just if you don't necessarily get something right, you going to come out with a lower mark?”

FG3P4: You want to learn more, and accounting is quite broad … So, I wanted to learn all of these and get to experience all these different positions under finance. Yet I only got a certain portion which is the debtor’s side, which is really not that ok. There's no growth in a way I would like to say it, it's a small portion that I was focusing on and not the bigger picture.”

Most of the graduates have never interacted with the workplace before, as reflected by the sentiments above. In addition, the truths they hold about their chosen field of study are challenged or refined when they get to the workplace. Certain areas of their field are not found

within the organisation and performing tasks are no longer about getting a pass mark, but about connecting how a task has implications for other people, divisions within an organisation and real work situations. Therefore, emotional support and sensitivity towards graduates' experiences is also important in assisting them to reconcile their transition through experiences.

We now move to the Transition Through component that highlights the development of skills through work. An important component in the design of the learnership are workplaces as sites of learning. Indeed, work as learning has transformative effects, it enhances the development of employability skills, and the graduates testify to this in the quotes below.

OEQ2# 20 "I noticed that I have a professional growth in the way I articulated myself and carried myself."

FG2P2: "Cause honestly, when I joined [the learnership], I was clueless of what goes on in the workplace. Now, even the confidence in myself is there … I'm to go for an interview for another job, the way I would express myself at it would be way different than the way I did when I was being interviewed to get into a learnership."

The views expressed above are voices of confidence, of individuals stepping out of graduateness into a professional identity through the learning and exposure to the workplace. The metaphors of meaning of "Gaining all-round skills" and "Professional growth" are testament to the value of the duality of the programme and the importance of meaningful work exposure. Unfortunately, there were negative sentiments from the empirical data which cannot be ignored. Below are sentiments shared by graduates who never got a chance to be allocated to a workplace during the learnership.

OEQ2# 5 "Unfortunately I never got the opportunity to apply anything I learned, since I was never given the opportunity to be at workplace."

OEQ2# 6 "No skills acquired; I came out of the learnership same way I entered."

When one component of the learnership is missing, especially the workplace placements, skills' development and professional growth will not be fully realised. When graduates enter a

learnership programme, practical skills development through meaningful work is more crucial, because they already have a qualification.

The above section highlighted findings from the empirical data in answering Research Question 2: What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme? Graduates' learning experiences during the Transition Through stage are characterised by the importance of an induction and resource allocation process; this has been shown to aid a smooth transition into the learnership. In addition, graduates learn to juggle the demands of the learnership theory and the practical workplace components. While in this juggling act, they acquire new skills and develop their professional identities. Transition Through can also results in feelings of stagnation or no growth, when learnership programmes do not use workplaces as sites of learning. The importance of workplace allocations and meaningful work allocation cannot be underestimated.

6.5 Transition Out: Readiness for the World of Work

As mentioned in the previous section, the stages of Transition Into, Through and Out of learnerships should not be viewed as isolated events that occur in graduates' lives, but a view of transition as closely linked to the former and ongoing occurrences. Transition Out leads off from Transition Through, since a learnership programme is a form of WBL programme aimed at enhancing employability. The focus of Transition Out is to gain insights into graduates' understanding of employability skills. Thus, the third research question was: What are the graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work? The question gives graduates an opportunity to reflect on their journey on the learnership programme and share their comprehension of employability skills.

Graduates' perceptions are influenced by their unique individual experiences of the learnership. The programme was seen as effective in delivering meaningful learning experiences and providing opportunities for valuable skills. The data indicate that graduates understand the employability skills required for transitioning into the world of work as communication skills, time management, presenting skills, improved technical skills, teamwork, self-discipline and goal attainment, project management, decision-making, professionalism, analytical skills and the development of a professional character.

OEQ2# 20: “Communication skills. I had an opportunity to do investigation at a client and successfully used my communication skills with the people at that company and that's when I noticed that I have a professional growth in the way I articulated myself and carried myself.”

OEQ1# 10: “When we had a project at hand, I had to use the following skills: analytical skills, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and communications skills which helped me to do my requirement analysis and develop the required documentations.”

Whilst a lot of graduates were able to be allocated workplaces, strong dissatisfaction was found amongst the graduates who were not placed. This rendered the entire experience meaningless for most. The data also reveal a missed opportunity to develop employability skills due to the absence of workplaces in the learnership programme. This contributed to an overall negative experience from the graduates.

OEQ1# 20. “I never applied the employability skills due to the lack of work experience. We were never placed and that make the learnership to be useless.”

OEQ1# 22. “There should be more space to accommodate learners in the workplace.”

In addition to the understanding of employability skills, the empirical data show that graduates recognise the personal evolution or growth they have undergone during the learnership programme. Graduates’ responses concerning their progression from one life stage (as graduates) to the next (as developing a professional identity) is evidence of Gale and Parker (2014) transition as development (T2). It is also important to note transition as becoming (T3) that is characterised by the to-and-fro movements that happen in life’s experiences and are packed with individuals’ subjective meanings (Gale & Parker, 2014).

According to Clarke (2018), an individual’s perceived employability consists of human capital, including skills competencies and work experience; social capital, for example, networks gained through the learnership; individual behaviours, such as career self-management and building skills; and individual attributes, for example, personality, adaptability and flexibility. What graduates describe as employability skills is localised within them. The learnership programme provides the platform for not just the development of skills but also enables the

space for other elements to play out, giving confirmation of the metaphor of the learnership being a “launchpad and springboard” to employability.

The empirical data show that opportunities for personal transformation took place for the graduates as they transitioned out of the learnership. This is evidenced by the following quotes:

FG3P4: "Honestly, I feel like you can never be ready for the future because you don't know what it has in store for you, but from what I've learned this year, I think. I'm a different person compared to the last."

FG3P1: "I am fully ready. As I mentioned, I do have work experience, so for me in terms of the transitioning from a learnership to full time employment, I don't think it's going to be too much of a hassle for me."

OEQ2# 15: "I was able to secure employment after the programme."

The above quotes are in line with the metaphors of meaning displayed earlier. Graduates are “ready to work.” This means that they believe that the “toolkit” obtained from both their HEI qualification and experience with the learnership is sufficient to assist them to “secure employment.”

The discussion offered in this section speaks to graduates’ experiences of transitioning out of the learnership and answers Research Question 3 which was: What are the graduates’ understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work? By Transition Out, the focus is on employability developed, identity transformation and the state of readiness to enter the labour market. The data show that graduates generally understand employability skills as soft skills that are required in the workplace. These skills are also what they got to demonstrate in their everyday operations at the workplace. By considering their understanding and lived experiences of employability skills, Research Question 3 can be answered.

6.6 Discussion and Synthesis

6.6.1 Summary of the Key Findings from the Analysis of each Transition Stage

The above analytical framework integrated the conceptual framework of GTE with the research questions and included the voices of graduates through representative quotes and metaphors of meaning. By aligning these, a structured approach to analysing the multifaceted experiences of graduates within learnership programmes was possible. Below is a synthesis of the graduates' transitions into, through and out of learnerships aimed at enhancing their employability prospects.

Transition Into:

Graduates are motivated to enrol in learnership programmes as a means of avoiding unemployment and seeking opportunities for career enhancement. In addition, it is important to note that their expectations vary, with some anticipating programme alignment with their field of study. They encounter mismatches between the learnership qualification and the actual WBL programme type. Despite their anxieties, graduates generally perceive learnerships as valuable opportunities for work exposure and career development. The transition into learnership programmes is influenced by graduates' motivations, expectations, and the perceived benefits of participating.

Transition Through:

Learnership programmes offer a dual-learning experience, combining theoretical knowledge with practical workplace learning. Graduates navigate challenges such as balancing academic requirements with workplace demands and adjusting to real-world implications of their work. Support structures, including induction processes and resource allocations, play a crucial role in facilitating a smooth transition through the programme. Graduates undergo personal and professional growth, acquiring new skills and refining their identities as they progress through the learnership programme.

Transition Out:

Graduates perceive employability skills such as communication, time management, teamwork, and professionalism as essential for transitioning into the world of work. Workplace placements during the learnership programme are instrumental in skill development and enhancing graduates' readiness for employment. The absence of workplaces and meaningful work can lead to dissatisfaction among graduates and can hinder their skill development opportunities.

Graduates recognise personal transformation and readiness for employment as outcomes of completing the learnership programme.

6.6.2 The Collective Understanding of Graduates' Experiences and Perceptions of the Learnership Programme

The collective findings from the analysis offer a comprehensive understanding of graduates' experiences and perceptions of the learnership programme, highlighting various facets of their journey from entry to exit. Firstly, by delving into the motivations behind graduates' enrolment in learnership programmes, we gain insight into the underlying factors driving their decisions and aspirations. Whether it is the desire to avoid unemployment or seek career advancement opportunities, understanding these motivations provides context for their subsequent experiences within the programme.

In addition, the exploration of graduates' expectations upon entering the learnership sheds light on the initial anticipation and hopes they bring into the programme. However, as revealed by the analysis, these expectations may not always align with the reality of the programme, leading to discrepancies and challenges along the way. This highlights the importance of managing expectations and ensuring clear communication between stakeholders to enhance the overall experience for graduates.

As graduates progress through the learnership programme, the dual-learning nature of the experience becomes apparent, with theoretical knowledge complemented by practical workplace learning. The challenges they face in balancing academic requirements with workplace demands underscore the complexities of this transitional phase. Nevertheless, the support structures provided, such as induction processes and resource allocations, play a pivotal role in facilitating a smoother transition and fostering personal and professional growth.

The insights from graduates' perceptions of employability skills and readiness for the workforce upon completing the programme offer valuable reflections on the transformative impact of learnerships. The acquisition of essential skills and the recognition of personal growth underscore the effectiveness of learnership programmes in preparing graduates for the realities of the job market.

6.6.3 Key Themes and Patterns from the Analysis

Firstly, graduates enter learnership programmes with diverse motivations, including the desire to avoid unemployment and to seek career advancement opportunities. However, their expectations may not always align with the realities of the programme, leading to expectations-reality mismatches.

Secondly, learnership programmes offer a dual-learning experience, combining theoretical knowledge with practical workplace learning. Graduates navigate challenges in balancing academic requirements with workplace demands, highlighting the complexity of this transitional phase.

Thirdly, the presence of support structures, such as induction processes and resource allocations, plays a crucial role in facilitating a smoother transition through the learnership programme. These structures help graduates overcome challenges and foster personal and professional growth.

Furthermore, graduates perceive employability skills such as communication, time management, and teamwork, etc., as essential for transitioning into the labour market. Workplace placements during the programme are instrumental in skill development and enhancing graduates' readiness for employment.

Lastly, graduates undergo personal and professional growth throughout the learnership programme, and they recognise this transformative impact of learnership programmes on their career development. This growth is evidenced by increased confidence, improved communication skills, and a heightened sense of readiness for the labour market.

Overall, these themes underscore the multifaceted nature of graduates' experiences within learnership programmes and highlight their importance in shaping graduates' employability and professional development.

6.6.4 The Effectiveness of the Conceptual Framework in Illuminating the Empirical Data: A Reflection

The conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3, is referred to as the 'GTE Conceptual Framework' (Graduateness, Transition, and Employability) and these key concepts are

interconnected and have equal importance. The framework provides a structured lens through which to understand graduates' experiences within learnership programmes. By integrating the key concepts of graduateness, transition, and employability, this framework offers an approach to analysing the empirical data.

Firstly, graduateness is emphasised as the starting point, representing the qualities and skills graduates bring from higher education institutions. This concept is crucial in understanding how graduates leverage their existing competencies within the learnership programme context, showcasing their technical and non-technical abilities and through them adapting to workplace environments.

Secondly, the framework acknowledges how transition as a process of navigating change and acquiring capabilities can be complex. It recognises that through the programmes, graduates undergo transitions that contribute to their employability. However, transition is not experienced in the same manner and equally by graduates, thereby making transitional experiences unique and subjective.

Thirdly, employability is viewed as the outcome of the transition process, encompassing the competencies acquired during the learnership that enhance graduates' prospects in the job market. The framework highlights the importance of both theoretical and workplace-based learning experiences in developing these skills.

The GTE Conceptual Framework emphasises that graduates progress from graduateness to employability through the transitional experiences that are facilitated by the learnership programmes. This conceptual framework serves as a guiding tool in analysing the empirical data, helping to organise and interpret the findings. It also enables the identification of patterns and themes related to graduateness, transition experiences, and employability skill development within learnership contexts.

Overall, the GTE Conceptual Framework has been effective in illuminating the empirical data by providing a theoretical lens through which to understand the complexities of graduates' experiences and perceptions within learnership programmes. It offers a holistic framework that integrates key concepts and guides the analysis process, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in graduates’ experiences of their transition phases.

6.7 Conclusion

Through the GTE Conceptual Framework, the chapter analysed the empirical data, providing a structured lens to understand the complexities of graduates' experiences within learnership programmes, and their journey toward enhanced employability and professional development. By connecting graduates quote, metaphors of meaning and the key concepts to the research questions, the framework was a valuable tool in helping to understand the multifaceted experiences of graduates. The chapter explored the experiences and perceptions of graduates within learnership programmes, focusing on their transition into, through, and out of these programmes. It began by discussing graduates' motivations for enrolling in learnerships, highlighting their desire to avoid unemployment and seek career enhancement opportunities. However, expectations may not always align with the actual qualifications and workplace learning experiences offered by the learnership.

Throughout the programme, graduates navigate challenges in balancing academic requirements with workplace demands, but support structures such as induction processes and resource allocations facilitate a smoother transition. The chapter also examined graduates' perceptions of employability skills, highlighting their readiness for the world of work upon completing the learnership programme. The analysis emphasised the transformative impact of structured learning experiences provided by learnerships on the career development of graduates. In addition, it effectively addressed the research questions by providing a structured approach to understanding graduates' experiences within learnership programmes.

Regarding the transition experience of graduates into learnership programmes (RQ 1), the framework facilitated an exploration of graduates' motivations, expectations, and perceptions as they entered the programme. Secondly, concerning the learning experiences of graduates during the learnership programme (RQ 2), the framework allowed for a detailed examination of how graduates navigated the dual-learning nature of the programme, balancing theoretical knowledge with practical workplace learning.

Finally, in addressing the research question regarding graduates' understanding of employability skills required for transitioning from the learnership into the world of work (RQ 3), the framework enabled an analysis of graduates' perceptions of the skills acquired and their readiness for employment after programme completion. The conceptual framework provided a

theoretical lens through which to organise and interpret the empirical data, ensuring that each research question was comprehensively addressed.

This chapter has used the GTE conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 3 as part of the analytical framework to help answer the study's research questions. Graduates' voices, articulated as experiences and perceptions were analysed from the empirical data highlighting their transition into, through and out of learnership programmes that aim to enhance their employability prospects. A summary and synthesis of each transition stage was discussed, key themes were identified from the analysis and an assessment of the analytical framework's effectiveness was provided. The discussion chapter will follow, focusing on the empirical data in relation to the literature in the key areas of graduates, learnerships, transition and employability.

Chapter 7. Discussion

7.1 Introduction

From the analysis of the data collected and presentation of key findings in Chapter 6, this first section summarises the key findings from the empirical data. The empirical analysis of graduates' experiences in learnership programmes revealed several significant themes. Firstly, graduates enter these programmes with diverse motivations, ranging from avoiding unemployment to seeking career advancement opportunities. However, their expectations may not always align with the realities of the programme, leading to challenges in expectations-reality mismatches. Secondly, learnership programmes offer a dual-learning experience, combining theoretical knowledge with practical workplace learning. Graduates often struggle to balance academic requirements with workplace demands, highlighting the complexity of this transitional phase. Additionally, the presence of support structures, such as induction processes and resource allocations, plays a crucial role in facilitating a smoother transition through the learnership programme. These support mechanisms help graduates overcome challenges and foster personal and professional growth.

Graduates identify employability skills considering soft skills, such as communication, time management, teamwork etc. as essential for transitioning into the labour market. Workplace placements during the programme are instrumental in skill development and enhancing graduates' readiness for employment. Finally, throughout the learnership programme, graduates undergo significant personal and professional growth. They recognise the transformative impact of the learnership programme experiences on their career development, evidenced by increased confidence, improved communication skills, and a heightened sense of readiness for the labour market. These themes collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of graduates' experiences within learnership programmes and emphasise their importance in shaping employability and professional development amongst graduates.

This chapter focuses on situating the five key findings from Chapter 6 within the context of existing literature. Interpreting these findings considering the relevant literature will assist in illuminating their value in the broader field of study. Each finding will be discussed in detail in the sections that follow, showing how the findings align or diverge with existing knowledge and where applicable offer new perspectives.

7.2 Core Finding 1: Transition into the Learnership—Navigating expectations and realities

Unemployment among graduates in South Africa is a pressing concern, particularly given the country's emphasis on higher education credentials in the labour market. Graham et al. (2019) shed light on the transition of unemployed graduates into learnerships, highlighting the advantage of possessing qualifications beyond high school. However, this advantage is not evenly distributed, with higher-skilled individuals (NQF 7+) often favoured despite the potential gaps in their work experience (Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Graduates with qualifications at NQF levels 5 and 6 face prolonged unemployment due to employers' cautiousness (Graham et al., 2019). The data also confirm Visser and Kruss (2009) findings that unemployed youth enter learnerships and sometimes at a lower NQF level than their highest qualification if the hope of employment exists. This study found that avoiding unemployment was a common motivator for enrolling in a learnership amongst graduates, even if it meant enrolling at a lower NQF than their HEI qualification.

Transitioning into learnerships involves understanding why individuals choose to enrol. While motivations vary, this study found that they commonly revolve around avoiding unemployment and aspiring to career progression. Kruss et al. (2012) observed that employed individuals pursue learnerships for career advancement, while the unemployed aim for qualification attainment and access to free education. However, the study revealed a nuanced perspective highly motivated by career growth opportunities. This finding suggests that the motivation for career advancement is not only limited to employed participants but also extends to unemployed graduates. The data extended our current understanding in that unemployed graduates have already embarked on their career path by studying towards a qualification in a particular field, and through learnerships are looking to continue that trajectory.

Mismatches between expectations and realities can occur after enrolling in the learnership programmes, leading to disappointment among graduates. Disengagements and terminations have been highlighted as characteristic of learnerships (Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2014). Addressing these expectations-realities mismatches requires providing comprehensive information about learnership pathways upfront, empowering graduates to make informed decisions and adjust their expectations accordingly.

Learnership programmes remain a suitable learning pathway for unemployed youth and graduates (Kruss et al., 2012) and, with their dual-learning approach, are perceived as conducive to fulfilling graduates' expectations. Yet, programme design must align with graduates' career growth objectives, encompassing both theoretical and practical aspects. Tailoring learnerships to participants' diverse needs and providing support structures, such as induction programmes and mentorship, enhances transition experiences and programme effectiveness. This calls for a developmental and targeted approach to learnerships instead of one-size-fits all approaches.

In summary, aligning learnership offerings with participants' expectations and addressing broader issues contributing to graduate unemployment are crucial. Future research could delve deeper into understanding the motivations of graduates participating in learnerships and workplace learning programmes. By specifically focusing on the discrepancies between their expectations and the realities of these programmes, researchers can uncover valuable insights into the dynamics driving graduate decisions and experiences. Understanding these motivations and mismatches is crucial for designing effective interventions and support mechanisms that better align with participants' needs. This research can inform programme developers and policymakers on how to tailor learning experiences to meet the diverse expectations of participants, ultimately improving the effectiveness of such programmes in enhancing graduate employability.

Current studies on graduate unemployment, skill development, and employability tend to operate within disciplinary silos, such as economics, sociology, education, and psychology, limiting the depth of understanding of the complex challenges facing graduates. A transdisciplinary research approach, integrating insights from diverse academic fields and involving non-academic stakeholders such as policymakers, employers, learners and training providers can provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing graduate employability. By examining the intersection of education, work, and graduate employability, transdisciplinary research collaborators can identify interconnected patterns and dynamics that may not be apparent within a single discipline. This approach facilitates collaboration and ensures that research findings translate into practical interventions and policies that benefit graduates and the wider society.

Core Finding 1 highlights the nuanced motivations driving unemployed graduates' transition into learnership programmes, emphasising the importance of aligning programme offerings with participants' expectations to address the challenges of graduate unemployment effectively. Building upon this understanding, Core Finding 2 explores the demands faced by learnership participants and the strategies employed to maintain balance during their transition. This investigation provides further insight into the complex experiences of how graduates navigate entry into and progression till the end through a learnership programme to acquire employability skills.

7.3 Core Finding 2: Transition into the Learnership—Meeting Demands

Core Finding 2 focuses on the intricate journey of unemployed graduates transitioning into learnerships, navigating a landscape filled with challenges and opportunities. At the outset, these graduates often find themselves lacking the requisite work experience demanded by prospective employers (Graham et al., 2019). Recognising learnerships as a pivotal pathway to gaining this crucial experience, they embark on this journey with the expectation of securing a "foot in the door" to future employment opportunities. Learnerships not only promise practical skills acquisition but also offer a valuable network of workplace contacts, thereby enhancing graduates' social capital in the job market.

However, the transition into learnerships presents significant challenges beyond academic and practical demands. Graduates must navigate a complex dual-learning paradigm while responding to the demands of multiple identities they encompass. Initially selected for their capabilities and anticipated contributions to workplace teams, graduates carry the identity of a capable employee. Simultaneously, as learners in the learnership, they are obligated to engage fully in a dual-learning programme. This entails balancing theoretical learning with practical workplace experiences. Furthermore, as employees hosted in the workplace, they must meet the expectations and demands set by their employers and managers. These demands cut across the identities of "Graduateness," learner on a learnership, and employee in the workplace. Thus, the challenge lies not only in academic and practical integration but also in reconciling these diverse identities and fulfilling their associated expectations.

A study conducted by Mummenthey and Du Preez (2010) provides insight into the effectiveness and efficiency of learnerships, shedding light on key stakeholders and interactions within the learnership process. Their analysis revealed that learnership participants primarily interacted

with training providers and employers. Employing a systems approach, the authors investigated learnership inputs, outputs, and the processes in between. The study's results primarily focused on other stakeholders (employers, training providers, professional bodies etc.) more than the participating learners. Where participants' perspectives were analysed, the study noted that participants generally reported a positive experience with the learnership programmes. They expressed satisfaction with aspects such as suitable learning materials and support availability from training providers and host employers. However, the study failed to delve deeper into the challenges participants faced in balancing the demands of their various identities as learners, employees, and individuals transitioning into the world of work. Understanding the intricacies behind the multiple and complex graduate identities inherent in the learnership experience is an oversight in the literature and raises questions about the adequacy of support provided. Specifically, it prompts inquiry into the extent to which participants received support to effectively balance the demands of their work and learning commitments.

In another study by Kruss et al. (2012), learnership participants terminated their programmes due to dissatisfaction with the quality of training, both in the practical workplace component and the theoretical classroom component. Concerns were raised about the quality of learning, misalignment of classroom instruction with the skills and knowledge required for workplace training (Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2014; Cornelissen & Rabie, 2023; Kruss et al., 2012; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010). The success of a learnership programme is influenced by stakeholder involvement in the design and development of the learnership programme. Through this meaningful practical work can form part of the learning.

Despite these challenges, unemployed graduates from this study exhibited resilience and determination to succeed. They employed various coping mechanisms, such as negotiating workload adjustments or investing extra hours, to navigate learnership demands. This resilience was derived from their commitment to overcoming challenges and extracting value from the experience, maintaining a positive outlook on learnerships (Kruss et al., 2012; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010). Concerns regarding the quality of training components, as highlighted by Kruss et al. (2012) and Aigbavboa and Thwala (2014), underscore the need for a comprehensive assessment of learnership components. Future research could investigate deepening our understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the transition of unemployed graduates into learnership programmes. Investigation into the quality and organisation of both theoretical and practical components within learnerships could provide valuable insights.

Finally, research could explore methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of these components as well as identifying areas for collaboration between training providers and employers to enhance the overall relevance and impact of learnership programmes.

Transitioning seamlessly through the learnership experience requires robust support structures, a topic which leads us to Core Finding 3: "Transition through the Learnership: Support Structures for Smooth Transition." Investigating the support mechanisms available to learners as they navigate the complexities of learnerships will not only complement our understanding of Core Finding 2, but also provide critical insights into facilitating a smoother transition for unemployed graduates into the world of work.

7.4 Core Finding 3: Transition Through the Learnership—Support Structures

Core Finding 3 sheds light on the crucial role of support structures in facilitating a smooth transition for graduates through learnership programmes. The complexity of this transition journey is profoundly impacted by the level of support provided to graduates at the onset and throughout the learnership programme. Many graduates entering learnerships lack prior work experience, social networks, and may even relocate to be closer to their workplace, magnifying the significance of the support they receive at the outset. This study underscores the invaluable nature of support structures established at the beginning of the programme. Instances where graduates received robust support witnessed managed expectations, decreased anxieties, and overall smoother transitions.

Support services play a multifaceted role, not only in managing anxieties and expectations but also in ensuring the successful completion of learnership programmes (Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010) and the development of employability (Graham et al., 2019). These services encompass various elements, including informative induction programmes, provision of technical resources such as laptops and workstations, allocation of human resources such as mentors, exposure to meaningful work experiences, and opportunities for network building.

Graduates in the study emphasised the importance of being allocated work resources like laptops, workstations, mentors and participating in real work. These were crucial for integration into the workplace, being part of a team and contributing to their professional identity. Unfortunately, the literature frequently cites poor planning and the unavailability of workplace learning as being among the key reasons for learnership fails (Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2014;

Kruss et al., 2012; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010). Indeed, this study found a relationship between the unavailability of workplaces with graduates' negative experiences, underscoring the importance of workplaces as key sites of employability skills development.

Drawing from Davies and Farquharson (2004) Lead Agency Model, which has influenced subsequent studies on learnership effectiveness, a well-structured programme entails induction and learner support structures facilitated by both the lead training provider and lead host employer. A successful programme is characterised by the alignment of theoretical and workplace components, alongside robust workplace procedures and quality assurance processes to ensure competency attainment (Kruss et al., 2012). In instances where workplaces for learning are limited, alternative strategies such as job rotation plans, job assignments, simulation training, and mentorship systems prove instrumental in enhancing the workplace component of learnership programmes (Kruss et al., 2012).

In summary, the availability of supportive initiatives is crucial for facilitating a smooth transition through learnership programmes, enhancing employability, and fostering successful programme completion. A well-structured programme encompasses comprehensive support structures that address the diverse needs of participants and ensures the availability of workplace sites for learning and the alignment between theoretical learning and practical workplace experiences.

Future research could explore innovative approaches to address challenges of limited workplace availability. This is in addition to studying the effectiveness of various support structures in learnerships. Investigating the long-term impact of support initiatives on graduates' career trajectories and employability outcomes across different learnerships could provide valuable insights into best practices for designing and implementing effective support structures within learnership programmes.

7.5 Core Finding 4: Transition Through the Learnership—Work as Learning

As South Africa moves towards establishing a WBL policy framework, it is crucial to recognise existing policies, both educational and non-educational, that endorse learning in the workplace for reasons related to work exposure, unemployment, and employability skills development (Blom, 2015). Internationally, WBL is highly regarded for its educational value and its effectiveness in various technical, vocational, occupational, and professional settings, leading

to a growing emphasis on it within South Africa (Blom, 2015). WBL programmes are known to facilitate the transition from learning to work, enhancing the skills and attitudes of new entrants into the labour market and making them more appealing to potential employers (Blom, 2015; Graham et al., 2019).

Debates persist regarding graduates' readiness for the workplace and the parties responsible for fostering this readiness, whether HEIs, employers, or the government. However, the learnership model offers a clear solution by assigning responsibility to education providers, employers, and participating students, with learning occurring both in classrooms and workplaces. Blom (2015) asserts that education, training, and work can be integrated to support learning experiences when they are directly tied to real work settings. This aligns with this study's argument that the education, work, and graduate employability nexus hinges on skill development occurring at, through, and for work.

Yet, realising learning at, through, and for work requires collaboration from both public and private sector organisations to provide workplaces as learning sites (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). The transition through a learnership relies heavily on the availability of workplaces where practical employability skills can be honed. However, employers seem reluctant to contribute towards the labour they seek, as evidenced by graduates' perception of learnerships as futile when workplaces are absent. Placements in relevant workplaces enable graduates to solidify employability skills through exposure to work settings. Intentional collaboration between training providers and employers are needed more now, as noted by Visser and Kruss (2009). The study's data acknowledge the importance of differentiated strategies that can not only meet the different needs of the unemployed graduate population, but also the demand of the labour market. This way, a desirable mix of skills and core competences required by employers is possible (Visser & Kruss, 2009).

The development of employability skills should be seen as a dynamic flow variable rather than a static stock variable in the context of learnerships and the education-work-employability skills nexus. Learnerships contribute to continuous skill development over time through theoretical learning combined with practical work experience. The data indicate that employability skills developed by graduates through learnerships such as communication are not merely acquired but evolve and are refined through ongoing learning and practical application. The more

exposure to meaningful work experiences, the stronger the self-perceived employability becomes.

While literature often views employability skills as stock variables acquired upon leaving HEIs, my findings suggest a different perspective. Graduates in learnership programmes perceive skills like communication and teamwork as dynamic, evolving through the programme's theoretical and practical components. Workplace experiences significantly outweigh theoretical learning in strengthening these skills (Mseleku, 2022a), since the workplace and work problems provide the platform for practice.

This section underscores two crucial components of Core Finding 4: the pivotal role of workplaces as sites of learning at, through, and for work in enhancing employability skills, and the understanding of skill development as a complex flow variable nurtured through theoretical learning and practical work experience in learnership programmes. Future research should delve into assessing the quality of workplace learning environments during learnerships, with a particular focus on elements such as mentorship, supervision, and task diversity. By conducting detailed assessments, researchers can gain insights into how workplace culture, organisational support, and infrastructure impact the effectiveness of learning experiences. Moreover, exploring strategies to enhance workplace learning can inform the development of WBL programmes.

In the context where workplace availability seems to be a challenge, future research can also investigate the role of technology in augmenting workplace learning experiences within learnerships. This entails exploring the integration of digital tools, virtual simulations, and online platforms to complement traditional learning methods. Research can assess the effectiveness of such technological interventions and evaluate their accessibility and usability for learnership participants, considering challenges such as the digital divide, digital literacy and technological infrastructure. Understanding how technology can enhance workplace learning can inform the design and implementation of technology-enabled learning initiatives.

Furthermore, larger mixed methods studies should be conducted to explore graduates' perspectives and experiences regarding the development of their employability skills acquired during learnership programmes. By delving into graduates' perceptions, researchers can gain insights into the transferability of skills acquired during learnerships to different work contexts

and career paths. Such insights can provide light into the long-term impact of learnership programmes on employability skill development.

7.6 Core Finding 5: Transition Out of the Learnership—Readiness for Work

The Core Finding 5 underscores that graduates, upon concluding their learnerships, undergo significant personal and professional development, marked by heightened self-confidence and a sense of readiness to enter the work of work. They perceive the employability skills acquired during the learnership as valuable assets that can aid them in securing employment either with the hosting employers or in the broader job market. The structured nature of learnerships fosters transformative effects, instilling in graduates a sense of preparedness for the demands of professional life. Existing literature on learnerships supports these observations, highlighting the perceived value of such programmes and their role in facilitating smoother transitions into employment (Kruss et al., 2012; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010). Consistent with this, graduates in this study reported an enhanced understanding of themselves as professionals, with increased confidence and perceived employability attributed to their participation in the learnership programme (Clarke, 2018).

However, two key aspects of transitioning out of learnerships warrant particular attention. Firstly, there is a need to recognise the significance of individual attributes and behaviours in enhancing graduate employability (Clarke, 2018), a dimension often overlooked in discussions on the topic. Individual behaviours play a crucial role in career self-management and skill development, and while some attributes are influenced by personality variables, learnership programmes can play a pivotal role in cultivating awareness of the behaviours and attributes essential for career success in contemporary and ever-changing labour market settings.

Secondly, any conceptualisation of graduate employability must acknowledge the influence of structural labour market dynamics on employment outcomes, both in the short and long term. Perceived employability is shaped by prevailing labour market conditions, while labour market factors themselves impact graduate employability. The South African labour market is biased towards work experience and certain levels of educational attainment. Graduates in this study may have acquired sufficient attributes, skills and credentials; however, unless labour market structures change, graduates will find themselves in an ever-spiralling whirl wheel of unemployment.

Consequently, there is a need for ongoing debate regarding the definition of 'work-readiness' across diverse employment contexts, as well as discussions concerning the responsibilities of employers in nurturing sustained graduate employability within the workplace.

7.7 Synthesis and Implications

This study investigated the experiences of graduates within learnership programmes, focusing on their transition into, through, and out of these programmes and how they acquire skills relevant to enhancing their employability. Key findings highlight the multifaceted nature of graduates' experiences and the important role of learnerships as structured programmes in shaping their professional development.

Transition Into Learnership Programmes:

Core Finding 1 sheds light on the motivations driving unemployed graduates' transition into learnerships and emphasises the importance of aligning programme offerings with participants' expectations. The study underscores the need for comprehensive information upfront to manage expectation-reality mismatches effectively. This aligns with existing literature on the value of learnerships in providing career growth opportunities for both employed and unemployed individuals.

Core Finding 2 delves into the demands faced by learnership participants and the strategies employed to maintain balance during their transition. By examining the challenges of navigating multiple identities and coping mechanisms employed by graduates, the study adds depth to our understanding of the complex experiences within learnerships. This complements Mummenthey and Du Preez (2010) findings on the effectiveness of learnerships, while highlighting the need for deeper exploration into participants' challenges and support mechanisms.

Transition Through Learnership Programmes:

Core Finding 3 highlights the critical role of support structures in facilitating a smooth transition for graduates through learnership programmes. The study underscores the need for comprehensive support initiatives tailored to participants' diverse needs. This aligns with Davies and Farquharson (2004) Lead Agency Model, emphasising the significance of well-structured programmes and collaborative efforts between training providers, employers, policymakers and beneficiaries of learnership programmes.

Core Finding 4 emphasises the importance of workplaces as sites of learning at, through, and for work in enhancing employability skills. The study highlights the dynamic nature of skill development and the role of learnership programmes in fostering continuous learning experiences. It also highlights the need for further research into the quality of workplace learning environments and the potential of technology-enabled learning initiatives within learnerships.

Transition Out of Learnership Programmes:

Core Finding 5 explains the transformative effects of learnership programmes on graduates' personal and professional development, aligning with existing literature on the perceived value of learnership programmes. However, the study also emphasises the need to consider individual attributes and labour market dynamics in conceptualising graduate employability, echoing Clarke (2018) insights into the role of individual behaviours and the influence of labour market conditions in employment outcomes.

Implications for Graduate Learnership Programmes

There is a need for tailored support in learnership programmes that are aimed at graduates. Recognising diverse motivations and expectations of graduates entering learnership programmes, tailored support structures such as inductions and mentorship are essential for managing expectations and facilitating smoother transitions. This has implications for called multiple stakeholders to ensure targeted support solutions. At the planning stages of the learnership undertaking, alumni participants, recruiters of participants, host employers, and training providers, education and workplace coaches should be involved in the designing and developing on the learnership programme. These stakeholders can identify the needs of graduates for specific learnership programmes at the different stages of transition.

Learnership designers can enhance the programme's quality through integrating HEI attributes. A key differentiation factor in learnerships for graduates is that the participants bring knowledge and skills obtained from their prior qualifications, that is, they have chosen a certain career path already. Therefore, building on this knowledge as a starting point is crucial. An assessment of what graduates bring in relation to what employers seek can position learnerships for graduates as a crucial intervention type that deepen the skills required by employers at the intermediate and higher skills. The duality of theoretical and practical learning components

within learnership programmes act as the bridge that complements the skills developed through higher education and those gained in the learnership. Aligning the learnership qualification and workplace experience and the graduates' already chosen career goals can maximise skill development and employability outcomes.

The value of learnerships in providing structured learning within the broader WBL contents is uncontested. Learnership programmes play the role of developing employability skills amongst graduates. They provide transformative experiences for graduates, enhancing their confidence, professional identity, and readiness for the job market. Learnership programmes' value of providing "a foot in the door" has implications for the graduates themselves, an awareness into their transitional changes calls for them to embody an employee/ professional identity which is different to that of a graduate. In this regard, their interaction with the labour market has been elevated by their transition out of the learnership programme.

In conclusion, graduates' experiences within learnerships underscore the importance of effective support structures, quality programme design, and the transformative potential of WBL in enhancing their employability and professional development. These findings provide valuable insights for designing and implementing effective graduate learnership programmes aimed at facilitating successful transitions into the world of work. The above also provides a case that promoted the need for a workplace-based policy framework.

7.8 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

In conducting the study, some limitations were identified, those that relate to the recruitment of the participants and the size of the sample in this mixed methods study.

The enacted POPIA posed serious challenges in accessing the SETA databases of graduates who had completed learnership programmes. The act prohibits the processing of personal information without consent from the individuals. The databases used in this study were conveniently accessed due to the researcher's positionality as an Education, Training and Development (ETD) Practitioner in a training company and host of learnership programmes. All other attempts to accessing SETA databases, except for one SETA, were unsuccessful. Permission was granted in writing by the SETA.

Linked to the above limitation, the study could have been enhanced by a larger and more diverse sample of graduates in learnership programmes from various sectors. A more comprehensive understanding of graduates' experiences of different sectoral learnership programmes would have been achieved. Since this study focused on a small and undifferentiated sample, the findings from this study cannot be generalised.

Although learnership research is still developing, perspectives from other stakeholders, such as hosts employers and training providers were the focus. Where larger studies were conducted on unemployed youth, there was no separation between those with no formal education, a Grade 12 and those with a tertiary qualification. Beneficiaries were seen as a homogenous group. An in-depth exploration of specific aspects of graduates' experiences, such as the alignment of theoretical and practical components, the role and effectiveness of support structures, or the impact of workplace placements on employability skill development is required to inform programme improvement for both policy makers and practitioners could be further explored.

Comparative studies across different regions, economies and WBL programmes could deepen our understanding of the education-work and gradual employability nexus across various contexts to identify contextual best practices, shared challenges and test solutions. Research questions to be asked can include:

- What are the common challenges experienced, and best practices employed in WBL graduate employability programmes in emerging economies?
- How do different regions approach the integration of employability skills in WBL programmes aimed at graduates?

Academic and non-academic actors such as policymakers, recruiters, hosts employers, training providers workplace coaches and learnership beneficiaries as alumni could be brought together for collective learnership programme knowledge creation, programme design and development. As learnership programme are stakeholder intense programmes, various perspectives voices could offer a more comprehensive understandings of the needs of the collective. Research questions to be asked could include:

- To what extent do learnership programmes qualifications improve alignment with employer needs compared to traditional higher education programs?
- What skills do employers identify as lacking among new graduates, and how do these compare to the focus areas of current workplace-based programmes such as learnerships?

With the concentration of graduates holding qualifications at NQF 5 and 6 involved in learnership programmes, there is a need to investigate the employability outcomes of this band of graduates. The research questions could ask the following:

- How effective are current learnership programmes in supporting graduates at NQF5 and 6's transition into the world of work?
- What specific learnership programme adaptations could better support the employability of graduates with NQF 5 & 6?

7.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of graduates within learnership programmes, focusing on their transition into, through, and out of these programmes and how they acquire skills relevant to enhancing their employability. Through a comprehensive analysis of empirical data and a review of existing literature, several key findings have emerged. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of graduates' experiences, emphasising the importance of effective support structures, quality programme design, and the transformative potential of structured learning provided by learnerships in shaping their professional development. Despite certain limitations, including sample size and methodological constraints, the study offers valuable contributions to the field of graduate learnership programmes.

The study makes significant contributions to research across multiple dimensions. Firstly, it offers empirical insights into graduates' experiences within learnership programmes, providing a rich understanding of the challenges, motivations, coping mechanisms, and support structures encountered during the transition from education to employment. This empirical depth enriches our understanding of this critical phase and lays the groundwork for further scholarly inquiry.

Moreover, the study contributes to theoretical advancement by synthesising existing literature with empirical findings, expanding and refining theoretical frameworks related to graduate employability, workplace learning, and the effectiveness of learnership programmes. By identifying the interplay between individual attributes, labour market dynamics, and support structures within learnerships, the study enriches theoretical discussions and offers insights into complex phenomena.

Additionally, the findings have practical implications for various stakeholders, including policymakers, educational institutions, employers, training providers, and graduates themselves. By identifying the importance of aligning learnership offerings with participants' expectations, enhancing support structures, and recognising the evolving nature of employability skills, the study offers actionable insights that can inform policy and practice, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and impact of learnership programmes in addressing graduate unemployment.

Lastly, methodologically, the study contributes by employing a rigorous research design that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the multifaceted nature of graduates' experiences. This methodological approach ensures the validity and reliability of the findings, demonstrating the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating diverse research methods to explore complex research questions. The study's contributions across empirical, theoretical, practical, and methodological dimensions enrich scholarly discourse and inform efforts to address graduate unemployment and foster career development.

Several recommendations for future research that collectively outline key areas for further exploration and advancement in the field are suggested. Firstly, there is a need for deeper investigation into graduates' motivations and expectation-reality mismatches in workplace learning programmes. This will ensure better understanding of the dynamics guiding graduate decisions and experiences. This research could inform the development of interventions and support mechanisms tailored to participants' needs, ultimately enhancing programme effectiveness.

Secondly, adopting a transdisciplinary research approach that integrates insights from diverse academic fields and involves non-academic stakeholders can provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing graduate employability. By examining the intersection of education, work, and employability, transdisciplinary research collaborators can identify interconnected patterns and dynamics and translate research findings into practical interventions and policies, thus co-creating knowledge.

Additionally, there is a call for research into the quality of workplace learning environments in learnership programmes, focusing on elements such as mentorship, supervision, and task

diversity. Exploring strategies to enhance workplace learning and evaluating the effectiveness of technological interventions can inform better design of WBL programmes.

Larger mixed-methods studies could be conducted to explore graduates' perspectives and experiences regarding the development of their employability skills during the programme. This research can provide insights into the transferability of skills acquired during learnerships to different work contexts and career paths, offering valuable insights into the long-term impact of learnerships on employability.

Overall, these recommendations collectively highlight avenues for future research that can deepen our understanding of graduate employability, enhance the effectiveness of workplace learning programmes, and inform policy and practice in addressing graduate unemployment and fostering career development. By addressing these recommendations, we can better support graduates in their transition into the labour market and enhance their employability outcomes, ultimately contributing to a more skilled and resilient workforce.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Youth unemployment is a critical issue in South Africa, with graduate unemployment on the rise despite various work-based learning interventions aimed at linking youth to the labour market. This study focused on graduates' experiences of learnership programmes, with the aim of investigating the experiences of graduates participating in learnership programmes. Specifically, the study undertook to understand how graduates transitioned from HEIs into learnership programmes and progressed through and out of these programmes. In addition, I explored how graduates' understanding, and awareness of employability skills developed through the learnership programmes.

The study analysed the graduates' narratives to identify transition and learning experiences that facilitated the development of employability skills necessary to move smoothly into the labour market. It was guided by two research objectives:

1) To gain insight into the journey of graduates into and through learnership programmes, and
2) To evaluate graduates' understanding of their acquisition of employability skills after completing the learning.

The overarching question of the research study was: How do graduates experience the transition into learnership programmes and acquire skills that contribute to improving their employment opportunities upon successfully completing the learnership programme? In this context, transition was conceptualised as transition into, transition through, and transition out of learnership programmes.

The overarching research question was addressed by the following complementary questions:

1) How is the transition experience of graduates in a learnership programme that is intended to enhance their employment prospects?
2) What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in a learnership programme?
3) What are graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?

These three complementary questions directly align with the research question and the aim of the study. The first question investigated the transitional experiences of graduates within learnership programmes, while the second question explored their learning journey. The third question investigated graduates' understanding of employability skills crucial for their successful transition into the labour market.

The previous chapters have highlighted the significance of studying learnership programmes from graduates' perspectives. Through the presentation and comprehensive analysis of empirical data in Chapters 5 and 6, and a review of the findings considering existing literature in Chapter 7, several key findings have emerged that highlight the multifaceted nature of graduates' experiences, emphasising the importance of effective support structures, quality programme design, and the transformative potential of structured learning provided by learnerships in shaping graduates' professional development.

This chapter provides a concise summary of the key findings, followed by a discussion on the study's contributions to knowledge, emphasising scholarly significance and potential for future research. Next the study's findings' implications for practice bridges theory and practice by offering recommendations. The limitations of the study are acknowledged and suggestions for future research direction are offered. In conclusion, key takeaways are emphasised that relate to supporting graduates in their transition from higher education institutions, through learnership programmes to work, and impacting the development of employability skills.

8.2 Summary of the Core Findings

Unemployment among graduates in South Africa is a pressing concern, particularly given the country's emphasis on higher education credentials in the labour market. Core finding 1 relates to transitioning into learnership programmes and highlights understanding why individuals enrol in learnerships. The findings suggest that motivations commonly revolve around avoiding unemployment and aspirations for chosen career progression. In the same vein, the findings highlight mismatches between expectations and realities that occur after enrolling in the learnership, leading to disappointment among graduates. To address the expectations-realities mismatches requires providing comprehensive information about learnership pathways upfront, empowering graduates to make informed decisions and adjust their expectations accordingly.

Learnership programmes remain a suitable learning pathway for unemployed youth and graduates, with their dual-learning approach perceived as conducive to fulfilling graduates' expectations. Yet, programme design must align with graduates' career growth objectives, encompassing both theoretical and practical aspects. Tailoring learnerships to participants' diverse needs and providing sufficient information from the onset is crucial for enhancing the transition into experiences and general programme effectiveness.

Core finding 2 highlights the challenges and opportunities inherent in the transition into processes of the learnership programme. Initially hindered by a lack of requisite work experience, graduates view learnerships as a pivotal pathway towards acquiring practical skills and expanding their professional networks. However, this transition presents a multifaceted challenge as graduates must navigate the complexities of balancing their roles at three levels at most, as capable employees and learners within the learnership framework, and as individuals developing a professional identity that is linked to their HEI qualification. While existing studies provide insights into the stakeholders and interactions within learnerships, there remains a notable oversight regarding the nuanced challenges graduates encounter in reconciling the various identities they occupy within learnership programme contexts.

Core finding 3 highlights the pivotal role of support structures in facilitating a smooth transition for graduates through learnership programmes. The level of support provided significantly impacts the complexity of this transition journey, especially for graduates lacking prior work experience or social networks. Robust support at the outset of the programme leads to managed expectations, decreased anxieties, and overall smoother transitions for participants. Support services encompass informative induction programmes, provision of technical resources like laptops and workstations, allocation of mentors, exposure to meaningful work experiences, and opportunities for network building.

However, challenges such as poor planning and limited workplace learning opportunities often hinder the effectiveness of learnership programmes. A successful programme requires alignment between theoretical learning and practical workplace experiences. In situations where workplaces are limited, job rotation plans and mentorship systems can enhance the learnership experience. The above underscores the need for thoughtful engagement amongst key stakeholders in the design and development phase of the programme.

Core finding 4 delves into the role of WBL as programmes that integrate education, training, and work to support learning experiences. However, realising WBL requires collaboration between public and private sector organisations to provide workplaces as learning sites. The availability of workplaces as learning sites is as important as the type of work allocated to the graduates. This means that both the availability of workplaces and meaningful work allocation are important for learnership programmes as forms of WBL. Assessments of the quality of workplace environments and alternative practical learning strategies using technology can be explored.

Core finding 5 highlights the significant personal and professional development experienced by graduates upon completing their learnerships, leading to increased self-confidence and readiness for the world of work. Graduates perceive the employability skills gained during learnership programmes as valuable assets for securing employment. However, transitioning out of learnerships necessitates attention to individual attributes and behaviours that enhance graduate employability, often overlooked in discussions on the topic. Learnership programmes can play a vital role in cultivating awareness of attributes essential for career success. Additionally, the influence of labour market dynamics on employment outcomes must be acknowledged. Perceived employability is shaped by prevailing labour market conditions, and unless structural changes occur, graduates may face ongoing challenges in securing employment. Therefore, ongoing debate is needed regarding the definition of 'work-readiness' and the responsibilities of employers in nurturing sustained graduate employability within the workplace.

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This research study offers significant contributions to understanding the education-work-graduate employability nexus within the learnership programmes in the South African context. The study sheds light on some key areas, following an in-depth exploration of the complex nature of graduates' transition into learnership programmes. Firstly, studies have suggested ways of conducting effective learnerships by drawing lessons learnt from past projects, drawing from training providers, employers and SETA perspectives. The voices of learnership stakeholders, including learnership participants, have confirmed that learnerships are indeed important vehicles for skills development and employability enhancement amongst unemployed youth. This study stands on and extends knowledge that relates to our understanding of the effectiveness of learnership programmes. It highlights the need to

understand learnership programmes from an education-work and graduate employability nexus, considering graduates' perspectives, that is, their transition experiences from graduateness to learnership participants to employability, their experience of the design learnership programme and experiences of skill development.

The research study contributes to understandings of graduate employability by uncovering the motivations, expectations, and challenges faced by graduates as they aim to enter the labour market through learnership programmes. The study has explained the factors influencing graduates' decisions to enrol in learnership programmes and the subsequent experiences within learnerships. In this manner, the study shows the complex interplay between education, work, and employability skills attainment for entry into the labour market, emphasising the need to communicate learnership information and managing expectations from the onset.

In addition, the study has offered unique insights regarding the design and implementation of learnership programmes. It emphasises the importance of aligning learnership offerings with the career aspirations and developmental needs of graduate participants. The study also highlights the importance of solid support structures. These initiatives and resources play a critical role in facilitating successful transitions through the learnership programme and enhances programme effectiveness.

Lastly, the study illuminates graduates' perspectives of their understanding of employability skills and their development. Through work exposure, these skills are developed as not fixed but floating variables. Graduates understand employability skills from a narrow perspective, as communication, presentation, teamwork and other soft skills. Other mechanisms such as different forms of capital and labour market dynamics that enable and disable smoother transitions and the development of employability skills are overlooked and not understood fully. In the Global South, the importance of both private and public sectors' participation in opening their workplaces as sites of learning cannot be overemphasised.

The implications of these findings call for considerations of the type of learnership, its NQF level and the target group of youth, recognising that youth and graduates are not a homogeneous group and have different needs. The findings also extend beyond the context of learnership programmes to include considerations for other WBL programmes like internships and apprenticeships. From a theoretical angle, the study offers valuable contributions to theory

development and future research on graduate employability outside of higher education learning environments. Thus, there is a need to theorise and unpack graduates' experiences within the transition in, through and out of learnership programmes and the role of employers in the development of the employability skills they demand.

Additionally, in Global South contexts where youth and graduate unemployment is high, and workplace hosts are lower. The identification of the challenges and opportunities learnership programmes provides paves the way for future investigations into innovative strategies to address issues of shortages of workplaces as sites of learning.

In summary, this study advances our understanding of the education-work and graduate employability nexus, as well as learnership programmes' transitions by providing insights into graduates' experiences, programme design considerations, and the broader implications for theory and practice. By highlighting the unique contributions to existing knowledge and outlining avenues for future research, the study will be valuable to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners within the post-school sector seeking to support the transition of graduates by optimising the effectiveness of skills development initiatives and contributing to meaningful employment opportunities.

8.4 Implications for Practice

Based on the findings presented above, several implications for practice can be highlighted to inform stakeholders, including learnership programme designers, HEIs, policymakers, practitioners, and learnership participants. Firstly, it is crucial for learnership programme designers, training providers and employer hosts to provide comprehensive information about learnership pathways upfront. This also includes detailing the expectations, realities, and potential challenges that participants may experience throughout the learnership programme. By empowering graduates with this knowledge, they can make more informed decisions and adjust their expectations accordingly. This could potentially reduce anxieties, disappointments and dropout rates at the beginning of the programme.

Secondly, in the context of learnership programmes targeted at graduates, tailoring the programme design should encompass career growth objectives with the participants in mind. This involves aligning the programme content, structure, theoretical learning and practical experiences with the needs and aspirations of graduates. In addition, offering tailored support

structures such as induction programmes, mentorship, and exposure to meaningful work experiences contributes to managing expectations, decreasing anxieties, and improving the transition experience for participants. The development of these support structures involves policymakers, training providers, hosts and other stakeholders who contribute to the development of these structures.

The promotion of quality assurance mechanisms and workplace integration cannot be overemphasised. Evaluating the quality of learnership programmes to ensure their effectiveness and relevance in preparing graduates for the labour market is crucial. Public and private sector organisations can be monitored in their provision of workplaces as learning sites and integration of theoretical learning with practical work experiences. Where workplaces are limited, other strategies such as job rotations, simulation and mentorship programmes can enhance the workplace component of learnership programmes.

Learnership programmes play a vital role in developing employability skills among graduates. Programme designers should cultivate awareness of attributes essential for career success and acknowledge the influence of labour market dynamics on employment outcomes. The concept of 'work-readiness' needs to be refined with a broad understanding of graduate employability. The employers' role in nurturing sustained graduate employability within and for the workplace is also worth exploring.

Based on these implications above, the following two recommendations are suggested for improving graduate learnership programmes. Regular evaluations of programme effectiveness and relevance should be conducted. This involves assessing the impact and outcomes of the learnership programme to ensure that it meets its objectives and addresses the needs of participants. For example, surveys or interviews can be conducted with programme participants and other stakeholders to gather feedback on their experiences and identify areas for improvement. Feedback from all stakeholders must be incorporated to continually refine programme design and support structures; learnership participants' voices are often not present in the early stages of designing the programmes.

There is an urgent need to explore innovative approaches to address challenges in workplace availability and enhance workplace-based learning experiences. This involves thinking creatively about how to overcome barriers such as limited workplace availability or access to

suitable learning environments. Learnership stakeholders can leverage technology to facilitate remote or virtual workplace experiences. They can also partner and draw from non-traditional employers such as business start-ups or community organisations to expand placement opportunities for graduates.

These practical implications and recommendations aim to promote the effectiveness of learnership programmes directed at graduates. They facilitate the transition into the world of work and contribute to enhanced employment prospects.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this study advances our understanding of the education-work and graduate employability nexus, providing actionable insights for improving the design and delivery of learnership programmes. By bridging theory and practice and offering practical recommendations, this research has the potential to contribute to meaningful changes in the post-school sector, ultimately supporting the transition of graduates into the labour market and fostering developed employability skills.

This study offers key takeaways and broader implications that illuminate the intersection of education, work and graduate employability nexus in the context of learnership programmes, within the context of South Africa. The first key takeaway involves the critical importance of aligning learnership offerings with the diverse needs and aspirations of graduate participants. By recognising the multifaceted nature of graduate transitions and the complex interplay between education, work, and employability skills attainment, this research highlights the necessity of tailored programme design and support structures.

The second takeaway emphasises the pivotal role of support structures, such as induction programmes, mentorship, and meaningful work experiences, in facilitating successful transitions and enhancing programme effectiveness. These initiatives not only contribute to managing expectations and decreasing anxieties but also foster a conducive environment for skill development and career advancement. Lastly, the research highlights the significance of regular evaluations of programme effectiveness and relevance, as well as the importance of strengthening partnerships between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and policymakers. By fostering collaboration and dialogue among key stakeholders, learnership programmes can be shaped to meet the evolving needs of graduates and the labour market.

Graduates represent the future workforce, and investing in their successful integration into the labour market is paramount for sustainable growth. The importance of supporting graduates in their transition to the world of work cannot be overstated. By highlighting the importance of addressing graduate unemployment and enhancing employability through learnership programmes, this research contributes to the broader discourse on skills development, employability, and sustainable employment opportunities.

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Annexures

Annexure A: Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Nyembe

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H23/06/35**
PROJECT TITLE	Transitioning into and through learnerships for employability: Graduate experiences of learnerships in South Africa
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Ms B Nyembe
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Wits School of Education/
DATE CONSIDERED	23 June 2023
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Minimal
EXPIRY DATE	27 August 2026

DATE 28 August 2023 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Dr E Ojo

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **A SIGNED COPY** returned to the Secretary electronically. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I/we agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

_____ _____/_____/_____
Signature **Date**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Annexure B: Personal Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PIS)

Dear Participant

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Brenda Zanele Nyembe, and I am currently pursuing my master's at the Wits School of Education. You are receiving this email because you participated in a BANKSETA Kuyasa learnership between 2020 and 2021 or were part of the OPTIMI GROUP learnership in 2022 and were retained.

I am conducting a research study titled "*Transitioning into and through learnerships for employability: Graduate experiences of learnerships in South Africa*," and I would like to invite you to be a part of this study. The research aims to investigate how graduates transitioned from acquiring their higher education qualification into and progressing through a learnership program, while also exploring their understanding of employability skills.

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and there are no direct benefits associated with participating. Your decision to participate or withdraw from the study will not result in any disadvantages or penalties. There are no personal costs involved in participating, and you will not be compensated for your involvement.

The study involves two data collection strategies: (1) a self-administered online questionnaire that takes less than 15 minutes to complete, and (2) three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with those of you who have self-selected and made yourselves available to be interviewed. In both methods, you have the freedom to skip any question you do not wish to answer. For the online questionnaire, rest assured that your responses will remain completely confidential and anonymous. For the FDGs, while I will make every effort to uphold your confidentiality, the interactive nature of focus group discussions inherently means that complete anonymity among participants cannot be guaranteed. However, I will encourage participants to respect each other's privacy and refrain from sharing information from the discussion outside the group, thereby fostering a 'safe space' for discussion.

Your identity will not be collected or recorded in the research data. All data will be securely stored on a password-protected laptop with a backup on a private cloud account. Access to the data will be restricted to me as the researcher, and all information will be destroyed five years after the research report has been completed.

Your valuable contribution to this study will not only enhance the representation of the findings but will also contribute to the broader knowledge of skills development and learnerships in South Africa. If you choose to participate, you can find the online questionnaire by following this link: https://bit.ly/3qgLwSz

Your consent to participate in this research study will be implied upon completion of the consent form attached herewith. By completing the consent form, you agree to the following:

1. The purpose and outline of the research study have been explained to you, and you understand its nature.
2. You are voluntarily participating in the study, and you can decide to discontinue participation at any time.

3. Direct quotations from your responses may be used in the research report without any identifiable information, ensuring anonymity.

Your participation and responses will remain confidential and anonymous in the final report. Should you have any questions or concerns during or after completing the questionnaire, please feel free to contact my MEd Research Supervisor, Dr. Emmanuel Ojo, at: Email: Emmanuel.Ojo@wits.ac.za

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you can contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at the following: Email: hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za & Telephone: +27 (0)11 717 1408

Thank you for considering participating in this research study. Your input is highly valued and will contribute significantly to advancing our understanding of learnership experiences in South Africa.

Kind regards,

Brenda Zanele Nyembe
Master's Student, Wits School of Education
Email: 775799@students.wits.ac.za
Phone: 063 851 7765

Annexure C: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Title of project:	Transitioning into and through learnerships for employability: Graduate experiences of learnerships in South Africa
Name of MEd student/researcher:	Brenda Zanele Nyembe

I, …….., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the focus group may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my focus group and other activity may be used by the researcher in their research report.	YES	NO
I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report.	YES	NO

…… (signature)
…… (name of participant)
…… (date)

…… (signature)
…… (name of MEd student/researcher)
…… (date)

Should you have any questions or concerns during or after completing the questionnaire, please feel free to contact my MEd Research Supervisor, Dr. Emmanuel Ojo, at: Email: Emmanuel.Ojo@wits.ac.za

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you can contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at the following: Email: hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za & Telephone: +27 (0)11 717 1408

Thank you for considering participating in this research study. Your input is highly valued and will contribute significantly to advancing our understanding of learnership experiences in South Africa.

Kind regards,

Brenda Zanele Nyembe
Master's Student, Wits School of Education
Email: 775799@students.wits.ac.za
Phone: 063 851 7765

Annexure D: Questionnaire

Research Question 1: "How is the transition experience of South African university graduates into a learnership programme intended to improve their employment prospects?" based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) questions provided. The Likert-scale will consist of five response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Likert-scale Questions for Research Question 1:

1. The learnership programme met my initial expectations and positively influenced my transition into the job market.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

2. The learnership programme directly enhanced my employability by providing relevant skills and experiences.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

3. The learnership programme reshaped my understanding of the job market and clarified my role within it.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

4. The learnership programme improved my employment prospects by offering valuable opportunities for growth and development.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

5. I believe that the transition experience through the learnership programme has positively impacted my future career prospects.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

Research Question 2: "What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in the learnership programme?" based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) questions provided:

Likert-scale Questions for Research Question 2:

1. The learnership programme provided meaningful learning activities that contributed to my personal and professional development.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

2. The structure and content of the learnership programme were well-designed to foster effective learning and skill development.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

3. I found the learning experiences in the learnership programme to be engaging and relevant to my career goals.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

4. The learnership programme presented challenging situations that encouraged me to expand my knowledge and skills.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

5. Overall, the learning experience in the learnership programme has positively influenced my professional growth and preparedness for the world of work.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

Here are the Likert-scale questions for Research Question 3: "What is the graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?" based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) questions provided:

Likert-scale Questions for Research Question 3:

1. The learnership programme equipped me with relevant employability skills that are applicable in the workplace.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

2. My perception of 'employability skills' evolved positively as a result of participating in the learnership programme.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

3. I can confidently identify and apply the employability skills acquired from the learnership in real-world work scenarios.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

4. The learnership programme provided opportunities to develop not only technical skills but also soft skills essential for employability.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

5. Overall, the learnership programme contributed significantly to my understanding of the employability skills needed to transition successfully into the world of work.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Neutral
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE:

Section 1: Transition Experience into Learnership Programmes
Section 2: Learning Experience within the Learnership Programme
Section 3: Understanding of Employability Skills for Transition to the World of Work

Here are two strong open-ended questions for each of the three Likert-scale sections to further probe the participants and gather more detailed insights:

Section 1: Transition Experience into Learnership Programmes

1. Please describe a specific challenge you encountered during the transition from acquiring your higher education qualification to entering the learnership programme. How did you navigate and overcome this challenge?
2. In your opinion, what aspects of the learnership programme could be improved to better support graduates' employability prospects during the transition period? Please provide any suggestions or recommendations you may have.

Section 2: Learning Experience within the Learnership Programme

1. Reflecting on your learning experiences within the learnership programme, could you share a particular moment or activity that significantly enhanced your skills and knowledge? How did this contribute to your overall development?
2. Were there any particular learning resources or methods utilized in the learnership programme that you found especially effective or ineffective? Please elaborate on your experience with these resources or methods.

Section 3: Understanding of Employability Skills for Transition to the World of Work

1. Thinking back to your time in the learnership programme, can you provide an example of a situation where you successfully applied one of the employability skills you acquired? How did this skill contribute to your performance and professional growth?
2. In your opinion, which employability skill(s) do you believe are most crucial for a smooth transition from the learnership programme into the world of work? Please explain your reasoning and any personal experiences that shaped this perspective.

These open-ended questions aim to encourage participants to share their personal experiences, insights, and suggestions related to the transition experience, learning opportunities, and understanding of employability skills. The responses to these open-ended questions will add depth and richness to the data collected and further enhance the overall findings of the research study.

Please indicate your willingness and availability to volunteer for a small focus group discussion (FGD) by selecting "Yes" or "No." The purpose of this FGD is to delve deeper into some of the responses you provided in the previous questions. If you choose to participate, the FGD session will be online and will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

Annexure E: FOCUS GROUP DISCISSIONS Questions

Questions for the participants

Dear Participants

We are excited to have you join us for the upcoming Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Your insights and experiences will contribute significantly to our research on the transition and learning experiences of graduates in learnership programmes.

During these FGDs, we will explore three core areas:

1. Your transition experience from university into the learnership programme.
2. Your learning experience while part of the learnership programme.
3. Your understanding of the employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work.

These discussions will delve into your personal experiences, insights, and perspectives, providing valuable data to inform and improve learnership programmes.

Please note that while we will make every effort to uphold your confidentiality, the interactive nature of focus group discussions inherently means that complete anonymity among participants cannot be guaranteed. However, we will encourage everyone to respect each other's privacy and refrain from sharing information from the discussion outside the group.

The focus group aims to foster a 'safe space' for open and honest discussion. We believe that your input will be invaluable to this research and look forward to your participation.

Thank you for your commitment to this project.

Best Regards,
Brenda Zanele Nyembe

VERSION ONE: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Sub-question 1: How is the transition experience of South African university graduates into a learnership programme intended to improve their employment prospects?

1. What motivated you to enroll in a learnership programme after completing your university degree?

2. What challenges did you face during the transition from university to a learnership programme?

3. In what ways do you think the learnership program has improved your employment prospects?

Sub-question 2: What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in the learnership programme?

1. What were some of the most valuable skills or knowledge that you gained during the learnership programme?

2. How did the learnership programme prepare you for the world of work?

3. What were some of the challenges you faced during the learning process in the learnership programme?

Sub-question 3: What are the graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?

1. What do you think are the most important employability skills that you gained during the learnership programme?

2. How confident do you feel about your ability to apply the skills you learned in the learnership programme in a real-world work environment?

3. What additional skills or knowledge do you think you need to acquire to be successful in your chosen career path?

VERSION TWO: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Sub-question 1: "How is the transition experience of South African university graduates into a learnership programme intended to improve their employment prospects?"

1. What were your initial expectations of the learnership programme and how did it influence your transition?
2. Can you share specific instances where you felt the learnership programme was directly enhancing your employability?
3. In what ways, if any, did the learnership program reshape your understanding of the job market and your role within it?

Sub-question 2: "What is the learning experience of these graduates involved in the learnership programme?"

1. Can you describe a typical day in the learnership programme and the kind of learning activities you were engaged in?
2. How did the structure and content of the learnership programme foster your learning and development?
3. Can you share a significant challenge you faced during the learnership and how you overcame it?

Sub-question 3: "What is the graduates' understanding of employability skills required to transition from the learnership into the world of work?"

1. What are the key skills that you believe the learnership programme equipped you with for the workplace?
2. How did your perception of 'employability skills' change, if at all, while the learnership?
3. Can you discuss an instance where you had to apply the skills acquired from the learnership in a real-world work scenario?