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Soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of their employment prospects

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A research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by coursework and Research Report (in the field of Organisational Psychology) in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 7 March 2018

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

(need to sign and date this)

Word count: 40241

Abstract

An increase in demand for tertiary education, high student fees, and a lack of appropriate graduate jobs has shifted the relationship between higher education qualifications and labour market returns (Finch, Peacock, Levallet, & Foster, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). Consequently, students are beginning to perceive the utility of developing skills and accumulating experiences and achievements outside their formal education in order to gain a positional advantage in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). Given these changes, this study qualitatively examined how a sample of South African soon-to-be-graduates perceived and managed their employability in the context of higher education and labour market change (Tomlinson, 2008). Further, it explored their perceptions of the utility of their degree, and its anticipated role in relation to their future employability. The study also analysed their perceptions of other factors that they felt contributed towards their employment prospects and their expectations of potential future employers.

Sixteen final-year undergraduate students completing Bachelor of Art degrees who were majoring in Psychology and who were registered with the Humanities faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand were interviewed with regards to their perceptions of their employment prospects. The data collection method used was face-to-face semi-structured interviews based on an interview schedule developed by the researcher. The findings indicated that the participants perceived the potential currency of their higher education qualifications in the labour market, as per the human capital theory (cf. Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961), however they also expressed a need to acquire additional credentials in order to gain a positional advantage in the oversaturated, highly competitive labour market. Further, the participants perceived both internal and external factors to influence their employability. These included work experience, field of study, postgraduate credentials, extra-curricular activities, personal characteristics, attributes, behaviour, knowledge, and skills, demographics, job searching behaviour, social media presence, performance at university, and the reputational capital of the university attended. Moreover it was found that the participants valued an organisation's growth and development opportunities, culture, and values, as well as additional benefits, job security, and the potential to pursue their passion as factors in their decision to work for an organisation. Working hours and workload, social responsibility, as well as location, travelling, and workspace, were indicated as important to some participants whilst irrelevant to others. Salary appeared to be characterised as desirable, yet not as influential as other factors in the context of job selection.

This research is important as it established factors that shape self-perceived employability for this sample of participants, which may assist universities to develop conditions that support and facilitate the employability of graduates. Consequently, this may help to prepare highly-qualified workers who are able to contribute to the human capital of the country (Karli, 2016; Qenani, MacDougall, & Sexton, 2014). In addition, the results of this study may contribute to a knowledge base that can be used to assist South African organisations to better attract and retain top-quality graduates.

Keywords: *Anticipatory Psychological Contract; Final-year Students; Perceptions; South Africa; Self-perceived Employability; Graduate Employability; Bachelor of Arts; Higher Education Qualification*

Acknowledgements

My sincerest gratitude goes to my supervisor Nicky Israel for her invaluable support and constructive suggestions during the planning and development of this research. Her guidance, encouragement, and patience are deeply appreciated. Further thanks go to Ian Siemers for providing me access to his quantitative data and for his assistance and advice in conceptualising the study.

I would also like to acknowledge the students who were willing to participate in this study. I would like to thank them for committing their time and effort, enabling me to complete my research.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, participation in higher education worldwide has increased substantially (Coetzee, 2012a; Van der Merwe, 2009). South Africans are following this trend, as indicated by growing registration rates at higher education institutions (Oluwajodu, Greyling, Blaauw, & Kleynhans, 2015; Van der Merwe, 2009). Higher education demand has been driven by the expectancy that tertiary education can accelerate social and economic expansion through the development of human capital (Pouris & Inglesi-Lotz, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008; Van der Merwe, 2009). Further, such growth can be explained by the potential returns of tertiary education, such as greater participation in the labour market, higher individual earnings over time, improved employment probability, and greater opportunities for career progression (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016).

However, tertiary education in South Africa is underfunded. There has been a decline in government subsidies which has resulted in the higher education price index being approximately two percent higher than the consumer price index. Further, among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, South Africa is indicated as "one of the lowest spenders on higher education as a percentage of GDP" (USAf, 2016, p.8). Therefore, students are facing increasing costs for their participation in tertiary education (USAf, 2016). Further, the South African economy is struggling to develop sufficient job opportunities for graduates. South Africa's labour market is characterised by large-scale retrenchments and exacerbated unemployment as a result of globalisation (Cebekhulu, 2012). Therefore, graduates in South Africa face a competitive job market driven by an oversupply of highly-qualified potential employees (Oluwajodu et al., 2015).

Given the increasing demand for tertiary education, the escalating student fees, and graduates' continuous struggles to secure appropriate jobs, it appears that there has been a shift in the relationship between higher education credentials and their returns in the labour market (Finch, Peacock, Levallet, & Foster, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). Consequently, students are beginning to perceive the utility of developing skills and accumulating experiences and achievements outside their formal education in order to gain a positional advantage in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008).

It is thus worthwhile to understand how soon-to-be-graduates perceive their employability in the context of higher education and labour market change (Tomlinson, 2008). The qualitative nature of this study provides a preliminary detailed understanding of a sample of soon-to-be-graduates' self-perceived employability, given the context of the South African labour market. Self-perceived employability can be defined as "...the perceived ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one's qualification level" (Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008, p.2). Research in this area is important as it may facilitate a better understanding of the factors that shape self-perceived employability, which may help universities to establish conditions that support and facilitate the employability of graduates. This is valuable as assisting students in managing their perceptions of employability can help prepare highly-qualified workers who will contribute to the human capital of the country (Karli, 2016; Qenani, MacDougall, & Sexton, 2014). Further, understanding how to facilitate self-perceived employability is vital, as feeling employable can result in better job performance, higher motivation, improved life satisfaction, and enhanced resilience to adversity (Karli, 2016).

The key aim of this study was to explore soon-to-be graduates' perceptions of their future employability in the South African context according to a sample drawn from undergraduate students completing Bachelor of Art degrees and majoring in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. The study specifically intended to explore these soon-to-be-graduates' interpretations of the role of their higher education qualifications in shaping their employment prospects in the context of changes in the labour market; it also intended to draw out understandings of soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of the utility of their degree, and its anticipated role in relation to their future employability. Further, the study aimed to explore soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of other factors that they felt contributed towards their employment prospects and to determine how employability perceptions might influence their expectations of their future employers, as well as what these expectations were.

This chapter will firstly explore the literature surrounding the relationship between higher education and the labour market, and will then review current and past literature on employability. Following this, an investigation of the concept of self-perceived employability will be conducted and an effort identifying how this concept has previously been operationalised will be made. In addition, the chapter will explore how the reputation of a university and graduates' field of study may impact perceptions of employability. Graduates' job seeking behaviour and anticipatory psychological contracts in relation to their self-perceived employability will also be reviewed. Lastly, this chapter will indicate the relevance

of researching soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of their employment prospects in a South African context.

1.2 Higher education and the labour market

Since 1994, higher education participation in South Africa has increased substantially (Coetzee, 2012a; Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh, & Susuman, 2016). According to Statistics South Africa (2016), approximately 3.6 million students obtained a higher education qualification in 2016. Further, "…since 1996, attendance in post-secondary institutions per 100 000 population grew by close to 445.5% or at a rate of 22.3% annually" (Statistics South Africa, 2016, p. 9). This growth may be attributed to the perception that a university education produces private goods for students, such as better paying jobs, higher employment probability, and increased opportunities for career growth (USAf, 2016). According to Johnstone (2004), the increasing demand for tertiary education in South Africa is a "…function of the sheer demographic increase in the traditional college-age cohort" (p. 407), along with increasing rates of secondary education completion. Further, in an increasingly global and cut-throat economy, countries aim to achieve knowledge-based economies by prioritising higher education (Coetzee, 2012a). A "university education generates new knowledge, produces research that leads to new commercial, technological, social, political, and other innovations beneficial for national development" (USAf, 2016, p. 1). Thus, upskilling and enhancing the qualifications of the workforce is seen as significantly increasing the growth and prosperity of a country (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Given that tertiary education yields both value for the country and private benefits, in South Africa, students and the state share the cost of higher education. Thus, funding for South African universities is derived from student fees as well as state subsidies (Allais, 2017). However, rapidly increasing enrolment rates as well as the depreciating value of the South African rand have resulted in a decline in government subsidies (Allais, 2017). Therefore, the proportion which students have to pay is rising. Students are thus facing increasing costs for their participation in tertiary education (USAf, 2016). In 2015, this funding crisis was escalated by the announcement of an eleven percent fee increase for students which led to student protests on university campuses throughout South Africa relating to the demand for free higher education for all (Allais, 2017). Although the protests have ceased for the moment, the tension between state subsidisation and student payment of fees remains a highly controversial current issue in South Africa (Bornman, 2017).

USAf (2016) is of the view that tuition fees "…should be at a level that allows students and their families to see sufficient value in the investment" (p.1). In other words, the employability of graduates and the resultant benefits they accrue from participating in higher education should justify its cost (Tomlinson, 2008). This is the human capital interpretation (cf. Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961) of higher education which assumes that individuals decide to invest in education by carefully weighing up the perceived advantages of participation versus the perceived costs. This deliberate and rational choice is driven by one's desire to optimise one's potential in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008).

The human capital interpretation highlights the link between economic growth and tertiary education as tertiary education produces a skilled and flexible workforce which enhances labour productivity, resulting in higher levels of economic output (Bhorat, Cassim, & Tseng, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). Consequently, employers make the rational decision to select and pay higher wages to tertiary educated employees as they modify their employment systems in order to appropriately utilise all new forms of productivity (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016). Therefore, investing in higher education yields private returns for graduates such as labour market rewards (Allais, 2017; Tomlinson, 2008). For example, in South Africa, graduates attain a positional advantage in the labour market as there is a high demand for degree-holders (Bhorat et al., 2016). Further, graduates' unemployment rate is "…eight times lower than the mean unemployment rate for individuals with only Grade 8 to 11 schooling" (Bhorat et al., p. 314). The human capital theory thus views tertiary education as a mutually beneficial investment for both graduates and the state (Tomlinson, 2008).

Nevertheless, it appears that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to 'cash-in' on higher education returns (Tomlinson, 2008). Given the growing enrolment rate at South African universities, there are an escalating number of graduates entering the labour market. However, South Africa's economy is failing to absorb all graduates into the labour force at a sufficient rate (Fatoki, 2010). Due to political upheaval, South Africa's government bonds have been downgraded to a junk rating, thus the government of South Africa's borrowing rate has risen. This means that more money is being spent on interest repayment rather than providing services to South African citizens. Consequences of this include slow economic growth, a lower standard of living, depreciation of the rand, higher inflation, and job losses (South African Market Insights, 2017). Further, corporate downsizing resulting from the economic recession has led to exacerbated unemployment in South Africa's labour market (Fatoki, 2010). Therefore, graduate unemployment has risen in South Africa as there is an oversupply of

graduates and insufficient job opportunities (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Additionally, Pauw, Oosthuizen, and Van Der Westhuizen (2008) indicated that graduates are not being employed as they do not possess qualifications of a suitable quality or standard required by employers. Thus, there appears to be a mismatch between the actual outcomes of higher education qualifications and their expected utility in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). According to Van der Merwe (2009), graduates' "…labour market expectations and experiences are less than well matched" (p.398).

This view corresponds with the credentialist interpretation (cf. Collins, 1979; Hirsch, 1977) of higher education which argues that growth in higher education credentials does not result in a higher demand for qualified labour. This view suggests that the labour market does not have the capacity to accommodate the increasing supply of highly qualified individuals. Therefore, the growing supply of graduates with similar education profiles has resulted in employers attributing more importance to personal traits and work experience than tertiary education qualifications (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Scott, 2014). Employers believe that it is a graduate's responsibility to acquire the knowledge, capabilities, and adaptive behaviours relevant to the job position in order to gain and maintain employment (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Consequently, having academic knowledge alone is insufficient and higher education qualifications are no longer perceived as a scarce resource. Graduates are thus required to attain additional skills and further credentials in order to improve their chances of employment and differentiate themselves from other graduates (Coetzee 2012a; Tomlinson, 2008). In addition, the hyper-competitive labour market has resulted in graduates having to access jobs previously going to non-graduates which has caused the average graduate salary to decline (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016). Subsequently, graduates are becoming increasingly overqualified for the type of employment that they are able to acquire (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). Therefore, the credentialist interpretation argues that higher education expansion can result in the under-utilisation of graduates and thus questions the utility of a university degree and its anticipated role in relation to future employability (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016).

Interestingly, Rothwell and Arnold (2007) believe that graduates are adopting the idea that qualification inflation reduces appropriate job opportunities. They found that non-graduate human resources professionals in the United Kingdom perceived themselves to be more employable than those with higher education credentials. Further, Tomlinson's (2008) qualitative study of fifty-three final-year undergraduates found that students perceive the graduate labour market to be highly competitive owing to a surplus of graduates with similar

education profiles and aspirations. They believe that they are tasked with the job of "…gaining a positional advantage in the labour market" (p.57), as employers have begun to attach less significance to academic credentials (Tomlinson, 2008). The study indicated that university students are gradually realising that they cannot capitalise upon their higher education qualifications and are therefore attributing greater significance to soft credentials, which include experiences, skills, personal attributes, extra-curricular activities, and achievements that fall outside formal learning, in order to gain competitive advantage in the labour market (Coetzee, Ferreira, Potgieter, 2015; Tomlinson 2008). Further, graduates in Gedye, Fender, and Chalkley's (2004) study believed that whilst their degree had enabled their employment, it did not facilitate them in achieving their desired job that met their expectations.

Nevertheless, Ribchester and Mitchell (2004) found that students entering the University College Chester Geography Department participated in higher education due to the possibility of enhancing their employment prospects. Additionally, Qenani et al. (2014) found that students perceived their university education as enhancing their employability. Therefore, there appear to be conflicting perceptions among graduates regarding the utility of their university qualifications. This study will attempt to determine the interpretations that a sample of South African soon-to-be-graduates subscribe to given the context of the South African labour market, as well as how these interpretations are seen to impact their perceived employability.

1.3 Employability

In order to understand the concept of employability, it is useful to explore its historic development since the 1940's by describing the seven different operationalisations of employability identified by Gazier (1999). Employability was initially conceptualised as 'dichotomic employability', as it focused on distinguishing between the unemployable and the employable. In the 1950's, this shifted to 'socio-medical employability', a quantitative scale, which measured the relationship between "…the existing work abilities of socially, physically or mentally disadvantaged people and the work requirements of employment" (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 201). 'Manpower policy employability' was developed in the 1960's; this once again emphasised the distance between the labour market's work demands and individual characteristics, however the concept was extended to include all socially disadvantaged groups (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2011). The 1960's additionally saw the emergence of 'flow employability' based on French sociology literature. This conceptualisation focused on

employment accessibility by investigating labour market demand and the absorption rate of the economy (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2011).

The aforementioned definitions have largely contributed to three modern conceptualisations of employability which evolved in the 1990's, namely 'labour market performance employability', 'initiative employability', and 'interactive employability'. 'Labour market performance employability' assesses the labour market outcomes of policy and training interventions (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2011). Formulated from human resource development literature, 'initiative employability' explores the development of transferable skills and flexibility for career growth. The emphasis is on "…the marketability of cumulative individual human, social and cultural capital" (p. 2), and the individual's responsibility to advance his/her career through developing required skills and networking (Wilton, 2011). Lastly, 'interactive employability' maintains an individual based focus, whilst recognising the interaction between personal attributes and the labour market (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2011).

It therefore appears that the concept of employability has shifted from a measure of labour underutilisation applied to optimise labour force productivity to a concept that emphasises the responsibility of an individual to develop marketable skills and manage his/her own career by adapting to the fluctuating economic environment (Wilton, 2011). This has resulted from changing employment practices, a product of escalating global competition and technological advancements in the modern working environment. For example, the labour market is more competitive, there is a stronger focus on outsourcing and flexibility, and an increase in downscaling (App, Merk, & Büttgen, 2012). Particularly, South Africa's work environment is characterised by high rates of downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, measures of affirmative action, and increasing levels of job loss (Coetzee & Schreuder, 2010). Consequently, career paths are unpredictable and long-term employment is regarded as an unrealistic expectation (Amundson, 2005; Coetzee et al., 2015). Thus lack of job security has encouraged individuals to focus on employability security through accumulating skills and experiences (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Wilton, 2011).

In this study, employability is conceptualised as "the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment" (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 12). It is "a multidimensional psycho-social construct" (Qenani et al., 2014, p. 201) which embodies personal characteristics and behaviours that enable ongoing employment, such

as initiative, career motivation, adaptability, and proactivity. Further, it is a function of labour supply and demand (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

Given the current adverse employment conditions impacting economies, employability has become a popular research topic. Research has explored the impact of government policy on employability. Further, it has widely focused on perceptions of the organisation and their expectations of employees. Additionally, current employees' perceptions of their employability and the consequences for organisations, work-related attitudes, and well-being have been explored (cf. Berntson & Marklund, 2007; De Cuyper, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, Witte, & Alarco, 2008; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Kirves, Kinnunen, & De Cuyper, 2014).

Attention has also been given to the employability of higher education students, specifically since the late 1990's (Rothwell, Jewell, & Hardie, 2009). Multiple stakeholders' perceptions towards graduates' employability, including employers, government, university faculty, and university recruiters have been studied (Coetzee 2012a; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). This research has stemmed from the view that graduates may not be equipped with the appropriate skills required by employers (Cranmer, 2006; Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Given the competitive global labour market, graduates are not only expected to be flexible, creative, willing to learn, self-managing, and have a wide range of achievements, they also need to be self-confident, self-aware, motivated, and emotionally intelligent (Coetzee et al., 2015; Qenani et al., 2014; Yorke, 2006). According to Qenani et al. (2014), universities are beginning to prioritise the employability of their graduates by providing guidance on career development. Further, universities are integrating transferable skills and attitudes such as problem solving, communication, interpersonal skills, accountability, and decision-making throughout their curricula (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Qenani et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, higher education institutions and employers perceive the primary responsibility of employability to lie with the graduate (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Taylor, 2016). Therefore, research has extended into studying students' perceptions of their own employability (cf. Rothwell et al., 2008; Rothwell et at., 2009; Tomlinson, 2008). The modern work environment pressurises graduates to manage their employability in order to be attractive in the labour market. To do this, graduates need to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and ambitions, which requires self-awareness (Fugate & Ashforth, 2003). Additionally, graduates must

recognise employers' expectations of their employees and identify the available job opportunities in the labour market (Clarke, 2008; Fugate et al., 2004).

However, there is still a lack of empirical, qualitative research on students' perceptions of their opportunities in the labour market as well as the attitudes, orientations, and identities that they have developed regarding their future employment prospects (Rothwell et al., 2009; Tomlinson, 2008). This is particularly true in the South African context (Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Maharasoa & Hay, 2001). This lack of empirical work is problematic as students are the primary recipients of universities' efforts to develop employability skills. Further, they are a source of potential employees. Therefore, exploring students' perceptions of their own attributes, the work environment, and their perceived employment prospects is valuable and could enrich current understandings of employability (Coetzee, 2012a). Hence, this study will attempt to fill this gap by researching soon-to-be-graduates' individual perspectives of employability in the South African context.

1.4 Self-perceived employability

Self-perceived employability has been defined as "…the perceived ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one's qualification level" (Rothwell et al., 2008, p. 2). It is a subjective evaluation process where one assesses one's personal capital as well as external factors in order to determine one's ability to obtain employment in one's chosen field (Creed & Gagliardi, 2015; Qenani et al., 2014). Therefore, self-perceived employability is a multi-dimensional construct with external and internal components (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014).

Internal factors can refer to an individual's perceptions of their characteristics, knowledge and skills, behaviours, ambition, capacity for learning, job search abilities, work experience, resilience, and self-efficacy (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Qenani et al., 2014; Rajan, Van Eupen, Chapple, & Lane, 2000; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Demographics such as race, age, and gender are also personal factors which significantly contribute to self-perceived employability (Qenani et al., 2014). External factors include the demand for an individual's field of occupation, the higher education institution's reputational capital, as well as the current state of the labour market (Mallough & Kleiner, 2001; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Therefore, graduates with similar education credentials may have different perceptions of their employability evoked by their diverse understandings of the labour market, their proactivity to enhance their employability, and their networking abilities (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

Understanding graduates' different perceptions is important as the manner in which individuals behave and make decisions can be predicted by their self-perception, as opposed to objective reality (Qenani et al., 2014; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Further, self-perceptions influence individuals' emotions, happiness, and health (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). Self-perceived employability has been found to be positively associated with ambition, university commitment, career choice satisfaction, career commitment, and subjective career success (Coetzee et al., 2015; De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011; McIlveen, Burton, & Beccaria, 2013; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Rothwell et al., 2008; Rothwell et al., 2009). In addition, feeling employable can result in better job performance, higher motivation, improved life satisfaction, and enhanced resilience to adversity (Karli, 2016). Thus, exploring the factors that contribute to self-perceived employability can provide universities and organisations with a distinct edge in the marketplace.

Self-perceived employability has been operationalised in many ways, including a self-perceived employability scale developed by Rothwell et al. (2008). This sixteen-item scale was developed from "…a matrix composed of influences on employability derived from a literature review" (Rothwell et al., 2008, p. 9). The overall scale consists of four components. The first component, 'My University', explores respondents' opinions of the university's reputation and brand image. The second component, 'Field of Study', examines "the status and credibility of the field of study" (p.6), and its demand in the labour market. The third component, 'The State of the External Labour Market', deals with awareness and perceptions of opportunities in the labour market. Lastly, the fourth component, 'Self-belief', explores the "individual's perception of their engagement with studies and academic performance" (p.8) and assesses individual attributes, including confidence in one's own abilities (Rothwell et al., 2008). However, these components do not exist in isolation. Therefore, the corner cells of the matrix "…represented the interaction of two of the four components of employability, and each cell generated two questions" (Rothwell et al., 2008, p.3). The scale measures these components by asking graduates to indicate the extent to which they agree with the items on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree" (Rothwell et al., 2008). Examples of the items include: "The status of this university is a significant asset to me in job seeking" (My University); "A lot more people apply for my degree than there are places available" (Field of Study); "I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant" (Self-belief); and "There is generally a strong demand for graduates at the present time" (The State of the External Labour Market) (Rothwell et al., 2008, p.10).

The results of the study by Rothwell et al. (2008) demonstrated that business undergraduates in three UK universities had modest perceptions of their future employability. Further, they found that perceptions of employability were driven by "components related to subject, then university brand, then the external labour market, then individual skills followed by study engagement" (Rothwell et al., 2009, p.157). Rothwell et al. (2008) also suggested the importance of advancing and refining the scale through additional research and the potential of the scale to be developed in other cultural contexts. Consequently, Karli (2016) conceptualised self-perceived employability in Turkey by modifying Rothwell et al.'s (2008) scale into a shorter three factor, ten-item scale. Items relating to individuals' perceptions of their engagement with studies and academic performance were discarded. Using the revised scale, Karli (2016) found that level of education (new graduates versus senior students) as well as work experience in the field of study accounted for significant differences in the participants' perceptions of their employability. The results also indicated that communicating in a foreign language and gender did not impact students' employability perceptions (Karli, 2016).

Goodman and Tredway (2016) also utilised Rothwell et al's (2008) perceived employability scale in their cross-sectional research design to explore antecedents of perceived graduate employability in a South African sample. They examined the reliability and validity of the scale for the measurement of perceived employability within the context of South Africa. They removed three items from the scale in order to increase the reliability coefficients. The results supported the construct validity of the scale for the measurement of perceived employability (Goodman & Tredway, 2016). Additionally, the results indicated that faculty of registration significantly predicted perceived external employability while social motivation for volunteering significantly predicted perceived internal employability (Goodman & Tredway, 2016).

In another study, Qenani et al. (2014) measured self-perceived employability by asking a survey question, "How confident are you that you will be employed right after graduation?" (p.205). Responses were measured on a five-point, Likert-type scale, where 1 meant "I am not at all confident in my skills to be employed right after graduation" and 5 meant "I am extremely confident of my skills to be employed right after graduation". Their findings indicated that self-management, work experience (internships), and perceived college reputation enhanced the employability confidence of students at the College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences (CAFES) and the College of Engineering (CE) located in California. However, field of study did not influence perceptions of employability (Qenani et al., 2014).

In the South African context, Bezuidenhout (2011) conducted a quantitative study exploring perceived employability of College of Economic and Management Sciences final-year undergraduates and postgraduates attending a higher distance learning institution in South Africa. In order to analyse perceived employability in relation to gender, age, race, educational level, qualification level, employment status, and marital status, Bezuidenhout (2011) developed the self-report Graduate Employability Measure (GEM), consisting of forty-two items representing three dimensions: career self-management, career resilience, and cultural competence. Responses indicated the degree to which an item was regarded as true for the respondent, ranging from (1) "never true for me" to (6) "always true for me". The results indicated that females and final-year undergraduates reported higher levels of perceived employability than males and postgraduates.

Potgieter (2012) utilised the Employability Attributes Scale (EAS) to explore the relationship between biographical details, self-esteem, and employability attributes amongst a sample of three hundred and four adults completing a business management honours degree at a higher distance education institution. The EAS (cf. Bezuidenhout, 2010; Coetzee, 2010) was developed to measure students' self-perceived employability attributes in the South African higher education context. It is a six-point Likert-type scale consisting of fifty-six items which measure eight sub-scales, namely: career self-management, cultural competence, self-efficacy, career resilience, sociability, entrepreneurial orientation, proactivity, and emotional literacy. A higher rating indicates a higher degree of truthfulness of the item for the respondent (Potgieter, 2012). Potgieter (2012) further utilised one item on a four-point scale, which ranged from "very dissatisfied" to "highly satisfied," to measure the participants' perceived level of 'employability satisfaction.' Potgieter (2012) found that participants' employability attributes were significantly predicted by biographical details and that there were significant relationships between the participants' perceived employability and self-esteem.

Although not directly exploring self-perceived employability, Coetzee (2014) conducted research on a closely related issue, graduateness, which refers to "the quality of personal growth and intellectual development of the graduates produced by a higher education institution, and the relevance of the graduateness skills and attributes they bring to the workplace" (Coetzee, 2014, p. 888). Coetzee (2014) developed and administered the Graduate Skills and Attributes Scale to large samples of undergraduate and postgraduate students in South Africa. The scale measures graduateness of students by assessing their possession of eight core skills and attributes (interactive skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills,

continuous learning orientation, enterprising skills, presenting and applying information skills, goal-directed behaviour, ethical and responsible behaviour, and analytical thinking skills) that are clustered into three holistic principal components known as scholarship, global and moral citizenship, and lifelong learning (Coetzee, 2012a; Coetzee, 2014). The study provided new insights into skills and attributes that establish a student's graduateness; these can be embedded in curriculum and course design in order to "…cultivate the mindsets and skills embodied by a student's graduateness as important aspects of meeting the employability demands of employers" (Coetzee, 2014, p. 901). It was therefore considered useful to explore perceptions of their own graduateness among the participants in this study, both in terms of which specific skills and behaviours they felt were important for their perceived employability, and in terms of what they felt their degree had equipped them with through the course of their studies that would enable them to enter the labour market.

There have thus been a number of ways in which researchers have attempted to explore self-perceived employability and associated topics such as graduateness quantitatively, including in the South African context. The concept of self-perceived employability has also been explored qualitatively, for example, Tomlinson (2008) assessed perceptions of employability using "semi-structured interviews with 53 final-year undergraduates in a pre-1992 UK university" (p.51). The study indicated that students perceive their education to significantly contribute to their employability. Nevertheless, they perceived the need to acquire additional skills in order to gain a positional advantage in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008). However, this research on employability was strongly focused on the context of the UK and is somewhat dated. Taylor (2016) conducted a qualitative analysis of perceptions of which soft skills were critical for success in the information systems profession using participants from lecturers, students, and industry at a university in South Africa. The study indicated that there was uncertainty among stakeholders regarding who was responsible for developing soft skills and that soft skills for students being trained were not developed adequately (Taylor, 2016). Although valuable, this research does not specifically explore students' perceptions of their employability and particularly focuses on the information systems field.

Thus, although self-perceived employability has been explored among university students previously, much of this work appears to have been carried out quantitatively and in particular historical and international contexts (for example, Karli, 2016; Qenani et al., 2014; Rothwell et al., 2008; Rothwell et al., 2009; Tomlinson, 2008). Given that social, economic, and cultural factors influence individual perspectives, self-perceived employability may vary in different

countries (Qenani et al., 2014). However, there seems to be a lack of qualitative research on the way in which graduates in South Africa perceive their employability given the current changes in higher education and the labour market. This research will therefore derive its value from its qualitative nature and location in the South African context, as it will provide a detailed description of a sample of South African students' perceptions of their employment prospects in their unique temporal, social, and environmental situation. This research will thus explore self-perceived employability among a sample of soon-to-be graduates drawn from the University of the Witwatersrand.

1.5 Employability and university reputation

Graduates' employment prospects and outcomes can be affected by the type of university they attended (Moleke, 2005). It is generally thought that highly rated tertiary institutions produce more employable graduates that are favoured by employers as they are perceived to "…possess broader forms of social and cultural capital than graduates from less reputable universities" (Qenani et al., 2014, p. 210). Further, elite universities are assumed to demand high grades for undergraduate entry (Rothwell et al., 2008). Higher education institutions' reputations thus serve as a signal in the labour market and are used to differentiate job applicants with similar qualifications (Tholen, 2013).

Rothwell et al. (2008) indicated that the reputation of a student's university is an external factor which may shape their perceptions of employability. Students who perceive their university to have reputational capital have positive perceptions of their employability (Qenani et al., 2014). Social identity theory supports this link as it proposes that individuals' self-concept is derived from the social group's reputation that they identify with, such as a higher education institution in which they study (Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007). According to Tomlinson (2008), students believe that graduating from an elite university will award them with a positional advantage in the labour market as they are perceived to have a valuable degree. Further, Rothwell et al. (2009) indicated that perceptions of university brand had the highest influence on post-graduates' perceptions of employability. Contrastingly, Rothwell et al.'s (2008) study of three separate universities found that undergraduates attending the university with the strongest brand had the least amount of confidence in their employability.

This is an important issue to explore in this study's sample as, according to Oluwajodu et al. (2015), graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand, regarded as one of the top universities in South Africa, are perceived by employers as excellent performers and valuable

investments. Further, employers perceive this university to have high standards of education, equipment, and facilities. Consequently, graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand are employed at a high frequency and enrolled students are perceived by employers as highly employable (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). It is, however, unclear as to whether students share this confidence in the brand name of their university. This research will thus investigate the sample's views of the university's reputation, as well as how this is linked to their perceptions of their employability.

1.6 Employability and Bachelor of Arts

There are also "perceived status differences between vocational areas" (Rothwell et al., 2008, p. 2). Employer demand for graduates varies according to their degrees and particular subjects (Rothwell et al., 2009). It is therefore not surprising that Rothwell et al. (2008) found that students' chosen field of study was the most influential factor on their self-perception of employability. In South Africa, there appears to be a mismatch between the skills and credentials required by the labour market and the type of degrees graduates are studying (Moleke, 2010). A high proportion of graduates are attaining general degrees in humanities and the social sciences rather than "professionally-related areas of study such as science, engineering and technology (SET), business, commerce and management (BCM), and teacher education, which are considered national priority areas" (Chetty, 2012, p. 20). Consequently, the labour market is unable to produce sufficient job opportunities for Bachelor of Arts graduates (Bhengu, Cele, & Menon, 2006).

This study will therefore focus on a sample of students completing a Bachelor of Arts (BA), as the value of this degree has recently been called into question (Gannaway, 2015). Gannaway (2015) argued that the BA degree is perceived to lack vocational relevance and that BA students are perceived as impulsively selecting subjects which are impractical for employability purposes. Additionally, it is common discourse that BA graduates find it more difficult to find employment in contrast to graduates with a professional, technical, or vocational degree (Gannaway, 2015; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Moreover, Lin, Sweet, and Anisef (2003) indicated that professional and vocational graduates are more successful than art graduates in terms of job security, income, and employment status. Goodman and Tredway (2016) found that South African students in engineering, legal, commerce, sciences, and medical faculties indicated that employers perceive them to be more qualified for employment than students in the faculty of humanities.

On the other hand, it has been argued that the broad, all-encompassing, and flexible nature of a BA degree may facilitate graduates to develop the appropriate skills valued by employers. Further, it enhances their adaptability thereby enabling them to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving labour market (Barnett, 2004; Waugh, 2001). Moreover, Moleke (2010) indicated that in South Africa's public sector, there is a significant demand for humanities and social sciences graduates. Additionally, a survey conducted by Moleke (2005) in South Africa found that there were no significant indicators that certain fields of study resulted in higher employment prospects. Given these contrasting perspectives, it will be useful to explore how BA soon-to-be-graduates view their employability.

In addition, this study will focus on BA students as previous studies on self-perceived employability have explored business students (for example, Coetzee, 2014; Potgieter, 2012; Rothwell et al., 2008; Rothwell et al., 2009), students completing a variety of degrees (for example, Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Qenani et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2008), or students in the information systems field (for example, Taylor, 2016). This study therefore aims to explore BA students' perceptions of their demand in the labour market and how this may impact on what they expect from an employer.

1.7 Employability and the anticipatory psychological contract

According to Oluwajodu et al. (2015), graduates often have unrealistic employment expectations. They believe that their qualifications will grant them job opportunities and they will not have to actively work and struggle to find employment (Pauw et al., 2008). Further, they expect that their qualifications will immediately generate managerial positions and high salaries (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Tomlinson (2008) found that the students in his study had internalised the discourse of graduates earning higher salaries. However, these high expectations were unjustified given graduates' lack of experiential training before entering the labour market. Unrealistic expectations can impact on graduates' job choice as they may select jobs based on these expectations and choose to endure unemployment whilst they find their ideal job (Pauw et al., 2008). Further, employers perceive graduates as having unrealistic expectations about the nature of jobs and thus tend to employ internal candidates over graduates (Pauw et al., 2008). The potential consequences of these unrealistically high expectations, such as reduced job opportunities and graduate unemployment, therefore support the importance of exploring graduates' and soon-to-be-graduates' expectations regarding the workplace (Mason, 2002).

Additionally, in order to survive the highly competitive modern work environment, organisations aim to sustain a competitive advantage through attracting and retaining highly-skilled employees (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013). Therefore, organisations should explore the expectations of potential employees in order to enhance their ability to attract top-quality employees (Berthon et al., 2005). According to Lievens, Van Hoye, and Schreurs (2005), it is difficult to determine which job aspects should be promoted to potential employees. Thus, identifying graduates' expectations may facilitate organisational psychologists in promoting a desirable work setting, thereby enhancing the attraction and retention of employees. Further, knowledge of graduates' expectations can assist organisations to effectively manage them and help them manage themselves (Bezuidenhout, 2011).

The anticipatory psychological contract is a valuable framework for understanding graduates' career expectations (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). The psychological contract can be defined as a reciprocal exchange agreement based on an individual's expectations regarding the terms and conditions of their employment. It is an obligation characterised by a promise of future benefits in return for a given contribution (Rousseau, 1989). Traditionally, the psychological contract between employers and employees is characterised by the exchange of job security for organisational commitment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). However, as mentioned above, in the current business environment the promise of job security is unrealistic. Consequently, a new psychological contract has developed where training, development opportunities, mobility, and growth are exchanged for flexibility and effort (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Within this new psychological contract, employees manage their own careers in exchange for support and facilities that ensure the continuity and expansion of their employability. Therefore, it appears that employability is related to the new psychological contract (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Nabi, 2003).

According to De Vos, De Stobbeleir, and Meganck (2009), it is vital to explore pre-employment psychological contract expectations, known as the anticipatory psychological contract (APC), as research has indicated that the relationship between job selection and job factors is mediated by the anticipatory psychological contract. Graduates' expectations of their jobs and organisations can include: autonomy, feedback, flexibility, recognition, promotion, meaning, integrity, support, training and development, fair treatment, a safe working environment, and financial benefits (Van der Merwe, 2009). Graduates assess their experiences in the organisation by using the anticipatory psychological contract as a frame of reference. If

pre-employment expectations are not met this can result in reduced organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; De Vos et al., 2009; Sturges & Guest, 2001). Therefore, given the high costs of turnover, it is vital to understand graduates' and soon-to-be graduates' expectations of employers (De Vos et al., 2009).

It has been found that individual differences, such as personality, knowledge, interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, and career motivations impact the anticipatory psychological contract (De Vos et al., 2009; Rousseau, 2001). Age may be another factor that plays a role, as Millennials who are positive about their labour market opportunities tend to report higher expectations in terms of their employment relationship (De Vos et al., 2009). This is related to the reciprocity norm, where Millennials who perceive themselves to be employable are more confident in their ability to contribute to the organisation and thus expect more from their employers (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). Therefore, this study will explore the pre-entry expectations of soon-to-be-graduates about their future employment relationship, as well as whether and how this is related to their perceived employability.

1.8 Employability and job searching behaviours

This research will also follow Vanhercke et al.'s (2014) recommendation to explore how subjective measures of employability relate to job searching attitudes and behaviour. This is important as job searching behaviours have been linked to graduate unemployment (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Onyishi, Enwereuzor, Ituma, and Omenma (2015) indicated that people who "perceive themselves as highly employable are likely to believe that employment is within reach and possibly set personal proactive strategies based on their perceived skills and capabilities that will eventually impact on their job search behaviour" (p.611). Further, Wanberg, Zhu, and Van Hooft (2010) suggested that individuals will be more proactive in job searching if they have a positive self-appraisal. Therefore, it may be assumed that individuals with positive perceptions of their employability will be actively engaged in job seeking. Additionally, positive self-evaluations enable individuals to adopt effective problem solving strategies when difficulties are encountered during their job search (Onyishi et al., 2015). Moreover, individuals with high levels of self-perceived employability participate in creative job search methods (Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). Consequently, this study will investigate soon-to-be-graduates job searching behaviours as well as whether and how this is related to their perceived employability.

1.9 Implications and the current study

Previous research on perceptions of employability has been mainly rooted in quantitative methods (for example, Coetzee, 2014; Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Karli, 2016; Qenani et al., 2014; Rothwell et al., 2008; Rothwell et al., 2009). Quantitative research seldom provides a detailed description within a specific context (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Therefore, the qualitative nature of this research is important as it will provide an in-depth understanding of a sample of soon-to-be graduates' perceptions of their employment prospects in the South African context. It therefore contributes to a highly under-researched area in the South African context and may provide a starting point for theoretical development and future empirical work.

This research will contribute to determining how soon-to-be graduates are responding to the changing relationship between higher education and labour market rewards, particularly in the current economic climate. It may also facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between personal and structural factors in shaping self-perceived employability, which may have potential application for universities, as understanding the factors that contribute towards self-perceived employability may help them to establish conditions that support and facilitate the employability of graduates (Rothwell et al., 2008). This could assist with the preparation of high-qualified workers and result in improved university commitment, ambition, job performance, higher motivation, career success, improved life satisfaction, and resilience to adversity (Creed & Gagliardi, 2015; Karli, 2016; Rothwell et al., 2008). In addition, poor self-perceptions can result in graduates compromising on their career goals (Creed & Gagliardi, 2015). This research may also raise awareness that universities should play a role in enhancing graduates' employability through curriculum design, personal development planning, and career education (Qenani et al., 2014).

Research into the anticipatory psychological contract is critical as it may help South African organisations to better attract and retain top-quality graduates. Determining soon-to-be graduates' anticipatory psychological contracts can assist employers in identifying what graduates expect from their employment relationship. Given that organisations perceive graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand as valuable investments, organisations may be able to use this information to differentiate themselves from their competitors and become these students' 'employers of choice' (De Vos et al., 2009; Oluwajodu et al., 2015; Roy, 2008). Further, this may facilitate human resource departments to develop and implement recruitment policies (Berthon et al., 2005). In addition, this research is valuable as it will explore the types

of perceptions surrounding a Bachelor of Arts degree as well the role these may play in BA students' perceptions of their employability (Gannaway, 2015). This may contribute to developing more targeted recruitment strategies and career advice.

This study may also contribute to the debate regarding whether higher education is the most effective route to employment or not. This is important given that the South African labour market is struggling to produce sufficient employment opportunities for graduates and there is a growing movement towards encouraging the youth of South Africa to explore alternative methods, such as technikons or vocational training centres (Oluwajodu et al., 2015).

In view of these findings, this study will be guided by the following primary research question and secondary questions:

What are soon-to-be graduates' perceptions of their future employability?

How do soon-to-be graduates understand the role of their educational credentials in relation to their future employability?

What are their perceptions of the utility of their university education?

What role do they think their higher education credentials may play in opening up opportunities in the labour market?

What other factors do they feel are likely to play a role in their employment prospects?

What would they expect from and what would attract them to a future employer?

Chapter 2: Methods

This chapter will outline the study's research design, sample, data collection, procedure, ethical considerations, and method of analysis.

2.1 Research design

This study utilised a qualitative research design which was appropriate as it emphasises the perspectives of research participants in order to deeply explore, understand, and interpret human experiences within the social world (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Therefore, qualitative research allowed for an acknowledgement and detailed description of the students' unique viewpoints (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Further, it provided an in-depth and holistic understanding of students' perceptions of their employment prospects (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). In addition, qualitative research aims to understand phenomena holistically, "from different perspectives and bounded by the context or setting within which [they are] located" (Long & Godfrey, 2004, p. 183). Given that this study explored students' perceptions of their employment prospects in relation to their social context, qualitative research was relevant. Qualitative research was also suitable as it permitted the researcher to collect data from a small sample who provided specific insight into the topic, enabling the researcher to develop a thick description of soon-to-be-graduates perceptions of employability (Fossey et al., 2002; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) orientation which highlights internal subjective realities. This was appropriate as this study aimed to understand the social world from the perspectives of the individuals participating in it (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Additionally, this was a suitable approach as it enabled the researcher to determine how individuals perceive and make sense of the particular situations they are faced with (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Further, this qualitative approach highlights the significance of understanding the meanings inherent in human behaviour and experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2007). The phenomenological approach involves a detailed examination of people's interpretation of and engagement with the social world. Therefore, it enabled the researcher to understand and provide a rich description of the students' interpretations of and engagement with factors that may impact their perceptions of their employment prospects (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Further, the phenomenological interpretive research paradigm was effective as it emphasises the dynamic process of research in which the researcher adopts an active role. Thus, this approach enables an understanding of complex

phenomena through the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This is suitable for this study as a method of interactional interviews was utilised and the researcher adopted the role of a subjective observer. In addition, the paradigm assumes that there is a connection between "people's talk and their thinking and emotional state" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.54). Hence, this paradigm advocates for the method, adopted in this research, of interviewing people in order to determine their perceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Lastly, this approach was used as the research aimed to explore, flexibly and in detail, soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of their employment prospects (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

2.2 Sample and sampling

The sample consisted of final-year undergraduate students completing Bachelor of Art degrees, majoring in Psychology, registered in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand. Given the changing relationship between higher education credentials and labour market outcomes, as well as the high probability that final-year university students will apply for a job in the near future, it is appropriate to determine how final-year undergraduates perceive their employability (Alnıaçık, Alnıaçık, Erat, & Akçin, 2014; Tomlinson, 2008). Additionally, employers target university students as a primary source of potential employees, therefore it is important to understand their job search behaviour and anticipatory psychological contracts (Alnıaçık et al., 2014). Students studying Bachelor of Art degrees were selected as, given the contrasting views of the utility of this degree, it was seen as worthwhile to determine how this impacted these students' perceptions of employability (Gannaway, 2015). Further, this research selected students majoring in Psychology as exploring perceptions of a very specific group makes it easier to draw out convergent and divergent themes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Students registered for general modules in Psychology as well as specialist modules in Organisational Psychology were approached.

Purposive sampling was utilised, so that the sample consisted of suitable participants who were able to contribute appropriate and valuable information on the topic (Fossey et al., 2002). In order to obtain the sample, potential participants were contacted via an e-mail announcement on Sakai which provided a summary of the study (please refer to Appendix A). The participant information sheet was then sent to students who were willing to volunteer and a convenient time and location for the interview with the researcher was arranged.

The sample included sixteen participants (fifteen females and one male). The gender composition of the sample, although very unequal, is typical of BA Psychology students (Skinner & Louw, 2009)**.** Participants fell between the ages of twenty and twenty-five (mean age = 21.44). The sample included participants who identified their race as Black (n=4), White (n=8), Coloured (n=3), and Indian (n=1). The majority of the participants indicated that English was their home language (n=13). Participants' home languages also included Northern Sotho (n=1), Sepedi (n=1), Hebrew (n=1), IsiZulu (n=2), and IsiXhosa (n=1). Three participants had two home languages. All participants spoke English in the interview.

It would have been the ideal to sample Bachelor of Arts students until saturation in order to ensure comprehensive and complete data (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). However, this was not practically possible as conducting a large number of interviews was not cost and time effective (Fossey et al., 2002). Further, the study aimed to maintain a small sample size as it enabled the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding and detailed description of the participants' experience (Fossey et al., 2002). In addition, studies following an IPA approach utilise small sample sizes as insightful analyses are developed from the quality and not the quantity of the data (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

2.3 Data collection and procedure

The data collection method used was face-to-face semi-structured interviews based on an interview schedule developed by the researcher (please refer to Appendix F). Sixteen interviews were conducted which lasted approximately thirty minutes each. Interviews were used as IPA requires data in the form of a "verbatim transcript of a first-person account" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 103). Typically this occurs as semi-structured interviews (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Further, interviews were used as they explore participants' experiences, feelings, and social world, thereby eliciting their perspectives and yielding in-depth information (Fossey et al., 2002). Additionally, face-to-face interviews permitted the researcher to observe non-verbal communication and to establish a close rapport with participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Barriball & While, 1994).

Semi-structured interviews provided a format that guided participants' responses and enabled similar data from all participants to be collected, creating a sense of order (Doody & Noonan, 2013). However, participants were also given the opportunity to elaborate and express other perspectives or opinions they felt were relevant to the topic. Therefore, this method facilitated a focused yet flexible exploration of the topic (Fossey et al., 2002; Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Further, it enabled the researcher to immediately clarify responses and probe participants for additional information (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). A recording device was used to record the interview which facilitated the accuracy and inclusiveness of the data collected and enabled the researcher to fully immerse in the interaction (Barriball & While, 1994).

The interview schedule was developed by the researcher based on Rothwell et al.'s (2008) four distinct components of self-perceived employability, namely 'My University', 'Field of Study', 'The State of the External Labour Market', and 'Self-belief'. Further, a series of questions were established based on themes put forward in empirical work on self-perceived employability carried out by Rothwell et al. (2008), Rothwell et al. (2009), and Tomlinson (2008). The final interview schedule consisted of a set of twenty-one questions that asked the participants to explain the background regarding their decision to study at university and their choice of university and degree, their views on future possible employment, their understanding of what they had gained from their higher education, their view of the current labour market, factors that they felt might influence their future employability, their job search behaviour, and factors that would attract them to a future employer. The interview schedule further listed prompts which accompanied certain questions and which were implemented as deemed appropriate (please refer to Appendix F). For descriptive purposes, a brief demographic questionnaire was completed which requested the participants' race, gender, age, home language, faculty, subject major, year of study, and plans for future employment (please refer to Appendix E).

The researcher was the primary data collection instrument. Therefore, the researcher's observations and interpretations of the collected data may have been shaped by her anticipations, pre-conceptions, values, and knowledge of formal research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Thus the researcher reflected and developed an awareness of her expectations, actions, biases, and principles while undertaking the research project (Pillow, 2003). This is important as interpretive phenomenological analysis proposes that researchers should reflect on their own experiences and assumptions in order to explore other people's experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The researcher enacted this process by maintaining a self-reflexive journal throughout the research project. In addition, the researcher maintained an audit trail explicitly reporting her methodological decisions so that the collection and reporting of data could be rendered transparent (Fossey et al., 2002).

Data collection commenced with the researcher obtaining ethical clearance for the project from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical)

(clearance number: MORG/17/002 IH; please see Appendix G). Potential participants were then contacted electronically and were provided with an invitation to participate and a brief explanation of the study. This was done via an email announcement (please refer to Appendix A) sent to the students through their course websites with the permission of the course coordinators and relevant lecturers (please refer to Appendix D to see the request for access letter). The participant information sheet (please refer to Appendix B) was then sent to students who indicated that they were willing to volunteer. A suitable location and time for the interview was then arranged. Interviews were conducted on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand, in a private quiet location indicated as convenient and suitable by the researcher and participant. The first two interviews conducted served as pilot interviews which enabled the researcher to analyse the efficiency of the interview schedule and make necessary adjustments before commencing with additional data collection. Further, it provided the researcher with valuable experience (Barriball & While, 1994).

To facilitate a healthy rapport, the interview began with a friendly introduction. The researcher then distributed the participant information sheet and explained the relevant aspects of participation. Participants were required to read through the participant information sheet (please refer to Appendix B) and sign forms consenting to be interviewed and audio-recorded (please refer to Appendix C). Participants then completed the demographic questionnaire. The interview started once the researcher turned on the audio-recording device. The researcher ensured that the participants felt at ease throughout the interview by presenting an open and comfortable demeanour. Moreover, the researcher demonstrated a sincere interest in the participants and their responses (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Respondents were thanked for their participation at the conclusion of the interview and they were provided with an opportunity to raise questions. The researcher's and supervisor's contact details were distributed in case participants desired any information at a later point. Additionally, participants were informed that a summary of the results would be made available to them on request. Once the interview process had been completed, the recordings were transcribed by the researcher and analysed.

2.4 Ethical considerations

To ensure informed consent (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), participants were invited to participate by the researcher via an email announcement sent to the students through their course websites (please refer to Appendix A), with the permission of the course coordinators and relevant lecturers (please refer to Appendix D for the request for access letter), which indicated the

purpose of the study. They were told that participation would involve taking part in an approximately one-hour long interview conducted by the researcher and that the interview would be audio-recorded with their consent. Participants were required to read through a participant information sheet (please refer to Appendix B) and they were instructed to sign the consent forms for participation and for recording (including permission to utilise direct quotes) (please refer to Appendix C), in order to illustrate their informed consent. Prior to signing the consent forms, participants were afforded the opportunity to raise any issues of concern and ask questions for clarification.

The participant information sheet indicated that the research was being conducted for the purpose of obtaining a Master of Arts degree in Organisational Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Further, it specified that the objective of the study was to explore final-year university students' perceptions of their employment prospects. The information sheet indicated that participation was strictly voluntary and that the participants would not be disadvantaged in any way if they decided not to participate. It further stated that at any time during the study, participants would have the right to withdraw participation and their responses from the study. In addition, they had the right to refrain from answering any specific questions asked during the interview. On completion of the interview, participants were debriefed and the researcher answered all questions raised by the participants. Further, the purpose and nature of the research was communicated to the participants. Participants were informed that approximately eight months after the collection of the data, a feedback sheet, in the form of a one to two page summary of the study and its findings, could be provided upon request. Lastly, the contact details of the researcher and supervisor were distributed so that participants could request this feedback sheet and/or make any additional queries if desired.

Confidentiality (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) was ensured as the participants' identities were kept strictly confidential and were not disclosed to others. Information directly identifying a participant as an individual was removed from the transcript of the interview. Furthermore, the audio-recordings of the interviews were kept in a secure location that only the researcher and her supervisor had access to (either a locked cupboard or a password-protected computer). The original recordings were destroyed once the write-up was completed. With the participants' permission, a copy of their interview transcripts was stored indefinitely, with all identifying information removed. The researcher asked the participants for their permission to use these transcripts for future research.

2.5 Analysis

The study adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse the interview data that was recorded and transcribed (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This approach to qualitative analysis was appropriate as it has a "particularly psychological interest in how people make sense of their experience" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p.101). Further, IPA enabled the researcher to capture and reflect on the perspectives of the participants and interpret their accounts whilst using psychological concepts to develop the information further (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). A key feature of this analysis is the phenomenological description which consists of the identification, description, and understanding of "…two related aspects of a respondent's account: the key 'objects of concern' in the participant's world, and the 'experiential claims' made by the participant" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 111). The analysis further involves insightful interpretation grounded in the participants' accounts, a focus on meaning, and the development of themes and superordinate themes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2007). This approach is thus an idiographic model of inquiry where the aim is to illustrate in detail the perceptions and understandings of a particular group as opposed to making general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The IPA included a line-by-line analysis of each participant's concerns, claims, and understandings; identification of emergent patterns by exploring nuance, convergence, and divergence within the collected data; interpretation of the participants' concerns within their context; development of a structure illustrating the relationships between themes; development of a detailed interpretation of the data; testing and developing the consistency and plausibility of the interpretation and reflexivity; and consideration of the researcher's perceptions throughout the analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Thematic analysis was used as a method to enact the IPA. Thematic analysis is a "progressive process of classifying, comparing, grouping and refining groupings of text segments to create and then clarify the definition of categories, or themes, within the data" (Fossey et al., 2002, pp. 728–729). This analysis highlights similarities and differences across the data set, unravels significant components of the data, and provides a comprehensive and nuanced classification of themes within the data. Therefore, thematic analysis enabled a thick description of the data and enhanced the researcher's understanding of the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, this method of analysis provided insight into the "meaning, richness and magnitude of the

subjective experience of social life" (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 403). The analysis was conducted by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis:

1) Familiarisation with the data

The researcher began the analysis by listening to the interview recordings and transcribing the data. Thereafter, in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, they were checked against the original audio recordings. The researcher then read the transcripts repeatedly in order to develop a preliminary understanding. Each reading offered new insights which were typed up by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was valuable as IPA requires sustained engagement with the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

2) Generating initial codes

The researcher returned to the beginning of the transcripts and annotated and labelled significant and interesting words, phrases, and sentences that were related to the research questions. The researcher then listed and colour-coded the identified codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3) Searching for themes

The colour-coded codes were analysed. The researcher identified emerging relationships amongst the codes and then clustered the codes together to develop overarching themes which were then typed up along with their corresponding codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4) Reviewing the themes

To consolidate the themes, the researcher re-read the transcripts and coded additional information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher strived for saturation in order to ensure that the themes were comprehensive and all relevant data was included (Drisko, 1997). To ensure the validity of the findings, an effort was made to identify divergent themes that could challenge or expand the initial interpretations (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

5) Defining and naming themes

A detailed analysis defining each individual theme's scope and content was conducted. Further, the researcher compiled a list of participants' phrases that supported each theme. Following this, themes were refined and sub-themes were developed. Lastly, the researcher developed titles for the identified themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

6) Producing the report

For guidance, the researcher investigated published work on thematic analysis. Thereafter, the researcher analysed the themes in order to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enrich and reinforce the arguments made, theoretical and empirical literature was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher further utilised quotations to provide evidence for the points demonstrated. This enables readers to evaluate the truthfulness of the claims made about the data (Fossey et al., 2002). Further, quotations ensure the transparency and clarity of the themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In addition, the researcher presented a detailed account of the findings and a rich interpretation to facilitate others in determining the research findings' applicability to different settings (Fossey et al., 2002). It was the researcher's aim, throughout this process, to develop a comprehensive and cohesive depiction of the collected data (Fossey et al., 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1983).

The data analysis resulted in the identification of the following themes which captured soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of their future employability:

1) Motivation for attending a higher education institution
2) Graduateness
3) Higher education and the labour market
4) Demand for a Bachelor of Arts degree
5) Labour market demand for different psychological registrations
6) The degree is not enough
7) Other factors contributing to self-perceived employability
8) Anticipatory psychological contract

Chapter 3: Results and Discussion

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the predominant themes that emerged from the data analysis and will present the existing knowledge and theory used to explore these themes. In order to capture the essence of the participants' statements, and to provide evidence for the points demonstrated, relevant direct quotations from the participants will be included (Fossey et al., 2002). Further, this chapter will present the implications of the findings that emerged from the study and will link these with previous work as well as with the research questions posed. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research will also be explored. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a short summary of the findings.

3.2 Motivation for attending a higher education institution

According to Matsolo et al. (2016), since 1994 South Africa has experienced a strong growth in higher education enrolments. This growth has been attributed to the perception that tertiary education results in increased participation in the labour market and higher earnings (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016). In this study, it appeared that most participants subscribed to this view as they indicated that the potential of higher education returns significantly contributed to their desire to attend university. Participant 3 explained that she invested in higher education as *"…you need a degree to get a job, it's very important."* Participant 14 indicated that she chose to participate in higher education in order to attain a better lifestyle, "*I thought it was necessary for me to get a tertiary education to improve my chances of getting a job, earning money and just for a more stable future for myself."* Therefore, it appears that these students have internalised the human capital discourse on higher education, which prescribes that investing in higher education yields private returns for graduates such as labour market rewards (Allais, 2017). This is a product of the marketization of higher education in which it is framed as "a firm investment in a better future life" (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 2). In addition, perceiving higher education as a means to labour market ends may be a justification for the significant issue of high tuition fees.

Similarly, students in Tomlinson's (2008) study indicated that they pursued higher education credentials in order to gain access to advantages in the labour market. Tomlinson (2008) further found that students often chose to invest in higher education as way to avoid the negative consequences that result from a lack of qualifications (Tomlinson, 2008). Likewise, certain

participants in this study expressed concerns regarding the limitations of not attaining a degree. Further, they indicated that their participation in higher education was due to a lack of alternative options in the labour market. For example, Participant 4 felt that there was no other option but to go to university, as she doubted the possibility of getting a good job with just a Matric certificate. Within the context of South Africa, these perspectives are realistic as, according to Allais (2017), "…there is a small technical and vocational system that has weak labour market outcomes" (p.151). Therefore, there was strong evidence that the participants chose to enrol at university as they perceived potential costs associated with non-participation as well as benefits associated with participation.

Participant 9 expressed that her parents insisted that *"to be successful or to make enough money you have to go to university and actually further your studies."* Other participants indicated that they had entered university at their parents' request, or due to societal norms *"It was just the thing everyone did after school and…it's like the norm"* (Participant 2), *"It was always just an expectation that it's something you did after school"* (Participant 10), *"It's kind of what society tells you, prepares you that after high school you go to university because that's the only way you can make a living"* (Participant 11). These responses reiterate Tomlinson's (2008) claim that there is "a widespread perception of external pressures placed upon young people to invest in higher education in order to maximise their chances in the competition for jobs" (p. 53). Additionally, it appears that participation in higher education was perceived by the participants to be an expected development in their education trajectories, as societal and cultural norms have framed this as an appropriate and natural pathway. These perspectives appear to be shaped by higher education policy, which depicts higher education as a vehicle for transformation and economic growth (Van der Merwe, 2009)

However, it is important to point out that two participants expressed that their investment in higher education was due to a passion for psychology. Participant 7 expressed, *"It was never an option not to go to university and pursue what I've always wanted to do,"* whilst Participant 1 stated, *"I wanted to get a degree in order to pursue a passion."* Passion also emerged as a common theme when participants were asked why they chose to study their degree. They indicated that their decision to study psychology could be attributed to their desire to help others and understand the human mind. It has been found that factors influencing course preference include the reputation of the course among employers, expected earnings, and graduate employment rates from the course (Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2006). Further, Maharasoa and Hay (2001) indicated that employability was one of the most influential factors

in their participants' choices of courses of study. However, this did not seem to be entirely the case in this study as some participants indicated that their choice was based on a *"…a passion for people and helping*" (Participant 1). This seems to contradict Maringe's (2006) finding that students' choice of courses and subjects of study are related to anticipated labour market outcomes as opposed to interest and love.

Nevertheless, the majority of participants appeared to subscribe to a human capital interpretation in their decision to invest in higher education, which was reinforced by their perceived lack of viable alternative options. Further, it appears that they conformed to their perceptions of societal expectations of an appropriate trajectory after high school.

3.3 Graduateness

Regardless of their intentions for participating in higher education, all participants had a positive view of the contribution of higher education and their experiences at university. When asked about what they have gained from studying at a higher education level, participants referred to their personal growth, life experience, and intellectual development. Participant 15 stated "*I've gained a lot of experience, life experience…I've grown a lot like maturity level…it's just helped me grow as a person."* Participant 14 indicated an improvement in her intellectual development through higher education by stating, *"…it really has challenged me and exposed me to way higher standards than I ever thought I was capable of doing."* In identifying the main contribution from her university experience, Participant 5 stated, *"It's definitely been for me a personal growth.*"

Coetzee (2011) indicated that higher education should facilitate the development of graduates who are capable of and effective at negotiating uncertainties in society and the workplace. Participant 1 perceived this to be true based on her experience of higher education, as she indicated *"…it's equipped me for the world."* Participant 16 felt that tertiary education had enabled her development as she stated, "*I have grown in terms of the way that I see life and how the world works…I think that my degree has really equipped me to make something out of myself."* The participants further expressed that higher education had equipped them with a variety of academic skills, generic skills, and personal attributes which would enhance their readiness for the working world and their attractiveness to employers. These findings align with the expectation that higher education develops graduates into well-rounded individuals who have acquired discipline-specific knowledge, skills, and competencies, broader transferable skills, and attributes which enhance their effectiveness in the workplace (Coetzee,

2012a). This is known as student graduateness, which is seen as "…the inherent characteristics (transferable meta-skills and personal attributes) of graduates…that differentiate them as responsible, accountable, relevant, ethical (RARE) and enterprising citizens, and employees of choice in the workplace" (Coetzee, 2012a, p. 121).

Participants felt that higher education had allowed them to develop attributes such as ambition, self-discipline, perseverance, persistence, work ethic, responsibility, and determination. Participant 16 stated, *"I've really developed skills to push forward and move through no matter what life hits me with."* The participants also felt that they had developed time management and planning skills and had learnt to work under pressure. Such skills and attributes can be categorised under goal-directed behaviour which is indicated as a significant feature of an individual's employability (Bezuidenhout, 2011). Further, Andrews and Higson (2008) indicated that the ability to plan and think strategically, good time-management skills, the ability to work under pressure, self-management, and willingness to accept responsibility are the key transferable soft skills that influence graduates' employability.

The students interviewed also perceived a relationship between their degrees and their development of academic skills such as the ability to conduct research, academic writing, editing, computer skills, statistics, referencing, presenting, ethics, and debating. Social skills were also commonly referred to by participants when explaining their higher education gains. Participant 16 indicated that she had made new friends and developed her confidence, *"I feel my confidence lifting and I am able to go and approach people and approach my lecturers and approach my tutors."* Participant 14 felt that she had learnt how to meet and interact with different people. This perspective was mirrored by Participant 13 as she indicated that higher education has helped her "*open up and talk to people and network."* Participants further indicated that attending university had contributed to the development of their communication skills. For instance, Participant 5 stated, *"It really opened me up in terms of life skills and engaging with people."* Participant 8 felt that higher education had afforded her the ability to *"engage in conversations with more people across the board."* These findings are important as the capacity to communicate and interact with others, as well as self-confidence, positively impacts graduates' employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Further, through their higher education experiences participants perceived gains in their tolerance, understanding, and empathy. These social skills are valuable as, according to Tynjälä (1999), graduates should be able to have diversified interpersonal, cooperation, and communication skills. Moreover,

employees need to be able to work with other cultures and communicate effectively (Gewertz, 2007).

In addition, students felt that university has taught them how to apply their knowledge confidently and effectively. Participant 1 expressed "…*university has also taught me that reading and learning like a parrot is not the only way, there is so many different ways that you have to apply your knowledge and use it in every aspect of life".* This is important as *"...you need to take what you have learnt at university and you need to apply it in the workplace, you not going to have books in front of you to study"* (Participant 15). Further, the participants felt that a higher education had facilitated them in developing abilities to think creatively and be innovative. They also perceived an improvement in their critical and analytical skills, *"It's definitely improved my analytical skills"* (Participant 14), *"I've been able to think more critically and think outside the box" (*Participant 8). Coetzee (2012b) indicated that such skills are important as graduates should be able to apply their knowledge, critique and analyse data, and offer unique and novel ideas in order to solve complex problems in the workplace. These skills are known as intelligence resources which have been strongly linked to employability across diverse occupations and contexts (Finch et al., 2016).

Interestingly, the skills and attributes that the participants identified cultivate what Coetzee (2012a) conceptualised as "…three overarching attitudinal stances of personal and intellectual development: scholarship (problem-solving and decision-making, analytical thinking skills, enterprising skills), global and moral citizenship (ethical and responsible behaviour, presenting and applying information skills, interactive skills), and lifelong learning (goal-directed behaviour and continuous learning orientation)" (Coetzee & Potgieter, 2012, p. 3). Additionally, previous research has indicated that higher education should develop the skills and attributes identified by the participants in students so that they become competent and professional graduates who contribute positively to society. These include critical thinking, research skills, ethical awareness, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills (Coetzee & Potgieter, 2012; Faber, López, & Prescher, 2012; Glover, Law, & Youngman, 2002; Spencer, Riddle, & Knewstubb, 2012; Tynjälä, 1999).

Research has indicated that employers attach significance to generic, transferable skills and attributes that constitute an employee's graduateness, and expect graduates to possess these when entering the workplace (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Maxwell, Scott, Macfarlane, & Williamson, 2010). Due to increasing competition and globalisation, employers demand these

skills and attributes in order to improve their bottom line as they are perceived to be critical for productive performance (Gewertz, 2007; Taylor, 2016). They anticipate that these skills and abilities will be developed through higher education and that graduates will have appropriate academic and interpersonal skills (Goodman & Tredway, 2016). Nevertheless, it has been indicated that higher education is struggling to develop these required graduate skills in students (Bernstein & Osman, 2012; Cranmer, 2006; Goodman & Tredway, 2016). It appears that both employers and students criticise higher education institutions' ability to produce graduates with the attributes that enable their productivity and effectiveness in the workplace (Griesel & Parker, 2009). However, in contrast, the participants in this study had a positive view of their graduateness as they perceived that their higher education had provided them with skills which would be desirable to employers and relevant in the workplace.

The students felt that the skills and attributes that they had acquired through their higher education experience would be regarded as vitally important by employers to their businesses. Participant 7 stated, *"I definitely think that the skills that are taught at university, and especially my degree, are definitely something that organisations would want to look at or would appeal to them."* According to Participant 15, employers want hard working, determined, and persistent employees who can apply their knowledge. Further, the participant indicated that employers require employees to have interpersonal skills so that they can interact with clients. Participant 14 expressed, *"I think it would be important in any business to be able to work on a computer and do calculations and look at the graphs and regression."* Therefore, it appears that the participant believed that statistical knowledge and computer skills, taught at university, would be important to employers. She also felt that writing and editing skills would give graduates an advantage in the business world. Participants also indicated that employers value time management skills, *"When you go out in the working environment then they expect you to like meet deadlines, and there's lots of pressure so you have to be able to manage your time accordingly*" (Participant 12). Such perceptions appear to be true as organisations in the modern economy require employees to have technical and functional skills as well as life skills, emotional intelligence, social and leadership skills, the ability to adapt to the rapidly changing business world, and the ability work well with team members (Coetzee et al., 2015; Qenani et al., 2014; Yorke, 2006).

These findings are valuable as students' graduateness is a key product of higher education learning (Coetzee, 2012a, 2012b). In addition, graduates who exhibit a diverse range of valued capabilities tend to position themselves as superior to others in competition for the same

opportunities (Finch et al., 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising that Coetzee (2011) found that students' perceptions of their graduateness are associated with their self-perceived employability. It appears that the students in this study perceived the utility of their university education as they felt that their higher education had instilled them with the appropriate skills and thus adequately prepared them for the labour market.

3.4 Higher education and the labour market

Current interpretations of employability focus on the interaction between the individual and the labour market (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2011). Vanhercke et al. (2014) indicated that graduates with similar qualifications will have different perceptions of their employability based on their understanding of the current state of the labour market. Consequently, this study explored the participants' perceptions of the current state of the labour market in South Africa. It emerged that the participants perceived an oversupply of potential employees and insufficient job opportunities. This is illustrated in Participant 1's statement, *"I don't think that there are many jobs available, I don't think there are enough jobs for the amount of people looking for work."* Further, it was indicated that there are *"high levels of unemployment"* in South Africa, "*Millions of people are looking for jobs and I think people count themselves as being very lucky to have a job*" (Participant 3). Participant 9 felt that the current state of the labour market is *"very stressful psychologically and physically,"* as it has reduced her job opportunities and her ability to provide for her family. She further stated, *"I'll just have to settle for something I didn't want to do."* Other participants also felt that due to the increasing number of graduates and scarce job opportunities graduates are not able to attain jobs in their desired field. These concerns appear to be realistic as the oversaturated labour market has resulted in graduates accepting jobs for which they are overqualified (Finch et al., 2016; Holmes & Mayhew, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008).

Participants attributed their gloomy outlook on the state of the labour market to the current recession in South Africa. Participant 5 stated, *"We are in shambles, we definitely in shambles because at the end of the day if I look at the employment rate and just how the country is going, we are definitely in trouble because we in recession and the opportunities for jobs is getting very very tight."* Further, participants indicated that technological advancements had reduced the number of job opportunities and thus contributed to the poor state of the labour market. Participant 14 felt that technology had taken the place of people, *"So as great as the technological improvements are, I think that because of the state of South Africa and the*

poverty and the unemployment they should be employing people." Participant 10 recognised the economic recession, technology, and political upheaval in South Africa as contributors to unemployment.

Pauw et al. (2008) indicated that "…as enrolment at tertiary institutions has increased during the last decade…more young graduates have become unemployed" (p.28). This may be due to the fact that graduates do not possess the desired skills required by employers (Pauw et al., 2008). However, the participants attributed the lack of demand of graduates to an oversupply of new graduate labour market entrants. Participant 6 indicated that although companies are setting up programmes specifically for graduates there is still limited demand for graduates in the labour market, *"So I know there a lot of programmes companies are setting up specifically for graduates…but I don't think it's enough I don't think there's enough spaces, because majority of students are getting educated now…so now everyone's getting educated, everyone's skilled so everyone is demanding a job."* Participant 14 communicated a sense of anxiety over the demand for graduates as she stated *"There are probably less jobs available for graduates in the current situation because companies just don't have the money to pay them, they don't have the facilities to employ them."* Unfortunately, her anxiety may be justified as hiring a graduate involves the cost of university career exhibitions, training costs, and graduate salaries which limits the number of graduates employed every year (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Further, Oluwajodu et al. (2015) found that there is an oversupply of graduates in South Africa and thus graduate unemployment has escalated.

The main concern of the students was that the number of graduates in South Africa exceeds labour market demand and, as such, has reduced the value of their higher education qualifications. This perspective corresponds with the credentialist approach (cf. Collins, 1979; Hirsch, 1977) to higher education which suggests that the high supply of graduates with similar qualifications has led employers to attach greater significance to work experience and other characteristics rather than higher education credentials (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Scott, 2014). Consequently, employers expect graduates to acquire additional skills and further credentials in order to differentiate themselves from other graduates (Coetzee, 2012a; Tomlinson, 2008). The credentialist interpretation was reflected in Participant 14's statement, "*So I think the more I study, the more I educate myself and even work experience it exposes you to different things and gives me an upper hand."* This view is common as, according to Allais (2017), "potential workers strive for higher and higher levels of qualifications to improve their place in the job queue" (p. 154).

Nevertheless some students felt that employers still actively compete to attract graduates as they bring new, unique ideas to the company. According to Participant 13, "…*at university you learn a lot of things and there's like always new theories, new information that is being provided to graduates. So I think they will be able to bring in fresh ideas. They will be able to bring in a different perspective towards the business and its goals."* This corresponds with the view that regardless of a surplus, employers actively compete to attract top-quality graduates (Arachchige & Robertson, 2013). Further, the participants still perceived their higher education credentials as providing them with access to economic and occupational opportunities. This is not surprising as there is a "…widespread perception among students that their higher education credentials are vital commodities in the pursuit of relatively well-paid, high-status and rewarding forms of graduate employment" (Tomlinson, 2008, p.52). Thus, despite their negative perception of the demand for graduates in the labour market, participants still associated their higher education credentials with labour market rewards. Participant 16 clearly communicated this in stating, *"Just because there are a lot of people at home with degrees, it doesn't mean that degrees aren't necessary for you to get a job."* Further, Participant 15 indicated, *"It is not easy to find a job in the labour market without a degree behind you. So I think it does provide you with an advantage, obviously not guarantee you a spot anywhere, but I do think having your degree behind you and having the company and the employers know that you've studied and given yourself a purpose and you have given yourself a goal to meet and you have furthered your education and your knowledge. I think employers see that as very appealing."* Therefore, it appears that the participants have internalised the prevalent view that education provides returns (Tomlinson, 2008).

It was acknowledged by Participant 7 that, *"…it's very hard to get a job without having a degree behind you."* She went on to say, *"I feel like qualification obviously is a big distinguishing factor between someone that doesn't have a tertiary education opposed to someone that does. So even though I said before that qualification is not enough it does put you at a more advantaged position than someone who is not as educated as you or who doesn't have your skills that you have acquired at university."* Thus it appears that participants differentiated themselves and their opportunities from individuals with a secondary education. For example, Participant 6 perceived her qualifications to provide her with greater growth opportunities in an organisation than *"an 18 year old just coming out of school."* She stated, *"I just think that they would put more responsibility on you. They would see you as someone who is more educated and maybe more capable…I've developed skills that maybe they haven't*

yet like communication, writing, like those kinds of things, what I've learnt in my degree like researching those kinds of things are like, I think are useful to a company." Consequently, participants attached value to their credentials based on the positional advantage it afforded them in the labour market. These perspectives may be a product of the framing of higher education as the only credible route to labour market rewards; which tends to develop a division between those who have a higher education and those who do not (Tomlinson, 2016). This may negatively impact perceptions of other vocational pathways that could lead to semi-skilled employment and thus reduce unemployment in South Africa. Nevertheless, these perceptions are realistic as Bhorat et al.'s (2016) study demonstrated a consistent trend where highly educated South Africans have more favourable labour positions than those who are less educated. Further, Moleke (2010) stated that relative to the unemployment rate of the total population in South Africa, the unemployment rate of graduates is small.

Further, research has indicated that South Africans with higher education qualifications do reap returns in the labour market (Allais, 2017). Participants felt that they could capitalise on their higher education participation through greater job opportunities, promotions, and higher salaries. According to Participant 1, graduates are valued more by employers than non-graduates and thus will receive a higher salary. Participant 4 echoed this view, "…*when I have looked at advertisements and stuff for jobs, I have seen that like the salary is negotiable like according to your level of education and also your work experience."* This discourse of graduates as higher earners tends to be common within higher education policy (Tomlinson, 2008). Further, it is used as a justification in South Africa for cost-sharing of university fees between individuals and the state (Allais, 2017). van der Berg et al. (2011) argued that there is a relationship between wages and levels of education. Additionally, education is perceived to be the majority of South Africans' only escape route from the poverty trap as it may lead to higher earnings and employment (Allais, 2017; van der Berg et al., 2011). Participant 4 appeared to agree with this as she indicated that graduates have more job opportunities, as they would *"probably be considered over someone who is less educated".*

In contrast, however, Participant 5 seemed to question the value of higher education, *"…the money and everything that you've put out there you won't get back. So at the end of the day you've put yourself through all this stress, through all these financial things and you actually not getting your value's worth".* Nevertheless, most participants perceived the worth of investing in higher education as they felt their higher education credentials would play a role in opening up opportunities in the labour market.

3.5 Demand for a Bachelor of Arts degree

According to Bhengu et al. (2006), the South African labour market is struggling to absorb the high number of South African Bachelor of Arts graduates. Further, Maharasoa and Hay (2001) found that deans of humanities faculties perceive the programmes that they offer to have a "lower exchange rate in the market place" (p.144). This may be attributed to the fact that humanities and social sciences are not perceived to be national priority areas in South Africa. Consequently, it has been argued that BA graduates develop skills that are in low demand in the labour market (Coetzee, 2012a; Moleke, 2010). Additionally, the South African labour market is said to be saturated with an oversupply of humanities graduates (Maharasoa & Hay, 2001). The participants in this study appeared to share this negative perception regarding the value of their BA degree. Participant 16 felt that employers do not target graduates with a BA degree and communicated that this low demand was indicated through the lack of bursary opportunities in her field of study. She explained that BA graduates are not well-regarded by employers as, *"they see it as a skill that we need but we won't die, our companies won't crumble if we don't have this skill. We'll use it if it's there but we won't put too much money into it."* Participant 12 perceived her BA subjects to be undesirable to employers, "…*well most of the subjects I'm doing like English, Psychology, those aren't really subjects they look for."* This seems to support the view that BA students choose subjects that are not relevant for employability or valuable to employers (Gannaway, 2015).

Goodman and Tredway (2016) found that South African humanities students had the lowest perceptions of their employability in comparison to students studying engineering, commerce, law, medicine, and science. Likewise, the participants in this study appeared to have a negative perspective of their employability prospects based on their field of study, "*BA people are at a disadvantage when it comes to labour, employment, and recruitment" (*Participant 11), *"with just a BA degree I'm not going to get a job"* (Participant 12). Further, it appears that Participant 9 agreed with research indicating that graduates from humanities are least likely to find a job in their field (Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2006; Gannaway, 2015; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012) as she indicated, "…*if you just have like a BA degree, you not going to get a job in your chosen field, you going to have to do something else maybe."* Participant 6 felt that there were no job opportunities available to her as a BA graduate, *"Nothing. It doesn't do anything. I wouldn't be employed in any field that I would want to be, like that would use my degree. I would never be employed*." Humanities students in Maharasoa and Hay's (2001) study had similar views as they felt disheartened by their lack of job opportunities. These findings

tend to contradict Qenani et al.'s (2014) results that field of study does not influence students' perceptions of their employability, as the labour market values dispositions, skills, attributes, and experiences of graduates rather than the subject of degree.

When asked what job opportunities are available to them with a BA degree, participants hesitated and expressed dismay at their limited options. For example Participant 9 stated, *"I honestly don't, I don't think there's anything hey because I mean what are you doing with a BA…unless like you can do an internship in psychology and stuff. I think that's basically it, you can just do internships, that's it."* A number of the participants indicated that their undergraduate degree would only yield internship opportunities. When asked what job opportunities would be available once her undergraduate degree was completed, Participant 13 replied, *"I'm hoping job shadowing. Although I know I won't get money, I know I'll get skills and hopefully an internship. So yah that's all I'm hoping for."* Participant 10 felt that as a BA graduate *"you've got to accept that you're on an academic track and you need to remain within the institution,"* as there is limited potential to find a job in industry. Thus given their poor perceptions of labour market demand for their field of study, it appears that these graduates were willing to compromise their goals. This relates to the finding that career compromise is associated with employment demand perceptions which may have negative implications as it can lead to career distress (Creed & Gagliardi, 2015).

The participants also perceived status differences between different fields of study and tended to adopt the view that employer demand for graduates varies according to their degrees and particular subjects (Rothwell et al., 2009). Participant 4 expressed, *"I guess it depends on the field of study, some skills are more required than others."* Participants indicated that although graduates may have an advantage in the labour market, it only applies to certain graduates, *"I think there are jobs available but I feel as though the jobs are available in certain sectors like you know your scarce skills, engineering and actuaries and whatever"* (Participant 16). Participant 15 mirrored this view, "*I think there is a strong demand for graduates in the current economy but also in specific career paths. I mean it's very easy for a CA, a Bcomm accounting student to get their articles so quickly…and get a job, it's almost like immediate. Whereas for a BA student it is a lot more challenging because our degree is not recognised as high as it should be and a lot of people underestimate our capabilities and our knowledge and abilities."* Participant 8 indicated that employers perceive a BA degree to be inferior compared to other degrees, *"I think with bigger companies they will focus on Bcomm degrees and degrees that are seen as more, I don't know that have a higher ranking than a BA, yah so they don't really*

focus on humanities." Further, Participant 7 perceived an income differential between various fields of study "…*some degrees are more prestigious which will earn them more income. So I think it's definitely a distinguishing factor."* Moreover she felt, *"that an accountant is definitely supposed to make more money than a psychologist."* This view appears to be accurate as it has been found that BA graduates' wages are consistently less than other graduates and thus a less viable option for individuals who would like to attain a high salary after graduation (Gannaway, 2015). It can thus be suggested that the participants conformed to the view that a BA degree results in graduates' reduced positional advantage in terms of labour market outcomes when compared to other fields of study (Lin et al., 2003).

Participants indicated that they had developed these views as career fairs at the University of the Witwatersrand tended to target other graduates *"…faculties in engineering, medicine, management, accounting"* (Participant 13), rather than BA students. Participant 12 felt discouraged after attending a career fair, *"…like there was hardly anything for like BA students. That was like the worst thing ever so we just like left there feeling scared and sad."* Additionally, Participant 4 felt that employers were more likely to target individuals in the field of law rather than those in the psychology department, *"I feel like legal firms always come to campus more often than employers searching for psychology graduates. I think because the university mostly invites you know legal firms and corporate firms like when we had that career day there were a lot of corporate firms and not many companies that were seeking to employ psychology students."* These findings are important as career fairs are conducted by universities to enable students to explore their employment prospects and to encourage students' employability (Payne & Sumter, 2005). However, in this case it appears that career fairs partly contributed to the BA graduates' poor perceptions of the worth of their degree by indicating their limited potential career paths.

It has been argued that liberal arts programmes such as the BA are valuable in that they develop transferable skills such as critical thinking, innovation, and ethical reasoning (Gannaway, 2015). Further, it has been suggested that the flexible and broad nature of a BA degree facilitates graduates to develop the appropriate skills to handle the ever-fluctuating labour market (Barnett, 2004). In this study, certain participants did perceive value in studying a BA degree as Participant 16 indicated, *"…it equips you with a lot of different skills. If you look at your different modules like your Sociology and English, you get so many things out of that and that's supposed to make you go further. I know more, when you do a BA you open to so many different subjects and it's just opened my mind to different things and it's given me a good*

foundation." Additionally, Participant 15 positively viewed her BA experience as its non-specificity and general trajectory enabled her to figure out where her passion lies, "*So I just applied for the BA so I could come and feel and get an idea of what I did want to do. It did take a lot of time but in third year finally I realised really where I want to go and what I want to do, so it kind of just let me do something that ended up being the best decision that I ever made."* Therefore, it appears that the participants valued their BA degree for its positive contribution to their personal development rather than its role in improving their labour market outcomes.

In summary, although Moleke (2005) found that there is a lack of significant evidence to support the view that certain fields of study result in disparities in labour market demand, the participants perceived the demand for different degrees to vary. In anticipating future employment trends, they also perceived a status difference between a BA degree and other degrees. This, however, was in contrast to the trends found in a quantitative study on self-perceived employability that ran concurrently to this study using the same pool of potential participants (Siemers, 2017). In the study, Rothwell et al.'s (2008) sixteen-item Self-Perceived Employability Scale was administered to a sample of one-hundred-and-five third year Psychology students registered at the University of the Witwatersrand. The results indicated that the majority of students who responded had a positive outlook regarding the potential value of their degree (Siemers, 2017). In answering "My chosen subject(s) rank(s) highly in terms of social status," a majority of the students selected 'neutral' (n = 42) or 'agree' (n = 31). The same occurred for the question "My degree is seen as leading to a specific career that is generally perceived as highly desirable" ($n_{neutral}$ = 42; n_{agree} = 42). It is important to note, however, that this discrepancy may be due to a different understanding of the question. In this study, participants were questioned about the value of their BA undergraduate degree specifically, whilst in the quantitative study the students may have been answering in terms of a larger process of completing Honours and Masters as well as registering as a professional psychologist, which would thereby yield different perspectives.

3.6 Labour market demand for different psychological registrations

Participants in the quantitative study (Siemers, 2017) were also optimistic when responding to the item "People in the career I am aiming for are in high demand in the external labour market" ($n_{neutral}$ = 40; n_{agree} = 49). However, in this study the participants had diverse views when asked about the labour market demand for their potential careers. Participants who had envisioned a career in organisational psychology were mostly positive about their labour market outcomes.

This was reflected in Participant 13's statement, "*Organisational psychology is now growing and it's gaining momentum and there are a lot of people who are looking for organisational psychologists. So it's in demand…"* and Participant 7's statement, *"I definitely think in terms of organisational psychology it's a major asset to the business world…organisational psychologists in general have a major part in the business. So I feel like that's important for an organisation to have and they definitely want as many as possible or the best that they could possibly get."* Participant 7 further indicated, *"…it's harder to make it as a clinical psychologist."* This appeared to be a common view amongst the participants studying to be clinical psychologists, as they doubted their employment opportunities. Participant 5 perceived a lack of demand for clinical psychologists and thus felt that she may have to take the academic route, *"there is no job unless you pursue the academic path, so I'm very concerned about it."* Further, Participant 12 felt that *"people don't have the means to pay for psychologists so that's why they are not in much demand."*

According to SIOP (2017), organisational psychology is an in-demand field for the future. Further, employment opportunities in this field are expected to grow through 2018, despite the struggling economy. Shellenbarger (2010) indicated that "psychologists will be in demand, but growth will be fastest in industrial and organizational psychology." Therefore, participants' perceptions that organisational psychologists are more in demand than clinical psychologists appears to be supported. This may be credited to organisational psychologists' ability to enhance productivity and retention in organisations (SIOP, 2017). Similarly, Participant 15 expressed that there is a demand for organisational psychologists as *"they are the heart of the company, they build the company on the level that they keep the clients happy, and they keep employees happy. They work on the profits and the incomes and how to bring everyone together to work together to get the best possible outcome…"* Therefore, the participant felt that organisational psychologists are in demand as they sustain a competitive advantage for the organisation through pursuing organisational objectives and attaining economic profits.

However, despite their hopeful attitudes towards organisational psychologists' labour market outcomes, participants still perceived higher employment prospects for individuals in scarce skills professions. According to Participant 15, *"I think they don't recognise* [psychology] *enough because you know the world is in a hierarchy, you know if you're an accountant or a lawyer that's the best possible job to have and that's recognised. Like if you a CA you're brilliant but I do think that industrial psychologists don't get the credit they deserve because they help people, they help businesses, they build companies. So I think they are under*

recognised." Participant 16 also indicated that organisational psychologists are demanded to a lesser degree, *"I don't know if they target them, like engineers*." These views are relevant as the Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa (HRD-SA) explains that in order to accelerate economic growth there should be an increase in engineering and design graduates, and an increase in qualified people in fields like "ICT, the capital/transport equipment and metal manufacture industries, the automotive and components industry and the chemicals, plastic manufacture, and pharmaceutical industries" (Chetty, 2012, p. 21). Therefore, psychology does not fall into current priority areas, which has implications for the employment of these graduates (Chetty, 2012). Thus, the participants perceived some demand for organisational psychologists and less for clinical psychologists in the labour market. In general, they reported a lack of demand for all psychologists which may imply that they perceived their reduced chances for employment in their potential careers as psychologists.

3.7 The degree is not enough

Given their perceptions of the limited value of their degree and lack of demand for their potential careers, as well as their concerns regarding the oversupply of similarly qualified graduates and their insufficient absorption in the labour market, it can be argued that participants perceived a weakening currency of their higher education credentials in the labour market. Participant 16 expressed that possessing higher education credentials is not enough, "*I think it's not even about your degree anymore, it's just about what you can make of your degree…you see that your degree doesn't even matter anymore. You need to sell yourself, you've got a degree but what else do you have. There are so many other people that have a degree and also want the job that you want."* This is important as Finch et al. (2016) believe that students need to be aware that their education is only one aspect of their competitive advantage in the labour market. In addition, Oluwajodu et al. (2015) found that higher education qualifications do not guarantee employment but rather are regarded as an entry point for consideration by employers.

It thus appears that an increase in the number of graduates entering the labour market has resulted in the participants perceiving their credentials as common and non-elite. According to Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011), employers share this view as they perceive a degree as a signal of intellectual ability, a common attribute amongst all graduates, and as such they expect graduates to combine this with other resources in order to differentiate themselves. Further, Finch et al. (2016) found that "…an earned degree does not offer a competitive advantage"

(p.70). Certain participants felt that higher education qualifications were necessary for job entry but not sufficient for job success. Participant 13 expressed that, *"…everyone starts at the bottom. It doesn't matter whether you have obtained a degree or not, you have to prove yourself to the employers that you will be able to survive within their work environment and their culture."* Participant 15 expressed a similar view, *"You will have to build yourself and let your company see that you doing well and that you're are prospering and achieving and only then I think you may get offered a higher salary."* Further, she indicated, *"I think your supervisors really don't care that you've got a degree, they care more that you produce, you've been given a task and you do it to the best of your ability. I don't think anyone with a degree would be promoted if that person doesn't do the work."*

Therefore in order to gain a positional advantage, participants articulated a need to add value to their credentials. This was indicated through the significance they attached to their postgraduate credentials, work experience, extra-curricular activities, personality characteristics, and soft skills. Similarly, in Tomlinson's (2008) study "…there was a growing sense amongst students that they had to 'do all they could' to give themselves a positional advantage in the labour market." (p.56). Thus a number of sub-themes, outlined below, emerged regarding additional factors, aside from the degree, that the participants felt were significant to their employability.

3.7.1 Postgraduate credentials

Participants felt that postgraduate qualifications would play a significant role in shaping their potential labour market outcomes. According to Participant 10, *"Well if I'm being honest, in terms of psychology, just from a third year level I don't believe there's many job opportunities because I've always had the impression that you need to study further if you want to become a psychologist or actually use psychology."* Further, Participant 4 expressed, *"I know that if you want to be a psychologist you need to have postgraduate studies."* This may be due to the fact that a postgraduate degree is a prerequisite for entering the labour market as a psychologist. In order to become a registered psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), one has to complete at least "five years full-time formal education in psychology, i.e. a three year Bachelor's degree majoring in psychology or equivalent thereof, a post-graduate year in psychology, i.e. honours degree, and a directed Master's degree programme in psychology; successful completion of a full-time approved internship of 12 months duration;

and successful completion of the National Examination of the Professional Board for Psychology" (HPCSA, 2010, p. 4).

The participants perceived there to be inadequate employment opportunities associated with a BA undergraduate degree. It was expressed by Participant 11 that without a postgraduate degree, she was not qualified for any career "*…just as a BA graduate and a BA graduate without any Honours or Masters, I don't fall into any qualification."* She felt that it would be necessary to pursue a postgraduate degree to secure a job as she explained, *"I don't think qualification wise I'd qualify to be anything."* This perspective is common as there is a tendency for liberal art graduates to pursue postgraduate studies in order to acquire a vocational qualification so that they can enter professional work (Purcell, Simm, & Pitcher, 1999; Waugh, 2001). Participant 16 also indicated the limited value in attaining an undergraduate qualification, *"You know an undergraduate you can't really do much… usually in psychology you need to go forward, you need to do Honours and Masters."* This was echoed by Participant 6, *"Without Honours or a Masters my degree is useless. My undergrad is useless."* These views correspond with Waugh's (2001) research which indicated that liberal art graduates who did not continue their education were more likely to experience poor labour market outcomes.

Interestingly, most participants had not started looking for jobs, despite their impending graduation, as they were set on first attaining postgraduate credentials. Fourteen participants indicated, on the demographic questionnaire, that they planned to continue their studies in the following year. Further, when asked about her potential job opportunities once she had completed her undergraduate degree, Participant 7 replied, *"I don't really have a back-up plan as of yet for psychology if I don't get into Honours or Masters just because it's something that I've always wanted to do, so it's something that I'm working towards…".* Additionally, Participant 2 stated that she would only attend career fairs to pursue job opportunities during her postgraduate studies, *"Yah like when I'm in Masters and Honours, I think that's when I'd start really going to more of those."* This may be attributed to Waugh's (2011) findings that liberal art graduates further their studies in order to enhance their initial employment outcomes and their career development. Further, Tomlinson (2016) argued that "individuals themselves may be 'trapped' into pursuing higher education in order to keep themselves on par with 'better qualified' graduates" (p.12).

Barone and Ortiz (2011) indicated that formal education is utilised by employers as a signal of potential employees' productivity. Consequently, postgraduate qualifications place them in a

higher position in the job queue, which incentivises them to further their studies (Allais, 2017). The participants in the current study articulated that further studies are significant for attaining a positional advantage in the labour market, "*I think it comes down to how much education you have so that's why I think it's important for me to do a postgrad next year and maybe even continue studying after that because the more degrees you have behind you the more chance I will be ahead of someone who only has one degree"* (Participant 14). Participant 3 communicated that a Master's degree is *"a very prestigious degree"* and that it is *"beneficial because you've been studying for so many years and you have actually gone through these intense two years of Honours and Masters and they don't just choose anyone, they very particular about who they chose so I think that's beneficial because it gives you a one up."* These findings may explain the discrepancy between the mean scores obtained from samples of undergraduate and postgraduate students for a self-perceived employability scale in Rothwell et al. 's (2009) study. Rothwell et al. (2009) found that "the mean score for the 16-item employability scale was much higher for the PG sample than it had been in the UG study (3.59/2.51)" (p.157).

Some participants, however, indicated that difficulties may occur if students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are unable to enter postgraduate degrees, *"…if you don't have for example say the means to study further and get like a postgraduate degree, Honours, Masters then it would be really difficult for you to go out and find a job*" (Participant 12). Participant 11 expressed, *"So in most cases if I'm from a disadvantaged family, most of the time I'd be forced to work after. I won't even have money to do my Honours and my Masters and I'm going to be forced to work immediately after graduating…being forced to work means me working for maybe a company that doesn't even pay much…people don't continue because they don't have the money and you not continuing means there is a less chance of you getting a proper job that pays well."* Research has indicated that South African Black students often do not pursue postgraduate degrees as they are pressured to start earning a salary in order to provide for their families (Habib, 2016). Thus it can be argued that the ability of postgraduate qualifications to enhance students' employment prospects may also strengthen structural inequality within South Africa, as individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds have limited access to postgraduate degrees. This argument was supported by the data provided from the participants, who felt that it could be difficult to find employment without a postgraduate qualification.

3.7.2 Work experience

Whilst further study is beneficial and can enhance employment prospects, research has indicated that relevant work experience is also useful for career success and satisfaction (Pool & Sewell, 2007; Waugh, 2001). This was perceived to be true by Participant 2, *"I definitely think the higher your qualifications the more chance you get a job. But it's also important to have job experience like that's the most important I think,"* and by Participant 11, *"You can be good on paper but what they don't tell you is that experience counts so much also. I think it's 50/50."* According to Coetzee (2012a), a higher education qualification by itself does not ensure graduate employment however work experience is recognised as a significant contributor to employment success. Experience develops one's skills and knowledge and as such enhances one's attractiveness to prospective employers (Fugate et al., 2004).

In Gault, Leach, and Duey's (2010) study of a hundred and forty-two recent university graduates, it was found that students with internship experience reported increased job acquisition skills and higher compensation satisfaction. Participant 4 indicated that completing an internship would develop one's employment potential, *"I think that would really help because I think that would count as work experience. So if you've had an internship you get an idea of what it's like to work in the field and your employers will kind of be aware of that, knowing that you've been in the field you've had some kind of experience and it will make it easier for you to work in that environment when you've actually been employed in that environment."* Similarly, Participant 3 communicated that part-time work or internships "*…teaches you life lessons. It also shows that you've been a hard worker, that you've had experience in the working world. So I think that they would be impressed that you've been balancing two things, studying and working, which are both hard things to do."* Participant 10 perceived an internship experience to be attractive to employers, *"I definitely think an internship can help, provided it is relevant, because it shows that you took the initiative to go and seek an internship. Sometimes they are not paid, so it's that determination you showing…being hard working despite having no perceived benefits…an internship can be another reference for your future employer to look at and you can learn a variety of skills in an internship."* According to Gault et al. (2010), undergraduates with internship experience are valued by employers as they are perceived to be better equipped for work life. Likewise, Participant 1 felt that her work experience had prepared her, *"…it's just taught me a lot about the working world."*

Finch et al. (2016) specified that the ability to gain work-related experience provides graduates with a competitive advantage. Further, it has been shown to be a "decisive differentiating factor among graduates" (Gault et al., 2010, p. 77). Interestingly both graduates and employers perceive work experience as a component of employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008). According to Participant 11, employers "*look into if you worked during university, you know there is vac work during holidays…which increases your chances of being hired rather than just your qualifications."* Participant 14 stated, *"Work experience…gives me an upper hand."* These perceptions correspond with Qenani et al.'s (2014) finding that work experience significantly influences students' employability perceptions. The authors indicated that "…students who report work experience gained through an internship during their academic studies…were almost 2.5 times more likely to feel highly confident of their employability, controlling for other factors" (Qenani et al., 2014, p. 208). Similarly, Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh, and Knight (2001) found that arts and design graduates perceived work experience as essential for future employability. In contrast, Rothwell et al. (2009) reported that work experience did not play a significant role in graduates' self-perceived employability; however they attributed this unusual finding to their non-homogenous sample.

Participant 6 felt that her specific job would contribute to her employability, *"I'm not au-pairing and I'm not doing something that's not furthering my career. I'm working in an NGO; I'm doing constant logistical work. I'm planning events. I'm constantly planning like tours and trips overseas and I think those are massive undertakings for a 22 year old to do…So what I'm doing is furthering my education and my career."* Participant 9 questioned whether her work experience would provide her with a positional advantage, *"Personally I do have work experience; I've been working part-time for a really long time and stuff. So I think for me that will help, because I do have experience but it's not specifically for this degree and stuff so maybe that might be a bit of a downfall."* Therefore, it appears that the participants believed that the work experience needs to be relevant to one's future career and field of study in order to enhance one's employment prospects. Likewise, Karli (2016) found a significant relationship between having work experience in the field of study and students' employability perceptions. This is supported by the results of a survey, completed by six hundred employers in the United Kingdom, where over half of the employers indicated relevant work experience to be an important graduate attribute (Brennan & David, 2010).

According to the National Treasury (2011), youth unemployment in South Africa can be partly attributed to the fact that employers perceive inexperienced job seekers as a risky investment.

Additionally, Knight and Yorke (2003) indicated employers' preference for work experience in their hiring decisions. Participants in this study similarly expressed that employers were more likely to employ graduates with work experience, *"I feel like you always have to have a certain amount of experience to get a job"* (Participant 4). Participant 2 felt that work experience is *"…very very important. The more work experience you can get the better it will be with your job prospects".* Further, Participant 2 indicated that employers *"tend to look for experienced workers"* because they can *"handle tough times."* Therefore, some students perceived their lack of work experience to negatively influence their employment opportunities. This was reflected in Participant 5's statement, *"I found that I couldn't really market myself in terms of my degree and what I got on paper because a lot of people now, yes they want you to have the knowledge that's perfect, but the practical experience counts more and life experience counts more."* The graduates in Moreau and Leathwood's (2006) study expressed similar anxiety about their lack of work experience as they felt that it would hinder the achievement of their career aspirations. Participant 13 attributed her concern to the fact that employers are *"…more accommodating to employing people who actually have skills, who have experience within the workplace."* Participant 8 appeared to share this view when asked if there is a strong demand for graduates in the economy, *"No, I feel like they'd rather use someone with a lot more experience. It takes a lot of time to train a new person."* Participant 9 responded to the same question by stating, *"No I don't think graduates. I think more for like experience because they need people who really know what they are doing."*

These perspectives may be realistic as Pauw et al. (2008) indicated that in South Africa's scarce skills economy, employers tend to employ older and more experienced workers as graduates require an investment in training. The DPRU (2006) report suggested that employer confidence in tertiary qualifications as a signal of productivity has dwindled, resulting in a demand shift from qualified to more experienced employees. Additionally, employers in Finch et al.'s (2016) study expressed, "I will always hire on real-world experience over education…" and "book learning is not sufficient; I will only hire a graduate that has combined their education with real work experience" (p.71). This was perceived to be the case by Participant 4, *"I think experience trumps education sometimes."*

In addition, Participant 14 and Participant 5 perceived there to be a connection between life experience and their employability prospects. Participant 14 stated: *"So I definitely think experience, whether its life experience or work experience. I think just personally having taken a gap year, a very productive experiential gap year* [overseas], *that I was exposed to lots of*

different things and lots of different experiences…So in terms of getting a job one day it's good that I have that because it changed my mind set." Participant 5 felt that life experience contributes to employability as when she had previously searched for a job *"…a lot of the interviews asked what are the things that really impacted your life…or what did you find made you grow as a person, so a lot of interpersonal questions of how you got to this point, what made you get to this place sitting here and what led up this decision."* Similarly, Karli (2016) indicated that employability can be affected by experiences in life.

Participant 11 expressed dismay at the fact that the opportunity for work experience is not provided by the university, *"What is a disadvantage when it comes to a lot of BA subjects is that we are not given the opportunity to go and have work experience so then this is why most people don't know that just your qualifications aren't good enough and I think maybe universities should add that*." This is important to note as literature has strongly advocated for work placements in higher education as it has been shown to enhance graduates' employability (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Rothwell et al., 2009). Additionally, Onyishi et al. (2015) indicated that internships and work placements can enhance individuals' self-perceived employability, which can positively impact their ability to compete in the highly competitive labour market. Therefore, it has been suggested that industry and universities partner to provide work experience to graduates that "…complements the programme of study to develop relevant skills at the undergraduate level" (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010, p. 238). In addition, it has been proposed that work-related learning, through internships and work placements, should be part of the university experience (Qenani et al., 2014).

3.7.3 Extra-curricular activities

Cole, Rubin, Feild, and Giles (2007) found that individuals who reported work experience and extra-curricular activities on their resumes were perceived to be highly employable. Further, according to Pinto and Ramalheira (2017), "extra-curricular activities and work experience are the main 'player' strategies that have been pursued by graduates entering into the labour market" (p.167). Although participants agreed that work experience enhanced their marketability in the labour market, they had contrasting perspectives regarding the importance of extra-curricular activities. Certain participants perceived extra-curricular activities as a means to project their competencies beyond their formal education. Participant 9 felt that extra-curricular activities such as charity, public speaking, or playing on a sports team would influence one's employability *"…just shows that you can do a lot as well. It's like saying, like*

working part-time and doing sports, you can multi-task; you can still have a good life and still focus on your school work as well." On the other hand, Participant 15 stated that *"Extracurricular* [activities] *is just on the side for you to enjoy, it's about your life but I don't think it should have anything to do with your job employment."* Participant 10 explained that she didn't think it was appropriate to list extra-curricular activities on a CV, *"I don't feel that is appropriate on a CV. I don't think I've seen too many CV's where people list their hobbies because I think maintaining an air of professionalism, especially when you're just seen as a piece of paper initially, it's better to come across very professional and quick, and to the point because when people have to sift through lots of CV's, it's nicer to just have a one to two pages…I've got the gist of who this person is, they are qualified, we can consider interviewing them. But if you are very long-winded with the whole thing then it can put people off."*

Both Participant 7 and Participant 8 also felt conflicted about the worth of extra-curricular activities, "*I don't know, I do have it on my CV like what I've done but I think they need to see it in person. I always think that words are words until you actually see it in practice*" (Participant 8), *"In my opinion I don't think those are major factors, I don't see how a sport or what you did when you were younger determines if you should be in a job or not. But again I feel like it kind of shows who you are as a person…they can kind of build that up from what they see based on those extra-curricular activities that you decided to do, so I think it's also very dependent but yes and no"* (Participant 7). These diverse views are also reflected in previous research; for example, students in Tymon 's (2013) study perceived limited value in extra-curricular opportunities, whereas the graduates in Tomlinson's (2008) research indicated extra-curricular activities' "potential utility value in the graduate market" (p.57).

Additionally, there are mixed reviews concerning the significance of volunteering activities in providing a positional advantage in the labour market. Whilst certain research has indicated that students perceive volunteering to enhance their skills and employability, there is little empirical evidence to back this up (Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Tymon, 2013). Nevertheless, Participant 13 perceived the usefulness of charity involvement, *"Oh yes that will also help. I mean they will see that okay even though you don't have the workplace skills, I mean you have shown initiative to try and help the community…Yah so I think it's a contributing factor to employment."* This perspective was echoed by Participant 5, *"…definitely community work and charity and all those type of things contribute to that…it's like a face value assessment on that person's personality. Like are you that type of person, are you willing to give some of your time to charity, and you know that type of characteristic will work in the workplace."* This

supports previous research which indicated that due to the competitive labour market, students engage in volunteer work in order to strengthen their employment potential (Handy et al., 2010; Holdsworth, 2010).

Participant 12 perceived an improvement in employment prospects, "... *if you're part of like groups on campus like they have these groups, these political groups or charity groups those kinds of things."* Further, Participant 11 expressed that employers *"…look into, if during varsity…if you were part of any society, if you were part of any leadership programmes…programmes to show that you can actually work with people and hold some like leadership position, so you have leadership qualities…"* Correspondingly, research has found that engagement in student associations can assist in developing students' leadership and interpersonal skills which are valued by employers (Brown & Campion, 1994; Nemanick & Clark, 2002).

Regardless of these diverse views, there was a common feeling amongst the participants that they needed to develop experiences and achievements outside their formal education, whether through work experience or extra-curricular activities. Participant 12 indicated that work experience and extra-curricular activities are important for employability, "*Well because I think they see that you are actually contributing and that you actually genuinely care about something and also that you can handle extra-curricular activities outside of like your studies."* It appears that participants had the view that their employment potential could no longer be represented solely by their higher education qualifications and that they would have to project individualised qualities as well in order to stand out in the congested market.

3.7.4 Personal characteristics

Given the high supply of graduates with similar education profiles, it has been proposed that employers have begun to attach greater significance to personal traits than to tertiary education qualifications (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). It appears that some of the participants recognised this emphasis placed on personal and behavioural attributes by employers as Participant 1 attributed her potential job opportunities to her individual qualities, *"Literally because of my individual qualities. I think my degree would be something that benefits me, but I don't think it's something that would get me the job. I think I would even be able to get the job without my degree…I don't think my degree would specifically give me an opportunity. It would just back me up."* Responding to the question regarding what employers perceive to be more valuable between personal characteristics and qualifications,

Participant 5 indicated, *"Your personal characteristics, I definitely think so…definitely your personal skills, it's something that they value the most."* Further with regards to job interviews she had attended, she expressed "*…a lot of the questions weren't based on what I studied. Like I think two or three of them were but a lot of them were scenario-based, what my personality is, what I would do in a situation, how I would communicate my views. So a lot of it came down to how I think as an individual and my perspective of the world…I think that is what employers are looking for."* This corresponds with Tomlinson's (2008) finding that students perceive their employability to be linked to who they are as individuals.

Certain participants felt that their degree would provide them with a job interview but their personality characteristics would place them in a position to actually attain the job. This was evident in Participant 10's statement *"…my gut would tell me they value the higher qualification credentials because your personality and characteristics only have the potential to come through in the interview. Before you are a piece a paper and if your credentials aren't what they need to be, they won't let you through to the interview round. Then I think it starts to become the issue of your personality and your traits because now we've let a bunch of people through, we all know they've got the credentials but now I'm looking for the right person based on how the interview goes. So then I think it becomes important."* Simply put by Participant 14, *"I think your qualifications get you the interview and your characteristics get you the job."* This perspective was mirrored by Participant 11, *"When they go through the screening process it's the qualifications but as soon as you get to the interview it's not necessarily. The qualifications do play a role but how you interact with them at the time is most important and that's your personal characteristics. Because they not going to know your personality before so they need to know your degree or your qualifications. But at a certain time they would need to see your personal characteristics and what you can bring to the company. So I think it's both."*

Participant 7 held the perspective that employers value both higher education qualifications and personality characteristics to an equal degree, *"…it's not just about your qualification, as I said it's over and above that. It's what you provide to the business. You can have your degree behind you and you can know all you need to know but if you don't have the personality for the job you won't get what you need done and it's not going to benefit the business… So I feel like they value both."* Participant 8 shared this perspective, *"I don't know, I think it's a mixture of both. If I'm honest you can have your Masters but be so poor at communicating with someone. It's all about the right fit I think."* These perspectives are similar to employer perspectives in

Finch et al.'s (2016) study. The employers indicated that education cannot be the single dimension on which hiring decisions are made as personal characteristics are also very important (Finch et al., 2016).

Tomlinson (2008) found that in light of the competitive labour market, significance was given by his participants to the social fit between employers and individual graduates. Similarly, Participant 6 felt that if a graduate possesses the appropriate qualifications but not the desired personality characteristics "*they not going to employ you…companies want a certain type, certain types of people that fit in with their culture, fit in with their environment and I think that's like important for a company in order for like things to work and mesh and for people to get along with…you got to be careful with who you employ. You got to fit a certain criteria I guess."* Participant 13 echoed this point, *"Your personality has to match with their organisational culture. I would say personality first because I know they do these psychometric tests so if your personality matches with their culture, then you are able to network with other employees and the employers as well. So you are able to work in an environment where you all accommodate each other, where you all respect each other."* This perspective is appropriate as it has become increasingly common to assess the congruence between personality and employer needs during the recruitment stage (Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Finch et al., 2016).

These findings reiterate the students' concerns regarding the limited value of their higher education qualification and their need to develop soft credentials, such as personal attributes, in order to gain a competitive advantage in the labour market. However, certain participants appeared to subscribe to the human capital interpretation in their perspective of what employers value most highly. This was reflected in Participant 3's statement *"I think my qualifications because in essence that's what is going to be the most productive and most beneficial to their organisation,"* and Participant 5's account, *"I think that your higher education qualifications would be their first priority because they obviously want to employ someone…who's got their degree and they know what they doing and they know what they getting themselves into...so I think your higher education qualification is the number one priority."* It thus appears that they believed that employers make a rational decision to select and prioritise tertiary educated employees (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016). Nevertheless, it has been shown that dispositions, personality traits, and individual attitudes contribute to one's employability, future income, and success in the labour market (Lees, 2002; Qenani et al., 2014; Semeijn, Boone, Van der Velden, & van Witteloostuijn, 2005), and the participants appeared to generally concur with this.

3.7.5 The degree is not enough: Adding value to higher education qualifications

In light of the above findings it can be concluded that the majority of the participants in this study agreed with previous research that has indicated that academic knowledge and technical skills alone are not adequate for employability (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Potgieter, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008). There also appeared to be a degree of qualification in the students' perspectives about the utility of their higher education qualifications in the labour market. Specifically, the participants perceived that their higher education qualifications would afford them employment opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible; however they also acknowledged that they are faced with the task of developing additional credentials, experience, and skills in order to gain a positional advantage in an over-saturated graduate labour market.

3.8 Other factors contributing to self-perceived employability

As mentioned in the literature review, self-perceived employability is a multi-faceted construct consisting of internal and external dimensions (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Qenani et al., 2014; Rothwell et al., 2008; Vanhercke et al., 2014). In this study, participants identified demographic features; personal characteristics, attributes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours; job searching behaviour; social media presence; and performance at university as additional internal factors that contributed to their employability (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Qenani et al., 2014; Rajan et al., 2000; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). In addition, the participants recognised the reputational capital of their higher education institution as an external factor that could bolster their employment prospects (Rothwell et al., 2009).

3.8.1 Demographics

Research has indicated that the rate of return to graduates differs based on a variety of factors. For example, female graduates and minority ethnic groups are less likely to benefit from possessing a degree in terms of labour market awards (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). This may occur as employees are commonly selected based on individual or group characteristics, otherwise known as 'stereotype signals' of a person's ability (Forrier & Sels, 2003). According to Participant 7, one's qualification is not enough as employability also depends on *"your background, so basically where you went to school what race you are, there's all different factors that come to determine whether you get a job or not compared to someone else."* Echoing this view, Participant 15 expressed, "*I think your race may impact your employability*

as well as your gender and your socioeconomic status." According to Qenani et al. (2014), personal factors such as race, gender, age, and other demographics do have an impact on self-perceived employability. In addition, Moleke (2005) indicated that graduates' employment prospects are affected by race and gender. This appeared to be a common perception amongst the participants as Participant 11 indicated, "*I think demographics have a lot to do with people getting hired."*

These findings contradict Rothwell et al.'s (2008) finding of non-significant relationships between self-perceived employability and demographic variables, however they may be partly accounted for by the legal and social structures present in South Africa. With the dismantling of Apartheid, the Employment Equity Act (1998) was established to encourage equal opportunity in the workplace. The legislation prescribes a degree of preferential treatment by employers for designated groups in order to compensate for past injustices and ensure an "equitable distribution of all groups in all occupations and levels in the workplace" (Wöcke & Sutherland, 2008, p. 536). Designated groups include Africans, Coloureds, Indians, white females, and the physically disadvantaged (Wöcke & Sutherland, 2008). However, this legislation has become viewed by some as an employment barrier for non-designated South Africans (Reddy, 2004; Schultz & Schultz, 2010). It is thus not surprising that the participants in this study perceived their race and gender to influence their employability. For example, Participant 16 perceived her demographics to positively contribute to her employability, *"...the fact that I'm an African female it does. A lot of the job opportunities that get advertised they say if you're a woman that's great, if you a black woman that's really great."* This perception was further reflected in Participant 9's statement, *"It* [demographics] *does help hey, I meant it's a big big factor…in terms of the BEE* [Black Economic Empowerment] *policy so if I'm black and there is a white person next to me I'd probably get employed more."* On the other hand, Participant 15 saw a negative correlation between her demographics and employment prospects, *"I think that it's very hard to get a job, you know, being a white female."* Similarly Participant 7 expressed, *"I just think because of South African history, unfortunately race and gender is something that's a huge determining factor in today's time. I definitely think as a white female I'm at a huge disadvantage in terms of who gets employed."* Thus, it appears that recruiting decisions in favour of the designated groups may lead to perceptions of unintentional discrimination against members of another group (Schultz & Schultz, 2010).

Coetzee and Schreuder (2010) and Schultz and Schultz (2010) argue that this situation has resulted in some white South Africans experiencing resentment towards organisations.

Participant 14 perceived the relationship between her race and employability to be unfair, "*I don't think it should be done in a discriminatory way that it discriminates against white people…I don't like the discrimination, I think it should be judged equally, it should be judged according to your abilities and not the colour of your skin."* Participant 10 further expressed frustration at the role of her *"skin colour"* in her labour market outcomes, *"…my mom is into recruitment and she often will receive a brief for a job and it specifies BEE, and so I know that counts me out of a lot of jobs if I try to apply and that is a scary thought for me personally, which is why I have thought of maybe the opportunity or potential of going overseas and seeking employment rather overseas because maybe the concept of skin colour won't come into it as much…So because of those fears I have and those reasons, I don't think I would want to seek employment in South Africa initially.* Participant 10's views are not uncommon; and are linked to arguments that affirmative action policies may have reduced the utilisation of young white graduates' skills in South Africa and encouraged emigration (Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Race thus appeared to be a key demographic factor identified by the participants to influence their self-perceived employability as well as their actual employability.

Rothwell and Arnold (2007), Rothwell et al. (2009), and Karli (2016) found no statistical relationship between gender and self-perceived employability. In line with this, both Participant 13 and Participant 12 did not perceive their gender as impeding their career progression and thus downplayed the influence of social structures, *"…but as a graduate I don't think* [gender] *will affect my employability"* (Participant 13), *"I don't really think it matters much your gender"* (Participant 12). Contrastingly, Qenani et al.'s (2014) study indicated that there were differences between genders in their stated self-confidence about the likelihood of employment right after graduation. They found that "female students are 50% less likely to consider themselves as highly employable compared to male students" (Qenani et al., 2014, p. 208). Similarly, when questioned about her gender, Participant 8 stated, "*I think it does hold me back because obviously I'm female."* According to Qenani et al. (2014), such findings may result from greater opportunities for men in the labour market. Further, research has indicated that females may be considered less employable than males due to family responsibilities and gender stereotypes (Clarke, 2008; Potgieter, 2012; Scandura & Lankau, 1997). On the other hand, the males in Bezuidenhout's (2011) study scored lower than the females on all of the employability dimensions. Similarly Participant 14 explained, *"I feel like nowadays companies are looking for females more than males, so I think that would be*

advantageous to me in that sense." Likewise, Participant 6 expressed, "*I think people are employing more women now and are trying to empower women. I think it's a focus in the workplace now, especially in South Africa they are trying to employ African women and give them like an opportunity to grow. So I think women are quite advantaged."* These findings may also be a product of the employment equity legislation which dictates the preferential treatment of women as a designated group in the South African labour market (Wöcke & Sutherland, 2008). It is important to note that the participants did not refer to their age in discussing the factors influencing their employability although research has shown that age does play a contributing role (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Despite the participants' differing perspectives, factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, disability, and social class have been shown to influence employment opportunities (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). More specifically, tracer studies in South Africa indicated that race and gender function as substantial predictors of success in the labour market (Allais, 2017). Nevertheless, certain participants refused to perceive social inequalities present in the labour market as a barrier. Participant 1 believed that she cannot use her demographics *"...as an excuse. I can't let these things stand in my way.*" Further, Participant 14 stated, *"...you just got to look in the right industries and additionally not give up like if you don't get a job in a certain place, don't stop trying, that's just the way it is. We've got to take initiative because no one else is going to help us…"* These perceptions are consistent with employability discourse which tends to discount social inequalities and prioritise individual responsibilities (Chetty, 2012). However, whilst cultivating appropriate employability skills amongst graduates is necessary, one cannot ignore the impact that social and cultural capital has on labour market opportunities. This was recognised by most participants who appeared to be very aware of contextual factors affecting employment.

3.8.2 Characteristics, attributes, behaviours, knowledge, and skills

The participants in the study perceived that their personal characteristics, attributes, and behaviours, as well as their knowledge and skills, would contribute to their employability. More specifically, they felt that employers would target graduates who *"...create a good name and a reputation for the business"* (Participant 1), which would be reflected through their individual qualities. Certain qualities that were specified as attractive to employers included motivation and determination, *"So I think if you have determination and that willpower you will go places"* (Participant 1), *"I feel like you have to be determined, I feel like that's a major*

characteristic that you need to have in order to perform better, I feel like it's also important for you to be motivated in the job…if you determined and motivated in the job you doing, it will only help benefit the business that you in" (Participant 7). Participants also perceived their ambition and drive to play a role in their employability, *"I think my determination and ambition would definitely impact my employability* (Participant 15), *"I'm very ambitious, I'm like very driven and I think that's a big big point and I'm not complacent…"* (Participant 6). This corresponds with Rothwell et al.'s (2008) finding that ambition is strongly correlated with self-perceived employability.

Additionally, Rothwell et al. (2008) found that internal employability was related to self-confidence; and research has found there to be significant relationships between self-esteem and employability (Fugate et al., 2004; Potgieter, 2012). Potgieter (2012) noted that "...people with higher self-esteem will have higher employability attributes" (p. 11). The participants also identified this relationship as they indicated that self-confidence was highly appealing to employers. Participant 9 communicated that self-belief places one at an advantage in the labour market *"…because you get confidence; you get courage to like talk at interviews…they can also see it if you have self- belief, people can see, actually see that you are confident in what you do and then that can actually be a big factor in you being employed."* Participant 10 expressed similar views on the relationship between self-belief and employability, "*…when you go for an interview they ask you what your strengths and weaknesses are and if you start to say you don't have that many strengths and you've got so many weaknesses, because you're doubting yourself, it can come across as someone who's not going to fit in here…"* This appears to be consistent with the finding in Wickramasinghe and Perera's (2010) study that graduates, employers, and university lecturers perceive self-confidence as one of the most important employability skills. Research has also found that people who perceive themselves as highly employable or have a positive self-appraisal are more likely to engage in proactive job searching behaviour (Onyishi et al., 2015; Wanberg et al., 2010).

Finch et al. (2016) indicated that personality traits such as motivation and adaptability influence individuals' employability. Likewise, when asked what factors contributed to their employability, Participant 16 responded that she is *"very flexible"* and *"adaptable*" whilst Participant 6 stated, *"I'm quite adaptable, I adapt to certain situations and I'm always like on my toes.*" The participants also recognised their communication, listening, and interpersonal skills as contributing to their employability. According to Participant 11, employers value *"good communication, good listening skills in the sense that you can take instruction."*

Similarly Participant 5 stated*, "I definitely think communication, the ability to work within a team…teamwork, presentation skills, and listening…those are the four things that stick out because at the end of the day no person would hire someone who doesn't listen or who can't communicate effectively because if you cannot communicate and you misread a situation you can cause a havoc in the company so I think those are definitely the four skills they look for."* Such perspectives are realistic as research has demonstrated that interpersonal skills such as communication, listening, adaptability, teamwork, and managing relationships signal employability (Finch et al., 2016; Kelley & Bridges, 2005).

Participant 1 perceived her experience of attending a leadership ambassador programme overseas to positively contribute to her employability. Similarly, Participant 11 felt that *"leadership qualities"* would bolster her employment prospects whilst Participant 9 indicated that employers attach value to "*good leadership skills".* According to Abraham and Karns (2009), leadership skills are one of the top ten employee competencies identified by American businesses. Dedication, honesty, loyalty, and reliability were also pinpointed as characteristics prioritised by employers. Participant 10 felt that employers target *"…someone who is honest and trustworthy, because you don't want to have any disciplinary actions or issues with an employee because of misconduct…"* It was further reported by Participant 4 and Participant 14 that individuals who are *"able to work under pressure,"* are attractive in the labour market. Innovation was another factor that was identified, for example, Participant 2 indicated that *"I think you also need to be innovative, come up with new ideas to help improve things."* Additionally, it was communicated by Participant 11 that employers pursue employees who *"try…when you go into the workplace you won't know everything but they appreciate your enthusiasm of wanting to actually try and fit into everything."* All these factors are consistent with Woods and West's (2010) assertion that employers seek "…employees who are reliable, dependable, able to work under pressure, creative, and enthusiastic" (p.71). Lastly, the attribute identified by most participants to contribute to employability was work ethic, "*Most companies obviously want employees that are hardworking"* (Participant 2), *"I think the main one* [characteristic] *obviously would be hard-working"* (Participant 10).

Thus it appears that the participants in the study perceived their personal characteristics, attributes, and behaviours, as well as their knowledge and skills, to influence their employment prospects. These included motivation and determination; ambition and drive; self-confidence; adaptability and flexibility; interpersonal skills; leadership qualities; dedication, honesty, and loyalty; innovation; the ability to work under pressure; enthusiasm; and work ethic.

3.8.3 Job searching behaviour

Mastery of job search has been indicated as an internal dimension of employability (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Certain participants also specified that job search behaviour would be an asset in their ability to secure employment. For example, Participant 16 stated, *"You need to be persistent; you need to attend those interviews. You need to send those emails, certify those documents, go and submit those certified IDs and matric results and transcripts. You need to do it consistently before you get a response."* Participant 4 expressed that job searching behaviour *"would definitely help* [one's employability] *because you won't actually get a job offer if you don't seek a job. Yah so you have to go out and seek as many jobs as you can and hope you just get one."* According to Participant 12, job searching behaviour would play an instrumental role in one's employability. However, she expressed that she had not developed the appropriate job seeking tools, *"Sometimes you don't know where to start like okay do I start online? Do I go here, do I go there?"* This supports the importance of educational institutions connecting graduates with potential employers and providing training for developing job searching skills (Gedye et al., 2004; Paadi, 2014).

It appears that the University of the Witwatersrand does attempt to achieve this through offering career fairs. Participant 9 and Participant 11 felt that attending these could be a step towards employability. This may be the case as career fairs can provide graduates with one-on-one interactions with employers which enables them to acquire advice and answers to their questions as well as establish contacts for future career searches (Payne & Sumter, 2005). However, as mentioned above, many of the participants indicated that they did not find these career fairs particularly beneficial and hence did not make common use of this channel. When asked whether she would attend a career fair offered by the university to find a job, Participant 6 responded, *"I've never gone to one so I don't know if they'd be beneficial so I don't know. But no I'd probably wouldn't."* Participant 13 stated, *"I feel like for our profession our career days are limited."* Similarly, Participant 10 doubted the utility of Wits' career days, *"So if there was a career day that was more focused on what I was interested in, then I would probably go to that particular career day. But I find they are very broad…and that can be a bit confusing and irritating because it feels like you're just going around getting a whole host of information, none of it is really relevant to you as an individual."*

According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), "…access to formal and informal networks is an important component of job search and employability" (p. 3). Moreover, Fugate et al. (2004)

indicated that networking with individuals who provide information and guidance can enhance one's employment prospects. The participants echoed this view as Participant 16 expressed that she would *"definitely use networking abilities"* to seek a job whilst Participant 1 indicated that "*…networking is really really important and I think it will take you to the next level.* Further, Participant 9 insisted that networking abilities are vital, *"I think in South Africa that is sometimes the only way for you to get a job."* Likewise, Participant 6 felt that due to the competitive graduate labour market, employability *"…depends on who you know at the end of the day. It's all about networking."* Previous research has demonstrated that networks enhance graduates' position in the labour market more than possession of an undergraduate degree (Tomlinson, 2016). This finding appeared to underscore Participant 11's perception that there is a lack of job opportunities for graduates and that *"...people who have jobs, most of the time it's through connections, who they knew."*

McQuaid, Greig, and Adams (2004) indicated that effective job search channels influence employability. Correspondingly, Van der Merwe (2009) stated that "… job search conditions and techniques may influence the rate of graduate employment" (p.403). For example, job hunting through social media has been shown to expand candidates' social networks which improves their ability to find a job (Sivertzen et al., 2013; Zhitomirsky-Geffet & Bratspiess, 2015). Further, social media sources utilised for job seeking such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn enhance candidates' access to information surrounding job opportunities and has thus effectively contributed to the job search process (Moore & Fris, 2014). Certain participants indicated social networking sites as their preferred job search information source. Participant 10 stated, *"I would have to consider creating a LinkedIn account and maybe putting myself out there because I know people now use the Internet and LinkedIn as a way to actually search for applicants."* Participant 8 expressed that she would utilise *"social media, like twitter,"* to look for a job. She explained, "*I actually see people tweet out, we need so and so for this and whatever, so yah that's how I learnt about the graduates' programme that I applied for."* Facebook was used by Participant 5 as a job search channel, *"actually Facebook… if you look for a job posting on this they say okay this is similar to this job posting. Yah so Facebook has also started to get on to that type of platform".* Research has indicated that with the explosive growth of social media, organisations have increased their adoption of this medium to inform and recruit potential employees. Thus it is not surprising that online recruiting and job searching has become an established norm (Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010).

Participants further highlighted proactive online searching as part of their job seeking behaviour. Participant 14 stated, *"Firstly I would look online for all the different job descriptions."* Participant 10 expressed that her job search process would involve *"…looking online to see what kind of jobs are available, seeing if I meet the criteria and then applying probably via email with my CV…"* Online job portals were also prioritised by the participants, "*So one of things that I did when I even started varsity was I put myself on every platform of opportunities that there were…you put up your profile like your CV and whatever and I still get messages from them to this day"* (Participant 1). These findings appear to be common as the Internet is a frequently used job search medium among job seekers (Soulez & Guillot-Soulez, 2011). Further, the participants are Generation Y members and are thus part of a technologically savvy generation which leads them to utilise the Internet predominantly for job hunting (Soulez & Guillot-Soulez, 2011). Carvalho (2008) found that Generation Y members actually distrust jobs that are not advertised online as they perceive it to be a signal of an organisation's inability to adapt to the modern work environment.

Despite this, it has been shown that graduates utilise a variety of sources for job searching (Soulez & Guillot-Soulez, 2011). For example, Participant 5 searched local newspapers and contacted recruitment agencies. She further indicated that she relied on *"…word of mouth, so I went to family, I went to friends and I basically said listen guys this is what I have done, do you know of anyone."* Participant 6 had a similar idea*, "I'd ask people for advice. I'd ask my parents. I would ask people in the field where to go, who to talk to, network, that kind of thing."* Likewise, Participant 15 stated, "*I would obviously try through word of mouth, if family members of friends know anyone looking."* According to Soulez and Guillot-Soulez (2011), young Generation Y graduates frequently seek out information about job openings from employees with whom they have social connections.

The above findings identified the participants' preferred job search methods such as social networking sites, proactive online searches, online job portals, and word of mouth. Further, the data collected demonstrates the value that the participants placed on networking as well as their perceptions of the limited role their university played in their job search process.

3.8.4 Social Media Presence

A subtheme that emerged from the data is the role of social media in graduates' employability. Participant 5 indicated that when attending a job interview she was asked about her social media presence, *"One of the questions that was very interesting that I got asked was what*

social networks sites do I own and [the interviewer] *said do I think I have a good public image on those sites…"* According to Caers and Castelyns (2011), social media has emerged as an informal information source about potential employees. It provides employers with access to candidates' interests, opinions, and other personal information which is valuable as it can facilitate their evaluation of candidates' potential fit with the organisation (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Research has indicated that employers utilise social media to explore graduates' behavioural patterns and, as such, their social media profiles can positively contribute to their employability if they portray their qualifications and present themselves in a favourable light (Benson, Morgan, & Filippaios, 2014). On the other hand, one's social media presence can also inhibit one's employment opportunities (Osborne & Connelly, 2015). Profiles displaying drinking or drug use, poor communication skills, negative social interactions, or inappropriate or provocative photographs may impair a candidate's employment potential (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Vicknair et al., 2010). This was perceived to be the case by Participant 10, "*I know social media creates a massive issue with being hired nowadays because employers will look."* She explained that her previous employer *"…would go and try and find the applicant on Facebook and actually view their profile and the one applicant she saw her profile, and she realised there's a lot of pictures of her partying with alcohol and it creates that perception of are you going to come into work on Monday hungover and actually be productive?"*. It thus appears that by not considering the outreach and content of one's social media presence, graduates can experience adverse effects within the labour market (Osborne & Connelly, 2015). However, despite its potential impact on employability only a few of the participants noted the importance of their social media presence.

3.8.5 Performance at university

Rothwell et al. (2008) found that student perceptions regarding engagement with their studies and academic performance explained 8.1% of the variance in the employability scale scores they obtained. Further, Qenani et al. (2014) discovered that students with a higher grade point average were more likely to feel highly confident in their employability. Likewise, Participant 7 felt that academic performance is a *"huge factor*" of employability, "*I definitely feel like any organisational business is going to be impressed by the results that you actually get in university."* With regards to applying for a graduate programme, Participant 8 told the interviewer "*I actually had to enter my marks and have a transcript so that played a huge part in the employability factor."* Similar to the students in Tomlinson's (2008) study, the participants seemed to view their marks as instrumental in their labour market outcomes, for

example, Participant 13 indicated that *"...your marks also have to be good in order to get the employment that you are looking for and to meet the requirements of the employers…I mean employers won't employ someone with low marks, but rather an individual with higher marks who has applied for the same job. Yah so they are a contributing factor."* Such perceptions seem to be realistic as academic performance has been linked to labour market rewards such as employment and salary (Chia & Miller, 2008; McKinney, Carlson, Mecham, D'angelo, & Connerley, 2003).

The participants indicated that a strong academic performance would signal their labour market potential to employers which would enhance their employability. According to Participant 15, *"one's performance at university is a strong indicator of how you will perform in the work place in a job after you graduated."* Correspondingly, research has found academic performance to be a significant predictor of job performance (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Participant 12 felt that achieving distinctions at university would impact her employment opportunities, "*because it shows that you can handle it and that you put your hundred percent into it…then obviously they'll consider well this person will obviously do the same in their work."* According to Participant 14, employers utilise graduates' academic performance, "…*to see if you can cope with work or if you hard working and diligent or do you not care whatsoever because I think that will reflect on your work in a job as well".* This is consistent with the human capital theory which indicates that "…differences in academic achievement may translate into different levels of workplace productivity" (Chia & Miller, 2008, p. 16).

Participant 3 felt that one's academic performance reflects characteristics valued by employers, *"...if you do well there's obviously a certain amount of work that you have to put into it, you don't just get good marks. So I think it shows that you are hardworking and that you actually know what you learning so you have a good background of the work that you will be doing."* This was supported by Finch et al.'s (2016) finding that employers perceive academic performance as an indicator of a candidate's possession of important characteristics such as discipline, goal orientation, and organisation. In addition, Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) found that graduates with résumés indicating high academic performance scored significantly higher in ratings of their job suitability, personal organisation, time management skills, and learning skills than those with low academic performance. Further, it has been shown that academic performance is positively related to supervisors' assessment of employees' job performance as well as training performance in the workplace (Devaraj & Babu, 2004; Roth, BeVier, Switzer, & Schippmann, 1996). Participant 10 perceived this to be the case, *"I know some people will*

put on their CV 'qualified with distinction' and I believe that can create a better perception because it's now this perception that this is someone who really knew what they were doing in their degree, they managed to qualify with distinction, they must know a lot about their field and they'll do better in their job because I won't have to train them so much or catch them out for any aspects that they are lagging behind."

In addition, the majority of the students in this study perceived their academic performance at university to play a facilitative role in gaining a positional advantage in the competitive graduate labour market. This was reflected in Participant 4's statement regarding the influence of academic performance on employability, "*I think it would in that sense that if you apply for a job and someone else applies and you seem to be the same level then maybe they look at your academic results or something to decide which candidate is best."* Thus it appears that the participants felt that employers consider performance at university in order to discriminate between increasing number of graduates with similar credentials. Participant 3, however, held a differing opinion, *"…if two people have the same degree and everything and the one got higher marks but the other one's more, because of their characteristics, can be more suited to the environment of the workplace, I think that will give them a big advantage."* Participant 15 further indicated the importance of one's characteristics, *"I don't think your marks are going to get you a job. I think you as a person, how you going to better your company and better yourself, build yourself up the ladder, create a future for yourself, I think that is the most important thing."* Additionally, Participant 11 felt that employers consider graduates' academic performance in relation to their other achievements*, "…so say you were an A student who didn't have a background in participating in any society, you still stand at a disadvantage in the sense that maybe I'm not an A student but I'm a B/C student and I have proof to show that I was part of* [a student council] *at Wits and I worked, then it could be 50/50 because I don't think it's obvious that an A student is going to be taken as opposed to a B/C student who has so much to offer."* Contrastingly, Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) found that the importance given to academic performance superseded the value of participating in extra-curricular activities when individuals' resumes were evaluated for job suitability.

However, despite these conflicting views, the majority of the participants in the study perceived academic performance to play an important role in their employability. This may explain the popularity of the responses 'strongly agree' (n= 42) and 'agree' (n=45) to the item "I regard my academic work as top priority" in the quantitative study on self-perceived employability that ran concurrently to this study (Siemers, 2017).

3.8.6 Reputational capital of the university

The participants attributed their choice to study at the University of the Witwatersrand to its high standing in South Africa, "*So Wits is like the Harvard of South Africa. My first choice was Wits…it's the best university in like Johannesburg and I just think it's a really really like an outstanding institution"* (Participant 1), *"Wits has always been known as one of the top universities in South Africa and I've always wanted to come to Wits"* (Participant 15). Participant 14 indicated that she chose to study at the University of the Witwatersrand because "*it's very high standing in South Africa, so people look at Wits and go okay that's a well renowned university."* Likewise, Participant 12 explained that she applied at the University of the Witwatersrand *"because I heard that it's the best university in South Africa."* According to ShanghaiRanking's (2017) Academic Ranking of World Universities 2017 list, the University of the Witwatersrand is the highest ranking university in Africa. Further, Oluwajodu et al. (2015) indicated that the University of the Witwatersrand is regarded as a top university with a positive reputation in South Africa. Thus, there seems to be strong support for the perspective that the University of the Witwatersrand has a good reputation.

Participant 15 expressed *"…that students coming from Wits may have a bit more of an advantage, just from the perspective that Wits is seen as one of the top universities in South Africa, a lot of students prosper to such a great level after coming out of this university."* Thus the participants perceived the reputation of the University of the Witwatersrand to be an asset in a congested labour market, *"I think that having a Wits education behind you gives you a step ahead*" (Participant 14), *"Wits does come out at the top. So I feel like that's going to help me a lot* (Participant 8). Participant 9 indicated that she chose to attend the University of the Witwatersrand because *"you get a high employment rate… you able to get hired if you study at Wits."* Similar results were found in the concurrent quantitative study (Siemers, 2017), as the majority of the participants selected 'strongly agree' (n = 51) and 'agree' (n = 40) in response to the item "The status of this university is a significant asset to me in job seeking." Thus it appears that in both studies the participants felt that they could capitalise on the status and reputation of the University of the Witwatersrand in order to position themselves at an advantage in the labour market. The perception that attending an elite university has a significant role in future labour market outcomes was also found amongst the students in Tomlinson's (2008) study. Such perceptions are supported by the finding that the reputation of one's higher education institution is utilised by employers to differentiate between graduates with similar qualifications (Tholen, 2013).

The participants in the quantitative study further indicated that employers are eager to employ graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand ($n_{stronglyagree}$ = 42; n_{agree} = 46) (Siemers, 2017). This may be attributed to the fact that the university is associated with high standards of education, equipment, and facilities (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Similarly Participant 10 expressed, *"…employers have a good perception of Wits graduates and they believe that Wits graduates get put through a lot in their degrees and they are hardworking individuals…"* Participant 2 felt that employers target University of the Witwatersrand graduates *"…because they know that coming from Wits you getting a very good education and they are going to prepare you to actually go into the workplace."* It has been indicated that firms tend to find graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand to be prepared for the workplace in terms of soft credentials and work experience which enables them to meet the demands of the formal work environment (Pauw et al., 2008). Thus it appears that the kind of institution attended by graduates impacts their employability (Moleke, 2005; Oluwajodu et al., 2015). This was reflected in Participant 16's statement, *"I've been in an interview where they like oh so you from this institution of higher learning, so they considered the institution. This institution is linked with prestigious marks, good students, good outcomes. So I think they do think about that, I like the institution you come from, it says something about you*."

It can thus be argued that the reputational capital of the participants' higher education institution was an external factor that shaped their self-perceived employability. This mirrors Qenani et al.'s (2014) finding that graduates who perceive their university to have reputational capital have positive perceptions of their employability. As mentioned in the literature review, this can be explained by the social identity theory which indicates that one derives their self-concept from the reputation of the social group that one identifies with (Lievens et al., 2007). Interestingly, this was the only factor that was perceived by all the participants to influence their employability. In other words, there were no diverging opinions amongst the sample on the role of the university's brand in their employment prospects. This is not surprising as Rothwell et al. (2009) found that "…it is the perception of the University's brand strength more than anything that drives perceptions of employability…" (p.157).

In summary, the above theme and its associated sub-themes yielded valuable insights regarding the personal and structural factors that the participants felt would be likely to play a role in their employment prospects.

3.9 Anticipatory psychological contract (APC)

It has been proposed that graduates' employment expectations tend to be impractical as they anticipate their qualifications to generate high incomes and senior job positions and, as such, they may choose to remain unemployed until these expectations are met (Oluwajodu et al., 2015; Pauw et al., 2008). However, throughout the data collection process it became clear that the participants did not possess unrealistic pre-employment expectations, *"It's not just easy to get accepted into a job and be earning such a high salary or be a manager, you've got to build yourself up"* (Participant 15). Rather they expressed that their lack of experience, coupled with the state of the labour market, limited their ability to expect certain job aspects. For example, when asked which aspects of the job would be most important in her decision to work for an organisation, Participant 8 responded, *"…actually if I'm honest with you if someone had to say I've got a job for you I would grab it with both hands because I'm so scared to keep looking because what if I don't find what was offered to me in the beginning."* Further, Participant 9 lacked confidence in her power to decide the importance of particular job aspects "…*then again if I'm looking at the fact that there is not much employment in South Africa then I'd probably just choose any job."* Additionally, Participant 4 felt that she could not expect a high salary and job security from an employer, *"not now, not at the moment maybe after I study further and have work experience then I can expect something major. I think like at the beginning the salary would probably be measly but you know you can't expect, like if there is someone else with more work experience and more education, you can't expect to get paid more than them."* These findings are valuable as they counter the justification of employing internal candidates over graduates due to graduates' abnormal expectations (Pauw et al., 2008).

Although the participants indicated that they would accept any job offered, they nevertheless still identified certain factors as important in guiding their expectations of and attraction to potential employers, including opportunities for growth and development; job security; salary; corporate social responsibility; organisational culture; passion; additional benefits; working hours and workload; workspace; and location, relocation, and travelling.

3.9.1 Development opportunities and job security

As discussed in the literature review, a new psychological contract characterised by growth and development opportunities has emerged. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), organisational commitment had been replaced by effort and flexibility whilst development, mobility, and growth have been substituted for job security. This is a product of changing employment practices that have rendered job security unfeasible (Amundson, 2005; Wilton,

2011). As such, Millennials recognise the need to develop their employability in the labour market in order to proactively address their security (Tomlinson, 2008). Accordingly, "Millennials have high expectations regarding training and development in organizations" (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010a, p. 294). This received some support in the findings in this study, as when asked whether opportunities for growth and development would be important in her decision to work for an organisation, Participant 14 replied, *"Yes, a hundred percent that would be really appealing to me."* Participant 11 expressed similar sentiments, *"So I think it's important for someone to choose a company that prides itself in taking its employees to training for development and growth…otherwise I become stagnant and I can't do my job efficiently.* Dries, Pepermans, and De Kerpel (2008) found that Millennials expect their jobs to be challenging and to involve learning opportunities that contribute to their career advancement. Correspondingly, Participant 14 stated, "*I would expect them to include and involve me and give me responsibilities that may seem hard and challenging but will ultimately grow me and develop me as an employee in the company."*

The fear of remaining stagnant was expressed by many of the participants, *"I might stay stagnant and that's a fear. I don't want to just be a person with the same job doing the same thing for years to come and you just like a worker bee*" (Participant 1). Participant 3 described training and continuous development as attractive because *"you don't want to be stuck in the same position doing the same thing for the rest of your life."* Similarly Participant 4 stated, *"Once you have a job it shouldn't be the end of your learning experience and your growth experience as a person. I think having a job should actually help you grow as an individual as well and teach you more skills. You shouldn't stop learning when you start working."* Participant 2 indicated that she valued organisations that offered opportunities for growth and development because *"that ultimately can get you a better job later on and a higher salary."* Therefore, it can be stated that the participants perceived opportunities to learn, grow, and develop within an organisation as attractive due to their facilitative role in their career progression. This finding is supported by research which shows that Millennials value opportunities for learning as they enable them to constantly upgrade their skills, thereby maintaining their employability in the labour market (Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002). Thus it can be suggested that these participants' expectations mirror the move from employment security to employability (Coetzee & Schreuder, 2010).

Kupperschmidt (2000) indicated that given the uncertainty of the modern business environment, Generation Y members do not expect organisations to provide them with security

and stability within their careers. Rather, they desire training and continuous stimulation in order to acquire employability in the labour market (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Participant 6 confirmed this by stating, "*It's* [job security] *important but because I'm a Millennial, I'm part of that generation, I don't want to be tied down, like sign a contract for five years and then like two years later I'm unhappy in that work. Job security is important because we have bills to pay and we have stuff to cover but I don't want to be stuck where I'm unhappy. I don't want to sign my life away."* Participant 11 shared this view, *"I think that sometimes* [job security] *has a disadvantage on you as an employee in the sense that say you have signed a contract…but now you get a better job or a better offer, because you permanent it becomes really difficult. That's why after graduating I'd probably do an internship which is better because it's not necessarily permanent and during that time if I work hard enough to show the organisation that they can hire me then they will offer me something but it doesn't really stop me from looking outside at something better."* The participants' desire for mobility during the early stages of their career is in line with findings in the literature; for example Lyons, Schweitzer, Ng, and Kuron (2012) found the Millennials in their study averaged two to three job changes between the ages of twenty and twenty-four. Further, they found that Millennials changed organisations more than other generations in their first three career stages (Lyons et al., 2012).

Dries et al. (2008), however, found that despite Millennials' low job security expectations, they still tended to value it. This appeared to be the case for the majority of the participants in this study. In response to the question 'If you were choosing an employer to work for, which aspects of the job would be most important in your decision,' Participant 10 stated, *"Stability, the concept of remaining in an institution or a company where you know it very well."* Participant 4 expressed that job security is "*very important because you want to know that you can keep your job and you not just going to get fired or retrenched any time soon."* Likewise, Participant 5 specified, *"For me, job security is very very important…I don't mind giving my time and effort and my all to a company that I at least know where I'm going and where the direction of that company is going. I don't want to go to a company where okay fine their job security can only offer me at least a year or two… So job security has to be, I think, the highest thing especially for me and then job security at least must be five years."* Thus it appears that this participant still subscribed to a psychological contract in which commitment and loyalty is exchanged for job security (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Therefore, it can be stated that the majority of the participants in the study perceived job security and opportunities for development to be an incentive to work for an organisation. This

corresponds with the finding that graduates are attracted to opportunities for career development as well as job security when seeking a job (Arachchige & Robertson, 2013).

3.9.2 Salary

Dries et al. (2008) found that Millennials have high expectations regarding their financial rewards. Further, research has indicated that salary has a significant impact on the attractiveness of a job (Alnıaçık et al., 2014; Cable & Judge, 1994). Correspondingly, the participants designated salary as important in their job choices, *"Salary is also very very important"* (Participant 16), *"Definitely the salary. At the end of the day you are sold this dream that you are paying for an education that's supposed to give you a better standard of living but you can't get that without them giving you at least a decent salary or benefits"* (Participant 5). Participant 10 similarly felt that due to high tuition fees, salary would play a role in her decision to work for an organisation, *"So the salary does have to be something that's acceptable and I know for a lot of students a starting-off salary can be very important because you might have student debt to pay back. So I don't believe accepting a minimum wage job is a good idea after graduating. I don't believe that's fair. You should receive a decent salary especially for the hours you are putting in and the qualification you have."*

On the other hand, certain participants indicated their willingness to forego a high salary in lieu of happiness, growth, and development. For example Participant 2 stated, *"It is important. It is but I think if it came down to it and I had to choose between a higher salary at a place where I wasn't going to enjoy myself or take a salary cut at a place where I would have the best time, I would be able to learn more and grow more, I'd choose that over the salary."* According to Participant 3, *"It's quite important. I don't want to work for free, but I don't think, I think if you working you actually have to do what you love as well as be paid nicely but I think there needs to be a balance."* Further, Participant 15 expressed, "*I would personally choose the job where I get a lower salary but I would be able to grow and develop because if you can grow and develop and work your way up and become better at your job and gain more experience then a higher salary will come to you eventually. You've just got to work for it and earn it and it will also give you life experience and opportunities that you might never get again."* These perspectives correspond with the results of a survey where employees ranked the importance of pay lower than workplace characteristics such as a challenging work environment and good career prospects (Sigamoney, 2007, as cited in Van der Merwe, 2009). Further, Rawlins,

Indvik, and Johnson (2008) found that Millennials prioritise meaningful work and personal fulfilment over well-paid work.

3.9.3 Socially Responsible Organisations

Rawlins et al. (2008) also found that Millennials are attracted to socially responsible organisations. Further, research has indicated that there is a positive relationship between organisations that behave in a socially responsible manner and potential applicants' intentions to pursue jobs (Greening & Turban, 2000; Ibrahim, 2017). According to social identity theory, employees' self-concepts are influenced by the reputation of their affiliated organisation. As such, a socially responsible organisation can improve potential employees' self-concepts, thereby enhancing their job-pursuing intentions (Greening & Turban, 2000; McShane & Cunningham, 2012).

In response to whether a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies would influence her job choice, Participant 6 replied, *"Yes it would. If the organisation I work for would be like involved in humanitarian work or charity organisations and they would like make it a thing that their employees would be involved with that…I think that shows a really good environment and I would definitely prefer to work at a company like that over someone who doesn't."* Participant 11 shared this perspective, *"I think it's important for organisations to not isolate themselves from the community that they are based in…So I think that would influence my decision to work there."* Additionally Participant 5 stated, *"I'm very humanitarian based, so I would want to work for a company that would give back to the community."* Thus, it can be suggested that these participants were attracted to socially responsible organisations as it enabled them to conceptualise themselves as altruists. Another explanation, based on signalling theory, is that an organisation's corporate social responsibility policies are a signal of their morals and values. This may impact potential employees' perceptions of the working conditions and culture within the organisation and thus the appeal of working for the organisation (Greening & Turban, 2000).

However, some participants did not perceive corporate social responsibility to influence their job choice, *"…for me personally it's not so important"* (Participant 2), *"If they do it's good but I don't think that it would impact me"* (Participant 16), *"I think charity and giving back is really important but I don't know if it would deter me from taking a job"* (Participant 3). Additionally Participant 7 expressed, "*So for example charity would be an amazing thing and I would fully support that but if I still agree with the values and beliefs of the company even if*

they not giving charity I would still work there." These perspectives may be explained by Albinger and Freeman's (2000) finding that job seekers with high levels of job choice are attracted to an organisation's corporate social responsibility practices. Thus the participants' concerns surrounding the lack of job opportunities in the South African labour market may have influenced their expectations towards the social responsibility of firms. Further, the participants' views of corporate social responsibility as less important might result from an incongruence between their values and the values signalled by corporate social responsibility policies as, according to Greening and Turban (2000), the degree to which potential applicants' job-pursuit intentions are influenced by corporate social responsibility depends on their specific values. Thus the participants held diverse opinions on the attractiveness of organisations' socially responsible behaviour.

3.9.4 Organisational culture

The values, morals, and beliefs of the company also appeared to influence the participants' desire to work for an organisation. For example, Participant 15 indicated that *"the morals and values of the company itself*" would influence her job selection. Participant 16 expressed, *"I don't want to be in a job where I feel as if I need to compromise on my own morals."* Further, Participant 7 felt that her choice to work for an organisation *"depends on what they stand for. It's their values and what they believe in and what they stand for, it has to correspond with what I believe. I could never work for an organisation or a job that I don't fully support what they stand for. So I definitely feel like it's their values and their beliefs…"* According to Lievens, Decaesteker, Coetsier, and Geirnaert (2001), job seekers are interested in organisations with similar values and goals to their own. Given that organisational culture can be defined as "the organisation's pattern of beliefs, expectations, and values as manifested in company and industry practices" (Schultz & Schultz, 2010, p.219), it can be stated that organisational culture appeared to contribute to the participants' attraction to an organisation. This was reflected in Participant 11's statement, *"I think culture is important because the organisational culture, if you don't fit then you going to have difficulties working in the organisation. So I'd like to see the culture and if I can relate to the culture."* Further, Participant 9 felt that *"the culture of the company like their values and stuff*" would be crucial in her decision to work for a company.

The participants indicated that an employee-oriented culture would appeal to them, *"I think that employees are a business's most important asset and so I think that taking care of your*

employees is very important and also it's nice to be reassured that you doing good work and that you making a difference and, you know, being productive (Participant 3), *"I want to feel valued and I want to also feel important. I want to feel appreciated"* (Participant 15). Participant 15 further indicated, *"I don't want an employer who sits on a pedestal and looks down at me…I think to have an employer who is loving and understanding and sympathetic and empathetic and is willing to help you and help you grow as a person in a company is important. To have an employer who's just sitting in his office, and earning all the money and not really caring about his employees, if they happy, if they doing well, to have an employer like that would make you miserable and make you not want to work there."*

Participant 12 reported that she would choose to work for an organisation that showed interest in her as a person, *"They have to be fair, consider you like as an individual, as a person rather than just an employee."* Similarly, Participant 8 stated that her future employers should recognise her individuality, "*They should treat me as an actual human being, not as a number or a statistic."* Therefore, it appears that the participants wanted to work for a company that recognises the utility of their employees and demonstrates their appreciation towards them, rather than organisations who perceive employees as resources from which they can extract value in order to benefit shareholders (Stewart, Rigg, & Trehan, 2007). Participant 6 stated, *"If the company encourages employees to do races with them or like fun runs or sport's days, I would definitely want to work in a company like that over a company that does nothing for their employees or does nothing to encourage them to better themselves or do good work."* This corresponds with the finding that prioritising employee wellbeing can enhance qualified individuals' intentions to apply for a job (Albinger & Freeman, 2000).

The participants also valued a supportive organisational culture. When questioned whether a supportive work environment would be important, Participant 16 replied, *"Yes, work is your second home, you going to spend most of your time there, I need an environment that encourages me to produce and to work hard."* In response to the same question, Participant 7 stated, *"One hundred percent, that's also something that is very big, you need to be able to work in an environment with your colleagues, you can't work in an environment that is getting you down and giving you more anxiety but rather you have the support behind you. So whenever you going through anything that you can't deal with alone you have the support of a helping working environment."* Behson (2005) found that a supportive work environment has positive organisational outcomes such as increased employee satisfaction as well as reduced stress and turnover intentions.

A supportive organisational culture may be important to the participants as it has been found that Millennials' expectations of their social connections in the workplace are high and that they are strongly motivated by a cooperative work environment (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008). This was supported by Participant 14 when she indicated that the most important aspect of a job *"would definitely be interacting with people."* She went on to say "*I can't just be put in a room and work and don't talk the whole day. I need to communicate with people. I need to express things verbally, that would be important to me."* Likewise Participant 1 stated, *"I would want to be growing and interacting with people because like I'm social and that's what I want to do, like I don't want to work in a block in an office. I want to be with people."* Some of the participants felt that the people who work at the organisation as well as their relationships with them would be important, *"I'd expect everyone in my immediate team to get along, I know not everyone is from the same walk of life and don't have the same interests but it's important to have a good bond with people you see every day."* This corresponds with Alnıaçık et al.'s (2014) study in which the respondents indicated that having a good relationship with colleagues was one of the most important attributes of an employer.

Additionally, the participants desired good relationships with their superiors. For instance Participant 7 expected her future employer *"to be very welcoming, for them to be supportive, honest and loyal…It needs to be someone I can work with and someone I can get on well with."* Further, Participant 6 expressed, "*I'd just expect them to be professional, treat me with respect and I'll treat them with respect. Yah and have a good working relationship and good communication."* Participant 3 felt that you need to *"be able to talk to your boss, like have a good relationship,"* whilst Participant 4 stated, *"You should have a good relationship with your employers so you enjoy going to work."* Similarly, Arachchige and Robertson (2011) found that Sri Lankan students identified relationships with managers and superiors to be one of the most significant elements of their attraction to potential employers.

The participants further reported the need for the organisation to function as a socially accessible environment where artificial status barriers are removed, *"I'd expect* [employers] *to treat me well and have a good relationship, not be treated like a lesser just because I work for you"* (Participant 4). Participant 10 communicated, *"Well I'd expect someone who treated me respectfully, who didn't try and undermine me or see me as a pushover or someone to just use to get their job done. I would want a level of mutual respect between us even though we might be at different positions within the company. I believe that would be important."* According to

Participant 14, the relationship between employer and employee should be characterised by "*open communication and maybe even like asking for my advice in decision making, what's the decision, what's my opinion."* Similarly Participant 3 expected her future employers to *"have a good rapport with their workers not just be like a strict scary boss, someone you feel that you can actually go talk to when you need."* Therefore, the participants were attracted to a culture without formal restrictive communication channels and that enabled interactions with people in higher positions.

The above findings indicate that the participants were attracted to organisations that cultivate an employee-oriented culture characterised by support, open communication, respect, and opportunities for positive social interactions, as well as organisations that ensure a fit between the organisational culture and employees' values and principles during the selection process. This data seems to support previous research which has indicated that graduates' expectations of employers include recognition, fair treatment, openness and integrity, respect for employee rights, and management support (Smith & Kruger, 2005; Van der Merwe, 2009).

3.9.5 Passion

It is important to note that certain participants appeared to be motivated by passion, happiness, and purpose when choosing an employer. This was reflected in the participants' willingness to select a job they loved over a desirable salary, *"…it's about what I love and what I love to do and of course financial stability is a major thing for me, so of course salary is very important but if I love what I'm doing that is what counts most for me*" (Participant 7). This relates to Dries et al.'s (2008) finding that Millennials rate meaningful work and career satisfaction higher than financial rewards. Further, Participant 1 indicated that the most important aspect in her job selection would be passion and purpose, *"So enjoying what I'm doing and feeling like I'm having a purpose and a passion is very very important to me,"* which was reiterated by Participant 13, "*So yah I think loving your job. The passion, so if you passionate about something then obviously you are able to contribute more to the company. I mean you could earn more but still not love your job. So I think passion."* Participant 15 expressed that in her job pursuit she would seek *"a balance between salary and passion."* She elaborated, *"…the more passionate and the more happy you are in a job, the better you can perform."*

These findings may be influenced by the fact that the participants attributed their decision to study psychology to passion rather than employability. Additionally, the participants' perception of the lack of demand for psychologists in the labour market, in contrast to other

careers, may have framed their answers. However, research has indicated that the prevalent view that employees are intangible assets has given applicants the right to expect meaningful and enriching work (Van der Smissen, Schalk, & Freese, 2013). Congruently, Participant 2 indicated, "*I think being able to work on what I want to work on is like the most important…freedom to do what you need to do you know. Having autonomy and stuff…also you don't want a boss that's going to be on top of you 24/7 piling work on your desk. I think being able to have space to be creative and try your own thing while doing the work that's quite important."* Similarly, Van der Merwe (2009) indicated that graduates become frustrated when they are not granted independence and the ability to express their creativity in the workplace.

3.9.6 Additional benefits

Smith and Kruger (2005) identified rewards and benefit expectations, such as pensions and life insurance, to form part of graduates' workplace expectations. This was reflected in the participants' answers to the question, 'If you were choosing an organisation to work for, are there any aspects of the job that would be important in your decision?' Participants responded with statements like, *"potential benefits like medical aid and stuff like that"; "obviously you look for benefits in terms of am I getting medical aid*"; and *"number two would be the benefits."* Additionally, Participant 9 felt that additional benefits are very important, *"If I don't have that then I might as well not get a salary because my salary is going to go to all of that and then I will be working for nothing. That's standard procedure, I'm not going to work if that's not there"* According to Participant 2, additional benefits are *"important on both sides."* He stated, *"I think that's important for the employers to give to get better workers and obviously you do want to go to the place where you do get better benefits so that you know you always looked after."* Therefore, it appears that some of the participants perceived additional benefits as contributing to employers' attraction of highly-qualified employees.

3.9.7 Working hours and workload

According to Bannon, Ford, and Meltzer (2011), it is important to Millennials to integrate their personal and work lives. The authors indicated that work-life balance is prioritised by this generation as they do not want to replicate the past generations' mistakes of enduring long hours at work, at the expense of their family, only to get downsized. Consequently, Millennials tend to emphasise balance between professional goals and personal goals (Wey Smola, & Sutton, 2002). Accordingly, the majority of participants in this study reported that working

hours would influence their decision to work for an organisation. Participant 14 expressed, *"They important. I need break time; I wouldn't be able to work 7-7. I think it's hard, I also would like to have children and not be isolated from them, not come home and they are asleep. So I would like to work but still have a balance, so working hours are important."* Equally Participant 16 stated that working hours *"would definitely be important."* She explained, *"because of my spiritual beliefs. I need to rest, my health is very important and also on Sunday I need to go to church".* This view was echoed by Participant 10, *"I think the time of the job, the hours would be very important. I don't think it's fair to be overworked,"* by Participant 11 *"It's not really realistic to make someone work 10 hours, I wouldn't be productive because you can't, as a human, sit at the desk and just do something for 10 hours. So I don't think that's even realistic,"* and by Participant 5, *"So I also think that working hours is very very important, you at least need that day or two to have that time to yourself."* These results align with the finding that when it comes to work-life balance, Millennials have high expectations (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010)

However, De Hauw and De Vos (2010) found that during a recession, Millennials may lower their work-life balance expectations and might be willing to put in additional hours to help the organisation succeed. This finding may explain why certain participants felt that working hours would not impact their decision to work for an organisation, *"I mean I'm prepared to work a 9-5, you know the normal hours and obviously overtime and stuff"* (Participant 2). Further, certain participants felt that working hours would not be important to them given their lack of responsibilities at this stage of their life, *"I think it depends on where I am in life. Like, so I'm single, young, I don't mind working hard. I work over hours now and I don't get paid for it and it's okay. I don't mind because I want to go that extra mile"* (Participant 1). It appeared that Participant 15 had a similar perspective *"For me working hours wouldn't impact my decision if it's the job that I love to do and I know I want to work hard and do the best I can and give as much as I can to my employers. The working hours wouldn't affect my decision; I would still want to take the job. Obviously as you have a family and you have children, you've got other responsibilities then your decision would have to be reconsidered but starting off coming out of university with my degree, the working hours wouldn't affect my decision."*

Further, the participants did not appear to have concerns regarding a high workload. Rather, they expressed an attraction to the challenge. For example, Participant 5 stated, *"For me personally, I actually don't mind workload. I think for my own personal preference I enjoy it. It's something that I can cope with because, it's a skill that I have learnt from university with*

the workload, so actually yah I don't mind workload at all." Similarly Participant 7 stated, *"First of all I love being put under pressure. I love knowing that I have a responsibility because then I actually know that I have something in my life that I have responsibility over and something that I can control. Workload…can be beneficial to you. It can help you grow as a person. It can help you learn more, develop more skills.* Additionally when asked about a heavy workload, Participant 6 indicated, *"…it wouldn't put me off, it would actually excite me…it would be like a challenge and I enjoy challenges."* This supports the finding that Millennials expect challenging jobs which provide opportunities for learning (Dries et al., 2008). Participant 12 felt that, given her lack of accountabilities, a heavy workload would not bother her, *"Well at this point in my life I don't think I'd mind if they give me loads of work to do. Maybe if I'm thirty-five I'd mind because then probably I'd want to have children or something you know."* Moreover, Participant 16 indicated that workload would not deter her intentions to apply for a job if it corresponds with the salary, *"Workload I'm not too concerned about if the salary is in line with the workload."* It can be argued that the participants' lack of concern towards a heavy workload may result from the perception that a high workload and long working hours are congruent with career success (Kossek & Lee, 2008).

Although the participants in this study had diverse views on the significance of working hours and workload, Cennamo and Gardner (2008) found that Millennials attribute greater significance to work-life balance than any other generational cohort.

3.9.8 Workspace

The participants further had expectations regarding their physical workspace. Participant 3 indicated that she would like to work in a good working environment, one in which there are *"no environmental hazards, a nice area to work in, and open plan."* Further Participant 4 felt that it would be important that *"the facilities, the condition of the building, air-conditioning and stuff like that were comfortable and ergonomic."* Likewise, Participant 13 stated that all job aspects are important, "*especially your environment, it's a contributing factor. If…you work in like a not so nice environment, then you are likely to not perform well. Then the job satisfaction levels decrease."* Participant 13 went on to describe her ideal working environment, *"Just like an office where there is just space for everyone to work within their spaces and air-conditioning."* These expectations align with Love and Singh's (2011) finding that physical workspace is a dimension which characterises best employers. The authors indicated that best employers are perceived to be those who ensure an appealing and

comfortable physical workspace with workstations that are ergonomically well structured (Love & Singh, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that although the issue of workspace was raised by some participants, it was not identified as important by others.

3.9.9 Location, relocation, and travelling

Another job-related expectation of graduates that needs to be considered is the location of the workplace (Smith & Kruger, 2005). Research suggests that a critical determinant in job selection decisions is location (Cable & Judge, 1996). Further, students in Lievens and Highhouse's (2003) sample considered location in their differentiation of the attractiveness of organisations as employers. This study yielded similar findings. For example, Participant 1 felt that working far from home would reduce her attraction to the job, *"I don't think I want to travel an hour…My happiness is important so I wouldn't work like an hour away."* Participant 6 mirrored this view, *"You also have to factor in petrol. You've got to factor in time, if you wasting two hours every day on just commuting, I think that's quite crazy…"* Participant 12 expressed that location is an important job aspect, particularly if one does not possess a car, *"…if you don't have a car yet then you have to like take public transport which is really scary. And yah just like petrol, like if it's really far then petrol would be an issue also."* It has been indicated that applicants' interests are triggered by organisations located close to where they live as they perceive it to maximise benefits and minimise costs (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Accordingly, Participant 8 and Participant 4 reported that *"distance from home"* and *"how far I'd have to travel to work"* would influence their decision to work for an organisation.

On the other hand, certain participants communicated a lack of concern towards the location of the organisation if *"the opportunity was great enough"* (Participant 14). Participant 7 stated, *"So location is obviously important but if it comes down to that's where I want to be then I would move to where I need to work."* Participant 9 indicated that location would not be a determinant in her job choice, *"if it's a good salary."* Responding to the question, 'If the organisation was far from you, would that influence your decision to work there?' Participant 13 replied "*No. I mean if you determined that you feel like this company is the correct one for you, it provides for all your needs and you know you will be able to potentially grow, then I wouldn't have a problem."* Moreover Participant 15 explained, *"…if the salary is very high and it's a job that you love and that you passionate about then waking up and driving to* [a far location] *every day for work is something that doesn't bother you because you happy to go to work every day. I think how passionate about the job you are can affect location…location to*

me doesn't matter if it's what I want to do and where I want to be and it makes me feel like I'm making a difference in the world." These findings may be attributed to the fact that the participants perceived a limited number of job opportunities for BA graduates in the labour market and thus feel a need to accept any opportunity despite the negative aspects. Further, participants may have felt that location was inconsequential given their youth and their resultant freedom from responsibility, *"…I'm prepared to move around and do whatever because I feel like I'm still young so I have the space to do those things, I'm more flexible. I don't think that would be a problem"* (Participant 6).

However, some participants seemed to find the idea of relocating as undesirable*, "…if I had to pack up and leave everything…I might take it but I think I'd have to take longer to actually think about it"* (Participant 8). Participant 14 and Participant 2 felt that if the job offer was in a city other than Johannesburg they would not pursue it, *"I mean if it was Cape Town or something that would be hugely off putting for me," "…if it was out of Joburg it would make the decision a lot harder."*

Lievens (2007) indicated that travel opportunities are a significant predictor of attractiveness for potential applicants. Participant 12 and Participant 13 appeared to agree as when asked whether they were attracted to organisations with travelling as part of the job description, they responded, "*I would like that"* and *"Gladly!"* On the other hand, some participants felt indifferent towards travelling. Participant 3 expressed that travelling would *"not necessarily contribute to her wanting the job,"* whereas Participant 9 stated, *"no that wouldn't change anything actually."* However, it is important to point out that the participants were queried about travelling in relation to domestic cities as opposed to global travel opportunities. This may have impacted their responses as according to Bannon et al. (2011), Millennials want global experience.

Therefore, it appears that the participants valued different job aspects in their attraction to an organisation such as development opportunities, job security, salary, socially responsible behaviour, a supportive employee oriented culture, and passion. These findings provide greater insight into changes in the anticipatory psychological contract. Further, there were a number of traditional job considerations that some participants identified as important in their decision to work for an organisation. These included additional benefits, working hours and workload, workspace, location, relocation, and travelling. Although these aspects were not identified as important by all participants, this theme still provided some insight into trends in the sample.

It is important to note that although the factors above were identified individually, they were not independent of one another, and would work together to create an overall set of expectations. This was reflected in Participant 10's statement *"…a job is almost like a package and everything's got to work, from location, to salary, to benefits, to the people you're working with."*

3.10 Implications

This qualitative research provided an in-depth description of a sample of soon-to-be graduates' perceptions of their employment prospects in the South African context. Further, the findings of this study contribute to higher education, industrial psychology practice, and the academic community by providing valuable insight into soon-to-be graduates' perceptions of the role of their educational credentials in relation to their future employability, their perceptions of the utility of their university education, and their understanding of the role of their higher education credentials in opening up opportunities in the labour market. In addition, the findings enhance understanding of the factors soon-to-be-graduates feel are likely to play a role in their employment prospects as well as their expectations of a future employer.

This research explored how a sample of soon-to-be graduates' perceived their future employment prospects and how they were responding to the changing relationship between higher education and labour market rewards, particularly in the current economic climate. It appeared that participants perceived higher education as the most effective route to employment, which corresponds with a prevalent view in South Africa that a university education is the only escape route from the poverty trap for the majority of South Africans, as it may lead to employment and higher earnings (Allais, 2017; van der Berg et al., 2011). This finding may demonstrate the participants' internalisation of the human capital approach to higher education, as they perceived the potential currency of their higher education qualifications in the labour market. This may justify cost-sharing of university fees between individuals and the state. However, this may also have negative implications for society if it leads to less value being placed on alternate routes, such as technikons or vocational training centres, which are currently being promoted as an important additional means to find employment (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). Too much emphasis on university could thus interfere with this and may ultimately bolster unemployment in South Africa.

The findings of this study also indicated that the participants perceived the utility of their university education, as they felt they had gained employability skills as a result of their higher

education experiences and were relatively well prepared for the working world. It is important to note, however, that although the participants felt that they had gained important skills, it is not clear if the actual skills they developed match the level of skills expected by employers. This aligns with research which has shown that higher education is struggling to produce graduates with the attributes that enable their productivity and effectiveness in the workplace (Griesel & Parker, 2009). Thus it is suggested that further research should be conducted regarding the match between students' perceived skills and employers' needs or students' perceptions of their skills and their actual performance.

In terms of the participants' views of the role of their higher education credentials in opening up opportunities in the labour market, they appeared to have mostly negative perceptions regarding their Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees in relation to their employability. This suggests that higher education institutions may need to consider certain interventions, such as career counselling or the development of informal and formal networks, in order to enhance employment opportunities and perceptions of these for BA graduates. Moreover, universities might be able to facilitate BA students' employability by encouraging them to select subjects targeted by employers. Given the participants' adverse reactions to career fairs and their resultant questioning of the worth of their degree, it is suggested that universities should consider holding separate career days for different faculties in order to assist BA students to explore their specific employment prospects and to encourage their self-perceived employability. Additionally, the students' perception of a lower demand for clinical psychologists in comparison to organisational psychologists may require universities to present detailed possible career routes to graduates with these career aspirations. This may enhance their self-confidence, which has been shown to positively impact self-perceived employability (Rothwell et al., 2008).

It was interesting to note that although the participants perceived their BA degree to have helped them develop useful skills which would enhance their readiness for the workplace, they did not appear very positive about their actual employment prospects based on the degree they had completed. Therefore, it may be valuable for universities to assist students to identify and package marketable skills they have gained through their degree in order to enhance their employability. This could be achieved, for example, through offering CV workshops that emphasise the skills valued by employers or through inviting employed graduates to give guidance to younger students. The guidance of previous graduates, currently in the world of

work as professional psychologists, could also assist students to gain a better understanding of the different fields of specialisation in psychology and the type of job opportunities available.

The participants also perceived the need to acquire additional credentials in order to compete in the labour market, as they indicated that employers are placing less emphasis on qualifications and more on work experience, postgraduate credentials, personality characteristics, and other soft credentials. This was linked to the relevance of internship programmes in this sample of soon-to-be-graduates' perceptions of their employability, as the participants felt that an internship could enhance their employment potential. Thus it may be worthwhile for organisations and universities to partner together to provide practical and relevant employment experience as part of students' education. This may be beneficial for organisations as research has indicated that internships and job shadowing can strengthen an organisation's image as these showcase the valuable practical training awaiting prospective students (App et al., 2012; Gault et al., 2010). A potential benefit for the university may be an increase in corporate fundraising efforts as the partnership could also enhance the number of personal connections with organisations, thereby improving the likelihood of corporate funding for development initiatives (Gault et al., 2010).

In addition to internships, certain participants also felt that presenting extra-curricular activities on their CV's might be worthwhile. Moreover, although some participants did have job-searching experience, other participants felt they lacked knowledge or experience to carry this out successfully. These findings generally support broader views that institutions should play a role in developing graduates' job searching behaviour and exposing them to opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities in order to enhance their self-perceived employability (Cole et al., 2007; Paadi, 2014). Certain participants also recognised the importance of social media in influencing their employment prospects. This finding supports previous research which has indicated that it may be worthwhile for higher education institutions to provide opportunities for students to learn how to utilise social media and manage their digital footprint in order to gain a competitive advantage and avoid negative consequences in the labour market (Osborne & Connelly, 2015).

The majority of the participants in the study felt that academic performance played an important role in their employability. Therefore, it may be valuable for higher education institutions to encourage academic achievements and provide academic support to enhance graduates' employment prospects (Chia & Miller, 2008; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). This could

possibly strengthen graduates' self-confidence, which was identified by the participants as a strategic path to enhancing their employability, and is supported by literature which explains that by believing in one's own ability, it becomes easier to signal one's possession of these qualities to others (Bénabou & Tirole, 2002; Qenani et al., 2014). The students further perceived improved employment prospects associated with postgraduate credentials. Thus it may be beneficial for the South African government to provide greater support for postgraduate studies in order to eliminate structural inequalities within South Africa, as previous research has indicated that individuals from poor socio-economic backgrounds have limited access to postgraduate degrees (Habib, 2016).

Another important finding in the study was that students perceived the University of the Witwatersrand to have a strong reputation and to produce high labour market returns. Therefore, it might be suggested that although the University of the Witwatersrand is the second most expensive public university for a Bachelor of Arts degree in South Africa (BusinessTech, 2017), students pay these high tuition fees due to their perceptions of high labour market returns for the investment.

Given the above findings, it appears that this study adds to the literature on factors that influence soon-to-be graduates' self-perceived employability as the participants identified various skills, abilities, experiences, and biographical factors that they felt were likely to play a role in their employment prospects. These included work experience, extracurricular activities, job searching behaviour, networking abilities, social media presence, academic performance, postgraduate credentials, field of study, the reputational capital of their university, and demographics. The findings from the study also indicated that the sample of soon-to-be-graduates attached significance to soft credentials over and above their higher education qualifications in their perceptions of employability, such as motivation and determination; ambition and drive; self-confidence; adaptability and flexibility; interpersonal skills; leadership qualities; dedication, honesty, and loyalty; innovation; the ability to work under pressure; enthusiasm; and work ethic. The participants' perceptions of the utility of these factors aligns with findings from other studies and suggests that these are core skills or factors that universities should try to develop, therefore it is suggested that higher education institutions should attempt to integrate the skills, abilities, and experiences identified by students and graduates as influencing their employability into the curriculum (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Qenani et al., 2014). This could result in greater university commitment,

ambition, job performance, higher motivation, career success, improved life satisfaction, and resilience to adversity (Creed & Gagliardi, 2015; Karli, 2016; Rothwell et al., 2008).

Additionally, the factors identified by the participants as influencing their self-perceived employability could be utilised in career counselling practices to contribute to graduates' career self-management, which may reduce the tendency for graduates to compromise on their career goals (Creed & Gagliardi, 2015). Further, this may empower graduates, prepare them for future job opportunities, and assist them in adapting to an uncertain work environment. Therefore, the findings in this study support the broader literature which proposes that in order to enhance graduate employment as well as self-perceived employability, students and graduates should be provided with information and help on career self-management and career development (Pool & Sewell, 2007). This may enhance their awareness of what employers expect from them and expose them to skills and experiences which will facilitate their success in the labour market (Potgieter, 2012).

Interestingly, some participants in this study perceived there to be an under-utilisation of young white graduates in the labour market. This may have implications for South Africa's economic growth as these students indicated an intention to emigrate which could result in a brain drain (Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). However, despite their recognition of the interplay between demographics and employability, some of the participants also focussed on the role played by their individual employability resources in securing employment. This suggests that it may be important to identify ways in which to mitigate views that either individual factors or societal structures play a role in labour market outcomes, and to enhance understandings of how these factors work in tandem in their effect on graduates' employability.

This study also supplements the literature on Millennials' anticipatory psychological contract expectations. This is valuable, as if pre-employment expectations are not met this can result in reduced organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; De Vos et al., 2009; Sturges & Guest, 2001). Therefore, given the high costs of turnover, it is vital to understand graduates' expectations of employers (De Vos et al., 2009). The findings indicating that the participants did not have high pre-employment expectations are particularly important as organisations tend to employ internal candidates over graduates as they are perceived to have abnormal expectations (Pauw et al., 2008).

In addition, the findings of this study support broader literature which provide advice on how managers and human resource practitioners in South Africa can strategically manage their

brands in order to optimise their recruiting efforts. For example, the findings relating to the participants' expectations from and attraction to a future employer correspond with research that suggests that in order to market an organisation to graduates, employers should utilise social media and online job portals (Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Vicknair et al., 2010). Further, the findings indicate that social interactions with current employees can also play a key role, which may occur through internships and job shadowing. This aligns with broader research which suggests that organisations should ensure that current employees act as positive ambassadors for a firm and incorporate these programmes into their recruitment process (Soulez & Guillot-Soulez, 2011).

Moreover, the findings demonstrated that the participants valued opportunities for growth, development, and learning. This supports the view that effective recruitment should be structured around employability security (Dries et al., 2008). Further, the participants indicated an attraction to organisations that focus on a passion for the field, work-life balance, and the organisational culture, more so than money-based incentives. Thus, in conjunction with previous research, it can be suggested that these factors may be valuable to promote in recruiting students and graduates (Bannon et al., 2011; Dries et al., 2008). According to the findings of this study, promotion of the organisational culture may indicate a supportive environment, characterised by concern for employee welfare, positive social interactions, and inclusivity. This seems to support previous research which has indicated that graduates' expectations of employers include recognition, fair treatment, openness and integrity, respect for employee rights, and management support (Smith & Kruger, 2005; Van der Merwe, 2009). This study further indicated that certain participants appeared to be motivated by passion, happiness, and purpose when choosing an employer; thus organisations could consider employing methods that afford graduates opportunities to find meaning at work. According to Van der Merwe, (2009), this may be achieved by providing opportunities for creativity and autonomy.

In addition, it was found that organisations that establish an attractive physical work environment were perceived as appealing by some of the participants. Therefore it may be worthwhile, as suggested by Love and Singh (2011), for organisations to establish and describe an attractive physical workspace in job advertisements in order to attract potential employees. This may be valuable as it has been demonstrated that by improving office environmental conditions, productivity can increase by four to ten percent. Thus, spending money on improving the work environment is cost effective, as a small percentage increase in

productivity can have a strong positive impact on the organisation's profitability (Clements-Croome & Baizhan, 2000). The findings further demonstrate that socially responsible behaviour, job security, salary, additional benefits, and the location of the organisation may form part of graduates' pre-employment expectations. Given that findings from other studies tend to support the participants' perceptions of the attractiveness of the above factors, it is suggested that organisations should consider embedding the above job factors into their ethos and structure in order to differentiate themselves in the war for talent against other South African organisations.

3.11 Limitations

When interpreting the findings of this study some limitations should be considered. One shortcoming is that data was not collected on the participants' socio-economic status. Socioeconomic status has the potential to impact the participants' perceptions towards job factors such as salary, location, and job security. Therefore, it may have been worthwhile to explore the participants' economic backgrounds in order to establish an improved understanding of the underlying causes of their preferences. In addition, there were other important contextual factors that were not explored in sufficient detail in relation to self-perceived employability such as race, gender, and age; thus it is suggested that future studies could investigate these relationships in more detail. Further, given that the participants had not yet graduated and also expressed intentions to pursue postgraduate studies and, as a result, might not have been familiar with or engaged with the realities of the labour market, their understandings and perceptions might change with experience or over time. Moreover, the sample was made up of a group with very specific characteristics and, as such, other groups might have different perceptions. Thus replicating the study with soon-to-be-graduates from different fields and degrees and with sample groups drawn from graduates and new employees as well as soon-to-be-graduates could be useful to capture a range of perspectives. It is important to note that given that only one male participated in the study there may be some limitations to the transferability of the study and the outcomes may have been different had the sample been more gender diverse.

The data collection method of interactional interviews always runs the risk of participants not being truthful in their accounts and providing information based on what they expect will please the researcher (Barriball & While, 1994). However, multiple sources of data were explored such as the interviews and the quantitative survey (Siemers, 2017) which may

overcome this limitation to an extent. In addition, understanding graduates' different perceptions is important as the manner in which individuals behave and make decisions can be predicted by their self-perception, as opposed to objective reality (Qenani et al., 2014; Vanhercke et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the data collected was self-report in nature and dependent on participant self-perceptions, which is prone to social desirability bias. In addition, given that the researcher was the primary data collection instrument, the researcher's observations and interpretations of the collected data may have been shaped by her anticipations, pre-conceptions, values, and knowledge of formal research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Nevertheless, the researcher reflected and developed an awareness of her expectations, actions, biases, and principles by maintaining a self-reflexive journal throughout the research project (Fossey et al., 2002); this may have addressed this concern to an extent.

3.12 Recommendations

In order to establish a comprehensive understanding of employability perceptions in the South African context, future research could explore the perceptions of students from different levels of study, as well as a range of degrees and universities. Further, it may be valuable to investigate differences between employability perceptions of participants from different departments within the same university in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different programmes. This may also provide additional information on whether field of study influences graduates' employability perspectives more broadly. Particular focus should be placed on students studying degrees designated as national priority sectors.

It may also be worthwhile to compare and contrast undergraduates' and postgraduates' perspectives of their employability in order to determine whether acquiring a postgraduate degree enhances self-perceived employability. In addition, future research could explore whether employers do perceive graduates from the University of the Witwatersrand as possessing skills and attributes required for the workplace. Future research can also examine the employability skills that are valued by employers, which could result in an improved curriculum design based on the skills that are seen as desirable. Further, it could be beneficial to extend the research by investigating human resource management personnel's perceptions of graduates' employability and comparing this to students' views in order to determine similarities and differences between these. It is also recommended that future research explores the interventions adopted by higher education institutions to enhance their graduates' employability and the resultant outcomes.

It may be worthwhile to determine how particular demographic factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status impact graduates' pre-employment expectations in order for organisations to identify patterns in the preferences of their specific target groups. Additionally, it appears that the students in this study felt that their higher education had instilled them with appropriate skills and thus adequately prepared them for the labour market however, as soon-to-be graduates, they may not yet have been fully integrated into the labour market. Therefore it might be useful to explore whether perceptions of graduateness shift between university and moving into actual employment in further studies. Lastly, it is suggested that a longitudinal study should be conducted determining whether students' perceptions of employability translate into employment reality.

3.13 Conclusion

This research is an important first step in exploring how soon-to-be graduates' perceive their future employment prospects. The study has provided greater insight into perspectives of the changing relationship between higher education and returns in the labour market. Whilst the participants perceived the potential currency of their higher education qualifications in the labour market, as per the human capital theory (cf. Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961), they also expressed a need to acquire additional credentials in order to gain a positional advantage in the oversaturated, highly competitive labour market. The participants indicated that employers are placing less emphasis on qualifications and more on work experience, postgraduate credentials, personality characteristics, and other soft credentials. Nevertheless, they expressed that a lack of higher education qualifications would result in even less job opportunities. Additionally, there was consensus amongst the students that their higher education experiences had instilled in them skills and attributes valued by employers.

The participants perceived both internal and external factors to influence their employability. The reputational capital of their university was indicated as one of the most important contributing factors. Moreover, the participants identified their characteristics, behaviour, knowledge and skills, attributes, field of study, job searching behaviour, networking abilities, and performance at university as factors that shape their employment prospects. The participants also strongly attached significance to self-confidence in their attempt to market themselves in the labour market. Further, social media presence was perceived to play a role in influencing labour market opportunities. It is valuable to note that the participants indicated that their demographics might impact their employability and thus they did not perceive the

South African labour market to be an even playing field. In addition, the participants felt that their field of study might lead to limited employment prospects.

The participants' need to add value to their qualifications may be attributed to their perceived lack of employer demand for BA graduates. They indicated that other degrees and qualifications generate a greater positional advantage in the labour market when compared to a BA degree. Thus it may be concluded that the participants perceived their specific higher education credentials to play a lesser role than other qualifications in opening up opportunities in the labour market. Further, the students viewed their potential careers to yield less job opportunities than other professions. In general, they felt that their degrees and career paths were not sufficient in their quest for labour market rewards and, as such, expressed an inability to be demanding in their pre-employment expectations. This view was further exacerbated by the current state of the labour market.

In exploring the preferences of soon-to-be graduates with regards to the anticipatory psychological contract, it was found that the participants had adopted the new psychological contract, in which employability is emphasised, as they valued an organisation's growth and development opportunities. However, certain participants still had expectations of job security. An organisation's culture, values, and morals were also identified by the participants as key aspects of their attraction to employers. Salary was indicated to be attractive, yet lacking significant influence in the context of job selection. Interestingly, organisations that enabled participants to pursue their passion and find meaning in their work were identified as employers of choice. However, the participants' expectations diverged on job factors such as working hours, socially responsible behaviour, travelling, and location of the organisation. Workspace and additional benefits were agreed upon by certain participants as having a positive influence on their choice to work for an organisation. Interestingly, a high workload was perceived to be attractive and relocation was largely viewed as negative by the participants.

In summary, this study has enhanced understandings of perceptions of employment prospects in a sample drawn from undergraduate students completing Bachelor of Art degrees and majoring in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Further, the study provided deep insights into soon-to-be-graduates' interpretations of the role of their higher education qualifications in shaping their employment prospects in the context of changes in the labour market. Moreover, it was found that soon-to-be-graduates' perceived the utility of higher education qualifications and their anticipated roles in relation to their future employability, yet

identified other factors that they felt were valued by employers and were necessary in order to enhance their employment prospects. Such perceptions appeared to influence their expectations of future employers. These expectations were explored and may contribute to improved employer recruitment and retention practices. Finally, it is argued that the findings of this study can enrich existing employability and anticipatory psychological contract literature.

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