



The Dichotomy of Curriculum Responsiveness and Graduate Unemployment in South African Higher Education

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Abstract. The direct implication of curriculum as a response to the upsurge in unemployment is still without some doubt, particularly in the context of higher education in South Africa. For the first time in history, the unemployment rate has increased to an all-time high of 32.7%, with young unemployment at 61%. These indices have been compounded by a 7.5% increase in the repo rate which has a direct or indirect impact on the employability of students. Consequently, this may reflect negatively on higher education's credibility. Half of the unemployed young are graduates from higher education institutions. The overall aim of the study is to evaluate curriculum responsiveness to the current unemployment challenges confronting South Africa. A desktop analysis was conducted to determine what the literature proposes for the responsiveness of the higher education curriculum to the South African unemployment rate. The paper concludes that curriculum design and implementation in the context of South African higher education require rejigging and evaluation for the build-up of graduates' skills and competency for labour market relevance. Thus, relevant stakeholders must swiftly commence the dialogue on how global innovativeness and entrepreneurial skills development can be infused into the South African higher education curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum, Higher Education, Preparedness, Unemployment, South Africa

1 Introduction

The varying nature of curriculum design and implementation has continued to provoke interesting debates among policy analysts, educationalists, and labour market analysts, particularly in establishing a nexus between the role of curriculum and graduates' unemployment in higher institutions of learning [1]. The current focus of this narrative has been on the significance of the contents and pedagogy techniques of higher education curricula to the demands of the labour markets [2]. The learning and teaching pedagogies emanating from higher education curricula have remained a subject of controversy in terms of addressing the global surge of unemployment, particularly among graduates [3]. Globally, higher education curriculum has continued to

undergo redesign and implementation strategies through the infusion of technology in teaching and learning deliveries. However, there are several debates around the intersection between these significances in addressing global graduates' unemployment [4]. In other words, existing scholarships on higher education curriculum design and implementation need to carve a niche understanding of graduates' unemployment through the content and pedagogies of higher education.

With evidence of major disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic on global economies, graduates' employment has continued to decline [5]. This challenge has continued to steer the need for the rejuvenation and rejigging of higher education curricula to meet global labour market demands. The required graduates' skills needed for competitive labour market participation and absorption are no doubt tied to the effectiveness and global relevance of higher education curricula [6]. For instance, higher education curriculum is expected to unpack contents in tandem with global labour market demand and expectations in terms of graduates' skills possession [7]. The higher education curriculum is expected to stimulate graduates with appropriate learning and skills experiences that could be tailored to dwindling the high rate of unemployment. Therefore, the collection of these experiences is an issue that forms the backdrop of graduates' unemployment. According to [5], the conversations on having a globally relevant curriculum in higher education of learning will continue to form public opinion and debates, particularly as a link towards reducing graduates' unemployment. While graduate unemployment has continued to surge globally, the narrative of developing countries calls for a critical evaluation.

The South Africa case remains a good reflection of the consistent increase in graduates' unemployment. For instance, the majority of the unemployed in South Africa are categorized as young people with over 29 percent between the age of 25-34 and 50 percent in the age range of 15-24 years respectively [8]. In addition, an all-time unemployment record of 32 percent with an estimate of 61 percent representing young unemployment also calls for critical interrogation [8]. The young employment rate has been argued to have a direct consequence on the employability of graduates in South Africa. The increased unemployment rate among South African graduates has been consistently linked to the lack of basic skills [9]. In essence, graduates are not well equipped with the labour market skills and competency needed to integrate and competitively fit into the South African labour market [10]. To address this snag, the existing higher education curriculum must be rejigged in line with ensuring graduates become employable. The existing discussions in the literature are essentially fixated on graduates' unemployment challenges without a cursory analysis of the responsiveness of higher education curricula to graduates' unemployment. While it is undoubted the fact that the South African labour market is yearning for skilled graduates with relevant education to fill the vacuum of graduates' unemployment, it is still unclear how the higher education curriculum has been responsive to this challenge [11, 12]. This forms the research gap this paper seeks to interrogate.

The literature is replete with discussions on South African higher education, curriculum design, and implementation. For example, these include [2] a study on designing the South African high education system for students' success; [13] a study on curriculum design as an enabler of student involvement and success in higher education; [1] decolonizing teachers education curriculum in South African higher education. Others include [14] Curriculum Development in South African higher education institutions: key considerations [15] curriculum: a neglected area in discourses in higher education. From this array of studies, hardly has there been any study that examined the responsiveness of curriculum to unemployment through the South African higher education perspectives. This research gap forms the main highlight of this paper. The paper through a theoretical argument interrogates the preparedness of higher education curriculum in terms of skills and competency readiness of graduates for the South African competitive labour market.

The contribution of this paper is the nuanced examination of the responsiveness of higher education curricula to graduate unemployment in South Africa. Thus, it is undoubted the verity that existing scholarships on higher education curricula in South Africa have examined an array of issues leaving out discussions on the responsiveness of higher education curricula to graduates' unemployment. By interrogating this discourse, the paper hopes to provoke fresh debates on the curriculum discourse in South African higher education. The paper through a theoretical analysis first conceptualized curriculum in the context of South Africa. After a brief conceptualization, the paper then highlights and explains the challenges of curriculum design and implementation in South Africa. This was followed by a brief explanation of the prevalence of graduate unemployment in South Africa and the responsiveness of the curriculum to graduate unemployment. The paper proposes a way forward on the significance of higher education curricula for addressing graduates' unemployment in South Africa.

2. Methodology

The philosophical standpoint of this study is borrowed from the assumptions of the interpretivism research philosophy. This is supported by the assumption of the qualitative research approach to understand the dichotomy of curriculum responsiveness and graduates' unemployment. However, for this paper, qualitative secondary data were employed to understand the dichotomy of curriculum responsiveness and graduate unemployment. The paper employs insight from a qualitative secondary methodology to assemble theoretical and textual data in the form of secondary data to make sense of the research problem. The study was designed on the assumption of exploratory research. This is required to further the limit of knowledge known about the dichotomy of curriculum responsiveness and graduate unemployment [16]. The retrieved secondary qualitative data includes a literature review and published articles, secondary documents, newspapers, government gazette legislation, and other materi-

als. Thereafter, a critical review of the secondary data sourced from the mentioned secondary sources was organized into different themes and analyzed.

3. South African higher education curriculum: A conceptualization

While curriculum development and implementation vary across different countries and educational systems, there are commonalities on which the curriculum is based. Curriculum is the heart of education; it brings purpose, and it is a map that provides direction to education [17]. The curriculum is about knowledge production, quality of the knowledge, recipients of the knowledge, producers of the knowledge, and constituencies of the knowledge. It is meant to respond to the needs of human beings, extending to factors like culture, politics, the environment, the economy, and social life [18]. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the diversity of approaches to curriculum globally and the importance of considering local context as well as the needs when discussing educational systems and practices in different countries.

[19] asserts that curriculum is about conceptions of what should be in those frameworks, how it should be done, and what happens in practice. [20] argues that although the ascendancy of an audit culture associated with the rise of neoliberalism concerning teaching programs poses threats to institutional autonomy and academic freedom, there is a need to curtail institutional autonomy. We are inclined with [21] who argues that curriculum is more than what is mandated at the policy level in frameworks and documents, but at the same time, this policy level work is integral to the system in which curriculum operates. Central to this curriculum discussion is the issue of quality in the curriculum, thus each country has its own institutional body which monitors quality.

[22] indicate that responsive curriculum development emphasizes different requirements for responding to changing graduate needs, including interdisciplinarity. [23] argues that curriculum responsiveness refers to the ability of an education system to address the diverse needs, aspirations, and contexts of students. Furthermore, curriculum responsiveness addresses issues of employability or economic responsiveness, diverse student makeup in the classroom or cultural responsiveness, the nature of underlying knowledge within the discipline or disciplinary responsiveness, and pedagogical or learning responsiveness [23]. In South Africa, the concept of curriculum responsiveness is particularly significant due to the country's history of apartheid, cultural diversity, and the need to prepare learners for agility so that they can adapt to the demands of the labour market.

The curriculum's adaptability and relevance cannot be overstated if it is to satisfy the requirements of those who are expected to benefit from it. Thus, [24] emphasizes the significance of keeping the curriculum engaged for it to remain relevant. According to [24] this could be accomplished through effective curriculum creation, which includes planning, reviewing, developing, implementing, and sustaining teaching and

learning content. Making this distinction becomes crucial to appreciate and comprehend the work involved in developing the curriculum. Higher education curricula are crucial because they demonstrate the long-term preparation that basic education has been provided. Higher education curricula refine, develop, and produce decision-makers, leaders, professionals, and entrepreneurs for the global labour market.

There are many convergences and dissonances in quality curriculum or quality assurance in the curriculum. Quality assurance is critical in ensuring the validity and reliability of quality curriculum development, quality curriculum design, and quality curriculum delivery whose outcome will be quality graduates [17, 25]. Many questions on the quality of curriculum are posed for instance; what determines quality curriculum, how is quality curriculum determined and whose standards are used to determine it (African or European standards), and how to determine quality graduates. According to [17] setting academic quality assurance and professional standards is essential in establishing a system that contributes to the higher education quality of any nation.

In South Africa, the Higher Education Quality Committee under the Council of Higher Education is mandated by the Higher Education Act of 1997 to conduct curriculum reviews. This mandate extends to private higher education (PHEI) seeing that private higher education institutions are sprouting and mushrooming and most of them breaching quality standards. PHEIs have the potential to offer a flexible curriculum that is business-orientated; hence they are not tied up in the government bureaucracy as much as they work under the Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education Institutions in South Africa [18].

These curriculum discourses show that curriculum is not static; hence it is meant to respond to its community needs and culture which changes over time. The flexibility allows the curriculum to be continuously responsive to the needs of students, lecturers, and societal expectations [18]. The responsiveness of the curriculum is further emphasized by [18] that the curriculum should not be distanced from the people it serves. The knowledge produced in higher education is the knowledge that is supposed to alleviate the societal ills and the economic state of both the students and the community [25].

4. Challenges of curriculum design and implementation in South Africa

The rebirth of South Africa in 1994 came with many opportunities including a new constitution (1996) which could be seen as an enabling factor especially the right to education. Access to higher education in the apartheid regime was limited to affording individuals who excluded the masses, which are black Africans, Colored, and Asian Africans [26]. South Africa has two types of institutions that are historically advantageous institutions (HAI), mainly White institutions) and historically disadvantaged

institutions (HDIs) which were mainly Black institutions. The HAIs had better offerings of technical and scientific programs, whilst the institutions for the masses had limited offerings and funding. A small number of graduates was generated at that time because they were all assured jobs. The political history of South Africa does have an impact on how unemployment is contextualized. This is clear in the paper titled, “Graduate Unemployment in South Africa: A Much-Exaggerated Problem” by [27].

South Africa's higher education system inherited deep-rooted historical inequalities, resulting in disparities in access to quality education and opportunities [28]. These inequalities continue to affect curriculum responsiveness, as students from marginalized communities often face limited resources, outdated curricula, and inadequate support. The impact of these inequalities is likely to manifest itself when graduates exit the system to the labour market. To compound challenges, imposed by historical inheritance, South Africa is known to be one of the most diverse nations globally with a plethora of different languages, cultures, and traditions [23]. Embracing diversity in the curriculum is essential for promoting social justice, inclusive education, and responsiveness. Critically, curriculum design and implementation must consider pedagogical approaches that promote effective teaching and learning practices [24, 17, 28].

[29] argue that globalization has transformed the world, leading to new challenges and opportunities for curriculum design and implementation. The direct impact that is imposed by globalization on curriculum is felt by both students and teachers in the institutions of higher learning resulting in a need to prepare learners for a rapidly changing global landscape, technological advancements, and evolving employment needs. The elephant in the room is that keeping pace with emerging trends while addressing historical inequalities and maintaining cultural relevance is hard to achieve. Consequently, some students are likely to fall through the cracks and that may have a knock-on effect on the employability of graduates in South Africa.

[30] observed that South African higher education has undergone three noticeable phases; the governance being the first during the insertion of the democratic government the curriculum needed to be adjusted to suit the new political era, and the second phase the teaching and learning policy which ought to accommodate the masses. The third phase should be the integration of employability into the curriculum. Employability amongst graduates is becoming a huge threat to the country's economic growth and education system at large.

5. Prevalence of graduate Unemployment in South Africa

Unemployment in any country is complex, multifaced, and has powerful ripple factors. [27] contended that immigration and job permit, affirmative action policies, the role of universities, and the selection of appropriate courses are contributing factors in the graduate unemployment rate. Our analysis of the unemployed commences with

the population. The population of South Africa is recorded at more than 61 million and 7.9 million are unemployed persons. Youth and graduate unemployment rate are logged at 62.1%, this remains a threat not only in South Africa but across the African continent [31, 32]. According to [8], there are approximately 7.9 million unemployed people compared to 7.8 million of last quarter. South Africa's unemployment rate appears to be increasing year after year; nonetheless, it was not a major issue a decade ago.

According to [27], graduate unemployment in South Africa was low in an international context, and there was no reason to be concerned about broad trends in graduate unemployment. However, this has dramatically changed as South Africa Statistics recorded it at 10.6% in Q1 of 2023 which marks an increase of 5.1.% as compared to 5.5% in Q1 in 2013. Of the 10.6% unemployed graduates, only 2.7% hold a university degree or a diploma, hence the rest are graduates from TVET colleges, private colleges, and other tertiary institutions. Graduate unemployment is still relatively high as those who are counted as employed are not employed in their profession and are mostly underpaid in their employment [8].

The massification of higher education which is seen as the attainment of social justice goals [33] and open access and equity measures given the history of the country has 'the good, bad and the ugly' [34] as far as the unemployment rate is concerned. The availability of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has opened access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The funding covers tuition fees, residence, meals, and stationery. The incremental number of registered students at public universities could be attributed to the availability of such funding. There are over a million active registered students in higher education in 2022 [35].

The Department of Higher Education and Training-DHET statistics show that 22,1942 students graduated in 2019, although this may not be considered a good output compared to the number of registered students [36]. However, it does have an impact on the increasing unemployment rate. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to constantly review and align their curriculum and programs according to the needs of the labour market to avoid skill imbalances. According to the Organisation for [37], skills imbalances occur when skills supply exceeds skills demand, which results in skills surplus, skills mismatch, and skills shortages. The common outcome of a skills imbalance is an increase in the unemployment rate. Graduate unemployment could be attributed to this disequilibrium to the influx and desperation of getting to higher education institutions. Due to limited spaces, students end up taking available spaces without considering the long-term consequences or articulation of such qualifications.

A degree certificate no longer guarantees employment and financial stability [38] given the high unemployment rate, which could be traced to the country's declining economic growth [31, 39) skills mismatch [38, 40), curriculum [41], and other factors.

The responsiveness of curriculum in higher education is being evaluated, hence the current discourse is on recalculation, curriculum renewal, and decolonization of the curriculum. It is critical to engage in discourses on the roles higher education curricula should play in enhancing the experiences of learning and displayed in graduates' attributes [18].

6. The responsiveness of the Curriculum

The curriculum, which [18] describes as the "heart of education," is crucial in understanding the higher education curriculum. The debates over curriculum design and development, where the government trying to transform and decolonize the curriculum, have dominated for far too long. Change and transformation are systematic processes that take time to manifest, but unemployment and poverty are more rapid. The country is still grappling with decolonizing the curriculum and healing from the past, as new issues emerge. Apart from decolonization, there appear to be several concerns with the curriculum; it must adapt to the fourth industrial revolution, global market, internalization, and African demands. As a result, the curriculum's current state is confusing and reactive, because it must meet the demands of society, the economy, politics, institutions, and individuals. [23] assert that a colonized curriculum would continue to be reactive. As a result, its goal was to spread capitalism's evil rather than to address Africa's issues. Although the discussion about curricular decolonization is important, the curriculum does not adequately address the requirements of its graduates.

In addition, there is a drive to incorporate social justice and inclusion principles so that no student is left behind. While the increasing number of students in higher education is a great gesture, the discussion about curricular transformation and what students should be experiencing remains indistinct and hazy [42]. There are also concerns that the higher education curriculum does not adequately address the issues that the graduate would confront in the world of work. There is a consensus amongst scholars that a responsive curriculum should equip students with the theoretical and practical knowledge they need to excel in their chosen professions, enabling them to be absorbed into the labour market or create employment [43, 32, 42]. Curriculum responsiveness appears to be a global challenge. According to [31], a government committee inquiry discovered that their curriculum does not adequately match the needs of the labour market. This could be addressed by working collaboratively with the private sector and other external parties. According to [44], the curriculum should be built with the student's needs in mind, allowing the student to transition beyond higher education.

Furthermore, the curriculum is thought to address the Maslow hierarchy of needs, namely the wants for safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. It is possible to meet these needs if one is working. Graduates who are unemployed are not

only less motivated, but they also inhibit economic progress, particularly in South Africa, where taxes are used to fund education. As a result, unemployed graduates are unable to contribute to the advancement of education, which has a knock-on effect on the economy. Higher education funding is currently declining, which could be ascribed to a lack of responsiveness in the curriculum.

With regards to curricular realignment and responsiveness, [45] argues that there is a lack of coherent and robust pedagogical foundations for graduates' employability, despite its emergence as a central concern in higher education. The author argued that the higher education community should recognize the congruence and compatibility of graduates' employability and career development and adopt a more integrated and critical understanding of careers and employability learning [45]. Integrative pedagogy is intended to include six pedagogical concepts that can guide attempts to provide students with high-quality, egalitarian, and empowering professions and employability learning. For instance [46], contends that the higher education curriculum should include a work-integrated learning (WIL) component that will successfully provide suitable pedagogical methodologies and high-quality assessment that enhances employability outcomes.

Given the global increase in graduates' unemployment, several studies support curriculum reengineering [45, 40, 18, 41, 46]. One of the suggested modifications is the need for the incorporation of entrepreneurship and venture creation learning skills into higher education curricula for an outlook of graduates with the global competitive skills necessary to succeed in this changing world. According to [40], there is a need to review higher education curricula to incorporate crucial skills such as communication and entrepreneurship, which will lead graduates toward self-employment in the face of an almost saturated formal labour market. As future leaders, graduates are expected to contribute towards economic growth, thus [18] strongly argued that a well-designed curriculum may provide students with the information, skills, and competencies needed to thrive in their chosen sectors and contribute to the country's development.

7. Way forward: Discussions and solutions

The motivation for this study is the need to understand the dichotomy of curriculum responsiveness to graduate unemployment in South African higher education. Thus, the nub is to interrogate the preparedness or otherwise of the South African higher education curriculum in meeting the demands and peculiarities of the South African labour markets. Having exhausted issues around the challenges of curriculum design and implementation in South African higher education from the preceding analysis, this section of the paper seeks to suggest critical responses and solutions for addressing the curriculum deficit of the South African higher education for an improved graduate employment rate. There are existing cultural barriers in South African higher

education curriculum design and implementation. Therefore, for South African graduates to be competitive in the labour markets, issues around cultural barriers must be addressed, particularly in the teaching and learning process. This conversation must be dialogued around the conventional narratives of decolonizing higher education curricula. While this conversation no doubt forestalls positive outcomes, stakeholders must be aware of the cultural challenges in curriculum design by ensuring that the decolonization of higher education curriculum imbibes important skill development initiatives that are a recipe for addressing graduates' unemployment in the country.

In addition, it is important to commence a shift from the conventional theoretical curriculum employed in teaching and learning in South African higher education. While this dialogue has been long in the dialogue arena, little or no evidence is available to support the overhaul of the South African higher education curriculum from a theoretical stance to a more practical-oriented curriculum. Thus, this paper suggests that efforts should be geared towards ensuring that the course content and pedagogy techniques are revamped in line with practical skills acquisition rather than theoretical explanations. Another possible solution is the need for South African higher education to imbibe a technology-driven curriculum in learning and teaching outcomes. This is important to embrace the changing skills demand of the labour market where graduates with high inclined for technological skills and competency are sought after. In a nutshell, the South African higher education curriculum must pitch and reflect global labour market standards for improved graduate employment rates.

Lastly, the paper also argued for the prominence and infusion of entrepreneurship and venture-creation learning skills into the South African higher education curriculum. While the conversation around this suggestion has been repeatedly making public debates, evidence is still largely sparse to acknowledge the infusion of entrepreneurship and its practical relevance in South African higher education. Thus, this paper suggests the swift monitoring and evaluation of higher education institutions by the South African Department of Higher Education and Technology (DHET) and the appropriateness of compliance and implementation. This call remains crucial to understand and identify possible barriers to the implementation of entrepreneurship skills in higher education curricula on the part of university administrators. Overall, an effective infusion of entrepreneurship into the higher education curriculum can appropriately position South African graduates to create jobs and ultimately contribute to addressing the high surge of graduate unemployment in the country.

8. Conclusion

The examination of the discourse of curriculum beyond the themes of students' learning experiences and academic performance to a more robust conversation of the significance of curriculum in addressing graduates' unemployment offers new research frontiers in the broad spectrum of curriculum studies and analysis. The paper con-

cludes that curriculum design and implementation, especially in the context of South African higher education require a well-thought-out rejigging and evaluation for global relevance, particularly for the build-up of graduates' skills and competency to meet the competitive demands of the labour markets.

On this note, it is crucial to commence dialogue among public policy analysts, educationists, and other stakeholders in South African higher education on how global innovativeness, entrepreneurial skills development initiatives, and labour market trends can be infused into the South African higher education curriculum. Canvassing for this dialogue will no doubt show the roles of all stakeholders in the transformational agenda of the South African higher education curriculum in the pursuit of providing robust solutions to the increasing graduate unemployment through higher education curricula. While these roles and responsibilities remain fundamental, the study concludes with the importance of legislation that will instil skills acquisition in the higher education curriculum. With this, it is hoped that the South African higher education curriculum will commence addressing the high rate of graduate unemployment in the country.

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