ISRG Journal of Economics, Business & Management (ISRGJEBM)

ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: Isrg J Econ Bus Manag

ISSN: 2584-0916 (Online)

Journal homepage: https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjebm/

Volume – IV Issue - IV (July – August) 2025

Frequency: Bimonthly

Skills Mismatch, Education Quality, and Graduate Unemployment in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Employer Perspectives on Policy Failures and the Imperative for Decolonising the Education System

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| **Received:** 28.06.2026 | **Accepted:** 02.07.2026 | **Published:** 14.07.2026

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Abstract

Graduate unemployment remain Graduate unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges confronting post-apartheid South Africa despite significant investments in education and skills development. While access to higher education has expanded since 1994, concerns persist regarding the quality, relevance, and labour market responsiveness of educational programmes. This study examines employer perspectives on the relationship between education quality, skills mismatches, and graduate unemployment, while exploring the role of curriculum transformation in enhancing graduate employability. The study is anchored in Human Capital Theory, Skills Mismatch Theory, and decolonial perspectives on education. A qualitative exploratory research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with fifteen employers, human resource practitioners, recruitment specialists, and industry experts from selected sectors of the South African economy. Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns relating to graduate competencies, employer expectations, curriculum relevance, and employment outcomes. The findings reveal a persistent disconnect between educational outputs and labour market requirements. Employers highlighted deficiencies in practical workplace competencies, critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, and workplace readiness, while noting that many programmes remain overly theoretical and insufficiently aligned with contemporary economic realities. The study concludes that graduate unemployment is driven by both structural weaknesses within the education system and labour market conditions. It proposes a Contextually Grounded Human Capital–Labour Market Alignment Framework that strengthens the relationship between education, employer expectations, and employment outcomes. The study recommends strengthening industry–education collaboration, curriculum relevance, and employability systems to improve labour market alignment and graduate employment outcomes.

Keywords: *Graduate Unemployment; Skills Mismatch; Education Quality; Decolonisation of Education; Human Capital Theory; Labour Market Alignment; Graduate Employability; Curriculum Transformation.*

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

1. Introduction

Graduate unemployment has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges confronting post-apartheid South Africa. Despite significant public investment in education and skills development since the advent of democracy in 1994, increasing numbers of graduates continue to experience difficulty transitioning into meaningful employment. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of the education system in preparing graduates for participation in an increasingly complex and competitive labour market (Moloto, Ramasimu & Motsei, 2025; Graham, Williams & Chisoro, 2019) South Africa's unemployment crisis remains among the highest globally, with youth bearing a disproportionate share of the burden. While higher education continues to offer some protection against unemployment, recent labour market trends indicate that educational attainment alone no longer guarantees employment. Increasing numbers of graduates are entering the labour market each year, yet many encounter prolonged periods of unemployment, underemployment, or employment in occupations unrelated to their fields of study (World Bank, 2018; Ipsos, 2023).

The persistence of graduate unemployment has stimulated growing concern among policymakers, employers, educational institutions, and researchers. Employers frequently report challenges in recruiting graduates who possess the practical competencies, technical skills, workplace readiness, and adaptive capabilities required in modern organisations. Simultaneously, graduates often contend that insufficient employment opportunities and limited workplace exposure constrain their ability to gain labour market entry (Yahui & Henry Dagogo, 2025). These concerns have intensified amidst rapid technological advancements, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), global economic uncertainty, and ongoing structural weaknesses within the South African economy. Collectively, these factors have heightened the importance of ensuring that educational systems produce graduates whose competencies align with labour market requirements (Msila, 2023; Carrim, 2022).

This study examines the relationship between education quality, skills mismatch, and graduate unemployment from the perspective of employers. Drawing on Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory, the study investigates whether shortcomings in educational quality, curriculum relevance, and labour market alignment contribute to graduate unemployment. Furthermore, the study explores the extent to which policy failures and insufficient curriculum transformation continue to undermine graduate employability in post-apartheid South Africa (Heriel, 2025; Draissi, Rong & Abker, 2023).

1.1 Background to the Study

Since the democratic transition of 1994, South Africa has pursued extensive reforms aimed at expanding access to education and improving human capital development. Government initiatives have focused on increasing participation in higher education, strengthening technical and vocational training, and promoting skills development as mechanisms for reducing poverty, inequality, and unemployment. These interventions were informed by the belief that educational attainment would enhance employability, increase productivity, and contribute to inclusive economic growth (Jansen & Taylor, 1994). Notwithstanding these efforts, unemployment remains persistently high. According to Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Q1 2026), the official unemployment rate reached 32.7%, while youth unemployment remained above 45%. Although graduates continue to experience lower unemployment rates than less educated individuals, graduate unemployment has increased over the past two decades, raising concerns regarding the returns on educational investment (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2026a).

The challenge of graduate unemployment is intricately linked to the broader issue of skills mismatch. South Africa simultaneously experiences high levels of unemployment and persistent shortages of critical skills in sectors such as engineering, information technology, healthcare, finance, and artisan occupations. This paradox suggests a disconnect between the competencies produced by educational institutions and those required by employers (Moloto et al., 2025; Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative [SSACI], 2024). Several studies have identified curriculum relevance, inadequate practical training, limited workplace exposure, and weak collaboration between educational institutions and industry as key contributors to this mismatch. Employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also problem-solving abilities, digital competencies, communication skills, innovation capabilities, and practical experience. However, many graduates enter the labour market lacking these attributes (Li, Omar, Harithuddin & Hassan, 2026; Lulamye, 2026; SSACI, 2024).

The problem is further compounded by structural inequalities inherited from apartheid, including unequal access to quality education, geographic disparities, and socioeconomic barriers that influence graduate employability. While post-apartheid policies have expanded educational access, questions remain regarding the quality, relevance, and responsiveness of educational programmes to labour market demands (Netshivhambe, 2025). Additionally, debates concerning the decolonisation of education have gained prominence within South African higher education. Critics argue that many curricula remain excessively theoretical, and insufficiently responsive to local developmental priorities. Consequently, graduates may acquire qualifications that do not adequately prepare them to address contemporary economic challenges or meet employer expectations (Fataar, 2018; Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2027).

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to understand how employers perceive graduate preparedness, identify the nature of existing skills mismatches, and assess the extent to which educational and policy shortcomings contribute to graduate unemployment. Such understanding is critical for informing evidence-based reforms aimed at strengthening the alignment between education, skills development, and labour market needs.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite substantial post-apartheid investments in education, skills development, and expanded access to higher education, graduate unemployment remains a persistent challenge in South Africa. This paradox suggests that the problem extends beyond limited employment opportunities and may be linked to deeper structural issues relating to education quality, curriculum relevance, and labour market alignment. Employers increasingly question whether graduates possess the competencies required in a rapidly evolving economy characterised by technological change and shifting workplace demands, while debates on the decolonisation of education have further highlighted concerns regarding the responsiveness of curricula to local socio-economic realities.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

Despite extensive research on graduate unemployment, employer perspectives remain underexplored. This study therefore investigates employer perceptions of skills mismatches, educational quality, and policy effectiveness to better understand the factors contributing to graduate unemployment and to inform strategies for improving graduate employability and labour market responsiveness in post-apartheid South Africa (Mohamed & Bao, 2026; Moloto et al., 2025; Mobarak, 2022; Graham et al., 2019).

1.3 Research Objectives

To investigate employer perspectives on the relationship between education quality, skills mismatch, and graduate unemployment in post-apartheid South Africa:

1. To assess employer perceptions regarding the quality and labour market relevance of graduates produced by South African higher education institutions.
2. To identify the skills gaps and competency mismatches that employers perceive among graduates entering the labour market.
3. To evaluate the extent to which education and skills development policies contribute to or mitigate graduate unemployment in South Africa.
4. To propose strategies for improving alignment between higher education outputs, employer expectations, and labour market demands.

1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the relationship between education quality, skills mismatches, and graduate unemployment from the perspective of employers in post-apartheid South Africa through the following research questions:

1. How do employers evaluate the quality and labour market relevance of graduates produced by South African higher education institutions?
2. What skills gaps and competency mismatches do employers identify among graduates entering the labour market?
3. To what extent do current education and skills development policies address the skills needs of employers and contribute to graduate employability?
4. What strategies can strengthen alignment between higher education outputs, employer expectations, and labour market requirements?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on graduate unemployment, education quality, and labour market alignment in South Africa by providing empirical insights from employers who are directly involved in recruitment, workforce development, and skills assessment. By integrating Human Capital Theory, Skills Mismatch Theory, and decolonial perspectives, the study advances understanding of how educational outcomes, curriculum relevance, and employer expectations interact to influence graduate employability and employment outcomes. The study further offers practical and policy-relevant insights for higher education institutions, TVET colleges, employers, and policymakers seeking to improve graduate employability and strengthen labour market responsiveness. Its findings contribute to ongoing debates on curriculum transformation, educational reform, and skills development by highlighting the importance of industry collaboration, work-integrated learning, and decolonised curricula that are both globally competitive and locally relevant. The study supports efforts to develop a more responsive education system capable of contributing to sustainable employment creation and inclusive socio-economic development in South Africa (Menzi Mhlanga & Reddy, 2026; Congna & Saad, 2025; Department of Higher Education & Training, 2024; Robson, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Graduate Unemployment in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Graduate unemployment in South Africa must be understood within the broader context of persistent structural unemployment, inequality, and uneven economic growth. Since 1994, the democratic state has prioritised education and skills development as central instruments for addressing poverty, inequality, and exclusion. Higher education expansion was therefore expected to improve human capital formation and increase employability among young people. However, the continued rise in unemployment, particularly among youth and new labour market entrants, suggests that educational attainment alone has not fully resolved the employment challenge Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling, L., & Kleynhans, 2015).

Although graduates experience lower unemployment rates than those without tertiary qualifications, graduate unemployment remains a serious concern because it weakens the assumed relationship between education and employment. The phenomenon also raises questions about the quality, relevance, and labour market responsiveness of higher education programmes. In this context, graduate unemployment reflects not only a shortage of jobs, but also a misalignment between what educational institutions produce and what employers require (Macginty, 2024).

Recent labour market trends confirm the seriousness of the challenge. South Africa's official unemployment rate stood at 32.7% in the first quarter of 2026, while youth unemployment remained exceptionally high. This reinforces the argument that the labour market is not absorbing young people at the rate required for inclusive development. Within this environment, graduates entering the labour market face increasing competition, limited entry-level opportunities, and rising employer expectations (Mapenzauswa, 2026; Stats SA, 2026b).

2.2 Human Capital Theory and Graduate Employability

Human Capital Theory provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between education, skills development, productivity, and employment. The theory argues that investment in education increases the knowledge, competencies, and productive capacity of individuals. From this perspective, graduates should have improved labour market prospects because their qualifications represent accumulated human capital (Rothomi & Rafid, 2023).

In the South African context, post-apartheid education reforms were strongly influenced by this logic. Government investment in higher education, TVET colleges, skills development, bursaries, and workplace training programmes was premised on the assumption that education would enhance employability and

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

contribute to economic growth (Sikhosana, 2026). However, the persistence of graduate unemployment reveals limitations in a narrow interpretation of Human Capital Theory. While education may increase individual capability, it does not automatically guarantee employment where the economy is weak, where labour market demand is limited, or where graduate competencies do not match employer expectations (Graham et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study adopts Human Capital Theory critically. It recognises the value of education as a driver of employability, but argues that the quality, relevance, and practical application of education are equally important. Human capital becomes meaningful only when graduate knowledge and skills are aligned with the realities of the labour market (Awu, Darius & Chimele, 2025; Ikee, 2025).

2.3 Skills Mismatch Theory

Skills Mismatch Theory complements Human Capital Theory by explaining why unemployment may persist even among educated individuals. The theory focuses on the gap between the skills supplied by education and training institutions and the skills demanded by employers. In South Africa, this mismatch is visible in the coexistence of high unemployment and persistent shortages of critical skills in areas such as engineering, information technology, healthcare, finance, technical occupations, and artisan-related fields (Moloto et al., 2025).

Skills mismatch may take several forms. Vertical mismatch occurs when graduates are either overqualified or underqualified for available jobs. Horizontal mismatch occurs when graduates work in occupations unrelated to their fields of study. Skills gaps occur when graduates possess formal qualifications but lack specific competencies required by employers. Skills obsolescence occurs when qualifications or competencies become outdated due to technological and economic change (McGuinness, Pouliakas & Redmond, 2018; Montt, 2017).

For employers, the key concern is not always whether graduates hold qualifications, but whether they can apply knowledge in practical workplace contexts. Many employers report that graduates often lack problem-solving ability, communication skills, digital competence, teamwork, innovation capacity, workplace discipline, and practical exposure. These gaps increase the cost of recruitment and workplace training, making some employers reluctant to absorb inexperienced graduates (Carvalho, Azevedo & Pacheco, 2026).

2.4 Education Quality and Curriculum Relevance

Education quality is central to the graduate unemployment debate. Access to education is important, but access without quality and relevance may produce graduates who remain poorly prepared for the world of work. Quality education includes effective teaching and learning, strong curriculum design, practical training, assessment integrity, technological integration, industry exposure, and responsiveness to changing economic conditions (Moloto et al., 2025).

Curriculum relevance is particularly important in the context of rapid technological change and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Employers increasingly require graduates who can work with digital tools, analyse information, solve complex problems, communicate effectively, and adapt to changing organisational environments. Where curricula remain overly theoretical, outdated, or disconnected from industry practice, graduates may struggle to demonstrate the competencies required for employment (Marumo, Motswaledi & Hope, 2024).

The literature therefore suggests that graduate employability depends not only on the existence of qualifications, but also on how those qualifications are designed, delivered, assessed, and linked to workplace realities. Higher education institutions and TVET colleges must therefore strengthen curriculum renewal, industry partnerships, work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship education, and applied problem-solving (Kana & Letaba, 2024).

2.5 Employer Perspectives on Graduate Preparedness

Employer perspectives are critical because employers are direct users of graduate skills. Their recruitment decisions are shaped by perceptions of graduate readiness, technical competence, attitude, adaptability, and workplace productivity. Employers often value formal qualifications, but they increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate practical experience, professional behaviour, digital literacy, communication ability, and readiness to contribute with limited additional training (Medusalem, Ashipala & Ntjamba, 2025).

From an employer perspective, graduate unemployment may therefore reflect a preparedness gap. This gap emerges when graduates possess theoretical knowledge but lack exposure to real workplace expectations. It also reflects weak collaboration between universities, TVET colleges, SETAs, industry bodies, and employers. Without structured engagement between education providers and the labour market, curricula may fail to keep pace with changing occupational demands (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023).

2.6 Policy Failures and Skills Development

South Africa has introduced several policies aimed at improving education, skills development, and employability. These include the National Development Plan, the National Skills Development Plan 2030, post-school education and training reforms, SETA-based skills development interventions, and work-integrated learning initiatives. These policies recognise the need to align education and training with economic growth, employment creation, and occupations in high demand (DHET, 2023; National Planning Commission, 2012).

However, the persistence of graduate unemployment suggests that policy intent has not always translated into effective implementation. Weaknesses include fragmented labour market intelligence, uneven coordination between education institutions and employers, limited workplace placement opportunities, curriculum rigidity, and insufficient monitoring of graduate outcomes. As a result, policies may exist on paper but fail to meaningfully transform the relationship between education and employment (Moloto et al., 2025; Ohei & Brink, 2019).

The literature therefore points to an implementation gap. This gap occurs when policy frameworks are well designed but poorly coordinated, underfunded, weakly monitored, or insufficiently responsive to employer needs. Addressing graduate unemployment therefore requires not only new policies, but stronger institutional coordination and accountability (Owegbe & Raphael, 2026).

2.7 Decolonising Education and Labour Market Relevance

The decolonisation of education has become an important debate in South African higher education. Decolonisation calls for curricula that are not only globally competitive, but also locally relevant,

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socially responsive, and reflective of African realities. In the context of graduate unemployment, decolonisation is significant because it challenges education systems to produce graduates capable of addressing local development problems rather than merely reproducing inherited knowledge systems (Chikoko, 2021).

A decolonised curriculum does not imply rejecting global knowledge. Rather, it requires balancing international standards with local context, indigenous knowledge, African development priorities, community realities, and practical problem-solving. Such an approach can strengthen graduate relevance by ensuring that education responds to the social, economic, technological, and cultural conditions of South Africa (Mushagasha, 2021). Decolonisation of education and curriculum should be linked to employability. A curriculum that is locally grounded and industry responsive may better prepare graduates to contribute to inclusive development, innovation, entrepreneurship, and community-based economic transformation (Ayandibu & Chasaya, 2026).

2.8 Synthesis of the Literature

The literature reveals that graduate unemployment in South Africa is a multidimensional problem shaped by structural unemployment, education quality, curriculum relevance, skills mismatch, employer expectations, and policy implementation weaknesses. Human Capital Theory explains why education remains important for employability, while Skills Mismatch Theory explains why qualifications may not translate into employment where graduate competencies do not meet labour market requirements (Reddy & Mncwango, 2021).

The review further shows that employer perspectives are essential for understanding the practical nature of graduate preparedness and skills gaps. It also demonstrates that curriculum transformation, work-integrated learning, industry partnerships, and decolonised education are central to improving labour market alignment. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining how employers perceive the relationship between education quality, skills mismatch, policy effectiveness, and graduate unemployment in post-apartheid South Africa (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory, which together provide a comprehensive framework for examining the relationship between education quality, graduate employability, labour market alignment, and graduate unemployment in post-apartheid South Africa. While Human Capital Theory explains the role of education in developing productive capabilities that enhance employability and economic participation, Skills Mismatch Theory highlights the consequences of misalignment between educational outputs and labour market requirements. The integration of these theories enables a deeper understanding of why increasing educational attainment has not translated into proportional employment outcomes for many South African graduates (Heriel, 2025; Harry, Chinyamurindi, & Mjoli, 2018).

Importantly, the study situates these theories within contemporary debates on educational transformation and decolonisation. It argues that persistent graduate unemployment cannot be understood solely as a labour market challenge but must also be examined as a consequence of historical, structural, and epistemological shortcomings within the education system. Consequently, the theoretical framework provides a basis for analysing employer perceptions of graduate preparedness, curriculum relevance, policy effectiveness, and labour market responsiveness (Moloto et al., 2025; Chiramba & Shireen Motala, 2023).

3.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, principally advanced by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), conceptualises education as an investment that enhances the productive capacities of individuals. Through education, training, and skills development, individuals acquire knowledge, competencies, values, and capabilities that improve their productivity and increase their participation within the labour market. The theory assumes that higher levels of education contribute to improved employability, higher earnings, and broader economic growth (CIPD, 2017).

Within South Africa, Human Capital Theory has informed numerous post-apartheid education and skills development policies aimed at expanding access to universities, TVET colleges, workplace training programmes, and skills development initiatives. Such interventions were premised on the assumption that increasing educational attainment would contribute to employment creation, poverty reduction, and economic transformation (Ngcwangu, 2018).

However, the persistence of graduate unemployment raises important questions regarding the quality and relevance of the human capital being produced. Human Capital Theory assumes that educational institutions develop competencies that are valued by employers. Where educational programmes fail to equip graduates with relevant knowledge, practical skills, and workplace capabilities, the anticipated returns on educational investment are weakened. Accordingly, this study employs Human Capital Theory to assess whether South Africa's education system is producing the forms of human capital required by contemporary employers and an increasingly knowledge-based economy (Tirivangasi, Rankoana & Maphaka, 2024; Maringe, 2023).

3.2 Skills Mismatch Theory

Skills Mismatch Theory complements Human Capital Theory by focusing on the degree of alignment between the competencies possessed by graduates and those demanded by employers. The theory argues that unemployment and underemployment may occur even where individuals possess formal qualifications if the skills acquired through education do not correspond with labour market requirements (Faustino, Gabasa & De Jesus (2025); Moloto et al., 2025).

Skills mismatches may take various forms, including qualification mismatch, field-of-study mismatch, competency mismatch, and workplace-readiness mismatch. These mismatches emerge when educational institutions produce graduates whose knowledge and skills differ from those required by employers, industries, and emerging economic sectors (Chivige & Magidi, 2025).

The relevance of Skills Mismatch Theory within South Africa is reflected in the coexistence of high graduate unemployment and persistent employer complaints regarding shortages of critical and specialised skills. Employers frequently report deficiencies in practical experience, digital literacy, communication abilities, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, innovation capacity, and workplace readiness among graduates. Such concerns suggest that unemployment may not only result from limited employment opportunities but also from inadequate alignment between

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educational outputs and labour market expectations (Molot et al., 2025; Salahuddin, Mahpar & Ishak, 2023)

The theory therefore highlights the importance of curriculum responsiveness, labour market intelligence, industry partnerships, work-integrated learning, and continuous curriculum renewal to ensure that educational programmes remain relevant in rapidly changing economic and technological environments (Kiruthika Kanaga & Valusa, 2024; Mahardhani, Nadeak, Hanika, Sentryo & Kemala, 2023).

3.3 Integrating Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory

The integration of Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory provides a robust analytical lens for understanding graduate unemployment in South Africa. Human Capital Theory explains why governments, institutions, and individuals invest heavily in education as a mechanism for improving economic productivity and employment outcomes. Skills Mismatch Theory explains why these anticipated outcomes may not materialise despite increased educational attainment. Together, the theories suggest that educational investment generates positive employment outcomes only when the competencies developed through education align with labour market requirements (Moloto et al., 2025; Ntuli, 2022).

This integrated perspective challenges the assumption that expanding educational access alone is sufficient to address unemployment. Rather, it suggests that the effectiveness of educational investment depends on the quality, relevance, and applicability of the knowledge and skills acquired. Where alignment is weak, skills mismatches emerge, resulting in graduate unemployment, underemployment, labour market inefficiencies, and reduced economic productivity. The framework therefore positions graduate unemployment as the outcome of a dynamic relationship between educational quality, human capital development, employer expectations, and labour market alignment (Eberlein, Pavlopoulos & Smits, 2026; Elian & Nahabwe, 2026; Mseleku, 2021).

3.4 Decolonisation and Curriculum Relevance

While Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory explain the economic and labour market dimensions of graduate unemployment, they do not sufficiently address questions of knowledge production, curriculum relevance, and epistemic justice. This study therefore incorporates insights from decolonial scholarship to strengthen the theoretical framework. Decolonisation of education advocates for the transformation of curricula, pedagogical approaches, and knowledge systems to reflect local realities, indigenous knowledge systems, and socio-economic contexts. Decolonial scholars argue that many African education systems continue to reproduce colonial epistemologies that are disconnected from local development challenges and labour market realities (Hussain & Saikia, 2025; Sebola-Samanyanga, Nkosi & Peter, 2025; Fongwa, 2018).

Within the South African context, curriculum decolonisation is not merely a cultural or political project but also an economic imperative. Educational programmes that remain detached from local industries, community needs, indigenous innovation systems, and contemporary socio-economic realities may produce graduates whose competencies are poorly aligned with labour market expectations. Consequently, curriculum relevance becomes a critical mechanism through which human capital development and labour market alignment can be strengthened. The study therefore argues that educational transformation, curriculum responsiveness, and decolonisation are mutually reinforcing processes necessary for improving graduate employability and reducing skills mismatches (Chimbunde & Brown, 2026; Fataar, 2018).

3.5 Theoretical Proposition

Drawing from Human Capital Theory, Skills Mismatch Theory, and decolonial perspectives, this study advances the proposition that graduate unemployment in South Africa is influenced not only by labour market conditions but also by the quality, relevance, and contextual responsiveness of educational programmes. Where educational institutions produce graduates, whose competencies align with employer expectations and local socio-economic realities, labour market alignment improves and employment outcomes are strengthened. Conversely, weak educational quality, curriculum irrelevance, and skills mismatches contribute to graduate unemployment, underemployment, and reduced economic productivity (Soni, 2026; Filipek et al., 2025; Mseleku, 2025). Accordingly, the conceptual model for this study can be summarized as follows:

Stage	Framework Construct	Function in the Framework
1	Education Quality and Curriculum Relevance	Provides the foundation for relevant and effective learning.
2	Contextually Relevant Knowledge Systems	Ensures education responds to local realities, cultural contexts, and societal needs.
3	Human Capital Development	Builds knowledge, skills, values, and capabilities.
4	Graduate Competencies	Produces workplace-ready graduates with employability skills.
5	Employer Expectations	Defines labour market requirements and performance standards.
6	Labour Market Alignment	Measures the extent of correspondence between graduate competencies and labour market needs.
7A	Positive Employment Outcomes	Employment, productivity, career progression, and socio-economic development.
7B	Skills Mismatches	Graduate unemployment, underemployment, and competency gaps resulting from weak alignment.
Continuous Process	Feedback Loop	Labour market information continuously informs curriculum renewal and educational improvement.

Source: Author computation

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study was conducted within the interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism is concerned with understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences and social realities. The paradigm was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore employers' perceptions and experiences regarding graduate employability, education quality, skills mismatches, and labour market alignment within the South African context. Rather than seeking objective measurement of unemployment trends, the study aimed to understand how employers interpret the preparedness of graduates entering the labour market (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2020).

4.2 Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research enables an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, opinions, and interpretations of complex social phenomena. The approach was particularly suitable for examining employer perspectives on graduate unemployment because it allowed participants to provide detailed accounts of their recruitment experiences, workplace expectations, and views regarding the effectiveness of the education system (Zenzo, Mefi, Konyana & Asoba, 2025).

4.3 Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience. Purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants who are most likely to provide rich and meaningful information relevant to the research problem. Participants were selected based on the following criteria (Tajik, Golzar & Noor, 2024; Campbell et al., 2020):

- Direct involvement in recruitment and selection processes;
- A minimum of five years' professional experience in management, human resources, or workforce development;
- Experience employing or assessing graduate candidates;
- Representation from diverse economic sectors.

4.4 Sample Size

The study consisted of fifteen (15) participants drawn from selected sectors of the South African economy, including education, manufacturing, information and communication technology, financial services, engineering, healthcare, public administration, and entrepreneurship. The sample size was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, which occurs when no significant new themes emerge from subsequent interviews. Previous qualitative studies have demonstrated that samples ranging between 12 and 20 participants are adequate for thematic analysis where participants possess specialised knowledge and experience (Noriega et al., 2024; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Category	Number of Participants
Human Resource Managers	4
Senior Managers/Executives	4
Recruitment Specialists	3
Industry Professionals/Sector Experts	4
Total	15

4.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided flexibility to explore emerging issues while ensuring consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and theoretical framework. Key areas explored included (Xu, Wang & Qian, 2025; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021):

- Perceptions of graduate employability;
- Employer expectations regarding graduate competencies;
- Experiences with graduate recruitment;
- Skills gaps observed among graduates;
- Perceived effectiveness of education and skills development policies;
- Curriculum relevance and labour market responsiveness;
- Recommendations for improving graduate employment outcomes.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through online platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it enables the systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts;
2. Initial coding of significant statements and ideas;
3. Identification of emerging themes;
4. Review and refinement of themes;
5. Definition and naming of themes;
6. Interpretation and reporting of findings.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and non-maleficence guided the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Participant identities and organisational affiliations were anonymised during data analysis and reporting. All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes (Al Habsi, 2024).

5. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the findings derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen employers, recruitment specialists, human resource practitioners, and industry experts from various sectors of the South African economy. The findings are organised according to the major themes that emerged during the thematic analysis process. The discussion is framed

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

through Human Capital Theory, Skills Mismatch Theory, and decolonial perspectives on education, enabling an examination of how educational quality, graduate competencies, labour market expectations, and curriculum relevance influence employment outcomes.

The findings demonstrate that graduate unemployment in South Africa cannot be attributed solely to labour market conditions. Instead, it reflects a complex interaction between education quality, human capital development, curriculum relevance, labour market alignment, and employer expectations. Human Capital Theory provides a useful explanation for why educational investment remains important for economic participation. However, the findings reveal that educational expansion alone does not guarantee employment outcomes (Soni, 2026; Buthelezi et al., 2024).

Skills Mismatch Theory complements this perspective by explaining how misalignment between educational outputs and labour market demand undermines employability. The study further extends these theoretical perspectives by demonstrating the importance of curriculum relevance and decolonisation. Employers consistently linked employability not only to technical competencies but also to contextual knowledge, adaptability, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities relevant to South African realities (Eberlein et al., 2026).

5.1 Employer Perspectives on Graduate Employability and Labour Market Alignment

The findings therefore suggest that sustainable solutions to graduate unemployment require an integrated approach that combines educational quality improvement, curriculum transformation, labour market intelligence, industry collaboration, and decolonised knowledge production (Soni, 2026). The analysis generated five overarching themes:

1. Employer perceptions of graduate competencies and employability;
2. Skills gaps and labour market mismatches;
3. Education quality and curriculum relevance;
4. Policy shortcomings and institutional constraints;
5. Decolonising education for labour market responsiveness.

5.1.1Employer Perceptions of Graduate Competencies and Employability

Participants agreed that South African graduates possess adequate theoretical knowledge but frequently lack the practical competencies required in contemporary workplaces. Employers expressed concerns regarding graduates' ability to apply academic knowledge to real-world situations, adapt to organisational environments, and demonstrate workplace readiness (Vezi-Magigaba & Reward Utete, 2023).

Several participants indicated that many graduates struggle with problem-solving, communication, teamwork, professional conduct, and independent decision-making. These competencies were regarded as increasingly important in modern workplaces characterised by technological change, innovation, and complex organisational structures.

One participant remarked: *"Many graduates arrive with qualifications, but they often require extensive workplace training before they can perform independently. The academic foundation is there, but the practical application is often missing."*

Another participant stated: *"We are not looking only for degrees anymore. We are looking for graduates who can think critically, communicate effectively, and adapt quickly."*

These findings support Human Capital Theory's assertion that education should develop productive capabilities that enhance employability. However, the findings also suggest that educational attainment alone is insufficient where graduates fail to acquire workplace-relevant competencies. The results indicate that employers increasingly evaluate graduates based on demonstrated skills and practical capabilities rather than qualifications alone (Sangeetha, 2022).

5.1.1.1 Sector Disparities in Skills and Graduate Employability

Sector Disparities: of the industrial and engineering industries, employers highlighted the deficiency of practical technical abilities. A senior manager in Mpumalanga's manufacturing sector remarked: "Graduates can articulate theoretical concepts from textbooks; however, when it pertains to operating machinery or resolving issues on the factory floor in a coal-dependent region transitioning to green economy initiatives, they necessitate months of supplementary training.

The public sector and municipal government, particularly in LED jobs, emphasise workplace readiness and administrative competence. An HR practitioner from a rural municipality noted: “We require graduates capable of formulating LED strategies, engaging SMMEs, and comprehending community dynamics in contexts such as spaza shop formalisation or agritourism development.” Numerous individuals possess degrees yet lack fundamental project coordination or stakeholder facilitation competencies.

5.1.2Skills Gaps and Labour Market Mismatches

A dominant theme emerging from the interviews was the existence of significant skills mismatches between educational outputs and labour market requirements. Employers consistently reported difficulty finding candidates with the competencies required for evolving occupational roles despite the availability of large numbers of graduates. Participants identified several recurring skills deficiencies, including:

- Digital literacy and technological competence;
- Critical and analytical thinking;
- Problem-solving abilities;
- Communication and presentation skills;
- Project management competencies;
- Innovation and entrepreneurial thinking;
- Workplace professionalism.

Employers particularly emphasised the increasing importance of digital skills in response to automation, artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital transformation initiatives across industries.

One participant observed: *"The labour market is changing much faster than educational institutions. By the time some students graduate, parts of their training are already outdated."*

The findings strongly support Skills Mismatch Theory, which argues that unemployment may arise from misalignment between acquired skills and labour market demand rather than from a

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simple shortage of employment opportunities. Participants suggested that educational institutions often continue to prepare students for traditional occupations while labour markets increasingly demand interdisciplinary, technology-driven, and adaptable skill sets (Picardal, 2026; Marois & Bezat, 2025).

The findings therefore reveal that graduate unemployment is partly a consequence of inadequate labour market alignment rather than educational participation alone.

5.1.2.1 Manufacturing and Engineering:

This element embeds coal transition as one of the economic considerations in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Digital literacy and problem-solving skills are essential for automation and sustainable practices. An industry leader remarked: “In our industry, graduates are deficient in exposure to Fourth Industrial Revolution tools and local issues such as infrastructure maintenance in rural regions” (Industry expert, Mpumalanga).

5.1.2.2 Public Administration and Local Economic Development:

Communication, policy execution, and an entrepreneurial mindset are essential for supporting Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises. Participants identified shortcomings in comprehending ordinances for spaza stores and in formulating tourism roadmaps.

5.1.2.3 Agriculture/Agritourism:

Proficient skills in value-chain enhancement and community-orientated enterprises. A recruitment specialist stated: “For agritourism in highveld regions such as Mkhondo Local Municipality, we require graduates who integrate business acumen with cultural sensitivity and fundamental project management skills for community cooperatives.”

5.1.3 Education Quality and Curriculum Relevance

Participants frequently linked graduate unemployment to concerns regarding educational quality and curriculum relevance (Soni, 2026). While employers acknowledged the efforts made by universities and colleges to expand access to education, many questioned whether curricula adequately reflected contemporary workplace realities.

Several employers argued that curricula remain excessively theoretical and insufficiently responsive to changing economic conditions. Participants highlighted limited exposure to industry practices, inadequate work-integrated learning opportunities, and weak collaboration between educational institutions and employers.

One respondent commented: *"Universities are teaching subjects, but industries are looking for competencies. There is often a gap between what is taught and what is required."*

Another participant stated: *“Students should be exposed to real workplace environments much earlier in their studies."*

Employers emphasised the importance of internships, apprenticeships, experiential learning, industry projects, and practical assessments in preparing graduates for employment.

From a Human Capital Theory perspective, these findings suggest weaknesses in the process of human capital development. Educational institutions may be producing graduates with qualifications but not necessarily with the competencies required to maximise labour market productivity. The findings therefore reinforce the need for curriculum renewal and stronger industry engagement within educational planning processes (Dalmon, 2026; Deming & Silliman, 2024).

5.1.4 Policy Shortcomings and Institutional Constraints

Participants expressed mixed views regarding the effectiveness of post-apartheid education and skills development policies. While acknowledging significant progress in expanding educational access, employers argued that policy implementation has often failed to keep pace with changing labour market conditions. Several participants highlighted challenges associated with:

- Fragmented labour market planning;
- Weak industry-education collaboration;
- Insufficient labour market intelligence systems;
- Limited workplace learning opportunities;
- Slow curriculum adaptation processes;
- Inadequate monitoring of graduate outcomes.

One participant observed: *“South Africa has many policies, but implementation remains the challenge. There is often insufficient coordination between education institutions and employers."*

Another participant remarked: *"Policy success should not only be measured by enrolment numbers or graduation rates but by whether graduates secure meaningful employment."*

These findings reveal a disconnect between policy intentions and labour market outcomes. While substantial investments have been made in education and skills development, participants questioned whether these investments have translated into improved labour market alignment. The findings suggest that policy frameworks require stronger mechanisms for linking educational planning to workforce development priorities (Graham et al., 2014).

5.1.5 Decolonising Education for Labour Market Responsiveness

A particularly significant finding was the growing recognition among participants that curriculum transformation should extend beyond technical skills development to include greater contextual relevance and responsiveness to South African realities.

Participants argued that educational programmes should reflect local economic conditions, indigenous knowledge systems, community development needs, and African innovation practices. Several employers suggested that graduates often emerge from educational institutions with limited understanding of local socio-economic challenges despite being trained within those contexts.

One participant stated: *"Our education system still prepares many graduates for imported models of development rather than the realities they encounter in South African communities and businesses."*

Another respondent argued: *"Decolonisation should not be understood only as changing reading materials. It should involve ensuring that graduates can solve local problems and contribute to local development."*

These findings align with decolonial scholarship, which advocates for curricula that are socially relevant, contextually grounded, and responsive to indigenous and local knowledge systems. Participants viewed curriculum transformation as a mechanism for enhancing both educational relevance and employability.

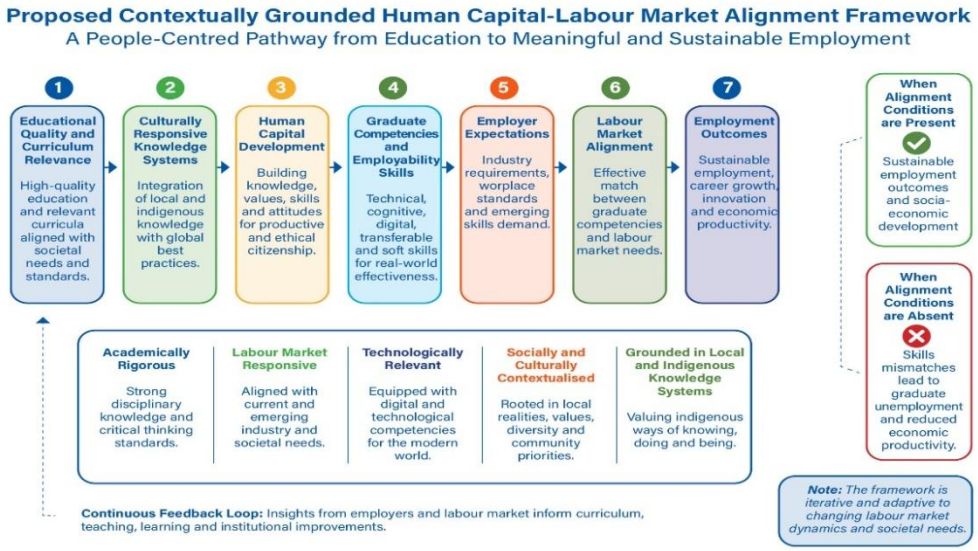
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

Importantly, employers did not perceive decolonisation and labour market responsiveness as contradictory objectives. Rather, they viewed them as mutually reinforcing processes capable of producing graduates who are both globally competitive and locally relevant (Chimbunde & Brown, 2026).

A participant specialising in LED remarked: "Decolonisation entails equipping graduates to address issues such as youth unemployment in rural areas through context-specific solutions, formalising spaza shops, promoting cultural tourism, or supporting small-scale agriculture, rather than relying solely on imported models. This directly enhances employability in towns such as ours."

5.2 Proposed Contextually Grounded Human Capital–Labour Market Alignment Framework

The findings of this study reveal that graduate unemployment in South Africa cannot be attributed solely to a shortage of employment opportunities. Rather, employers consistently identified a disconnect between higher education outputs and labour market requirements, highlighting concerns related to curriculum relevance, practical competencies, technological preparedness, and workplace readiness. Drawing on these findings, and informed by Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory, the study proposes a *Contextually Grounded Human Capital–Labour Market Alignment Framework* as a conceptual model for understanding the relationship between education, skills development, and employment outcomes.



Source: Autor computed

The framework posits that sustainable employment outcomes begin with Educational Quality and Curriculum Relevance. Educational institutions play a critical role in developing human capital through curricula that are academically rigorous, responsive to industry needs, and aligned with contemporary socio-economic realities. However, the findings suggest that educational quality alone is insufficient if learning remains disconnected from the contexts within which graduates are expected to work and contribute.

The framework therefore introduces Contextually Relevant Knowledge Systems as a critical intermediary component. This element recognises the importance of integrating globally recognised disciplinary knowledge with local realities, cultural contexts, indigenous knowledge systems, and societal needs. Such integration enhances the relevance of learning and supports the development of graduates who are capable of addressing both local and global challenges.

Through quality and contextually relevant education, institutions contribute to Human Capital Development, which encompasses the acquisition of knowledge, technical abilities, values, attitudes, and capabilities required for productive participation in society and the economy. Human capital development subsequently translates into Graduate Competencies and Employability Skills, including cognitive, technical, digital, interpersonal, and problem-solving capabilities identified by employers as critical for workplace effectiveness.

The framework further acknowledges the central role of Employer Expectations in shaping labour market demand. Employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only academic qualifications but also practical experience, adaptability, technological proficiency, communication skills, and the capacity to operate in diverse and dynamic environments.

The extent to which graduate competencies correspond with these expectations determines the degree of Labour Market Alignment. Labour market alignment occurs when the skills, knowledge, and attributes possessed by graduates correspond with current and emerging workforce requirements. The findings indicate that where such alignment exists, graduates are more likely to secure meaningful employment, contribute productively within organisations, and adapt to changing workplace conditions.

Consequently, effective labour market alignment contributes to positive Employment Outcomes, including graduate employment, career progression, innovation, organisational productivity, and broader socio-economic development.

The framework further proposes that sustainable employment outcomes emerge when educational institutions produce graduates whose competencies are simultaneously academically rigorous, labour market responsive, technologically relevant, socially, and culturally contextualised, and grounded in locally relevant knowledge systems. These characteristics collectively enhance

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

graduate employability and strengthen the relationship between education and economic participation.

Conversely, where educational systems fail to produce graduates with these attributes, skills mismatches emerge. Such mismatches manifest in graduate unemployment, underemployment, prolonged school-to-work transitions, and reduced economic productivity.

The framework therefore reinforces the argument that addressing graduate unemployment requires a holistic approach that extends beyond increasing access to education and focuses on strengthening the alignment between educational processes, graduate competencies, employer expectations, and labour market realities.

The Contextually Grounded Human Capital–Labour Market Alignment Framework contributes to the existing literature by extending traditional Human Capital Theory beyond the accumulation of knowledge and skills to include contextual relevance and societal responsiveness. At the same time, it advances Skills Mismatch Theory by demonstrating that labour market alignment is influenced not only by technical competencies but also by the extent to which education responds to local contexts, cultural realities, and evolving economic demands.

6. Conclusion

Three decades after the advent of democracy, South Africa has made significant progress in expanding access to education. However, the challenge has shifted from access alone to relevance, quality, and responsiveness. The findings of this study suggest that graduate unemployment is not merely a labour market problem but a broader developmental challenge requiring stronger alignment between education, society, and the economy. Addressing this challenge will require educational systems capable of producing graduates who are not only qualified, but also competent, adaptable, innovative, and equipped to contribute meaningfully to South Africa's social and economic transformation (Graham et al., 2019).

This study examined employer perspectives on the relationship between education quality, skills mismatches, and graduate unemployment in post-apartheid South Africa. Guided by Human Capital Theory and Skills Mismatch Theory, and informed by contemporary debates on curriculum decolonisation, the study sought to understand why increasing educational attainment has not translated into proportional employment outcomes for many graduates (Giotis et al., 2025; Moloto et al., 2025).

The findings revealed that graduate unemployment is influenced by a complex interaction of educational quality, curriculum relevance, labour market alignment, employer expectations, and policy implementation challenges. While employers acknowledged the value of formal qualifications, they consistently emphasised the importance of practical competencies, workplace readiness, critical thinking, communication skills, adaptability, and digital literacy in determining employability (Buthelezi et al., 2024; Vezi-Magigaba & Utete, 2024).

The study concludes that graduate unemployment in South Africa cannot be attributed solely to insufficient employment opportunities. Rather, it is partly a consequence of structural weaknesses within the education and skills development system that limit effective alignment between educational outputs and labour market requirements (Mthethwa & Jili, 2023).

The findings indicate that educational expansion has successfully increased access to learning opportunities and qualifications. However, the production of qualifications alone has not necessarily translated into the development of competencies required by contemporary employers. Consequently, significant investments in human capital development are yielding suboptimal labour market outcomes.

The study further concludes that curriculum relevance remains a critical challenge (Dzhamilya et al., 2025; Mabaso & Ontong, 2025). Educational programmes often struggle to keep pace with technological change, evolving workplace requirements, and emerging economic sectors. As a result, graduates frequently enter the labour market with qualifications that do not fully correspond with employer expectations (Motsepe, Sethu, Sikhosana & Dladlama, 2026).

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings and the proposed Contextually Grounded Human Capital–Labour Market Alignment Framework, the study advances a set of recommendations aimed at strengthening the alignment between education and labour market needs. These recommendations seek to enhance curriculum relevance, graduate employability, and institutional responsiveness to evolving socio-economic and workforce demands.

1. Strengthen Industry-Education Collaboration

Higher education institutions, TVET colleges, employers, professional bodies, and government departments should establish structured partnerships to ensure continuous curriculum review and alignment with labour market requirements. Industry representatives should participate actively in curriculum design, programme evaluation, and competency development processes (Motsepe et al., 2026).

2. Expand Work-Integrated Learning Opportunities

Educational institutions should increase opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, workplace-based learning, industry projects, and experiential learning programmes. Such interventions would strengthen graduate workplace readiness and reduce the transition gap between education and employment (Alshammari et al., 2025).

3. Enhance Labour Market Intelligence Systems

Government and educational institutions should strengthen labour market forecasting mechanisms to ensure that educational planning responds proactively to changing workforce demands. Regular labour market assessments should inform enrolment planning, programme development, and resource allocation decisions (Paramole & Adeoye, 2024).

4. Promote Digital and Future Skills Development

Curricula should be redesigned to incorporate digital literacy, artificial intelligence awareness, data analytics, innovation management, entrepreneurship, critical thinking, and problem-solving competencies. These skills are increasingly becoming prerequisites for employment across multiple sectors (Chen, 2025; Oyetade & Zuva, 2025).

5. Advance Curriculum Decolonisation and Contextual Relevance

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21352890

Educational institutions should accelerate efforts to integrate indigenous knowledge systems, African-centred perspectives, local innovation practices, and community-responsive learning approaches into curricula. Such reforms would enhance both educational relevance and graduate employability within the South African context (Bhuda & Maditsi, 2025; Muyambo, 2025).

6. Establish Graduate Employability Monitoring Systems

Universities and colleges should implement graduate tracer studies and employability monitoring systems to assess employment outcomes, identify emerging skills gaps, and evaluate the effectiveness of educational programmes (Abdulgani & Bandila, 2025; Ramos et al., 2025).

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