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The Complexities and Challenges of Graduate Unemployment in KwaZulu-Natal: South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa suffers from high unemployment rates, with the official unemployment rate currently sitting at 34.9% and youth unemployment at over 45%. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to assess unemployment challenges among graduates in KwaZulu-Natal, and to recommend solutions and interventions that will address this challenge. Data was collected from 1853 graduates in KwaZulu-Natal, using online survey questionnaires. Most graduates had a bachelor's degree (664), followed by Diploma (653), Honours or postgraduate Diploma (241) and lastly BTech (127). The challenges faced by graduates include, but not limited to: (i) Job availability vs number of graduates (i.e., limited number of job opportunities vs high number of graduates, (ii) Lack of relevant experience to qualify for jobs, (iii) Limited or no job opportunities in their field of study, (iv) Limited internship/ learnership programmes vs high number of unemployed graduates, (v) Overqualified with no experience and (vi) Misalignment with the labour market demands.

Keywords Graduates; unemployment; labour market; skills; internship

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary global world, the up shoot of graduate unemployment has become an all reaching concern. It is a challenge that most economies are facing under the current economic circumstances (Oppong & Sachs, 2015). Even developed nations have not shown exception to this frightful social problem, although the up surge is more pronounced in the developing countries. In Africa and South Africa in particular, graduate unemployment is a very daunting challenge in the labour market. Oddly enough, Balogun (2016) hinted that almost half of the 10 million graduates, churned out of the over 668 universities in Africa annually, do not get jobs. This by implication goes to establish that, graduate unemployment is one of the most critical developmental problems facing the African continent. It has not only disallowed some of the countries to achieve their economic greatness and developmental aspirations but has also kept them as nations with jobless growth economy.

According to Afolabi et al (2014), of all the problems facing Africa in recent times, none is as virulent, persistent, and agonizing as the problems of high unemployment among graduates. The deleterious effects on the nation's economy and affected individuals are highly unquantifiable. Aside from being a huge waste of human capital and loss of investment in higher education, those caught in the web of this social menace are often susceptible to frustration and non-conforming behaviours. Rampant unemployment of university graduates is not only a disincentive to schooling, but could also be recipe for social unrest, if not checked (Durotoye, 2014). This unravelled in South Africa during the July 2021 social unrest and looting. For these reasons, reducing the problems of graduate unemployment in South Africa is tantamount to solving one of the greatest macro-economic challenges militating against rapid transformation of the nation's economy. With floods of unemployed graduates, South Africa as a country will continue to be a disoriented nation, if we do not effectively stop this social ordeal, which requires deliberate policies of government to arrest. Other countries such as South Korea, Thailand, Israel, and Brazil amongst others have successfully taken decisive and bold actions to address graduate unemployment by creating jobs for their trained graduates (Longe, 2017).

Statistics clearly demonstrate that young people aged between 15 and 34 are the most affected group in terms of unemployment in South Africa. According to Stats SA (2022c), youth unemployment in South Africa is at 66.5% (third quarter). No society and economy can grow or thrive when most of its young people are unemployed. The lack of relevant skills and qualifications, lack of relevant previous work experience, high rate of corruption, nepotism and connections in the labour market are some of the major factors that increase unemployment among the youth (Ntshiza, 2018). Given the sickening current trend of graduate unemployment in South Africa, it is surprising that research efforts have been limited in this area of study which is of strategic importance for sustainable growth and development in the country. As such, there is an urgent need for more studies to address graduate and youth unemployment in South Africa, especially in KwaZulu-Natal which is one of the impoverished provinces. Therefore, employment opportunities targeting young people should be prioritized to deal with the youth unemployment rate. Increasing job opportunities for youth can aid to decrease criminal activities, poverty, and inequality in the communities since failure to achieve material success (commonly represented by the lack of jobs) can frustrate those ranking low in the social structure due to economic deprivation which consequently and potentially breeds retaliatory crime (Mazorodze, 2020). South Africa's unemployment rate was at 33.9% in the Q2 of 2022 (Stats SA, 2022). The number of unemployed persons increased by 132 000 to 7.994 million (Stats SA, 2022b). The youth unemployment rate, measuring jobseekers between 15 and 24 years old, fell to 63.9% in the first quarter of 2022 (Stats SA, 2022a). Therefore, the objective of this study was to assess unemployment challenges among graduates in KwaZulu-Natal and to recommend interventions to address this crisis.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Data Collection Strategy

In this study data was collected using online survey questionnaires. The data was collected in eleven district municipalities in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The target population for this study was 1853 graduates. The data collected from respondents, was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to compute descriptive statistics from the data.

2.2 Sampling Strategies

The sampling strategy that was used in this study was simple random sampling. This method is used when the entire population is accessible, and the researchers have a list of all subjects in this target population (Elfiland and Negida, 2017).

2.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data underwent a data cleaning and validation process, whereby all duplicate records and identified errors were removed and all typing errors corrected. To produce the expected outputs, descriptive statistical procedures in form frequencies were used to analyse the data. The frequency tables with corresponding summary charts produced using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel as data analysis tools.

2.4 Reliability and Validity

Three content experts were asked to review the relevance of each question on a 4-point Likert scale): 1= not relevant; 2= somewhat relevant; 3= relevant; 4= very relevant (Shi et al., 2012). Then for each question, number of experts giving 3 or 4 score was counted (3,4 – relevant; 1,2 – nonrelevant). The recommended I-CVI is between 0.78 to 1.00. The experts rated the questionnaire and gave it an I-CVI rating of 0.9.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues that were considered while carrying out this quantitative research were anonymity, confidentiality, respect of subjects, and informed consent. Informed consent has been recognized as an integral part of ethics in research conducted in different fields (Sanjari et al., 2014). Only two (2) graduates did not consent to participating in this study, whereas 1853 gave their full consent. The principle of informed consent stresses the researcher's responsibility to completely inform participants of various aspects of the research in comprehensible language.

2.6 Exclusion Criteria

Due to the nature of the study, minors below the ages of eighteen were excluded from participating in the survey. Unemployed graduates that formed part of this study were 20 years and older.

3 Results

3.1 Gender and Age Group of the Graduates

More than half (66%) of the 1853 graduates were female while the remaining 34% were male (Figure 1). Similarly, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey of the second quarter of 2021, indicated that the South African labour market is more favourable to men than it is to women (Stats SA, 2021b). Men are more likely to be in paid employment than women regardless of race, while women are more likely than men to be doing unpaid work. The rate of unemployment among women was 36,8% in the second quarter of 2021 compared to 32,4% amongst men.

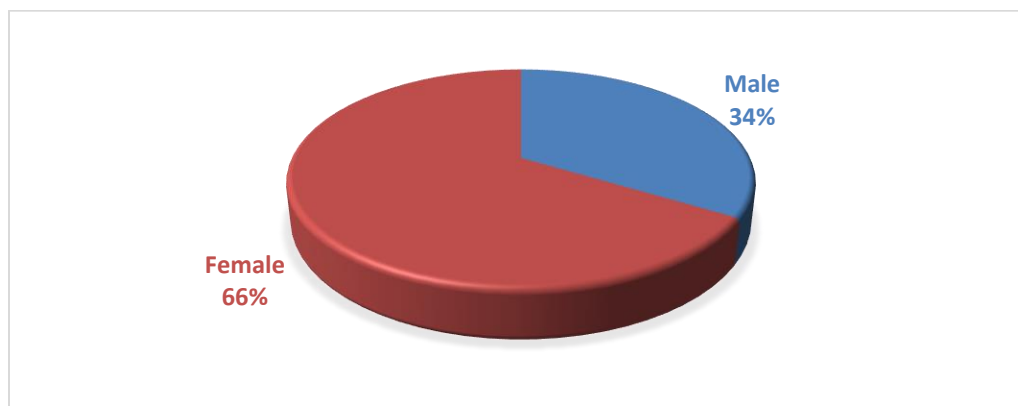


Figure 1: Gender of the unemployed graduates

Graduates that participated in this study were between the ages of 24 and 27; whereas 25% of the graduates were between the ages of 28 and 31 (Figure 2). The small proportion (5%) of the graduates indicated that they were above 35 years old. According to Stats SA (2021a) youth unemployment rate across all sectors in the first quarter of 2021 was 46.3%. Of this percentage 9.3% were university graduates. Comparison first quarter graduate unemployment statistics with that of the third quarter, graduate unemployment was 3.2% higher [currently at 12.5%] (Stats SA, 2021c).

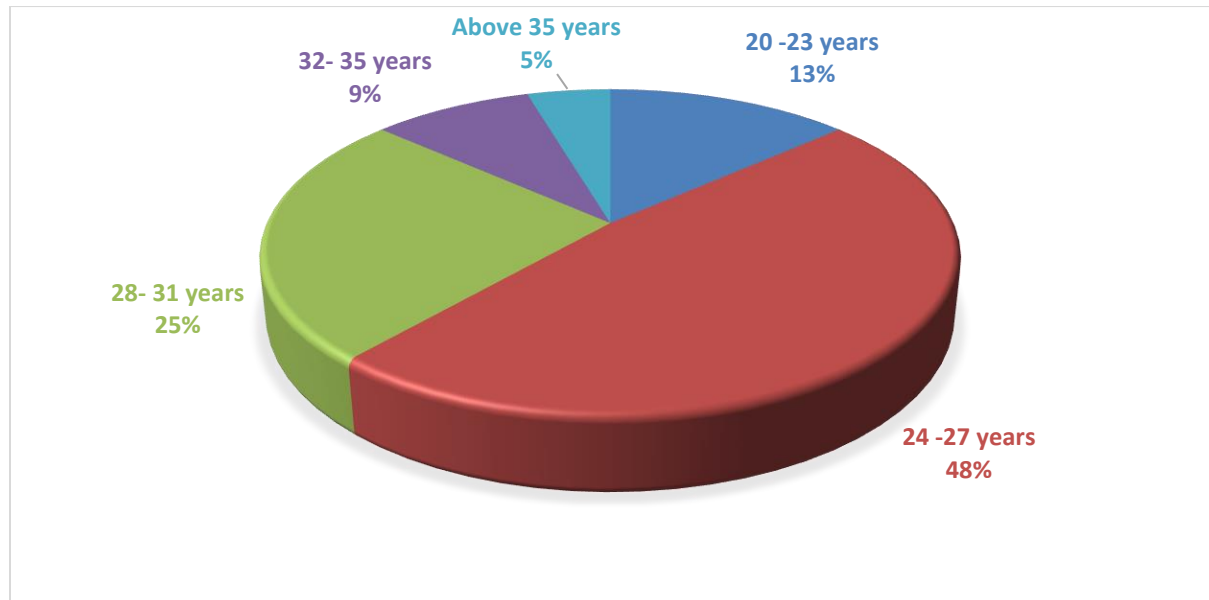


Figure 2: Age groups of the unemployed graduates

3.2 Post Matric Qualification of Graduates

The highest proportion of graduates had bachelor's degree or Advance Diploma (664), followed by Diploma (653), Honours or postgraduate Diploma (241) and BTech (127) as depicted in figure 3. It is worth noting that other unemployed graduates had master's degree (70), MTech (1), PhD (3) and one post-doctoral student (Figure 3). Unemployed graduates, especially those with diploma/ degree were spread across all disciplines, except for Health Sciences and Engineering. Most of the master's graduates specialised in the following disciplines: Public Administration; Project Management; Environmental studies; Tourism; Business Administration; Quantity Surveying or Built Environment; Community Development; Human Resource; Marketing; Finance; Commerce, Law, Agriculture (animal and food production); and Applied Sciences (Biological studies, Biotechnology, Microbiology, and Chemistry). Similar to the findings of this study, Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 2: 2021 reported that unemployed graduates are skilled and qualified in, among other disciplines, accounting (finances), economics, laws, public administration, logistics and transport economics (supply chain), business management, ICT, project management, research, operations management, town planning, human resource management, health sciences, social work, sport-cultural sciences, technicians, artisans and many other skills required for effective and efficient functioning of a municipality (Stats SA, 2021 b). The area specialisation for the MTech graduate is in Linguistic, while PhD graduates and postdoctoral student are in Agriculture. This highlights the magnitude and the crisis faced by graduates, and the province at large if PhD graduates are struggling to obtain decent employment after so many years of studying.

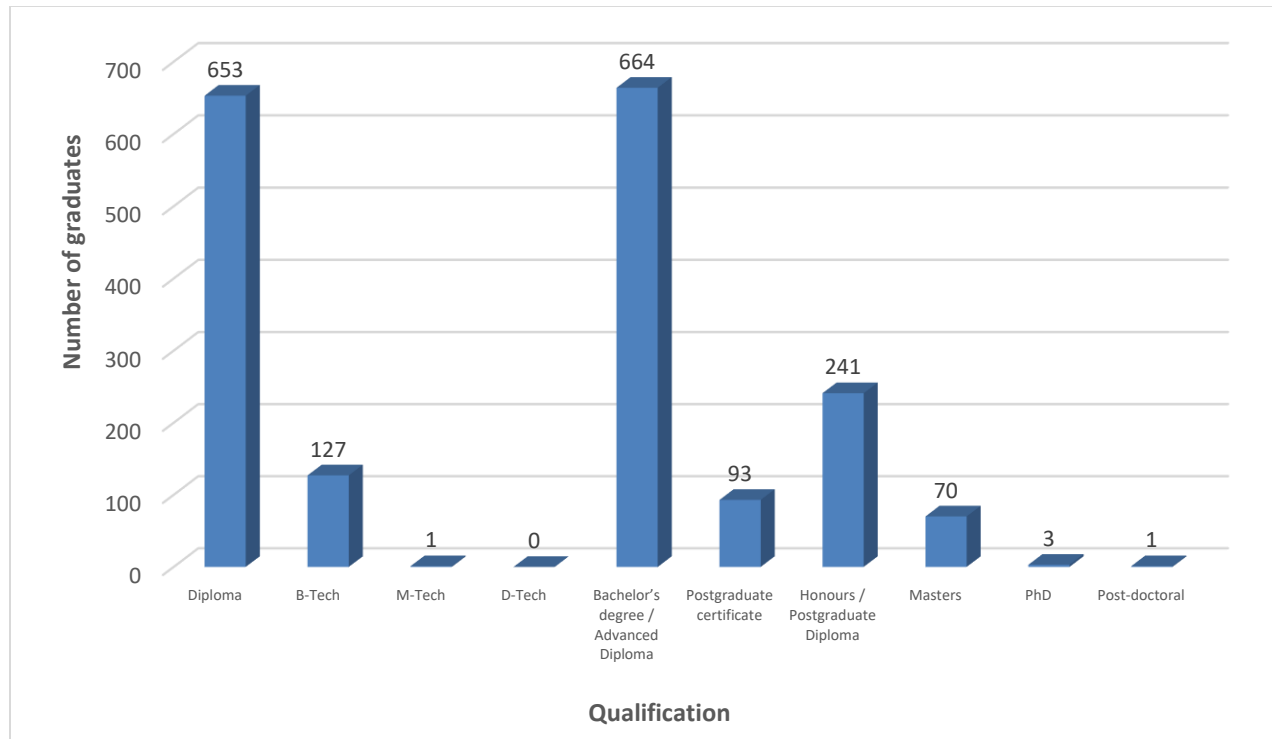


Figure 3: Number of graduates with post matric qualification

3.3 Number of years Graduates have been unemployed

Most graduates that participated in this study had been unemployed for 0-3 years (72%). Eighteen percent (18%) reported that they had been unemployed for 4-5 years, whereas 6% had been unemployed for 6-7 years. Only 4% of the graduates have been unemployed for more than 7 years. This highlights the need for the development of strategies and policies in the province that will address graduates' unemployment. Moreover, academia must collaborate with industry to ensure that there is proper alignment between curriculum and labour market demands. The findings of this study underscore the need for reskilling of unemployed graduates especially those that have been unemployed for over 5 years.

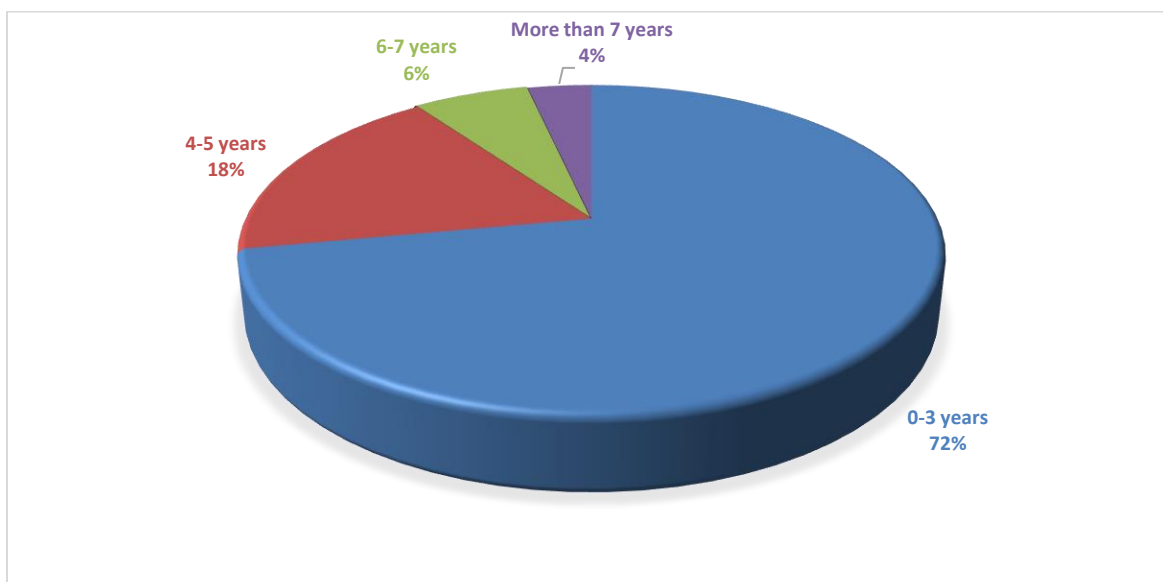


Figure 4: Graduate unemployment in years

3.4 Challenges in securing employment

Graduates (82.2%) indicated that the biggest challenge in securing employment is due to job availability versus number of graduates (i.e., limited number of job opportunities versus high number of graduates). This means that there are more graduates with the same qualification, thus that creates stiff competition for available jobs (Figure 5). Lack of relevant experience is also a major issue for graduates (69.6%) followed by limited or no job opportunities in graduates' field of study (41.1%). Contrary to widespread belief, it is worth noting that graduates are not expecting to get paid ridiculous amounts of money when they secure employment (45.8%). Securing employment, internship or voluntary employment is graduates main priority.

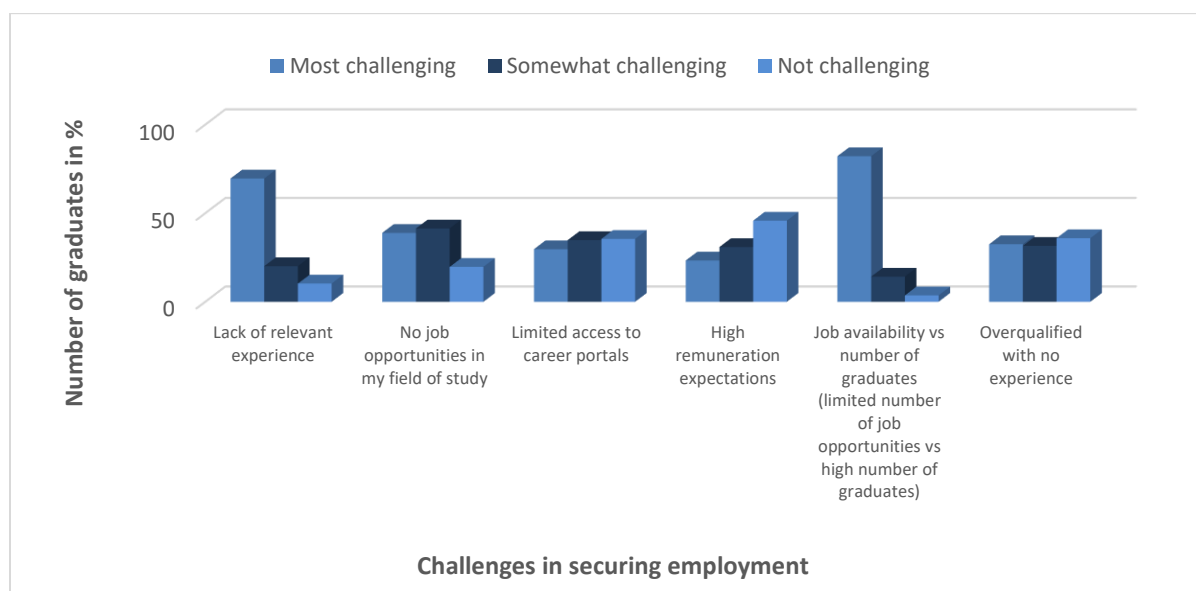


Figure 5: Challenges in securing employment per number of graduates

3.5 Graduates' Requirements to Enhance Employability

Graduates require internship or learnership programmes (71.2%), followed by reskilling (69.9%), and voluntary work (57%). It is worth noting that 39% of the graduates indicated that they need to embark for a new qualification altogether to enable them to be more employable (Figure 6). Internships enable students to acquire skills, which cannot be learned in the classroom environment, while employers obtain access to low-cost labour and reduced recruitment costs (Galloway et al. 2014; Maertz et al. 2014; Holyoak, 2013). Interns develop people skills, team-working skills, professionalism, and customer management experience. Students also improve their communication, confidence, and self-efficacy. Those with internship experience are more likely to find jobs and earn more (Saniter and Siedler, 2014).

Rapid technological advancement and adoption risks further excluding those who were already struggling to access employment because of a lack of advanced skills. Covid-19 further underscores the importance of developing effective up-skilling and re-skilling pathways. Therefore, it is crucial that graduates are reskilled or upskilled to enhance their chances of being employed. Similarly, Profiroiu and Păceșilă (2017) observed that young people involved in volunteering work have greater chances of securing a job.

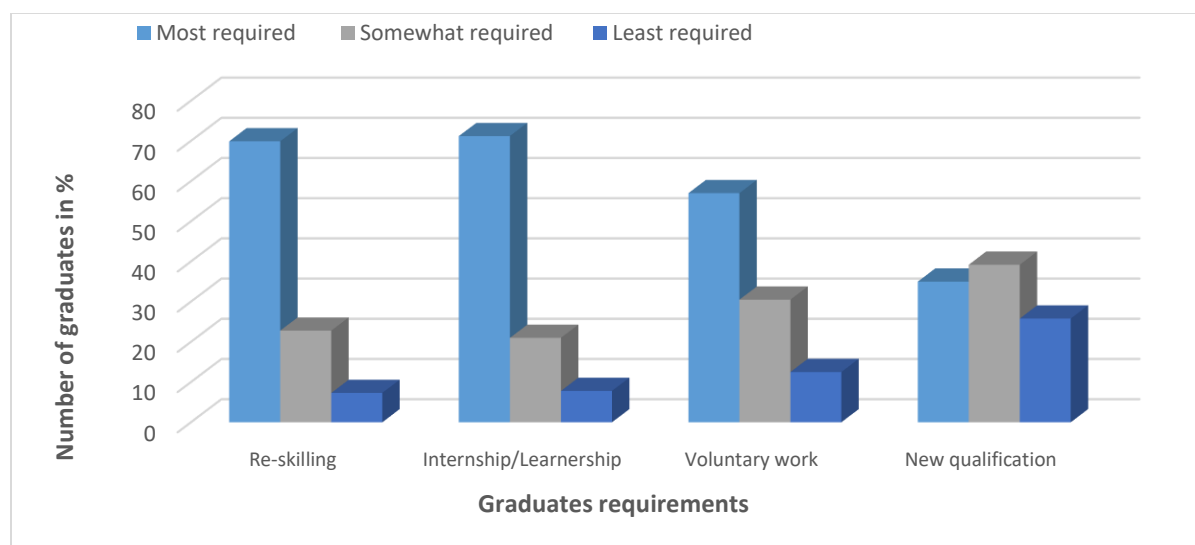


Figure 6: Graduates requirements to enhance employability

3.6 Graduates' Requirement from the Institutions of Higher Learning

Graduates require institutions of learning to include more practical experience in their final year of study (94.3%) rather than focusing purely on theory, followed by placement with businesses and/or organisations (92.4%) so that they can obtain valuable experience, and work readiness and work readiness programme/coaching and mentorship (90.2%). In their views this will enhance their chances of securing employment (Figure 7). The continuing gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the areas of education, recruitment and employability of people has become a major concern for educational establishments, employers, and the recruitment industry (Fisher and González, 2020). There is room for both theory and practice, and the optimum situation is when both co-exist. In agreement with the findings of this study, Fisher and González (2020) reported that there are situations where practical knowledge is of greater importance than theoretical knowledge, for example, in teaching and engineering. Furthermore, placement provides an opportunity for industry and university to work together in a cost-effective way of training the future graduates. Placements programmes help students to develop their common, transferable, technical, and people skills and provide industry an opportunity to train students for future industrial careers in specialized fields. Industrial placement enhances the practical and communication skills of graduates (Vaezi-Nejad, 2008).

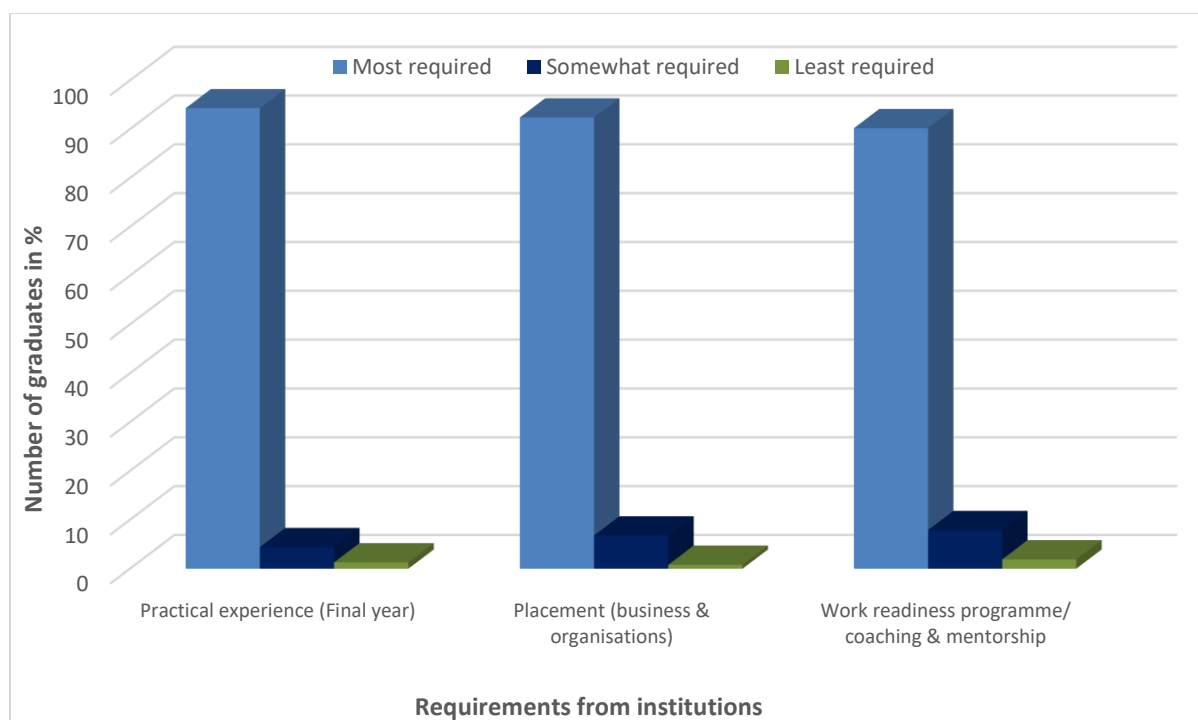


Figure 7: Graduates requirements from institutions of higher learning

4. Conclusion

The results from this study indicate that graduate unemployment in South Africa especially in KwaZulu-Natal is worse than what was anticipated. The rate of unemployment among Black graduates is even worse since all the responded in this study were Black Africans. Of great concern is that even master's and PhD graduates are struggling to secure internships, let alone contract or permanent employment. Some of the recommendations that will assist in addressing graduate unemployment include but not limited to (i) All disciplines should offer final year students community service placements. Moreover, final year students should be linked or placed with businesses and organizations where they will gain practical experience and exposure. (ii) Practical experience, work readiness and work integrated learning programmes, coaching and mentorship are crucial for graduates to gain work experience and thus enhancing graduates' employability. (iii) Align course content with specific needs of the employers. Often, the curriculum is developed in isolation without tapping into what is required/demanded by the employers, industry, business, or the economy. (iv) Proper career guidance should be provided to matriculants so that they can choose their career path and qualification wisely and with an understanding of where they could potentially work. (v) Reduce the number of students enrolling for redundant courses that are no longer in demand or relevant. (vi) Ongoing collaboration between academia and industry to ensure that graduates are equipped with the skills needed by industry and labour market. (vii) Technological advances brought by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) warrants curriculum change to meet the demands for new jobs that currently do not exist.

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Ethical Approval: Not applicable.

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