

Empowering South African Youth for Economic Participation Part 1: The Landscape of Youth Unemployment

The Current Employment Landscape

In South Africa, the youth (aged 15-34) experience high rates of unemployment. The youth unemployment rate is higher than the general unemployment rate. In the first quarter of 2025, the youth unemployment rate worsened, rising to 46.1% (Statistics South Africa, 2025b). The youth unemployment rate has persistently remained over 40% since the third quarter of 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2025b). Apartheid reinforced segregation and discrimination, which plays a significant role in economic inequality today. It is through meaningful economic participation that South African youth can begin to break cycles of inter-generational poverty and the legacy of structural inequality.

Factors Influencing High Youth Unemployment

Skills Mismatch

A prominent theme that emerges is the skills mismatch, as research suggests that South African youth are not acquiring adequate skills and competencies from the education system (Habiyaemye et al., 2022) when transitioning to the workforce. The global economy has a deficit of highly skilled

Experience

“The experience ‘dividend’ reveals that youth with experience outperform youth without experience by a margin of 4 to 1” (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Education

Obtaining an education is crucial because it equips young people with the skills and core competencies required to succeed in the workforce (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Those with the clearest advantage are university graduates, who have a significantly lower unemployment rate of 23.9% (Statistics South Africa, 2025a). This indicates that higher education has a protective effect and proves to be an advantage in the current labour market (Statistics South Africa, 2025a).

Gender

The data indicates that young women encounter more difficulties than men in securing decent employment (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Structural barriers such as caregiving responsibilities can impede their educational attainment, thus further hindering women's labour force participation and advancement (Statistics South Africa, 2024). This can be traced back to the historical confinement of women to caregiving roles, and black women specifically being relegated to domestic and agricultural roles in the apartheid era (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). Additionally, Gender-role socialisation plays a significant role in career decisions, emphasising the need for early intervention (Bimrose et al., 2017).

Geographical Location

“The nine provinces in the country display diversity in labour market dynamics, with variations in employment trends.” (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Geographical location can also determine access to opportunities, as urban areas generally offer better employment prospects than rural areas (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Ableism

The South African constitution stipulates equal access to education and employment for all persons is mandatory, yet the high number of unemployed youth with disabilities (PWD) disputes this. During apartheid, PWD had less access to public spaces, thereby reducing or removing the opportunity to gain employment. The remnants of this permeate through society, and women with disabilities are faced with further discrimination on the premise of their gender and disability. The government does not provide sufficient support to Arts and Culture programs which PWD tend to thrive in (le Roux, 2022). Social and structural exclusion, as well as pathologisation of PWD also negatively impact meaningful economic participation.

Socioeconomic and Psychological Impacts of Youth Unemployment

Poverty

Unemployment majorly contributes to poverty (Ngcaweni, 2017). In South Africa, where apartheid created structural class divides based on race, youth unemployment can further contribute to structural economic inequality (Ngcaweni, 2017).

Social Problems

Unemployment is associated with many social problems, including reduced political participation, such as less participation in elections, as well as “crime, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, poor health, and the loss of self-esteem and confidence needed to participate in broader society (Ngcaweni, 2017).

Psychological Distress

Participants in a South African study described experiencing high levels of psychological distress when they were unemployed, including feelings of guilt and fear for the future as well as anxiety, a lack of self-esteem, social exclusion and loss of identity (Pereira et al., 2024).

Empowering South African Youth for Economic Participation Part 2: Interventions to Assist the Youth with Becoming Economic Participants

Now that we have discussed the challenges facing young people regarding employment and access to economic participation, we explore various interventions aimed at empowering South African youth to become economic participants.

Current Governmental and Grassroots Interventions to Assist the Youth

Many governmental interventions aimed at addressing high rates of youth unemployment focus on skills development and assisting young people in gaining relevant work experience to increase their employability. These programmes have not significantly minimised exorbitant youth unemployment rates. Some of these programmes include:

- **The National Rural Youth Service Corps (NARYSEC):** Directed at youth from disadvantaged communities by providing them with vocational and technical skills.
- **National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA)** outlines four pertinent digital skills: “Digital literacy, ICT practitioner skills, sector-specific skills, digital leadership skills”. (Ohei & Mantzaris, 2023, p.229).
- **The National Planning Commission of South Africa:** Uplifting black women in academia to address inequality in employment and representation, lack of transformation and reduce the growing proportion of older academic staff (Biljohn et al., 2024).

Additionally, many grassroots and community-based interventions focus on providing resources to improve the youth’s employability. Some of these interventions include:

- **Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator:** Focuses on bridging the gap between unemployed youth and employers. The target group is unemployed youth aged 18-35 with no prior work experience. They offer work-readiness training, job-matching, and partnerships with employers, with the goal of reducing youth unemployment through training the youth to be employable and assisting with making the hiring process more accessible.
- **National Youth Development Agency (NYDA):** Focuses on holistic youth development, which also encompasses economic participation for youth aged 14-35. They have multiple offerings, including skills development, business funding, career guidance, and mentorship. They aim to facilitate youth empowerment and improve the livelihoods of young people.
- **Youth Employment Service (YES) program:** Focuses on private-sector job creation for unemployed youth (aged 18-34). They offer 12-month work experience placements in private companies with the overall goal of providing young people with relevant work experience to increase their long-term employability.

Suggestions for the Changing World of Work

- There is an increasing need for the development of soft skills in the changing world of work (Habiyaemye et al., 2022).
- Gaining work experience is a key factor in making a candidate more employable.
- The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), or the internet era of things (IoT) leverage integration of technology to fuel economic and sustainable development.
- The Department of Higher Education (DHET) should harness ICT skills in collaboration with research facilities in the form of accessible online courses, virtual discussion groups, gamification and related digitised learning (Ohei & Mantzaris, 2023).
- Vocational and Education Training (VET) programmes, guided learning in work settings through mentorship and informal-sector based training (Afeti, 2024).
- Including families and communities as supportive structures for career development programs targeted at people with disabilities/PWD (le Roux, 2022).
- Governing bodies of tertiary institutions should facilitate discussions around innovation and entrepreneurship in collaboration with, and supported by government (Naik, 2021).

- Adoption of a multi-pronged approach in Africa; prioritising foundational skills to alleviate poverty, while also cultivating advanced technical skills in individuals with established competencies to excel in specialised fields (Afeti, 2024). This includes categorising skills on “skill type, level of complexity and dimension of context.” (Afeti, 2024, p.3).

Empowering South African Youth for Economic Participation Part 3: Empowering Psychology (and other) Students and Graduates

In South Africa, obtaining a Master's degree that has been approved by the HPCSA for professional training is a prerequisite for becoming a psychologist. These programmes are highly competitive to get into as there are limited spaces compared to the high volume of applicants (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2017). So, psychology students and graduates face two concerns. They must enhance their chances of getting into a Master's programme, but that may take a few years. Thus, in the meantime, they must also consider their overall employability while they wait to get into a programme. This may mean exploring alternative employment paths in the interim.

Experience

As previously discussed in part 1, work experience is significant in improving chances of gaining employment. For psychology students, work or volunteer experience can enhance their applications for Master's programmes. This is because many universities ask about previous work or volunteer experience in the field during the application process. Some ways to get experience as a psychology student include:

- Becoming a lay counsellor for NGOs/NPOs such as SADAG, LifeLine, Mind Matters, or Childline
- Volunteering with local charities or NGOs/NPOs
- Gaining any work experience that deals with people (e.g. tutoring, being a waiter, au pairing, call centre, HR and recruitment, working at a bookshop, etc.)
- Gaining work experience at university (more details below)

Mentorship

Guidance from people in the field can assist students with clarifying what the profession they are pursuing is like, and mentors can provide insight into how to improve employability. For psychology students, mentors can help demystify the application process and training process for becoming a psychologist. They can assist students in better positioning themselves for future psychology applications. There are now numerous mentorship programmes for psychology students, and these are a few of them:

- PsySSA Student Division's National Mentorship Programme
- The PsySSA Student Division's YouTube channel also has insightful webinars regarding career development including:
 - Building Careers in Corporate and Industrial Psychology Parts 1
 - Building Careers in Corporate and Industrial Psychology Parts 2
 - Building a Professional Brand: A Guide for Aspiring Psychology Practitioners
- PsySSA's YouTube channel also has webinars guiding psychology students in various career paths they can pursue
 - The Psychology Career Compass Series Part 1
 - The Psychology Career Compass Series Part 2

Networking

Creating and nurturing relationships can help increase access to job opportunities and gain valuable references for the hiring process. Psychology students need at least two to three people (who are not family or friends) who can complete referee reports for them during the Master's application process. However, for overall employability, having a variety of relationships, including friends and family, can assist with finding job opportunities (Pereira et al., 2024).

- Get to know lecturers at your university by speaking up in lectures, attending office hours, and volunteering to be a class representative
- Attend alumni events as a graduate and approach alumni via social networking sites such as LinkedIn
- Build professional relationships by attending industry events such as conferences, webinars and becoming a member of a professional body such as PsySSA
- Volunteering and working are also opportunities to build relationships

Career Guidance

Many universities offer career guidance services to students via their campus support services. Students should take advantage of these free or very affordable workshops and counselling services to get guidance and support for planning alternative employment options while applying to get into psychology Master's programmes.

University Resources

Universities usually have a range of opportunities for students to gain relevant experience and increase their employability. These can include:

- Become a peer mentor (usually universities have peer mentorship programmes where older students mentor 1st years).
- Gain work experience by becoming a departmental tutor or taking on other work opportunities, like working at the library or assisting at events such as graduation
- Make use of counselling services and workshops for career guidance – you may be able to explore career alternatives while waiting to get into a psychology Master's programme.
- Many universities have writing centres where you can get assistance with putting together or improving your CV

Psychological Resources

It has been found that resilience, self-motivation and grit are psychological resources that can help the youth navigate the stress of job-searching (Pereira et al., 2024). Psychology students can cultivate these empowering psychological resources to assist them with the highly stressful Master's application process and with planning for alternative employment options. Self-efficacy may result in increased remuneration and breaking the glass ceiling, as individuals are more likely to engage in activities that propel their career (Moeketsane, 2024).

- Many universities offer students counselling services with psychologists on campus that are free of charge or very affordable. Use these services if you are feeling that the stress of future employability is impacting your mental health negatively.
- Students can also call into mental health helplines such as SADAG and LifeLine to get mental health support.

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