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PROVIDING PERSPECTIVES

# YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

Insights into South African youth unemployment,  
skills of the future and varsity applications

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# Youth unemployment and the skills for the future

## Insights into South African youth unemployment, skills of the future and varsity applications

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### 1. Introduction

The unemployment rate in South Africa for men and women willing to work remains high, which has become a significant economic concern. Young people must bear the burden of waiting longer on the job market for their first job. The high unemployment rate in South Africa has been related to several factors, such as geographical location, a slowdown in the growth rate, and government debt. The increase in government debt means there's little chance of funds being available for youth empowerment programmes. The increase in the trade unions bargaining for wage increases is another factor contributing to unemployment. Skills mismatch has been mentioned as another cause of unemployment. It is thought that with a university degree, it should become more accessible to find job opportunities. Despite being qualified, South African youth struggle to enter the job market. South Africa is producing many graduates, but the economy battles to employ them. This has led to the rate of unemployment amongst graduates being worse than it was a decade ago. Employers have indicated that graduates lack skills required by the industry, which is one of the reasons for not hiring them. There's a gap between skills developed during higher education and the skills needed for the industry. This has led to SA graduates looking for opportunities abroad.

This paper will look at the causes and trends in unemployment amongst South African youth and the skills currently in demand by the employment sector.

## 2. Unemployment in South Africa

South Africa continues to struggle with enduringly elevated levels of youth unemployment, despite substantial investments in active labour market programmes implemented by the government, private sector, and civil society ([Lannoy, et al., 2020](#)). The subject has attracted significant attention and is frequently discussed across various media platforms. In South Africa, the unemployment rate among the employable population (aged 15 to 64 years) is recorded at 32.9%. Furthermore, within this employable group, it is observed that 20% of the youth segment is experiencing unemployment ([Stats SA, Q 1:2023](#)). When focusing specifically on youth unemployment, which is our topic of interest, it is observed that the overall unemployment rate stands at 46.47%. This finding indicates that almost 50% of the adolescent demographic is experiencing unemployment.

**Table 1: Displays the unemployment rate of employable South Africans from age 15 to 64 years in Q1 of 2023 as given by Stats SA**

| Age Group                       | Labour Force<br>(Thousands) | Employed<br>(Thousands)          | Unemployed<br>(Thousands) | Unemployed<br>Rate (%) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Youth</b>                    |                             |                                  |                           |                        |
| 15-24 yrs                       | 2 823                       | 1 069                            | 1 754                     | 62.13%                 |
| 25-34 yrs                       | 7 674                       | 4 550                            | 3 124                     | 40.71%                 |
| Total Youth                     | 10 497                      | 5 619                            | 4 878                     | 46.47%                 |
| <b>Adults</b>                   |                             |                                  |                           |                        |
| 35-44 yrs                       | 6 996                       | 5 047                            | 1 949                     | 27.86%                 |
| 45-54 yrs                       | 4 868                       | 3 951                            | 916                       | 18.82%                 |
| 55-64 yrs                       | 1 764                       | 1 574                            | 190                       | 10.77%                 |
| Total Adults                    | 13 628                      | 10 572                           | 3 055                     | 22.42%                 |
| Total                           | 24 125                      | 16 191                           | 7 933                     | 32.88%                 |
| <b>Youth<br/>Unemployment %</b> | <b>20.22%</b>               | <b>Of the total labour force</b> |                           |                        |

## 2.1 Implications of a high unemployment rate

The observations in Table 1 are giving rise to a sense of worry. The implications of a high unemployment rate, particularly among the youth, will manifest in the following outcomes to mention a few:

A reduction in economic growth will hinder overall economic progress because of a substantial number of unemployed youth (O'Higgins, 2010). Secondly, the societal implications such as poverty and inequality, crime and social unrest, as well as concerns related to mental health. Furthermore, an additional aspect to consider is the phenomenon of migration patterns ([O'Higgins, 2010](#)). Rural-to-urban migration is anticipated due to the movement of young individuals toward urban centres in pursuit of employment opportunities. Numerous individuals may engage in the pursuit of opportunities outside the confines of South Africa, leading to adverse consequences for our competitiveness, as there is a possibility of skilled persons being attracted to other countries.

## 2.2 Factors influencing the unemployment rate.

Studies have shown that there are various factors influencing the high percentage of unemployment in South Africa, such as:

Economic instability, where an economy experiences fluctuations, uncertainty, and disruptions in various aspects of its functioning ([Washmuth, 2022](#)) is a leading cause of youth unemployment. An economy that lacks stability constrains the government's capacity to effectively address unexpected events and fulfill increasing social and developmental demands (South African team, 2023). To mitigate this, Brand South Africa CEO Miller Matola and Amy Rosen agree that entrepreneurship is the best solution to solving youth unemployment in South Africa, even as a long-term solution to youth unemployment globally ([Youthenvoy, 2014](#)). While this is not an entirely new concept, it may be undergoing a reinvention to appeal to a broader audience of young people, including those in rural areas.

The South African government has established several agencies to support youth entrepreneurship. These include the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA), the South African Black Entrepreneurs Forum (SABEF), and the Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA). These agencies provide financial aid through loans and grants, along with possibilities for skill enhancement, coaching, networking, and market access for young entrepreneurs (Youthenvoy, 2014). Rural areas derive advantages from the services rendered by organizations such as the Limpopo Business Support Agency (LIBSA), which attempts explicitly to facilitate young individuals' access to local business prospects. The agency acknowledges co-operatives as an essential representation of entrepreneurship.

Geographical location is also a significant factor contributing to unemployment in a way that areas with limited access to quality education or vocational training may have a less-skilled workforce, reducing their competitiveness in knowledge-based industries and contributing to higher unemployment. Furthermore, areas with low population density may have fewer businesses and job opportunities, which can contribute to higher unemployment. The province with the highest unemployment rate is the Northwest at 53.5%, followed by KwaZulu-Natal at 46.7%, Northern Cape and Eastern Cape both at 43.3%, Mpumalanga at 49.5%, Limpopo at 47.9%, Free State 44.0%, Gauteng 39.3% and Western Cape stands at 25.3% ([Jacobs, 2023](#)). This is a cause for migration to cities from rural areas, but entrepreneurship can assist with these where even rural areas have employment.

Another high contributor to youth unemployment in South Africa is skills mismatch. The primary cause is that schools in South Africa still produce graduates they made during the Industrial Revolution period and need to think about what the new world requires. Those skills are different from what our future needs. According to the World Economic Forum's most recent "Future of Jobs" report, 23% of all jobs worldwide will undergo changes by 2027. The report also highlights that in the near future, job losses will exceed the creation of new job opportunities (Malinga, 2023). During a round table discussion at a CNBC Africa summit on the Future of Work, all the panelists reached

a unanimous conclusion that Africa is currently facing a situation where schools are unaware of the demands of the job market, and universities are disregarding the needs of employers. This is because they continue to administer traditional knowledge-based exams and tests like those used in the early stages of education. In addition, they deliberated on the significance of upskilling and vocational training in equipping the workforce for upcoming positions. They emphasized that the shifting job market has decreased the importance of university degrees while placing greater emphasis on industry certification (Malinga, 2023).

### 3. Level of unemployment amongst graduates

Graduate unemployment has gradually been the topic of research interest as it grows in many countries. As a result of demanding high skilled labour, South African graduates remain unemployed ([Graham, Williams, & Chisoro, 2019](#)). To date, the percentage of unemployed graduates in South Africa is sitting at 2.7% ([Stats SA, Q 1:2023](#)) there has been an evident decrease from 6.6% in 1995 and 9.7% in 2005 ([van de Rheede, 2012](#)). A small percentage of the reduction can also be linked to government initiatives that the South African president emphasized in his State of the Nation address in 2018 ([Ramaphosa, 2018](#)) that involve public and private sectors combining forces and working towards decreasing these numbers.

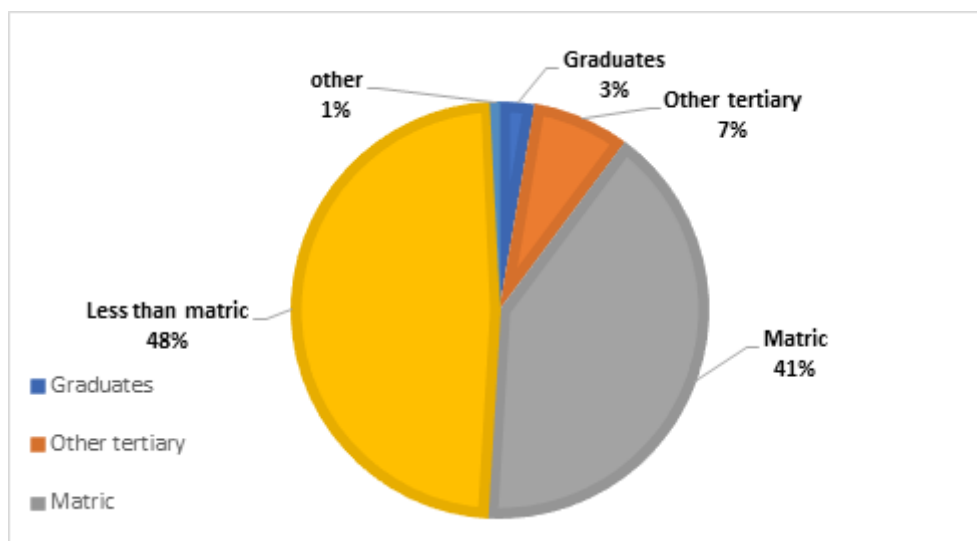


Figure 1. Unemployment in South Africa in the first quarter of 2023, by educational level (Cowling, 2023)

### 3.1 Different post-school education and training institutions

The term graduates generally refer to individuals with any type of post-matriculation qualification. These post-matriculation qualifications can be obtained from a variety of institutions, such as 1) Community Education and Training (CET) colleges, 2) technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges as well as 3) traditional universities, and 4) universities of technology. The difference between TVET and CET colleges is that the TVET colleges do not accept students without completing the Basic Education qualification (Mkhatshwa, 2020). CET colleges do not require basic education qualifications. The target audience is out-of-school youth that do not meet the requirements to get into TVET college or university (Mkhatshwa, 2020). Both these institutions offer their students skills. Then we have traditional universities and universities of technology; our country recognizes them as the same thing; they provide similar qualifications, which range from Higher Certificates to Doctoral degrees, and they can be public or private (ManpowerGroup SA, 2021). Figure 2 compares the size of the post-school education and training (PSET) system and component sectors in 2019 and their expected size in 2030. Achieving the envisioned growth in enrolments across the PSET system to 5.4 million students by 2030 requires growth in both public and private PSET provisions.

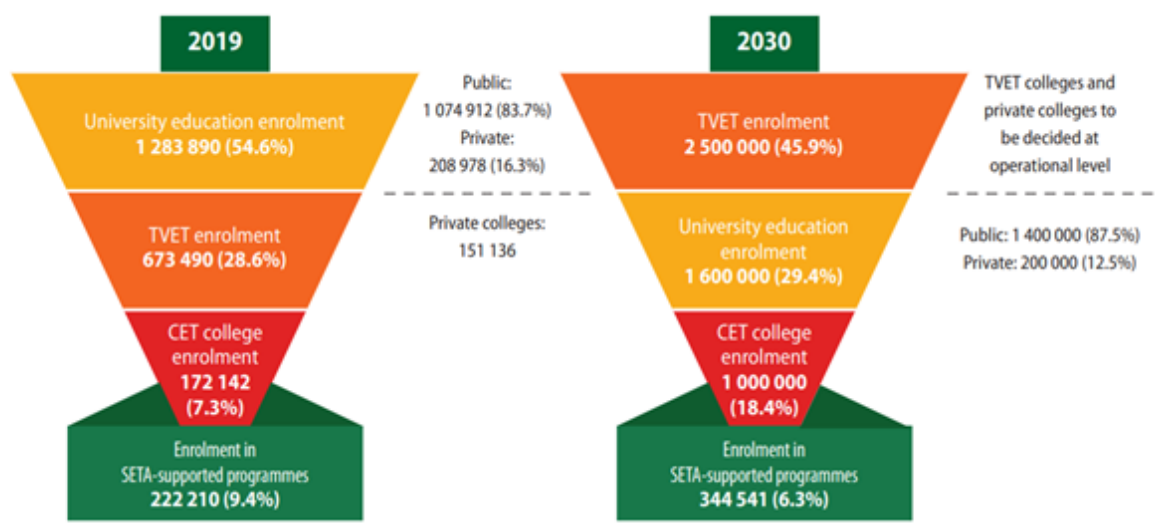


Figure 2. Source - DHT white paper for post-school education and training (2013a); DHET statistics on post-school education and training in South Africa (2019b)

### 3.2 Level of education linked to unemployment.



Statistics South Africa (2017) acknowledged that unemployment among university graduates appears to be low compared to that of TVET graduates, which was at 33% ([Sibiya, Nyembezi, & Bogopa, 2020](#)). A placement and employability study for TVET graduates who were part of the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Programme in the Safety and Security Sector from 2015/16 to 2017/18 found that TVET graduates are finding it hard to find employment. However, they have experienced workplace learning ([SASSETA, 2018:22](#)). In 2011/12, there were about 600,000 unemployed graduates in South Africa, a third of whom were TVET engineering and science graduates (Prinsloo, 2011; Sharp, 2015). These statistics are particularly disappointing to everyone since we all have placed hope in the role that TVET is developing skills that workplaces need. Therefore, employability should be more accessible ([Prinsloo, 2011; Nkosi, 2017](#)). With the possibility of TVET graduates increasing by 2030, as shown in Fig 2, reasons as to why their employability is lower need to be looked at, and ways of reducing even higher unemployment rates needs to be reviewed.

## 4. Skills & Job of the future

This section will examine the skills in demand and the information businesses have provided regarding prioritizing their reskilling and upskilling initiatives over the next five years. We will also look at the skills needed in South Africa. The fastest-growing and fastest-declining jobs over the next five years will be evaluated.

### 4.1. Skills Outlook

The enormous mismatch between the supply and demand for skills in South Africa is a matter of widespread knowledge. A growing need for people with high-level skills has been identified by prior studies, even though most of the population has low-level skills. Furthermore, many South Africans must be more qualified or qualified for their current jobs. According to research conducted by [Allen, et al., \(2021\)](#) there are significant discrepancies between the fields of education and employment that workers are qualified for. Sometimes, a worker's educational background does not match the position's academic requirements ([Allen, et al., 2021](#)). As a result, institutions are under

intense pressure to create graduates who will easily transition into the workforce following graduation.

Universities are currently at the forefront of the employability discourse in the race to produce competent graduates for the workforce. As a result, numerous employability research studies have been conducted over the years to address a variety of topics, including employability skills, employability, pedagogical pedagogy approaches, which is the approach to teaching, graduate NES, and learning ([Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010](#)) ([Lowden , et al., 2011](#)) ([Finch, et al., 2013](#)) ([Suleman, 2018](#)) ([Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2019](#)) ([Succi & Canovi, 2019](#))

#### **4.1.1 Core Skills and skills evolution: 2023 – 2027**

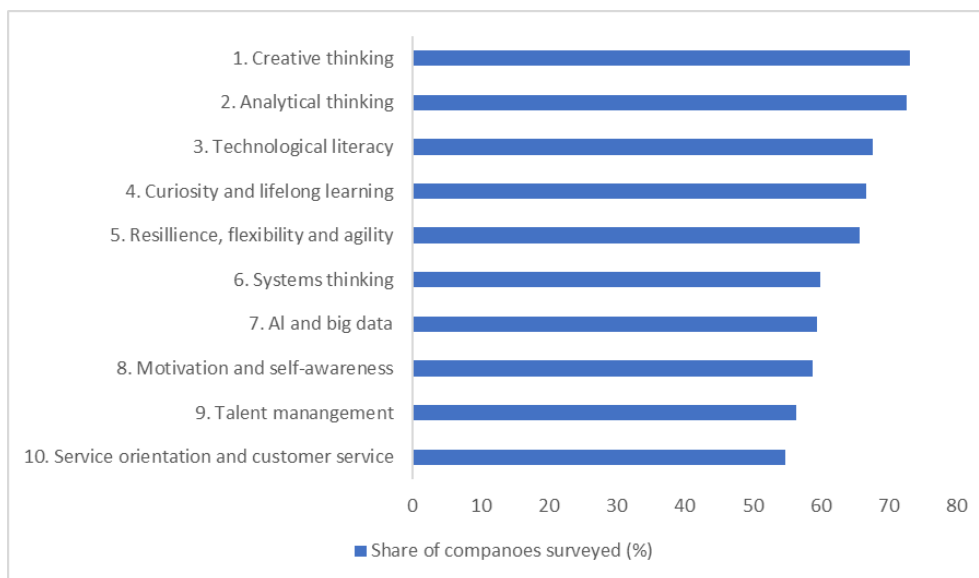
The essential skills needed by workers today are displayed in Table 2. As of 2020, organisations named Analytical Thinking one of their core abilities, accounting for 9% of total skills (M A Y 2 0 2 3/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023). More companies than any other see it as a fundamental skill. The cognitive skill of creative thinking ranks second in terms of how important it is for workers to adjust to hectic work environments, ahead of three self-efficacy skills: resilience, flexibility, and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning. (M A Y 2 0 2 3/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023). Dependability and attention to detail, the fourth self-efficacy skill in the Global Skills Taxonomy, is ranked eighth, just below technological literacy.

**Table 2: Core skills of 2023**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. <span style="color: green;">■</span> Analytical skills                  | 6. <span style="color: orange;">■</span> Technological literacy              |
| 2. <span style="color: green;">■</span> Creative thinking                  | 7. <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Dependability and attention to detail |
| 3. <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Resilience, flexibility and agility | 8. <span style="color: green;">■</span> Empathy and active listening         |
| 4. <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Motivation and self-awareness       | 9. <span style="color: green;">■</span> Leadership and social influence      |
| 5. <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Curiosity and lifelong learning     | 10. <span style="color: lightblue;">■</span> Quality control                 |

■ Cognitive skills   
 ■ Self-efficacy   
 ■ Technological skills   
 ■ Working with others  
■ Management skills

According to a survey conducted by the World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2023, businesses are projecting that over the next five years, employees' value of skills will change most quickly in cognitive skills (Figure 3). This aligns with the growing importance of complex problem-solving in the workplace (Insights report, 2023). Businesses surveyed claim creative thinking is becoming slightly more critical than analytical thinking. The third-fastest expanding core competency is technology literacy.



*Figure 3. Skills on the rise (Insights report, 2023)*

## 4.2 Jobs Outlook

### 4.2.1 Fastest growing versus fastest declining Jobs.

The 100 jobs that have risen the fastest, steadily, and worldwide over the past four years are referred to as the "Jobs on the Rise," according to research done by LinkedIn for the Future of Jobs Report 2023. Data from Jobs on the Rise specifies the precise job categories that have rapidly increased. In contrast, data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals which industries have the highest employment rates (Insights report, 2023). Figure 4 below shows the number of jobs in the top 100 that are the fastest growing. The third highest of all employment categories, the technology and digital communication sector, which includes occupations related to IT and technology, account for 16 of the top 100 Jobs on the Rise (Figure 4). 22 out of the 100 roles are connected to customer engagement and sales growth. In a world with greater access to digital technology and rapid technical improvement, the inclusion of roles like sales development representatives, directors of growth, and customer success engineers in this category may indicate a growing emphasis on expanding client bases and growth models.

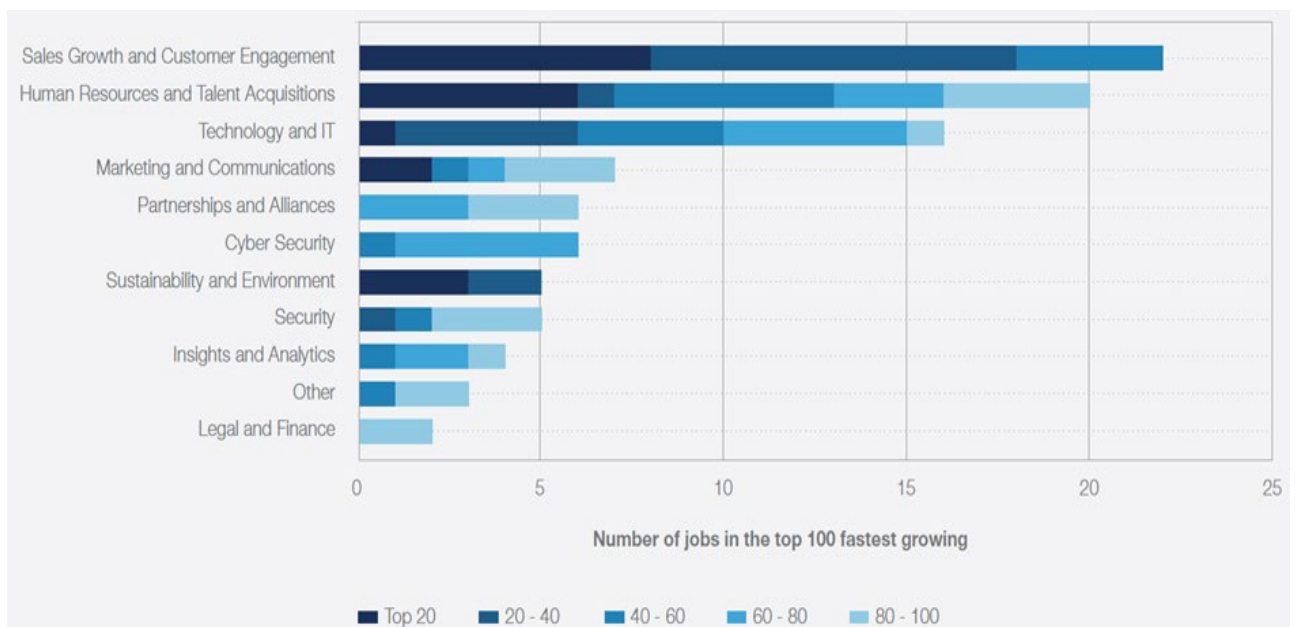


Figure 4. Jobs on the rise 2018 (Insights report, 2023)

Sustainability and environmental-related responsibilities stand out among the groupings lower down the list because they are all in the top 40 and include three top

10 roles (Figure 4). Given that positions with titles like "Sustainability Analyst" are available, this may indicate that the green transition is a substantial and developing labor-market trend.

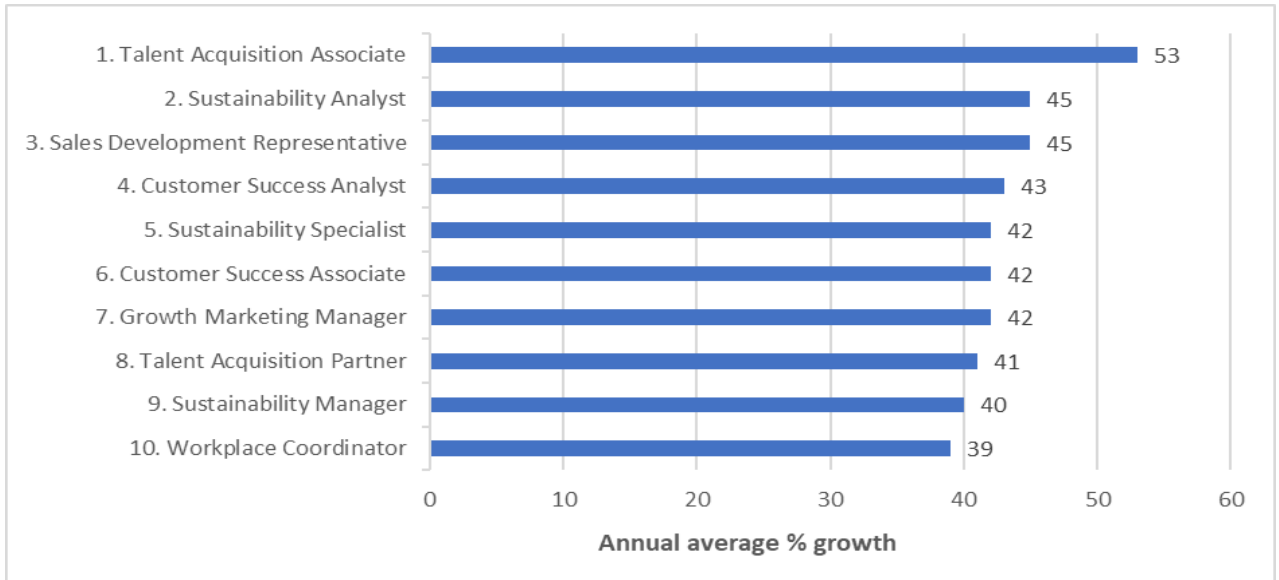


Figure 5. Top 10 fastest growing jobs (Insights report, 2023)

Clerical and secretarial positions account for the most rapidly declining positions, and the jobs expected to decrease fastest are those connected to bank tellers and related clerks, postal service clerks, cashiers, and ticket clerks (Figure 6).

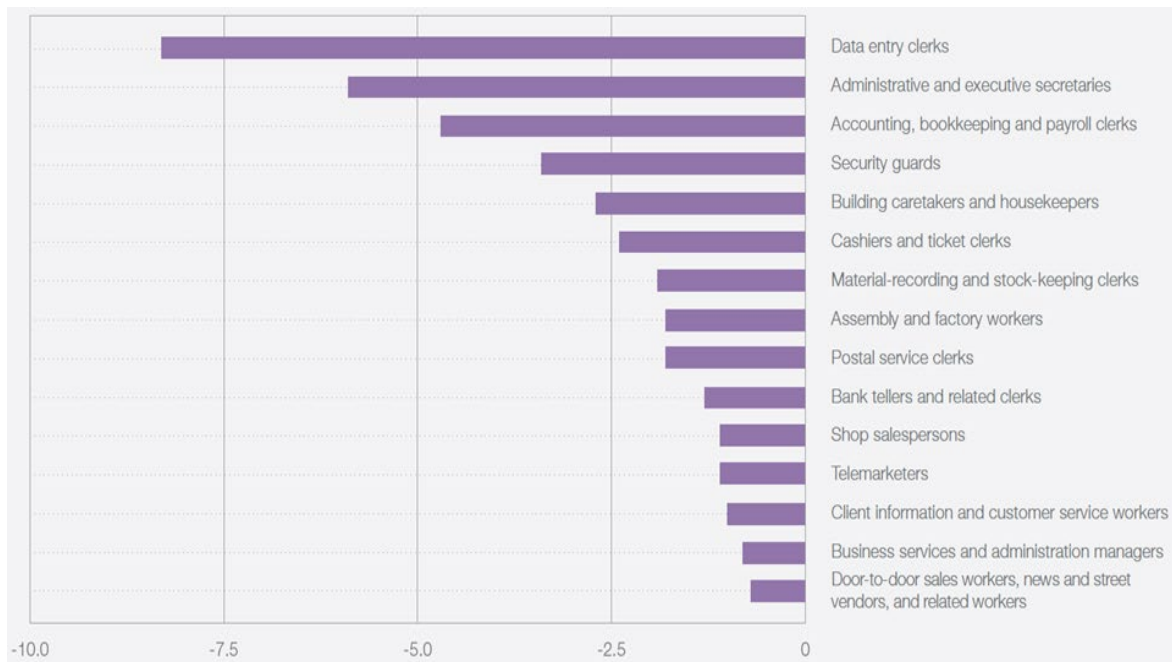


Figure 6. Largest job declines in 5 years (Insights report, 2023)

## 5. Tertiary learning applications

As shown in Figure 1 in Section 3, youth unemployment amongst non-tertiary graduates is 41%, higher than the unemployment rate among graduates. A young person with a tertiary education increases their employability in almost all countries. Therefore, it is still advisable that youth in South Africa should still complete a post-school qualification. The ever-developing technology applied to these institutes has been made easier and more convenient for South Africans from different financial backgrounds. According To Basoeki et al, technology has improved, and their empirical data points to the value of robotics as a supplemental teaching tool in higher education and in the current context most tertiary institutions are shying away from using paper-based systems. University applications are now performed online therefore, prospective students must familiarize themselves with such online platforms. Most institutions no longer require an application fee; the application is free. This is because of the online platform provided to avoid cost implications for needy students. After familiarizing themselves with the online platforms, they must note that compulsory documents are required to apply at a tertiary institution, such as a Copy of the ID of legal guardians (if one is under 18), a Grade 11 report, and final matric results.

### 5.1 Tertiary Education Common Dates

According to [Fundi Connect Article \(2023\)](#), the South African academic year runs from January to December, and applications for tertiary institutions in South Africa typically open between April and July. The closing dates vary around August/ September, with some staying open through December or January, and Health Sciences applications typically close around June.

### 5.2 Courses students are likely to apply for

The University of the Witwatersrand recently revealed early registration figures for first-year students in 2020. Engineering (throughout the eight departments) received the

most applications, totalling roughly 19,000. It was then followed by 17,036 candidates for a Bachelor of Science degree.

Moreover, Studies have further proved that most learners apply for humanities career-related fields. (BA, Education, communication sciences, etc.) Given that in the present SA context, most learners opt for careers in humanities, they need more employment opportunities. [According to Allen, R., 1998](#), students opt for humanities careers for various reasons, reflecting their interests, passions, and career aspirations. He further believes that it is crucial to remember that employability varies depending on different circumstances, including the subject of study, the skills acquired, and the employment market at any given moment. Humanities careers might occasionally be seen as having poorer employability for various reasons.

Moreover, [Allen, R., 1998](#) believes that many humanities fields, such as philosophy, history, and literature, need to offer direct vocational training or specialized technical skills in great demand in the marketplace. This result may make it more challenging for graduates to obtain jobs that are directly relevant to their field of study. Some humanities degrees, like English or sociology, may need a more precise and direct career path, making it more challenging for graduates to identify potential job opportunities.

Therefore, prospective students must research the disciplinary fields they wish to apply for. If one has enrolled in humanities courses, the major modules they choose must align with the current job market. Choosing a humanities major can lead to fulfilling and meaningful career paths for those passionate about the subject matter and committed to developing their skills.

### **5.3 Courses students unlikely to apply for.**

Courses that students are less likely to apply for can vary depending on individual interests, career goals, and cultural factors. However, some courses have lower enrolment rates due to perceived difficulty and lack of interest. [According to the Q2 Pnet Job Market Trends Report., 2023](#). Jobs in sales, financial services, and IT are the most sought-after occupations in South Africa. Furthermore, the Pnet report

highlights that the most sought-after occupations in the SME sector are sales representatives, accountants, and software developers. This part of the paper highlights that the Pnet report shows that skills need to be improved within the SME, such as financial skills, business and management skills, and information technology skills, which are skills and courses that students need to apply for. Prospective students are urged to apply for careers and courses in demand.

## **6. Limitations and prospects**

Since its democratic transition in 1994, South Africa's economic development and job creation have been lacking. High unemployment is caused mainly by high wages and the contraction of the non-mineral tradable industry since the early 1990s. Centered around exports, manufacturing has deprived South Africa of growth potential and job creation, with the most significant contributor being a reduction in manufacturing profitability (Fedderke et al., 2006). Education and limitations associated with the sector also play a massive role in the economy's low growth. Almost every skilled employee is sharpened or acquires the knowledge they use in the industry through the education sector; therefore, as industries advance, education must advance along with the work industry.

Although South Africa has allowed its citizens to acquire education through the rise of the 'fees must fall', which was introduced to accommodate all individuals from different family backgrounds, the country needs to upgrade its curriculum to match the standard of other countries. This may include applying and regulating approaches such as design thinking, which "is a mindset and approach to problem-solving and innovation anchored around human-centered design." (Schmidberger & Wippermann, 2023) (University of Bridgeport, 2023). Schools in countries such as India, which have introduced design thinking in their curriculum, report that their students are better collaborators; they are resourceful, critical thinkers, and problem solvers because of design thinking incorporated into their education system. The South African government needs to seriously consider adding design thinking in the education sector as early as preschool. Where the next generation would be exposed to critical skills in solving problems, the next generation should not only be good at memorizing and regurgitating facts but should be able to think creatively, collaborate with others, and



communicate well; design thinking incorporated in the education systems could highly assist with that.

Dual degrees and double majors are also viable approaches we can adopt to reduce high unemployment among graduates (University of Bridgeport, 2023). A dual degree means the individual will graduate with two degrees, generally with just one year added to the time it would take to finish one degree. The double major degree is a single bachelor's degree in two subjects or areas. Unfortunately, in South Africa, these options are not available. Again, an upgraded and added approach such as this in education will allow the country to improve its skills and competitiveness with other countries. These approaches and many others will assist in securing the future economic growth of the country by not only increasing skilled and knowledgeable workers and job creation, which will decrease the worrying unemployment rate. With all this being said, a study properly discussing these approaches following this study needs to be conducted.

## 7. Conclusion

Youth unemployment in SA has resulted in a decline in economic growth, inequality, crime, and social unrest and has been associated with another significant cause of depression amongst the youth. There's a need for ways to reduce unemployment, including entrepreneurship, exposing students to jobs that are in demand in the country, and creating programmes that connect students with employers at an early stage of their job search could be of assistance. With the rate of graduate unemployment rising in South Africa, there's undoubtedly a need to re-evaluate the education system to bridge the gap of skills mismatch. Education and training needs should be aligned with market demand to produce work-ready graduates. The tertiary institutions need to partner with industry to assist graduates in finding employment. There is room to consider keeping graduates longer at university (e.g., five years instead of 3) as they complete dual degrees or double majors. This proposal could allow the economy time to recover and create jobs as graduates dive into research and make discoveries for medical mysteries, food security, or oil and gas, which could undoubtedly be a game changer. GDP growth to between 4-8%, as seen with other

countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and recently Guyana, would be possible. Will this proposal not create a demand for the construction of more universities and student accommodations, which could further stimulate the economy as we're currently battling with an infrastructure build programme? The increasing population of young people will demand that this be considered.

Additionally, with the ratio of university applications and university space not balancing, could the Department of Higher Education not open more bursaries for young South Africans to study abroad? With them abroad, it would open possibilities for them to find employment abroad. South African youth must follow the correct process and procedure when applying for tertiary education. Moreover, prospective students are urged to research the courses they wish to enroll in and the employability of courses of their choice.

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