

From school into the jobless abyss

Young people should be encouraged to remain in education for as long as possible, writes Michael Cosser

A STUDY tracing the destinations of learners who were in Grade 12 in 2005 has revealed that 9 percent of the 40 002 matriculants were working in 2006, less than half the 20 percent who had aspired to a job.

Thirty-two percent - 138 240 learners - were unemployed and looking for a job, a higher percentage than the official unemployment figure of Statistics SA's Labour Force Survey of 25.5 percent in September 2006.

Of the 9 percent of learners who were employed, the largest proportion - nearly a quarter (24 percent) - found employment by going from place to place asking for work. This contrasts with the situation in 2002, when an HSRC survey of the destinations of Grade 12s of 2001 showed that only 12 percent found work by going from door to door.

In 2006, 42 percent found employment through networks operating within their spheres of activity - and taking more than four months to do so.

The three variables most strongly influencing learners' perceptions of what facilitated finding employment, were personality, the ability to speak English well and possession of a Senior Certificate.

While having Grade 12 was clearly important, it ranked only third in the table - and was far more influential for women than for men.

Race exerted a negligible influence in learners' minds on their finding employment: the score was 2.3 on a 5-point Likert-type scale for Africans, and 1.6 for whites.

Not surprisingly, most of the first-time entrants into the labour market (77 percent) were working for a company or organisation, while 15 percent assisted someone else in a business. Some 57 percent were employed in a private company, 24 percent in government or the public service, and 19 percent in a non-governmental or community-based organisation.

The vast majority of employed post-Grade 12 learners worked in the wholesale, retail, repairs and hotel sector (60 percent), followed by community, social, or personal services (14 percent), financial, insurance, real estate or business (11 percent)



HIGH HOPES: Matric pupils celebrate after receiving their results. Latest statistics from the HSRC show that less than half can expect to find employment within a year of finishing school, the vast majority working in the wholesale, retail, repairs and hotel sector, says the writer.
PICTURE: TRACEY ADAMS

and construction (4 percent).

Thirty-nine percent were working as service workers, shop and market sales workers, 20 percent as clerks, 17 percent in elementary occupations, 8 percent as technicians and associate professionals, 7 percent in craft and related trades, 6 percent as plant and machine operators and assemblers, 2 percent as professionals, and 1 percent as legislators, senior officials and managers.

What is clear is that school qualifications do not skill for work. Those employed rated alignment between the knowledge and skills they acquired at school and use of these attributes in their jobs at 3.6 on a 5-point scale.

Seventy-one percent indicated that their jobs were neither appropriate nor linked to their school qualifications, most indicating that they took the job to support themselves and or their families (76 per-

cent), that they could gain valuable experience in their current jobs (45 percent), and that they could not find a job linked to their level of education (37 percent).

That the number of employed learners includes those working part-time (half of those employed) places the high percentage (71 percent) of learners who took jobs not linked to their schooling in perspective. However, only 7 percent of those employed ascribe their deci-

sion to take their jobs to the need for the flexibility which part-time work affords.

The high percentage of those employed who indicated their jobs were neither appropriate nor linked to their school qualifications is a sobering comment - albeit from the learners' perspective - about the extent to which school is an adequate preparation ground for work.

Sixty percent of the sub-set of those not working (which includes

those studying) were in need of employment, underscoring the extent to which studying and unemployment are not mutually exclusive categories for many South African youth - studying being used as a holding mechanism until the finding of a job.

The average length of time unemployed learners had been looking for employment was 8.5 months.

The reasons provided by the unemployed for their not having

jobs included insufficiently high qualification levels (56 percent); the absence of job opportunities where they lived (48 percent); lacking the skills/experience for the job (35 percent); and having no money to look for work (23 percent).

The first and third of these point to the mismatch between school supply and labour market demand, suggesting high under-qualification for employment. Unemployed learners indicated that neither race (2.7), level of physical ability (2.4), nor gender (2.5) had exerted any perceptible effect on their employment status.

The five main strategies that respondents say might have enhanced their employability were: acquiring more practical training (61 percent of responses); applying for more jobs (47 percent); moving to another area where there might be work (38 percent); sending a CV to employers (36 percent); and sending a CV to an employment agency (34 percent).

The high percentage of unemployed learners the year after school, the correspondingly low percentage of learners in employment, the high under-qualification for the labour market, and employers' apparent demand that learners bring experience to the job market, underscore the inherently skewed nature of post-school trajectories.

Learners should either be studying towards achieving a Senior Certificate the year after school (if they have failed at the first attempt), or be continuing with their studies - in further or higher education.

That 41 percent of school-leavers enter the labour market in any one year signals a generation without opportunity. If that generation is not to replicate itself - as Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande pronounced in his budget speech - the multitude of young people (2.8 million) who are not employed, in education, or training, suggests that young people should be encouraged to remain in education for as long as possible.

● This article, first published in the HSRC Review, is based on Michael Cosser and Sekinah Sehlola's *Ambitions Revised: Grade 12 Learner Destinations One Year On*, published by the HSRC Press