

POLICY BRIEF

Public attitudes to work in South Africa

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Introduction and background

A key area for policy in South Africa is how to develop a strong foundation of labour market information and to provide the type of intelligence and signals that can help government, stakeholders, education and training providers, and students to make more informed decisions about how resources are invested in skills development, education and training. In order to address this need the DHET initiated a four year Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) project, with research to be conducted by an HSRC consortium. The project investigates labour market and skill issues, with a view to produce recommendations on how education and training institutions could respond to signals from the labour market, with the goal of developing a credible skills planning mechanism for South Africa.

The significance of public attitudes for ensuring the effectiveness of national government skills and labour market interventions and policies has been widely recognised. Attitudes serve as significant predictors of individuals' behaviour and, thus, can provide clues about behaviour related to finding and keeping paid work, as well as about perceptions of commitment to work, skills acquisition and satisfaction at work. It is therefore imperative that skills-planners have a comprehensive understanding of labour market perceptions. In South Africa, data-driven scientific studies of the public's attitudes to work, their expectations, preferences and job-search behaviours are limited. To address this gap, the Labour Market Intelligence Programme (LMIP) initiated a unique study with specific, focused questions about social attitudes to the labour market.

This policy brief is based on an analytical study, with the objective to assess public attitudes towards the South African labour market¹. To address this question the study canvassed the opinions of both the

¹ Mncwango B. (2016) Public Attitudes to Work in South Africa. An LMIP publication. Human Sciences Research Council.

employed and the unemployed. The study therefore adds value by providing detailed attitudinal data, to complement existing labour market macro-datasets. A quantitative methodological approach was used to undertake the study. Data was collected from a representative national sample of 2885 respondents that included the employed (30 per cent), unemployed work-seekers (37 per cent) and those who are economically inactive (33 per cent) in the labour market. Questions were fielded through the HSRC's South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) in 2013.

Privileging the connection between labour market behaviours and work attitudes, the study examined public attitudes to work in order to gain a deeper understanding of South African work values, preferences and experiences, and labour market behaviour patterns. While social attitudes to the labour market are dynamic, they also are shaped by perceived opportunities and constraints, which, in turn, frame expectations and aspirations of education and labour market participation. Therefore, if the challenge for policy-makers lies in how they can understand decision-making about work, job-searching, or participation education and training, an understanding of the public's lived experiences as labour market participants offers critical information for effective skills planning.

With an unemployment rate at 36 per cent based on the first quarter of 2016, if one counts the discouraged unemployed who have given up looking for a job (Stats SA 2016)² — the study of attitudes to work is critical in order to gain insight into the attitudes, motivations and behaviours of individuals in order to formulate tailored employment and skills-development interventions. Moreover, the South Africa's working age population face varied labour market circumstances ranging from unequal access to employment to unequal rewards, testifying to high levels of inequality. However, it is not only the labour market opportunities that are unequally distributed, but also the type of jobs available, with specific groups likely to be underemployed, in non-standard forms of employment or in 'working poverty'. Indeed, unemployment profoundly affects the most disadvantaged segments of the population — those who have low levels of education and skills, those who reside in relatively poorer provinces and black people, are most likely to be vulnerable to unemployment (Yu, 2008 in Festus et al. 2015³; Stats SA 2014⁴).

The next section presents some of the key findings regarding public perceptions of the labour market, perceptions of those in employment about quality of employment, and perceptions of those without jobs about prospects of labour market participation and their work-seeking behaviour.

General Perceptions towards the Labour Market

The study revealed four important findings regarding general perceptions of the South African population towards the labour market. According to respondents:

1. **There is a significant and positive relationship between education and labour market position.** Individuals with tertiary education are three times more likely to be employed than are those with less than a matric or equivalent level of education. Furthermore, Black African respondents continue to be overrepresented amongst those with no or lower levels of schooling.

2 Stats SA (2016) *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 1*. Accessed June 2016. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2016.pdf>

3 Festus L, Kasongo A, Moses M & Yu D (2015) *The South African labour market, 1995–2013*. Economic Research Southern Africa (ERSA) Working Paper 493. Accessed November 2015, http://www.econrsa.org/system/files/publications/working_papers/working_paper_493.pdf

4 Stats SA (Statistics South Africa) (2014) *Labour market dynamics in South Africa*. Pretoria: Stats SA.

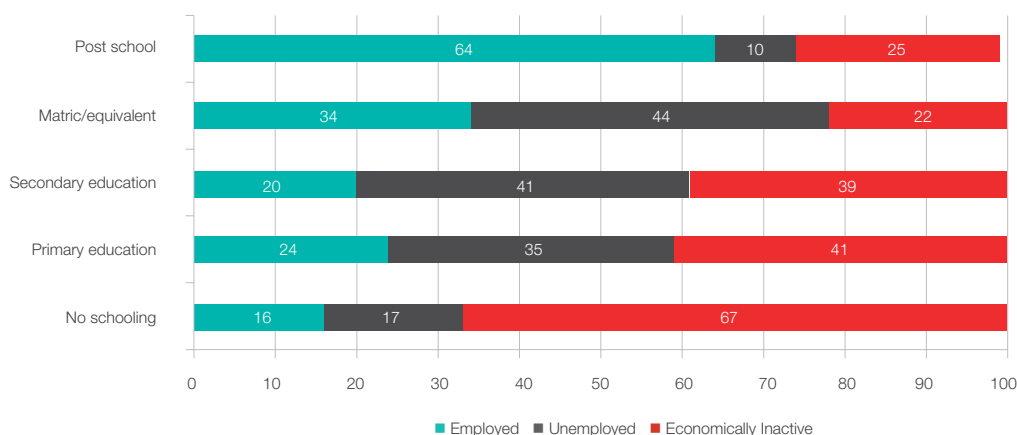


Figure 2: Attendance of workplace training by level of education (percentage).

2. **Job security is the most important characteristic of a job.** Other characteristics such as decent earnings, promotional chances and stimulating work are valued by both the employed and the unemployed, however job security is the foremost concern within both categories.
3. **Social and economic mobility are strongly linked to education.** These factors are also seen to facilitate economic advancement, irrespective of family background. Over three-quarters of South Africans concur that being educated improves one's chances of getting a job.
4. **Unemployment is attributed to both societal and individual factors.** Unemployment is seen as the responsibility of both government and individuals. There is consensus that lack and poor quality of education is a bottleneck to participation in the labour market. Furthermore, the public strongly believes that education is central to positive labour market outcomes and improved labour force participation.

Findings therefore suggest that the public places value on education as the primary currency towards securing employment, successfully navigating the labour market, as well as to improve one's economic and social status.

The Employed and the Labour Market

From the perspective of the employed there seem to be a number of discrepancies between work values and workplace reality. The study results show that discrepancies are most extreme in relation to the reality of attaining a high income and good prospects for job promotion. The analysis further indicates differences in the overall experience of work and job outcomes on the basis of race, education levels and social class. Key points include:

1. **Black African workers were less satisfied with their jobs than white workers.** Those with a low or medium living standard also recorded significantly lower satisfaction scores than those with a high living standard. Job satisfaction is significantly, and most positively, associated with workers rating their jobs as providing interesting content, fair remuneration and security.
2. **Less-educated workers are less likely to receive workplace training.** Workers with a tertiary education were almost three times more likely to be offered training than were those with lower educational levels.

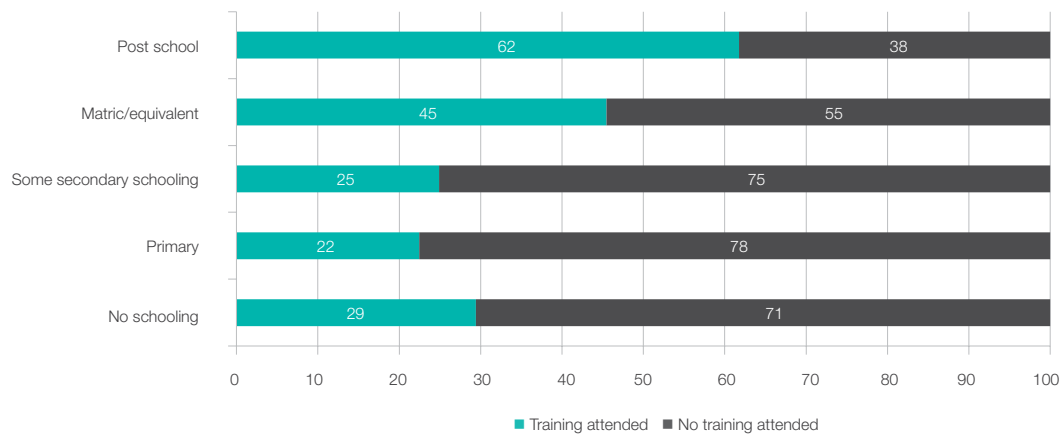


Figure 2: Attendance of workplace training by level of education (percentage).

3. **Over-qualification was more commonly reported than under-qualification amongst the employed respondents.** While 30 per cent of the employed said that the minimum levels of education required to perform their jobs were below their current levels of education, one-fifth/ 21% indicated that they were under-qualified for the work that they were currently doing and a 49% reported that their qualification were well matched to what was required in the job. Black Africans were almost three times more likely to be over-qualified than were white and Indian workers. The incidence of over-qualification was also more common amongst rural commercial farms dwellers, while residents in informal settlements were more likely to be under-qualified. Data further suggest that being better educated increases the odds of workers being well matched to their jobs.

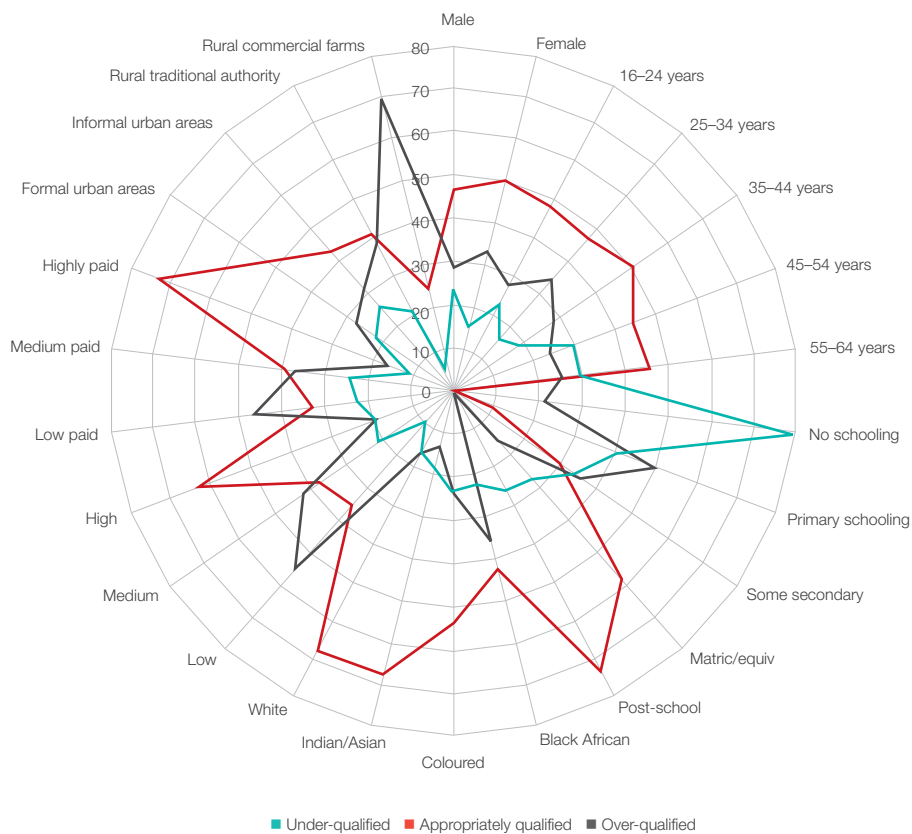


Figure 3: Incidence of perceptions of over-qualification/under-qualification (percentage) across socio-economic characteristics.

The Unemployed and the Labour Market

Key findings regarding the unemployed segment of the population's attitudes towards the labour market include:

1. **The unemployed desire employment, but are sceptical about finding it.** Almost all (98 per cent) of the unemployed expressed the desire to have paid employment (either currently or in the future). While the intention to secure paid employment among the unemployed is high, there is great scepticism about the likelihood of securing such employment. The strongest reservations are expressed by women, those with primary or no formal schooling and those in formal urban areas. Conversely, the highest optimism was articulated by the youth.
2. **Social networks are the most common method of seeking employment.** Internet use for finding work is more prominent amongst the middle to upper social classes while the less-affluent were predominantly represented amongst those who in addition to using social networks relied on job advertisements and waited on the side of the road in search for jobs. Moreover, the affluent use a combination of methods to search for employment, while there is an over reliance on social networks by the rest of the population. Furthermore, males are more likely to search for jobs on the Internet, in newspapers, through registration at a labour centre or private employment agency, or by waiting at the roadside.

Implications for Skills Planning

Understanding the general public's attitudes towards the labour market and perceived bottlenecks to participation is important to inform government's skills planning interventions, by placing on the policy agenda the views and beliefs of ordinary South Africans. The study's findings underscore the value of a national survey seeking to understand the public's attitudes to and experience of employment and unemployment.

Study results provide evidence that attitudes and experience of work vary significantly, and continue to be inequitably influenced by an individual's race, educational attainment and social class position. These distinct but intertwined dimensions of disadvantage require adaptable and targeted policies in order to benefit vulnerable segments of our population.

These findings have a number of important implications for current and future policy interventions.

Reliance on informal networks underscores the importance of the National Career Advice Portal (NCAP) project and other career guidance interventions that do not rely on internet access.

There is a need to strengthen targeted interventions focused at vulnerable labour market participants with low education and skills levels, to facilitate mobility to better jobs. On-the-job training and vocational training to upgrade skills and boost overall human capital could be effective mechanisms to improve their labour market outcomes.

More interventions are required that focus on the labour market phenomenon of over- and under-qualification, in order to enhance a better match between qualifications, experience and skill requirements of a job.

Racial inequality suggests that much more needs to be done across all spheres of government – education, higher education and training, labour, and economic development. The efficacy of programmes such as Employment Equity and Broad Based Economic Empowerment should be interrogated.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges are valuable centres for skill delivery within the South African economy. The public's knowledge of and attitudes toward these institutions should be investigated alongside interventions seeking to improve access and throughput.



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