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Making the transition: Graduateness and employability in an Open Distance Learning university

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About Unisa

- Unisa is an **open distance learning** university
- 142 years old
- Vision is to be *the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity*
- Currently moving towards open distance and **e-learning** with significant changes in its organisational architecture being planned – online qualifications; open educational resources (OER); e-tutors; e-mentors
- Approximately **400 000 students** (both formal and non-formal enrolments)
- **47% employed**; **10% in full time study**; **5% international**



Presentation outline

- **Acknowledgements**
- **Introduction**
- **Unisa context**
- **Aims and Research Questions**
- **Methodology and Sample**
- **Conceptual Framework**
- **Results & Discussion**



Acknowledgements

- Alumni Relations
- The 2013 Graduate respondents



Introduction

- Major motivation for entering **tertiary** education for students of all ages is **access to the job market** and to **improve their career trajectory** (McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & Tett, 2010)
- This is particularly relevant in the South African context, which unfortunately claims an unemployment rate of **25,5%** (Statistics South Africa, 2014)
- Universities therefore have to **balance** their broader purpose of producing **well-rounded citizens** with meeting the **demands of the labour market**
- Within the South African context, the value of a tertiary qualification in attaining employment is illustrated in the **unemployment rate** according to **level of education**



Introduction

- For **graduates with degrees**, the unemployment rate was just **under 5%** in 2011, with any unemployment mainly ascribed to graduates moving between jobs
- Unemployment **increases progressively** as one goes **down the educational scale**. Any post-school qualification increases one's job prospects:
 - for people with **non-degree tertiary education**, unemployment was about **16%**
 - for **matriculants** (i.e. completed schooling) it was **29%**
 - and for those with **fewer than 12 years of schooling**, it was **42%**

(Altbeker & Storme, 2013, p. 1)



Unisa context

- The **Graduate Exit Survey** with its focus on academic and non-academic variables, student agency and fit, is located within the broader student success and learner support framework developed by Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011)
- Within this context, **employability** is seen as an indicator of **student success** as is the university's ability to provide **qualifications appropriate** for the ever-changing demands of the globalised knowledge economy
- Given the sheer size of Unisa and its ODeL model, providing **quality qualifications** and producing **graduates who are employable** are fundamental to its overall success as a university



Unisa context

- The **Graduate Exit Survey** focused on a wider definition of employability
- If there is a fit between employability and the demands of the labour market, this may result in **employment**
- Employability included aspects such as:
 - *Quality and relevance of the qualification*
 - *Graduateness (knowledge, skills, attributes)*
 - *Career management approach*
 - *Attitudes and orientations to the job market*



Aims and research questions

AIM 1

To explore the appropriateness and relevance of qualifications for employment from the perspective of graduates.

Q 1

How does a Unisa qualification contribute to students' ability to meet the demands of the workplace?

Q 2

How does the broader student experience at Unisa facilitate students' transition from a university environment into the workplace?



Aims and research questions

AIM 2

To explore the dimensions of graduate employability

Q 1

How does completing a qualification at Unisa contribute to students' employability and career advancement?

Q 2

What are Unisa students' attitudes and approaches to the workplace and career advancement which shape their employment and employability?

Q 2

What are the employment pathways of Unisa graduates?



Comparing 2009 and 2013 cohorts

Methodology

- Research design: **Quantitative**
- Online **survey** (Qualtrics)
- Instrument development:
 - *Guided by literature, examples of best-practice in national and international institutional research community and a **conceptual framework** developed from literature on employability and graduateness*
 - *Circulated for stakeholder feedback and piloted*



Target sample and sampling approach

- The database of **2013 Unisa graduates** obtained from Alumni Relations at Unisa, constituted the sampling frame for this study
- The sampling approach was therefore **purposive**, specifically targeting the 2013 cohort
- This cohort was selected as these graduates were deemed as having sufficient opportunity to secure or change employment after graduation



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Higher Education Institution

- Academic
- Support services
- Social

Labour Market

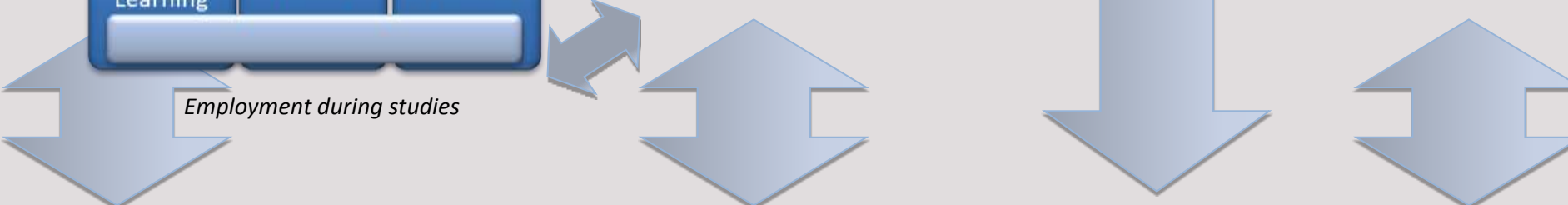
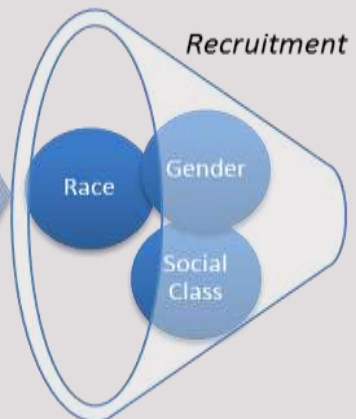


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Graduate Employability (Archer & Chetty, 2013, p.138)



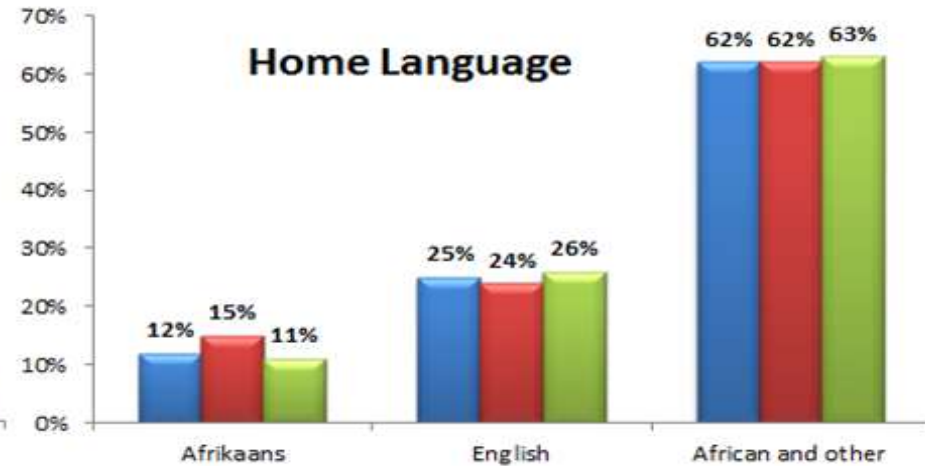
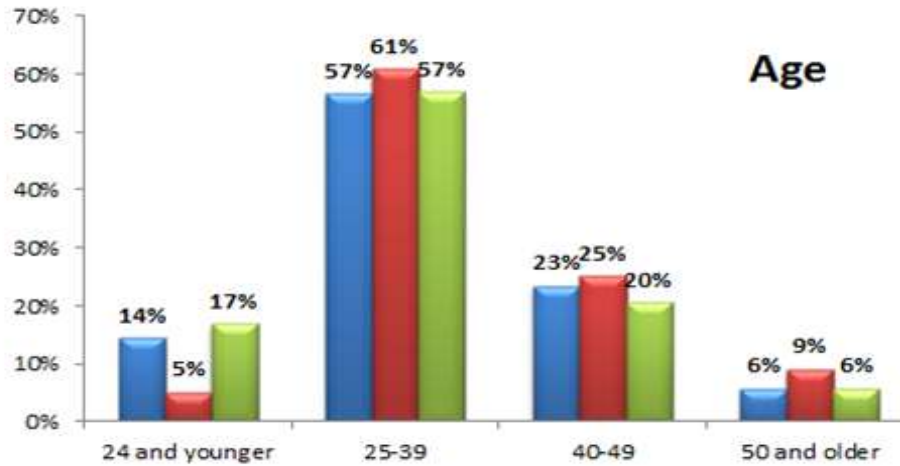
Response rate

| | 2009 | 2013 |
|---------------|--------|--------|
| Responses | 650 | 832 |
| Graduates | 22 675 | 34 934 |
| Response Rate | 2,8% | 2,4% |



Not all graduates were contactable. This meant that the accessible population for the survey did not constitute the entire cohort.

Profile of respondents



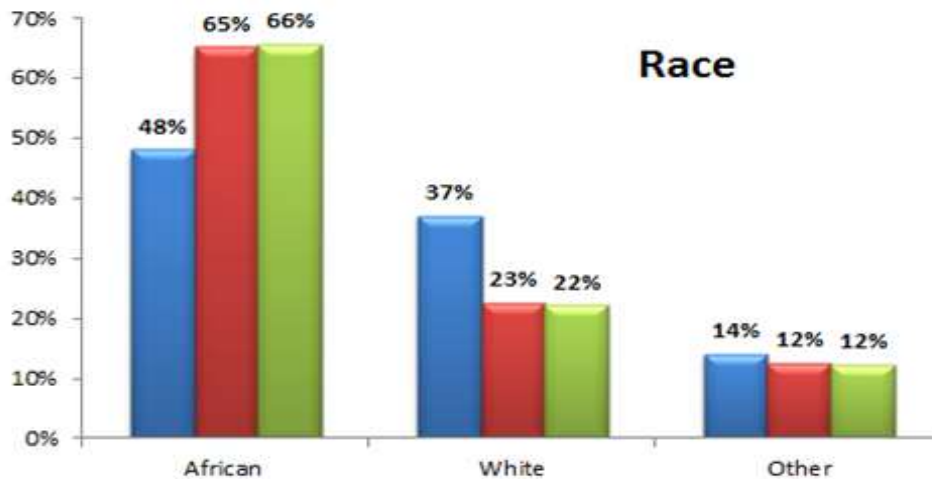
2009 Sample



2013 Sample



2013 Graduate Population



Male

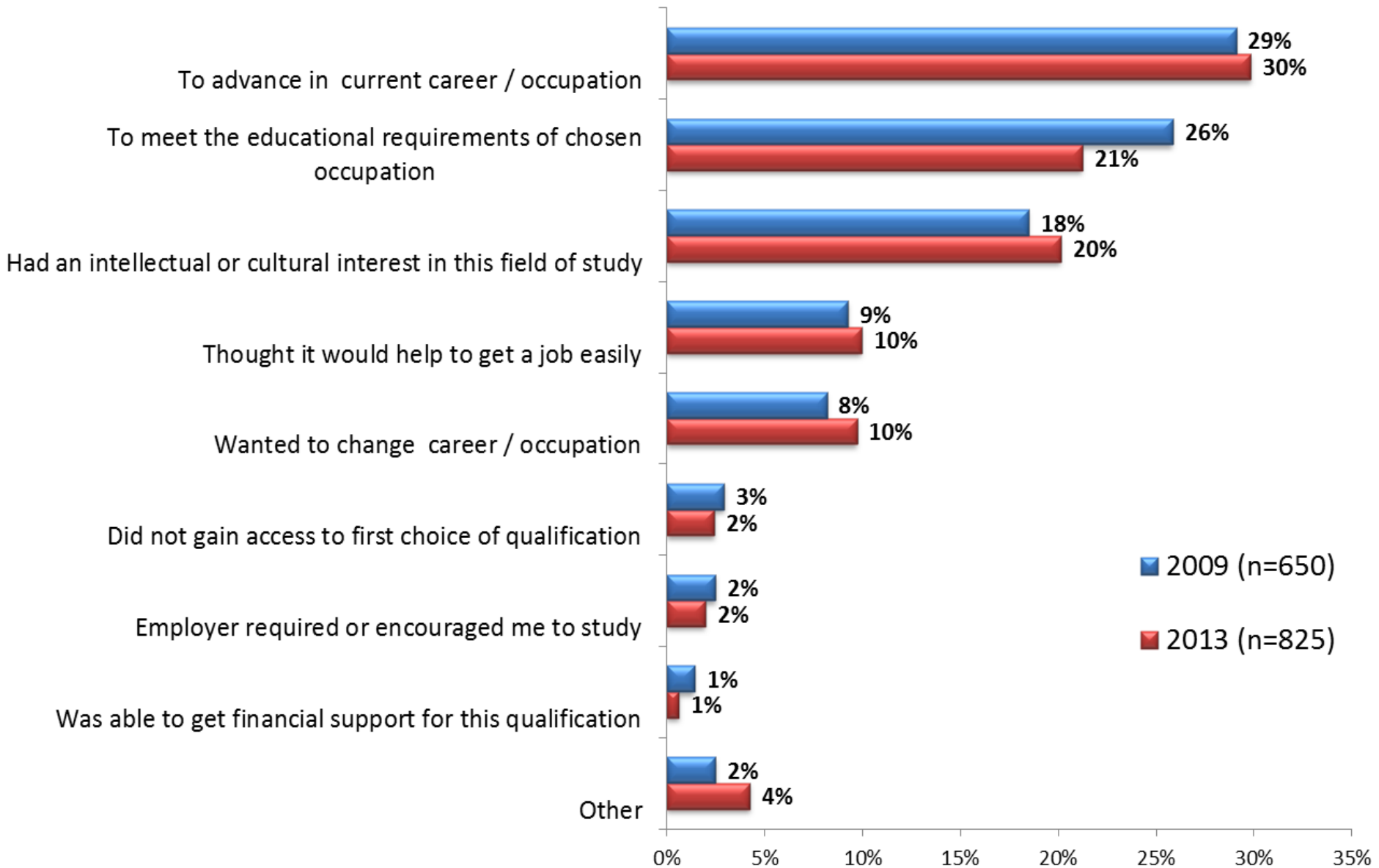


Female

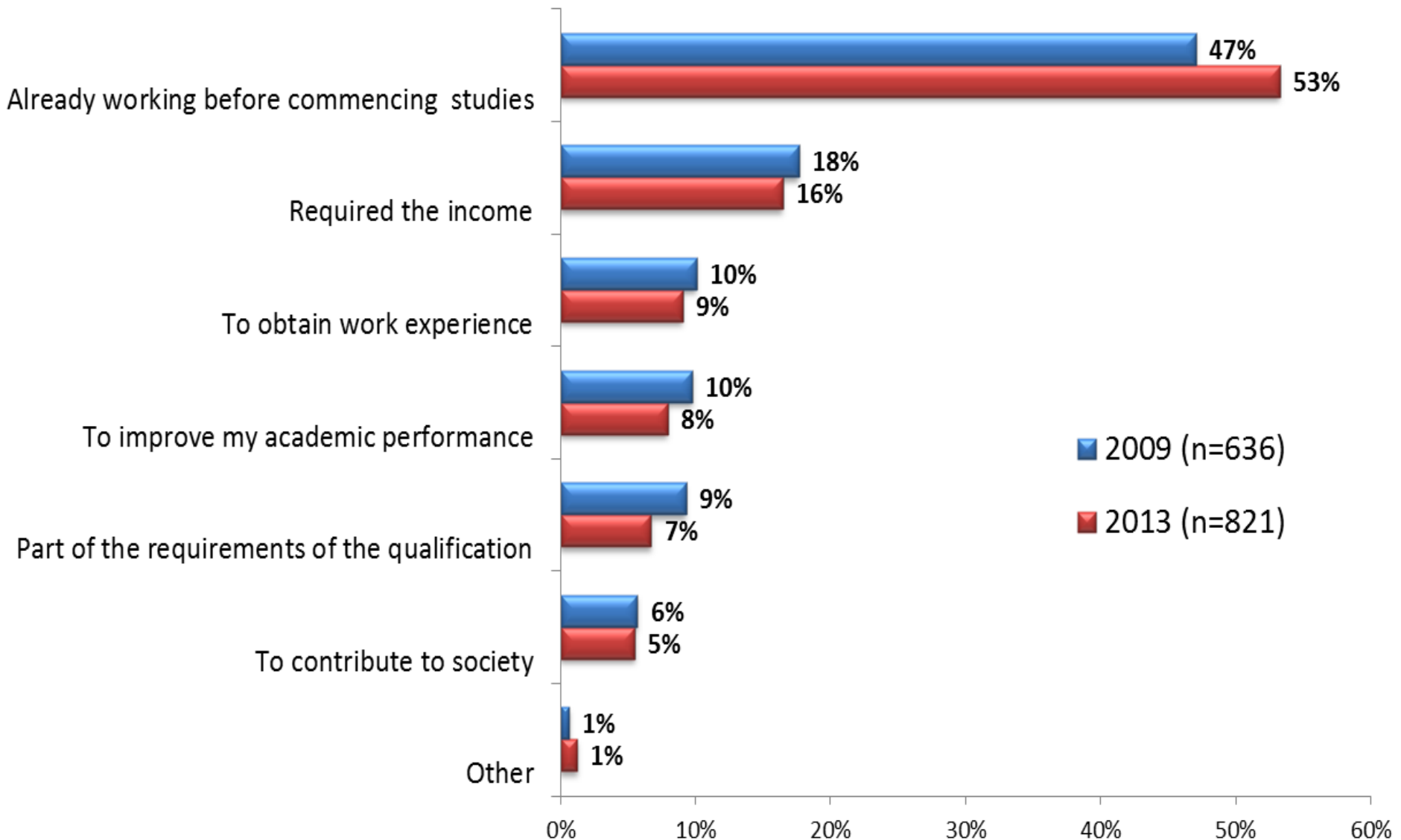
42% / 45% / 33%

58% / 55% / 67%

Main reasons enrolment in studies



Main reason for employment during studies

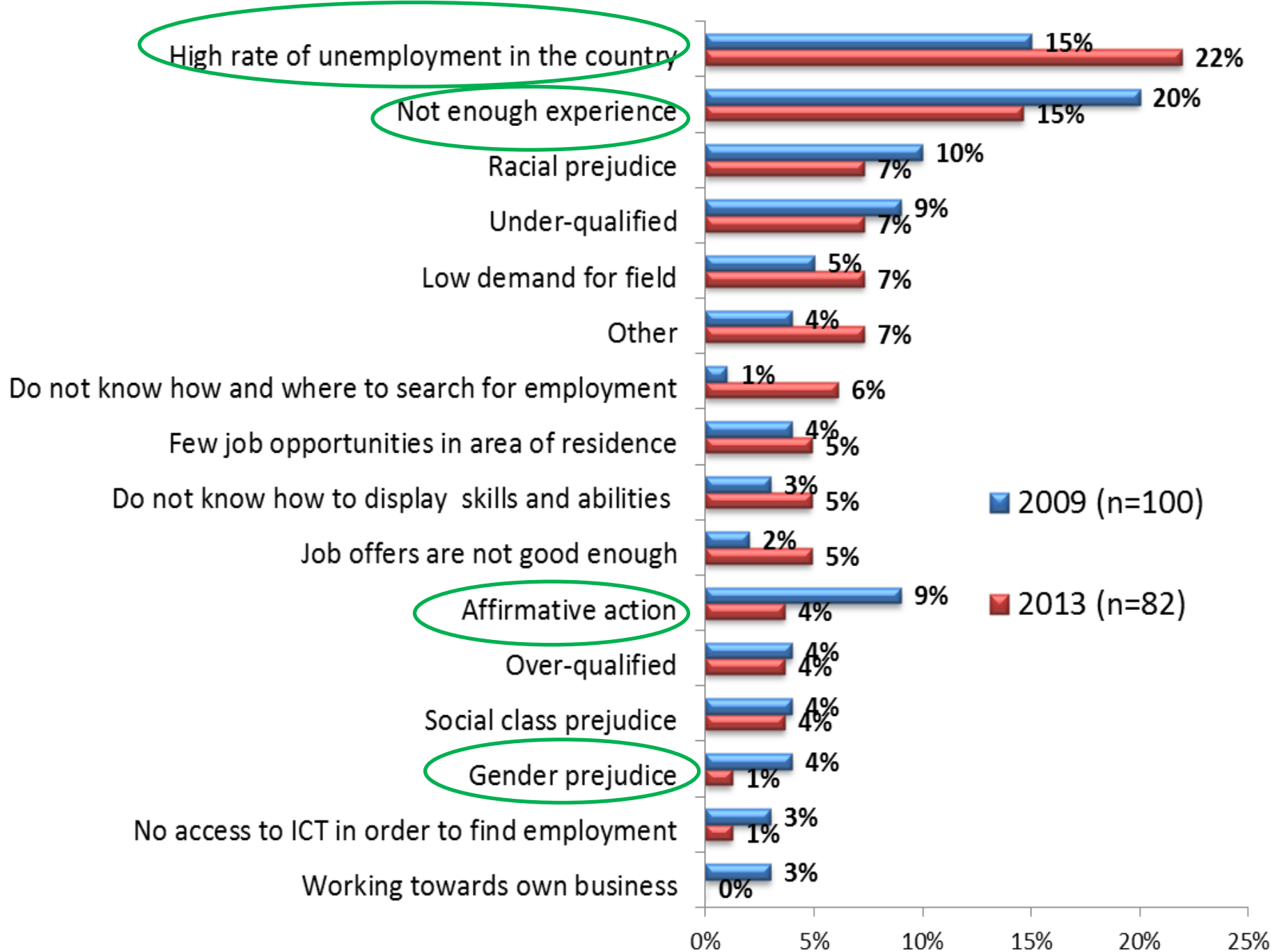


Of the 2013 graduates who weren't employed during their studies and were **seeking employment**, 63% found employment, an increase from 2009 (54%)





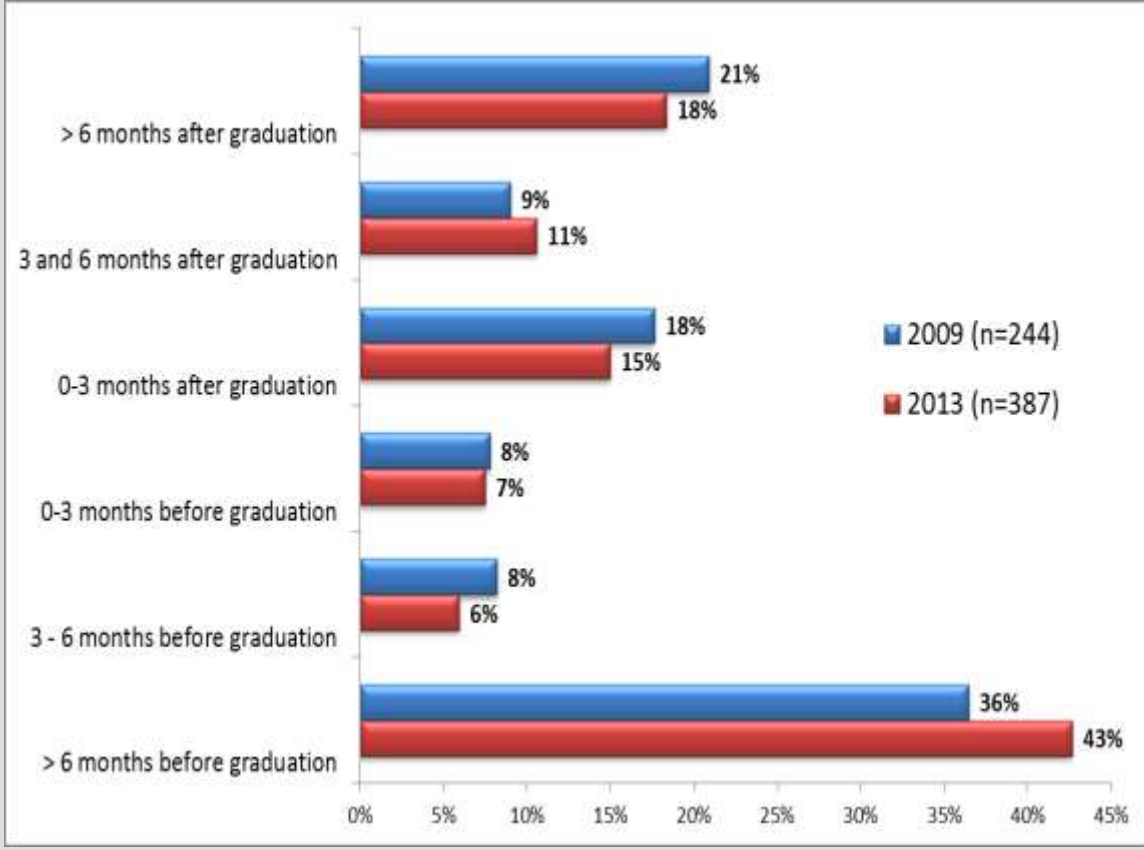
For those 2013 graduates who **failed to secure employment**, the main reasons cited for this were high unemployment in the country, insufficient experience, racial prejudice, under-qualification and low demand for the field



Some **77%** of graduates, who actively sought employment after the 2013 graduation (compared to 70% in 2009), were **already employed** and therefore were looking for **alternative employment**



2013 graduates started seeking employment early, with 43% seeking employment *more than 6 months before graduation* (36% for 2009 cohort)



Could point to a **growing awareness** among students that finding and securing employment immediately upon graduation is not guaranteed, particularly within the context of the current economic climate of the country, leading to students beginning the “search” well in advance of graduating



Some begin their search too late

Methods of seeking employment



The extent to which the following methods of seeking employment were relied on

| Method | More than average | |
|---|-------------------|--------------|
| | 2009 (n=243) | 2013 (n=387) |
| Responded to an internet advertisement | 62% | 78% |
| Posting details (CV) on the internet | 63% | 65% |
| Printed advertisement | 61% | 55% |
| I approached employers on my own initiative | 39% | 35% |
| Family or friends | 38% | 29% |
| Work contacts or networks | 37% | 25% |
| Employment agency | 29% | 24% |
| Approached directly by an employer | 23% | 13% |
| Department of Labour employment services | 10% | 5% |
| I placed an advertisement in a newspaper looking for work | 8% | 4% |
| Through help from Unisa | 4% | 2% |

| | | | | |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------|
| Not at all | Very little | Somewhat | More than average | A lot |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------|

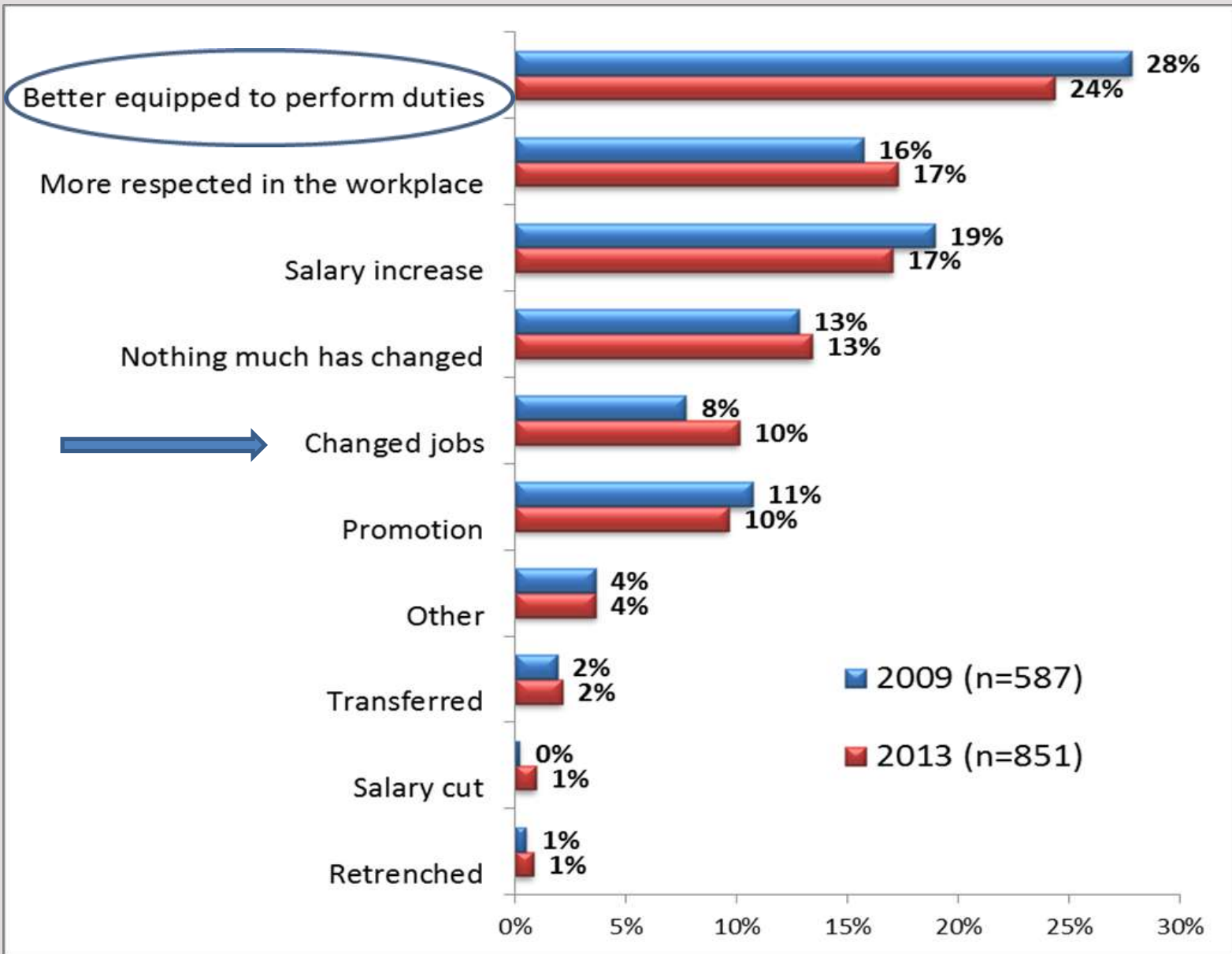
In terms of **changes experienced in existing employment after graduation, 2013 graduates who were employed during their studies noted **positive changes** (68%)**

This included feeling better equipped to perform their duties, being more respected in the workplace, receiving salary increases, and receiving promotions

Very few experienced negative changes such as salary cuts and retrenchments (1%)

Their Unisa qualification seems to have contributed to their employability





Both the 2013 and 2009 cohorts
felt that their studies were
somewhat or directly related to
their employment
(83% and 82% respectively)

More graduates felt **over-qualified** in 2013 (41%) compared
to 2009 (28%), indicating a shift
towards under-employment
(Garci & Velden, 2008)

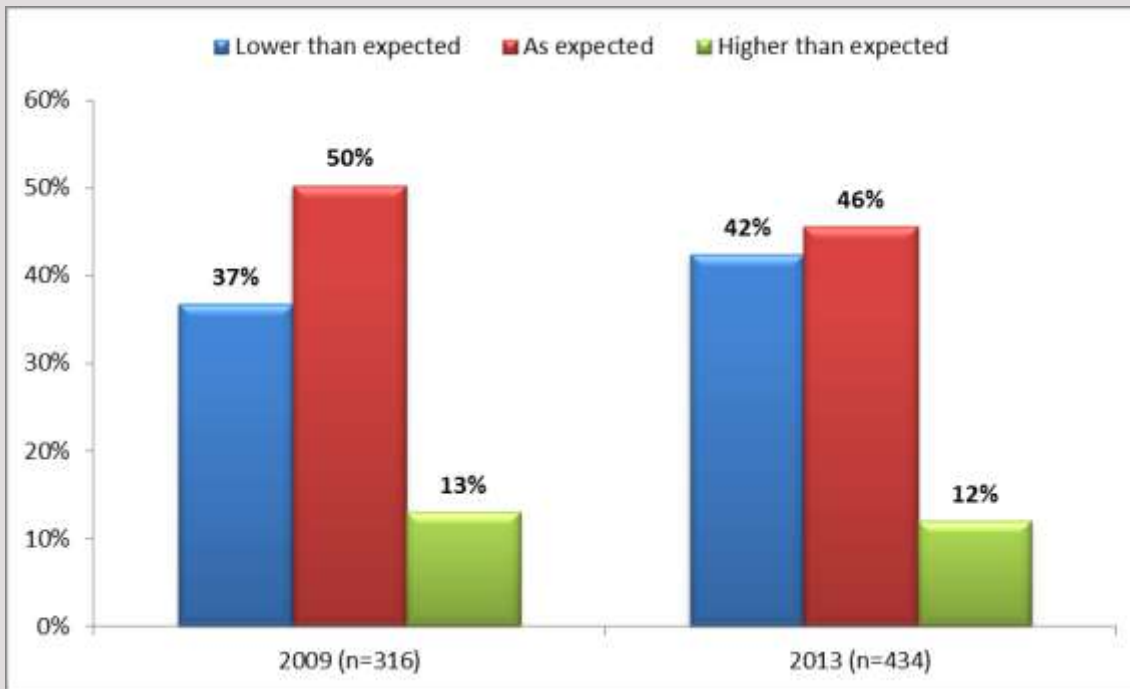


Vast majority (88%) of **employed** 2013 Unisa graduates surveyed have full-time positions either in permanent (73%) or contract positions (15%)

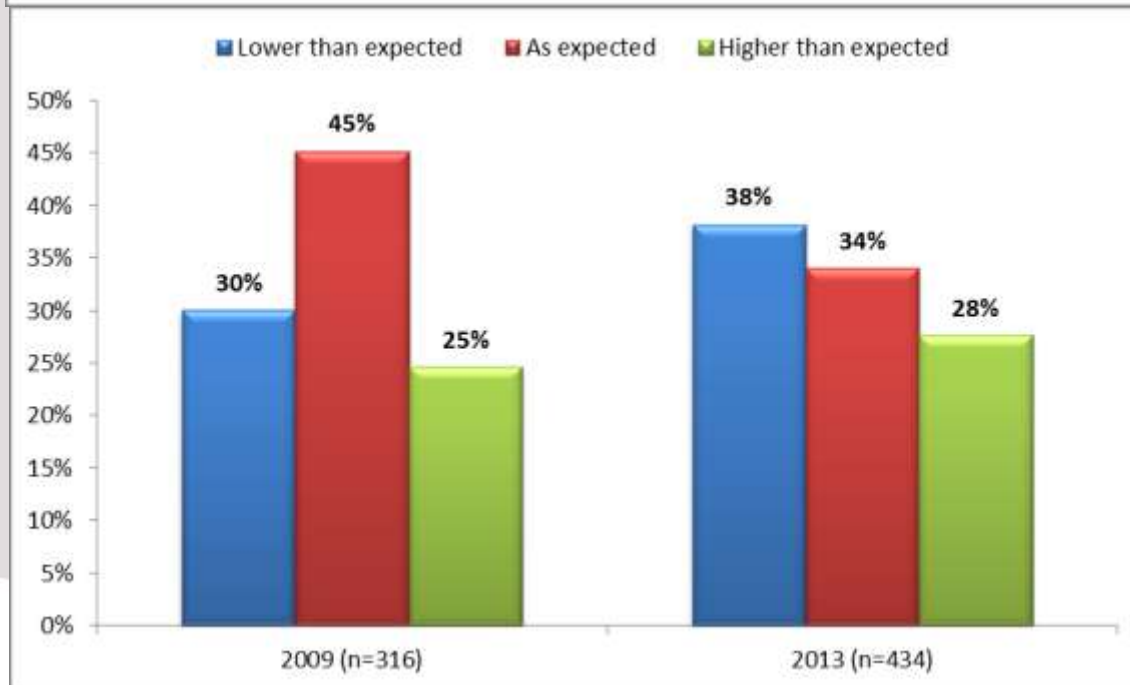
Majority of **employed** 2013 graduates felt expectations were met or exceeded in terms of salary (58%) and job satisfaction (62%)

Mainly students who were **not exposed to work** during their studies felt that their salary and job satisfaction expectations were not met – possibly suggesting that work exposure leads to more realistic expectations?





Meeting of salary expectations



Meeting of job satisfaction expectations

Unisa through its academic offerings seems to be supporting students well in the *development of employment skills, knowledge and beliefs*

and employment during studies also contributes significantly to this



Graduates felt that **employment during their studies** contributed higher than average to **all** employability skills, beliefs and knowledge

A factor analysis (principal-component) relating to graduates' perceptions of the the particular contribution of employment during studies to employability skills, beliefs and knowledge produced a solution of four components/clusters with eigenvalues greater than unity.

These four components accounted for **60%** of the total explained variance

| | | | | | |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------|----------------|
| Not at all | Very little | Somewhat | More than average | A lot | Not Applicable |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------|----------------|

| Subscales | Example items relating to subscale |
|--|---|
| 1. Meta-cognitive skills, efficacy beliefs and skilful practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your self-confidence, creativity, innovation and ability to take responsibility. • Your ability to critically examine your own skills and abilities to determine how you need to improve yourself • Your ability to think of your studies in terms of its application in the workplace • Your ability to be adaptable and flexible |
| 2. Transferable skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your communication ability (written and verbal) • Your ability to use information and communication technology • Your ability to work independently, under pressure. |
| 3. Academic and study skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your subject/discipline-specific knowledge • Your subject/discipline-specific skills and techniques • Your ability to apply your learning and skills in the workplace |
| 4. Career management skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your ability and belief in self to effectively search or look for employment • Your knowledge of the labour market where you have to compete for employment |

Graduates indicated that they felt that their **studies at Unisa** contributed **higher than average** to all employability skills, beliefs and knowledge



A factor analysis (principal-component) relating to graduates' perceptions of the particular contribution of studies at Unisa to employability skills, beliefs and knowledge produced a solution of four components/clusters with eigenvalues greater than unity.

These four components accounted for **65%** of the total explained variance

| | | | | | |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------|----------------|
| Not at all | Very little | Somewhat | More than average | A lot | Not Applicable |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------|----------------|

| Subscales | Example items relating to subscale |
|---|---|
| 1. Transferable skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your communication ability (written and verbal) • Your ability to use time effectively, work under pressure and independently while taking responsibility |
| 2. Academic and study skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your subject/discipline-specific knowledge • Your subject/discipline-specific skills and techniques • Your ability to apply your learning and skills in the workplace |
| 3. Meta-cognitive skills, efficacy beliefs and skilful practice skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your ability to be an independent, resilient, responsible and caring citizen. • Your self-confidence • Your ability to think of your studies in terms of its application in the workplace |
| 4. Career management skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your ability to search or look for employment • Your knowledge and expectations of your future workplace • Your knowledge of the labour market where you have to compete for employment |

Career management skills could therefore be area for further development among Unisa graduates

- The ability to search or look for employment
- Knowledge and expectations of the future workplace
- Knowledge of the labour market where one has to compete for employment



Graduates indicated that the most important component for them was achieving **quality of life**, this was followed in importance by **organisational mobility** and **career and job variety**

This was reaffirmed by the **low ranking of the idea of loyalty** to one organisation as an orientation to the job market

Unisa graduates therefore appear to be **open to changing their careers** rather than remaining loyal to just one organisation, and this is in line with recent literature on employability



Dominant influences on career choice and path



| Importance of the following factors in influencing or guiding your career choices and development path | Percentage indicating more than average importance | |
|--|--|-----------------|
| | 2009 (n=422) | 2013 (n≈522) |
| Personal or individual attributes and skills | 88% | 89% |
| Subject/discipline knowledge and skills | 88% | 88% |
| Achieving a balance between work and personal/family life | 83% | 83% |
| Having the opportunity to provide service to other (e.g. contribute value, help others, protect the environment) | 85% | 83% |
| Financial considerations (e.g. security, stability, cost of living) | 82% | 81% |
| Having a challenging occupation | 77% | 72% |
| Having the opportunity to show leadership and manage other people | 76% | 72% |
| Having a high level of autonomy and independence (e.g. freedom and flexibility to work in the way you want to) | 72% | 70% |
| Labour market demands | 66% | 67% |
| Influence of family, community member or teacher | N/A | 60% |
| Personal circumstances (e.g. illness, family responsibilities, financial constraints) | 64% | 56% |
| Achieving status and prestige | 47% | 37% |

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