Examing the evidence: Graduate employability at NMMU

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Abstract
Globally there is increasing pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) to enhance the employability of graduates by ensuring that university learning experiences contribute to inculcating the knowledge, skills and attributes that will enable graduates to perform successfully as citizens in the knowledge economy. Graduate employability is evidenced in a mix of personal attributes, understandings, skilful practices, and the ability to reflect productively on experience. This article will provide an analysis of research conducted at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) to investigate graduates’ perceptions of the extent to which their particular university qualification contributed to employability. The research was conducted by means of a structured questionnaire administered among NMMU graduates at graduation ceremonies in April 2011, with an online follow-up questionnaire administered two months later. Of a total of 5397 graduates, 2379 completed the questionnaires resulting in a response rate of 44.1 per cent. The overwhelming majority of respondents reported that their qualifications and study experiences at NMMU had enhanced their employability and this was supported by the research findings which demonstrated of all respondents had secured employment at the time of graduation. Respondents recommended various courses of action to further enhance graduate employability, including increased exposure to work-integrated or experiential learning and improved relations between university academics and employers. The study revealed that the purposeful design and delivery of curricula and co-curricular activities support the development of intellectual and interpersonal skills that enable graduates to fulfils a role, rather than merely possessing the immediate task-related skills that enable them to perform a specific job.

Keywords: graduate, employability, unemployment, knowledge, attributes, skills, qualification

INTRODUCTION
High youth unemployment is one of the most pressing issues facing the world today. The urgency to tackle this problem has been made all too clear by the events in North Africa, the Middle East, and London precipitated by disenchanted youth. South
Africa’s unemployment rate of 24 per cent is among the highest in the world and rises to 32.4 per cent if discouraged workers are included. The employment challenge facing South Africa’s youth is even greater. Using the country’s definition of youth (15–34 years), about three million young people were unemployed in December 2010 and 1.3 million were discouraged. This translates into an unemployment rate of 34.5 per cent and represents 72 per cent of overall unemployment. Applying the International Labour Organisation’s definition, which restricts ‘youth’ to those aged between 15 and 24 years, the number of unemployed is more than 1.2 million (30% of overall unemployment) with an unemployment rate of 49 per cent: one in every two people below the age of 25 looking for work is jobless. The ratio of youth to adult unemployment in South Africa is about 2.5 meaning that the youth unemployment rate is two and half times larger than the adult unemployment rate (National Treasury 2011, 13).

The growing joblessness amongst people with university degrees has become a disturbing trend in the post-apartheid South African labour market (Bhorat 2004; Moleke 2010; Pauw, Oosthuizen and Van der Westhuizen 2006). Globally, the structure of employment has shifted from manual work in manufacturing to jobs in the services sectors, which require higher levels of knowledge and skills. Alongside this, technological advances and global economic forces have driven the demand for graduate knowledge and skills in a wide variety of jobs. The nature and organisation of jobs have changed, requiring higher levels of skills and creating broader opportunities for graduates in the labour market. The capacity of the economy to create enough jobs to absorb the growing number of new entrants is another key variable in the job market equation. The growth in labour force entrants has outstripped growth in employment created, resulting in low absorption rates (Moleke 2010, 88). Furthermore, there is general consensus that unemployment is ‘structural’ in the sense that there is a mismatch between the types of workers supplied and those demanded by the economy. Past policies have done little to close the skills deficit in the economy through the provision of high quality education (Pauw et al. 2006, 1).

Within this context, it is interesting to note that, although graduate unemployment in South Africa remained low relative to overall unemployment, actual graduate unemployment increased by almost 50 per cent between 1995 and 2005 from 6.6 per cent to 9.7 per cent, making it the fastest growing unemployment rate (ibid., 10). In South Africa, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of university graduates, yet these graduates are not always employable due to mismatches in qualifications acquired and labour market skills required, with an oversupply in fields where labour demands are less acute (such as the social sciences, humanities and commerce degree holders), and graduates not being of a high enough quality, and lacking soft skills (such as time management, communication, creative thinking, and ability to work independently), practical skills and experience (MacGregor 2007, 1). This is supported by a Discussion Paper released by the National Treasury (2011, 13–14) which reports that an important reason why joblessness is so high among the youth is
that young people struggle to gain work experience, which is an important signal of ability to potential employers. This could explain the large number of young South Africans who are unemployed and the significant numbers who spend sustained periods without a job after leaving education.

It is clear that, against expectations, unemployment is rising amongst young and better educated people and university graduates are no exception. Graduate employability has become an important aspect of institutional and academic planning since there are benefits to be gained by higher education institutions (HEIs), employers and graduates themselves gaining an improved understanding of the factors resulting in unemployable graduates. This article, therefore, aims to explore the extent to which graduates of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) are gaining employment in a field related to what they studied. Attention will be devoted to analysing the perceptions of NMMU graduates in respect of the extent to which their university qualification developed the key knowledge, skills and attributes to enhance their employability, as well as their overall levels of satisfaction with respect to their experiences of their university learning experience. The findings of this research will lay the foundation for various recommendations to ensure that university graduates are better prepared for the world of work through a range of curricular and co-curricular interventions.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The statutory responsibilities of universities are twofold, namely: to prepare and equip graduates with entry-level knowledge and skills for the labour market; and to play a leadership role as a custodian of knowledge (Jarvis 2000, 56–59). However, nationally and internationally the ability of graduates to access employment relevant to their knowledge and skills has attracted the attention of various role players within the higher education sector. In a study conducted by the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) on relations between higher education and the labour market, it is reported that business, government and civil society expect HEIs to ensure that graduates are employable, in the sense that they are prepared to enter the labour market and make a contribution as high-level skilled employees (Kruss 2002, 59).

A South African study by Maharasoa and Hay (2001, 145) found that irrespective of race and gender, students agreed that employability is one of the greatest factors influencing their choices of university courses to study. Despite this, evidence is showing that, in addition to the problem of increasing graduate unemployment, more graduates may be in ‘non-traditional’ areas of work, not relevant to their field of study, and that are not considered ‘graduate level’ (Harvey, Moon and Geall 1997). Especially first destination jobs are often not linked to a distinctive career, but are an initial job step and involve graduates taking jobs for which they are ‘overqualified’ (Koen 2006, 4). A Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC 2000) study also reported that a perception existed amongst the respondents that their jobs could be done by a person with a qualification lower than the one they held.
Harvey and Green (1994) argue that the perceived skills gap between the labour requirements of an industrially developed society and the outputs from the higher education system occurs for four reasons:

- a view that education is a ‘once-and-for-all’ activity, which ignores the need for lifelong learning and a continuous updating of skills;
- a lack of communication between higher education and employers regarding strategies to enhance graduate employability;
- the indifference and inconsistency of employers in identifying what they want; and
- the perceived threat to academic autonomy and freedom posed by closer links with and increased responsiveness to the world of work.

Similarly, research conducted by Koen (2006, 17–19) demonstrates that the key graduate employment problems in the South African context relate to the demographics of graduates; mismatches between graduate skills and labour market needs; graduate shortages in key fields; bias in terms of HEIs attended; and crucial differences in time-to-employment across economic sectors. The growing number of unemployed graduates is challenging the ability of HEIs to provide the requisite education for national development, economic growth and competitiveness.

Reich (2002) argues that advanced economies need two types of high-level expertise, namely: one that emphasises discovery; and another that focuses on exploiting the discoveries of others through market-related intelligence and the application of interpersonal skills. Professionals with this expertise are described as ‘symbolic analysts’ and share a series of achievements, namely: they are imaginative, creative, and possess the relevant disciplinary understanding and skills to apply their knowledge in various contexts.

Higher education institutions are not always successful in preparing students for the complexity inherent in the role of symbolic analysts. Subject matter is often compartmentalised and students are expected to learn what is put in front of them and to work individually and competitively. Nationally and internationally, there is increasing pressure on HEIs to enhance the employability of graduates by ensuring that the learning experience contributes to inculcating the knowledge, skills and attributes that will enable graduates to perform successfully in the 21st century knowledge society. It is important to note that graduate employability, in this sense, goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities, attributes, understandings, skilful practices, and reflective capacity. Furthermore, employability should not be narrowly equated with graduate employment since there is no certainty that the possession of a range of desirable characteristics will necessarily guarantee that university graduates are employed since there are too many extraneous socio-economic variables that can impact on this. It must be emphasised that ‘employability implies something about the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and it is not to be confused with the
acquisition of a job, whether a graduate job or otherwise’ (Yorke 2006, 7).

In this respect it must be noted that, despite the fact that the research findings presented in the article will provide an indication of the extent to which NMMU graduates have been successful in securing employment, the primary focus will be on assessing strategies to enhance the employability of graduates. The following research questions will be addressed:

• What are the employment destinations of NMMU graduates at the point of graduation?
• Have NMMU graduates found employment in a field related to what they studied?
• How do NMMU graduates perceive the extent to which their qualification/programmes at NMMU have developed the key knowledge, skills and attributes that enhance their employability?
• What are the strengths of and areas for improvement with respect to their academic qualification?
• What are the levels of satisfaction amongst NMMU graduates with respect to their programme/qualification experiences, their lecturers, and with NMMU generally?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

To achieve the aims of this study, a survey research design was used to collect the data. The sampling frame included all 2010 NMMU graduates and a non-probability convenience sampling method was employed to obtain the sample. A structured self-report questionnaire, consisting of a number of closed- and open-ended items, was administered to NMMU graduates at the April 2011 graduation ceremonies, with an online follow-up questionnaire administered to graduates from all faculties two months later. The respondents comprised both under- and postgraduate students and, of the total of 5397 graduates, 2379 respondents completed the questionnaires resulting in a response rate of 44.1 per cent.

Data analysis for the closed-ended items in the questionnaire was executed using Statistica. Descriptive statistics and cross tabulations were performed. The statistical analyses were conducted by the researcher, and the data was analysed in line with the intended purpose and outcomes of the study.

In addition to the overall results, the various sections of the questionnaire were also analysed on the basis of relevant variables, such as: qualification type, faculty, ethnic group or sector of employment.

The questionnaire made use of a five-point Likert scale to obtain ratings, in a range from ‘excellent’ (5) to ‘very poor’ (1) for the items relating to the graduate attributes and skills and a range from ‘strongly agree’ (5) to ‘strongly disagree’ (1) for the items relating to graduates’ course experiences. The responses for individual items are presented in tabular form as mean scores. The mean scores represent the
aggregate of the responses on the range from ‘excellent’ to ‘very poor’ or ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. In the interpretation of the individual items, mean scores are interpreted in the following manner:

- A score of 4.2 and above indicates ‘very good’ to ‘excellent’ OR ‘agree’ to ‘strongly agree’.
- A score between 3.4 and 4.2 indicates an acceptable level – ‘average’ to ‘very well’ OR ‘neutral’ to ‘agree’.
- A score of between 2.6 and 3.4 indicates room for improvement – ‘poor’ to ‘average’ OR ‘neutral’ to ‘disagree’.
- A score of less than 2.6 signals a problem that is in need of urgent attention.

The open-ended responses were analysed using semiotics. According to Myers (1997, 5), one form of semiotics is the use of content analysis to draw valid references from the empirical data to ‘context’. This kind of analysis allows the researcher to search for uniform/non-uniform patterns, and extract recurring themes from the data. Both the positive and negative themes extracted from the open-ended responses have been integrated with the quantitative results and triangulated against the trends extracted from the literature review. Verbatim responses are used where necessary to reflect graduate perceptions as honestly and accurately as possible.

RESULTS

Biographical data indicated that the sample was generally representative of the total population comprising all 2010 NMMU graduates in respect of the following variables:

- All seven faculties and the George Campus were proportionately represented with the exception of the faculties of Law (0.6%) and Education (18.1%) which were under-represented in the sample. The under-representation could be due to the fact that a large number of Education graduates studied through distance mode, and they could thus perhaps have decided not to travel to Port Elizabeth for the graduation ceremony due to the costs of doing so. Problems in the administration of the survey during one of the graduation ceremonies led to the Law graduates not receiving pens, and thus being unable to complete the survey at their graduation ceremony.

- The sample per qualification type was relatively proportionate to the total number of 2010 graduates at NMMU. While graduates with Certificates and Professional Bachelor’s degrees were slightly under-represented in the sample, this was not the case for graduates in possession of Diplomas, General Formative degrees, and B Tech degrees. Most notably, those graduates in possession of a Diploma (32.1%) and a General Formative degree (21.8%) were quite significantly over-represented compared to a proportion of 24.5 and
13 per cent respectively in terms of the total NMMU graduate population for these qualification types in 2010. The sample was representative of the various postgraduate qualifications offered at NMMU with the exception of Honours degree graduates which were slightly under-represented (10.7%) compared to a proportion of 11.3 per cent of the total NMMU graduate population, while B Tech degree graduates were slightly over-represented (13%) compared to a proportion of 10.8 per cent of the total NMMU graduate population.

• With respect to gender, 1 353 (57%) of the respondents were female while 1 015 (42.5%) were male. Eleven respondents (0.5%) did not indicate their gender. The gender distribution in the sample was representative of the gender breakdown for all 2010 graduates where 56 per cent were female and 44 per cent were male.

• The majority of the respondents (71.4%) were aged 20–29 years, while 28.4 per cent were 30 years and older, and four respondents (0.2%) did not indicate their age. The sample slightly under-represented the mature learner age groups and this can probably be attributed to the non-attendance, at their graduation ceremony, of a large number of the distance education graduates in the Education faculty.

• More than half of the respondents (51.3%) were black, while the remaining were white (28.4%), Coloured (14.3%) and Asian (1%); 37 respondents (1.6%) did not wish to indicate their race and a further 14 respondents (0.6%) did not respond to the item. The race distribution in the sample revealed a slight over-representation of Coloured respondents and an under-representation of black respondents, but was relatively proportionate to the race profile in the total population of all 2010 NMMU graduates.

• The majority of the respondents (92.3%) were South African citizens or permanent residents while 7.3 per cent were not citizens or permanent residents of South Africa, and 0.5 per cent did not answer this item. This is generally representative of the total population of all 2010 NMMU graduates in that 92 per cent are South African citizens while 8 per cent are citizens of other countries.

• Interestingly, 37.2 per cent of the respondents were first-generation students meaning that they were the first person in their family to have qualified with a university diploma or degree.

Of the 2010 NMMU graduates who participated in this study, 62.6 per cent indicated that they were in paid employment while 37.3 per cent were unemployed. Of those respondents who were in paid employment, nearly half (49.5%) were studying further whilst working. Of those respondents who indicated that they were studying further, the majority (73%) were doing so at NMMU.
Of the 37 per cent of respondents who were unemployed, Figure 2 depicts that more than half (54.8%) were studying further on either a full- or part-time basis, 35.4 per cent were searching for work, 3.6 per cent were performing voluntary or unpaid work, while others were: taking a gap year (1.5%); not working due to personal ill health or family responsibilities (0.9%); travelling (0.7%); awaiting their internship or registration with a professional council (0.5%); and in the process of emigrating (0.1%); while 23 respondents (2.6%) indicated that they were not looking for work.
The main reasons provided by the above mentioned respondents for being unemployed included: a lack of available jobs (24.9%); a lack of work experience (21.3%); a lack of opportunities in the respondent’s particular field of study (9%); being over-qualified for the position applied for (1.4%); or being under-qualified for the position applied for (1.1%); and international graduates who indicated that it is difficult to find work as a foreign national (1.3%). Most graduates listed a combination of the above reasons for being unemployed.

A lack of work experience was particularly regarded as a problem by respondents from the faculties of Arts (34.2%), Business and Economic Sciences (19.4%) and Science (18.6%). Respondents from each of the faculties were of the opinion that a lack of employment opportunities in their field was also responsible for them being unemployed, but this was particularly mentioned by graduates from the Faculties of Education (18.6%), Arts (17.6%) and the George Campus (14.3%). Interestingly, fewer graduates completing national diplomas (50.7%) and general formative undergraduate degrees (33.5%) were employed than all other qualification types.

Just over half the graduates (54%) had already secured employment before graduating, 33 per cent had secured employment within six months, while 11.6 per cent took longer than six months to find employment. Only a small percentage of graduates (1.4%) indicated that they were self-employed.

It is noteworthy that 78.4 per cent of the respondents were in paid employment relating to the qualification they studied at NMMU, whilst 21.6 per cent were not. The majority of respondents who obtained qualifications from the George Campus (90.6%) and from the faculties of Health Sciences (86.9%), Science (85.3%), and Engineering, the Built Environment and Information Technology (84.2%) were employed in a job relating to the qualification they had studied at NMMU. Nearly a third of the graduates from the Faculties of Arts (30.0%) and Business and Economic Sciences (30.9%) indicated that they were not employed in a job relating to their field of study.

More graduates (44.4%) stated that it was difficult or somewhat difficult to find a job in their field of study, while 30.2 per cent found it easy or very easy to find employment in their field of study, and 25.4 per cent found it to be as expected.

For 85.9 per cent of the graduates their qualification was a formal requirement or important in securing their employment. For 61.4 per cent of the graduates their results were a formal requirement or important in securing employment.

Of the respondents who were in paid employment, 95.7 per cent were working in South Africa, while 4.3 per cent indicated that they were working outside of South Africa. The majority who were working outside of South Africa were working in Botswana, Zimbabwe and in the Seychelles. The majority of NMMU graduates who were working in South Africa were working in the Eastern Cape, followed by Kwazulu-Natal (7%), the Western Cape (6.3%), Gauteng (5.9%), and Limpopo (4.7%). NMMU graduates were working in each of the nine provinces.

Just more than half of the respondents (50.4%) indicated that they participated in experiential or work-based learning during their studies at NMMU. Greater numbers
of graduates on the George Campus (73.3%) and in the faculties of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology (62.8%) and Health Sciences (60.7%) indicated that they had participated in experiential or work-based learning during their studies. The majority of those who answered this question (91%) felt that experiential or work-based learning enhanced their employability. Of those who did not participate in such opportunities during their studies, 78.6 per cent felt that had they done so, this would have enhanced their employability.

It is interesting to note that only a small percentage of the respondents (15.6%) held co-curricular leadership positions on campus whilst they were studying at NMMU. Greater numbers of graduates on the George Campus (28.0%) and in the faculties of Law (35.7%) and Business and Economic Sciences (19.2%) indicated that they had held co-curricular leadership positions on campus during their studies at NMMU. The majority of those who answered this question (97.5%) were of the opinion that co-curricular leadership had enhanced their employability. Just less than half of the graduates who answered this question (49%) felt that even though they did not hold co-curricular leadership positions on campus whilst they were studying at NMMU, had they done so, it would have enhanced their employability.

Table 1 provides an analysis of graduate perceptions of the extent to which their qualification/programme at NMMU equipped them with 22 graduate skills or attributes that are regarded as contributing to employability. The majority of the mean ratings by the graduates were between the 3.4 and 4.2 cut-points, indicating that respondents were of the opinion that these attributes and skills were well developed through their qualification/programme. Only four attributes achieved a mean rating above the 4.2 cut-point meaning that the respondents felt that these were very well developed through their qualification/programme. These were as follows: ability to work as a team (4.29); respect for other people’s perspectives and knowledge systems (4.28); self-management skills including the ability to work alone, exercise initiative, apply time management, etc. (4.27); ability to function in a multicultural context (4.24).

The lowest mean ratings were assigned to entrepreneurship (3.66); learning through interaction with other related fields of study/disciplines/professions (3.77); awareness of the latest advances in my field of study (3.89); and social awareness (3.93). However, despite being rated lower, the mean ratings for these attributes were above the cut-off point of 3.4 which means that respondents felt that these were satisfactorily developed through their qualification/programme.
Examining the evidence: Graduate employability at NMMU

Table 1: NMMU graduate skills and attributes – ranked from most to least developed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute/skill</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Ability to work as part of a team</td>
<td>2 360</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Respect for other people’s perspectives and knowledge systems</td>
<td>2 360</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Self-management skills (i.e., ability to work alone, exercise initiative, apply time management, etc.)</td>
<td>2 361</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ability to function in a multicultural context</td>
<td>2 358</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Ability to accommodate change</td>
<td>2 347</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Capacity for critical thinking</td>
<td>2 361</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Electronic communication skills (e.g. e-mail, PowerPoint, etc.)</td>
<td>2 365</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Openness to new ideas</td>
<td>2 360</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Capacity for creative thinking</td>
<td>2 359</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Respect for constitutional values and principles (e.g. equality, equity, humanity, diversity and social justice)</td>
<td>2 369</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Commitment to ethical behaviour</td>
<td>2 360</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Written communication skills</td>
<td>2 364</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Ability to verbally present information in a clear manner</td>
<td>2 364</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Capacity to apply knowledge and skills in a range of contexts</td>
<td>2 335</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Respect for the natural environment</td>
<td>2 342</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 In-depth knowledge of my field of study</td>
<td>2 359</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Capacity for generating innovative solutions to complex problems</td>
<td>2 342</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Excellence in my field of study</td>
<td>2 360</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Social awareness (i.e. general knowledge of social, political, economic, technological, environmental, etc. issues impacting on my discipline/ profession)</td>
<td>2 368</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Awareness of the latest advances in my field of study</td>
<td>2 346</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Learning through interaction with other related fields of study/ disciplines/professions</td>
<td>2 341</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Entrepreneurial skills</td>
<td>2 361</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the final section of the questionnaire graduates rated their satisfaction regarding their qualification/programme, their lecturers, and the university more generally. Overall, the graduates were very satisfied with their qualification/programme rating it at 4.3 and their lecturers at 4.2. The two areas where the graduates were the least satisfied were that their qualification/programme was good value for money (4.17) and that their lecturers generally gave them helpful feedback on their academic performance (4.15).
Table 2: Satisfaction with NMMU qualification/programme and lecturers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the quality of education I was provided at NMMU</td>
<td>2 376</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend this qualification/programme to another person</td>
<td>2 369</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My qualification/programme has equipped me adequately for the world of work</td>
<td>2 370</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My qualification/programme was good value for money</td>
<td>2 366</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My lecturers taught content that was relevant</td>
<td>2 373</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My lecturers motivated me to do my best work</td>
<td>2 369</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My lecturers were available for consultation</td>
<td>2 370</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My lecturers generally gave me helpful feedback on my academic performance</td>
<td>2 365</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3 it is apparent that the graduates rated their overall satisfaction with NMMU at 4.3 which is a high level of satisfaction. Although the item *NMMU was my first choice when I decided to attend university* achieved the lowest mean rating of 3.94, a more detailed analysis of the responses revealed that 68.1 per cent of the respondents agreed that NMMU was their first choice when they decided to attend university; 14.1 per cent were neutral; and 14.7 per cent disagreed. It is furthermore encouraging to note that the majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that:

- They are proud to be known as an NMMU graduate (89%).
- They would recommend NMMU to another person wishing to study further (87.1%).
- NMMU makes an effort to develop well-rounded graduates (83.5%).

Table 3: General satisfaction with NMMU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NMMU was my first choice when I decided to attend university</td>
<td>2 305</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am proud to be known as an NMMU graduate</td>
<td>2 311</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend NMMU to another person wishing to study further</td>
<td>2 304</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMMU makes an effort to develop well-rounded graduates</td>
<td>2 307</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, in the open-ended responses, graduates were requested to reflect on the strengths and areas for improvement of NMMU with regard to graduate employability. The top three strengths that were mentioned most frequently by the respondents
were that their NMMU qualifications/programmes:

• equipped them with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for success in their careers;

• were good quality and internationally recognised, and that the university or particular academic department had a good reputation;

• were lectured by experienced, knowledgeable and committed lecturers.

The top three areas for improvement that were highlighted by the respondents were:

• Improve particular aspects of the content and delivery of their qualification or programme. These included suggestions such as encouraging smaller classes, ensuring that the latest teaching technology is used, enhancing the approachability of lecturers, and ensuring that lecturers are suitably qualified and experienced.

• Incorporate more practical work into programmes/qualifications and provide assistance to students to ease their transition into the world of work. Respondents recommended that experiential or work-based learning should be a compulsory component of their programme/qualification, and entrepreneurial skills should be taught.

• Improve NMMU’s administration and facilities, equipment, and resources. Career guidance for students should be enhanced, and advice should be provided to first-year students in choosing appropriate modules/majors.

Several respondents commented on the need for better communication between faculty administration and students, as well as the need to improve timetabling. Respondents suggested that NMMU should increase the number of residences on campus, provide newer library books, better equip existing lecture venues and build more venues on the Summerstrand North and Second Avenue campuses, and invest in more computers and software programmes.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It is evident from the results of this study that the overwhelming majority of NMMU graduates regarded their qualifications and study experiences at NMMU in a positive light, and felt these developed the key knowledge, skills and attributes that enhanced their employability. It was particularly encouraging to note that the majority of the respondents were of the opinion that their studies had contributed to their personal development and maturation and they had developed what Reich (2002) refers to as the ‘soft’ or generic skills that enable the disciplinary base to be deployed to optimal effect. These generic skills and attributes included the ability to work in a team, respect for multiculturalism and diversity, self-management, and communication skills. This is significant given that employers consistently state that, to succeed
at work, most people in future must develop a range of personal and intellectual attributes beyond those traditionally made explicit in programmes of study in HEIs. These personal attributes are important to allow graduates to fit into the work culture, do the job, develop ideas, take initiative and responsibility, and ultimately help organisations deal with change (Harvey 1999, 6).

From the results of the study it is evident that co-curricular leadership is reaching a small group of students, and that these students feel that these experiences have enhanced their employability. This suggests that an area for improvement in enhancing the employability of graduates is the need to encourage students to actively participate in co-curricular activities while they are still pursuing their studies. Yorke and Knight (2004, 6) note in this regard that although HEIs are unable to impact directly on students’ extra-curricular activities, they can help students to recognise the significance of co-curricular activities by presenting them with evidence of how certain achievements can be supported through their participation in such activities.

In addition, graduates who participated in the study voiced a demand for more practical skills and for more work experience and preparation for work before graduating as they felt this would significantly enhance their employability. Some of the suggestions were for closer links to industry in terms of guest lectures by industry experts; for site visits/tours/field trips; and for closer working relationships between employers and NMMU academic departments. The respondents expressed a desire that NMMU would assist them with preparation for the world of work, by developing ‘employability competencies’ such as compiling curriculum vitae, conducting oneself in a job interview, etc.

In this regard, Harvey (1999, 12) correctly argues that graduate employability is not about getting graduates into jobs, nor is it even about delivering ‘employability skills’ in some generic sense. Rather it is about empowering critical lifelong learners by developing their reflective and transformative abilities. This requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students to learn a body of knowledge and be able to apply it analytically. Increasingly, in a world of change, learners need to be able to help the organisations in which they work after graduation to transform and adapt. Graduates will not be able to do so if they are not able to work in teams, communicate well, analyse, and synthesise. Yorke and Knight (2004, 9) refer to ‘considerate pedagogy’ as embracing the range of teaching and learning practices that are necessary to support the intentions associated with embedding employability in the curriculum. These need to allow students to come to terms with practices that may be unfamiliar, ambiguous and even disturbing. Biggs (2003, 1) uses the term ‘constructive alignment’ to convey the importance of coherence in curriculum design. His conception of alignment starts with learners who construct their own understandings from their experiences of the world. He argues that the pedagogical approach needs to engage students positively in their learning, and should discourage a relatively passive approach that is likely to lead to surface, rather than deep, learning.

Coherent curriculum design and lecturers’ pedagogical skills, and their interest
in, support of, and communication with students are therefore crucial issues needing attention. This relationship and interaction with the lecturer has been shown through literature on student success and retention to be important to student success. The importance of the relationship is borne out by the current study as graduates reflected on the extent to which interaction with and constructive feedback from their lecturers assisted them in developing the knowledge, skills and attributes that contributed to their employability.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the whole, the current study has demonstrated that the design and delivery of NMMU curricula do support the development of knowledge, skills and attributes that enable graduates to fulfil a role, rather than merely possessing the immediate task-related skills that enable them to perform a specific job. However, given the current global and local economic situation, NMMU will need to work closely with employers and other relevant stakeholders to try and create more pathways to employment for its graduates.

NMMU needs to recognise the mutual benefits of enhancing the relationship between academic staff and the relevant employers. Respondents felt that NMMU must create more opportunities for experiential learning and exposure to the workplace before graduation. The current NMMU strategy for experiential learning and service learning, and the existing graduate placement programmes could be broadened to facilitate closer links with industry. Close attention also needs to be devoted to curriculum design, as well as pedagogical practices, to ensure that these contribute to developing the transferable skills and attributes that characterise employable graduates.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, initiatives that help improve graduate employability are to be encouraged, especially where they include significant work-related elements or are embedded in the curriculum. Graduate employability raises fundamental questions about the purpose and structure of higher education and as such it is not about training or providing add-on skills to gain employment. On the contrary, employability is about how higher education develops critical, reflective, empowered learners who have the capacity to assist their organisations to succeed in a highly competitive, global knowledge society.

The study has revealed that there is a growing expectation from external stakeholders that HEIs will be responsive to the need to ensure that graduates are employable, in the sense that they are adequately prepared for the demands of the world of work. The aim of the study was to create an awareness of the expectations of university graduates regarding graduate employability, as well as strategies required to address identified shortcomings contributing to graduate unemployment. As noted
by Pauw, Oosthuizen and Van der Westhuizen (2006, 2) although there is no easy solution or ‘quick fix’, there are certain strategies that can be implemented by HEIs to enhance graduate employability:

While no single short-term solution will solve the problem, policies which move to increasing the quality of our education, limiting enrolment to some courses and ‘incentivising’ companies to take up graduates ... will ensure that future graduates are absorbed.

REFERENCES


