

Distance Learning Students' Graduateness as Predictors of Their Job Satisfaction and Optimism about Future Career Prospects

Melinde Coetzee

*Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, PO Box 392,
University of South Africa 0003*

Telephone: +27 12 429 8204. E-mail: coetz1@unisa.ac.za

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ABSTRACT This study explored whether individuals' graduateness skills and attributes (measured by the Graduateness Scale) significantly predict their job satisfaction and optimism about their future career prospects, and whether race and gender groups differ significantly regarding these variables. A random sample of 272 adults employed in the South African service industry and registered as distance learning students in the economic and management sciences field at a South African open distance learning higher education institution participated in the study. A quantitative survey design was used. Multiple regression analyses indicated enterprising skills as a significant predictor of the participants' job satisfaction. Continuous learning orientation and presenting and applying information skills significantly predicted the participants' optimism regarding their future career prospects. The race and gender groups differed significantly regarding their graduateness skills and attributes, with Indians scoring higher than the other race groups, and females scoring higher than their male counterparts. The new knowledge obtained may be used to inform organisational training and development and higher educational curriculum design practices concerned with optimising the graduateness of employees in their role as students and lifelong learners in a knowledge-driven global business economy.

INTRODUCTION

Employers globally are paying increasing attention to the graduateness of their prospective and current employees as they recognise the human capital inherent in their professionally qualified and high-skilled knowledge workers as important intangible assets to gain a competitive advantage, and secure survival and success in a turbulent business environment (Noe et al. 2010; Reissner and Watson 2010). The skills and attributes that constitute the graduateness of a university graduate are considered to be an important outcome of university-level learning experiences (Barrie 2004). Students' graduateness implies that apart from their degree-specific knowledge and technical skills, they are able to demonstrate a set of generic transferable meta-skills and personal attributes which are generally regarded as indicators of their employability and work readiness (Clanchy and Ballard 1995; Coetzee 2011; Rigby et al. 2009; Wendlandt and Rochlen 2011).

Distance learning students tend to be working adults who have the opportunity to apply and further develop their graduateness skills and attributes in the workplace. Higher education academics increasingly realise the importance of students' graduateness and imparting these

skills and attributes to their students with a view of them becoming competent and professional graduates who have the potential to make sustained positive contributions to society, to their professions, and in their workplaces (Coetzee 2011). Paying attention to the graduateness of students prepares them for successful transition to work and managing their continued employability in the contemporary workplace (Coetzee 2011; Wendlandt and Rochlen 2011).

Employers generally consider the generic, transferable skills and attributes that signify an employee's graduateness as vitally important to their businesses and therefore expect graduates to have these when they enter the workplace (Griesel and Parker 2009; Raftapoulous et al 2009). In the context of a knowledge-driven business economy, the skills and attributes that constitute employees' graduateness are regarded by companies as being vital in creating the type of workplace culture in which innovation, adaptability and flexibility thrives (Thompson et al. 2008; Van Dam 2004).

Based on an extensive review of the research literature, South African employer surveys and higher education academics' perceptions on student graduateness, Coetzee (2011) identified eight core skills and attributes that constitute the graduateness of students' pursuing a career

in the economic and management sciences. These skills and attributes are of relevance to the present study and include the following (Coetzee 2011):

Interactive Skills: These skills relate to: (1) the effective and efficient use of English language and technology when communicating with others and (2) the ability to function effectively and efficiently as a person in communicating and interacting with people from diverse cultures, backgrounds, and authority levels.

Problem-solving and Decision-making Skills: These skills relate to being creative and proactive in the process of producing a solution to a recognised often ill-defined problem or problematic complex situation.

Continuous Learning Orientation: This involves having a cognitive openness toward life-long learning and the willingness to proactively engage in the process of acquiring new knowledge, skills and abilities throughout one's life and career in reaction to, and in anticipation of, changing technology and performance criteria.

Enterprising Skills: These skills involve being venturesome and applying critical thinking, initiative and proactivity when engaging in economic activities or undertakings either to create and operate an enterprise of one's own, or be a substantial contributor to an enterprise as an employee. Being enterprising also means that one is able to recognise and be adept at dealing with organisational or team politics.

Presenting and Applying Information Skills: These skills refer to the ability to clearly and convincingly communicate knowledge, facts, ideas, and opinions (oral and written) with the view to offer solutions for one's personal benefit, or for the benefit of one's community or workplace.

Goal-Directed Behaviour: This refers to the ability to be proactive and apply initiative to achieve one's goals, accomplish tasks, or meet deadlines. Setting realistic goals, developing plans and taking action to achieve one's goals, accomplish tasks and meeting deadlines are core elements of goal-directed behaviour.

Ethical and Responsible Behaviour: This involves accepting full responsibility for, and taking the lead in upholding the code of moral beliefs and values of one's profession, community, and/or workplace in all one does.

Analytical Thinking Skills: Analytical thinking implies being skillful in employing log-

ical reasoning and analysis in explaining information and data, and drawing insightful conclusions from the data analysis.

Apart from the increasing emphasis on employees' gradueness and employability, organisations continue to regard the job and career satisfaction, and commitment of their valuable human capital as important. Organisations work hard to retain valued employees who consistently maintain a high level of job performance, grow and develop on the job, and who as a human resource, provide greater flexibility and productivity for their organisation (Cardy and Lengnick-Hall 2011). Employees' job satisfaction and career satisfaction have been found to be related to their perceptions of opportunities for career advancement and mobility, further growth and learning, and applying their talents and skills in the workplace (Coetzee and Bergh 2009; João 2011; Kidd 2008). Race and gender groups have also been found to differ regarding their career needs and motivations and perceptions of job and career satisfaction (Coetzee and Bergh 2009). However, being a concept only recently introduced in the South African context (Griesel and Parker 2009), there seems to be a paucity regarding research on how individuals' gradueness relate to their job satisfaction and their optimism about their future career prospects, and to what extent gender and race groups differ regarding these variables.

The present study explores whether individuals' gradueness skills and attributes significantly predict their job satisfaction and optimism about their future career prospects, and whether race and gender groups differ significantly regarding these variables. This study is regarded as important in the light of research (Brown and Scase 1994; Cranmer 2006; Griesel and Parker 2009; Raftapoulous et al. 2009; Thijssen et al. 2008) which shows that employers' perceptions about the quality of graduates from higher education institutions, their employability and general work readiness not only continue to influence graduates' transition into employment, but also their sustained ability to secure employment in a turbulent and uncertain employment context. Research has also indicated employees' job and career satisfaction as important variables that significantly influence their productivity, morale, commitment and general life satisfaction (Coetzee and Bergh 2009; Fritzsche and Parrish, 2005). In the light of research evidence

showing that individuals' background play a pivotal role in their job and career satisfaction, motivation and commitment (Coetzee and Bergh 2009; João 2011; Lumley 2010), exploring cultural and gender differences in terms of career-related variables are regarded as important (Risco and Duffy 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants were a random sample of 272 employed adults who were registered as distance learning students for final year undergraduate and post-graduate studies in the economic and management sciences field at a South African higher education institution. The total sample of 272 constituted predominantly Africans (21%), Indian (43%), Coloured (6%) and White (15%) participants employed at senior and middle management levels (20%), middle- and first-level supervisory levels (13%), and staff levels (68%) in the South African service industry (81%). The sample included females (86%) and males (14%) in the exploration and establishment phases of their careers (72% in the 25-40 years category). The sample reported high levels of job satisfaction (80%), with 70% reporting high levels of optimism regarding their future career prospects.

Instrumentation

The Graduateness Scale (Coetzee 2010) is a self-rated, multi-factorial measure which contains 64 items and eight sub-scales which measure individuals' sense of internal graduateness on a six-point Likert-type scale: (1) interactive skills (16 items); (2) problem-solving and decision making skills (8 items); (3) continuous learning orientation (7 items); (4) enterprising skills (9 items); (5) skills in presenting and applying information (5 items); (6) goal-directed behaviour (10 items); (7) ethical and responsible behaviour (5 items); (8) analytical thinking skills (4 items). The scale included two additional items measuring respondents' optimism about their future career prospects and current level of job satisfaction, measured on a four-point categorical scale (ranging from very dissatisfied to highly satisfied). An exploratory factor analysis (Coetzee 2010) and inter-item correlational analyses

provided evidence that the Graduateness Scale items meet the psychometric criteria of construct validity. In terms of reliability (internal-consistency), Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for each subscale range between 0.75 and 0.92 (high) (Coetzee 2010).

Procedure

A web-survey was used to collect the data. Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the survey were obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the higher education institution. Participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and privacy were explained to the participants, as well as the purpose of the study. It was indicated to the participants that the completion and return of the questionnaires signified that they granted permission for their questionnaires to be utilised for research purposes.

Data Analysis

In the light of the exploratory nature of the research design, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients) and multiple regression analyses were performed to assess whether the participants' graduateness significantly predicted their optimism about their future career prospects and job satisfaction. The Mann-Whitney-U test and Kruskal Wallis test were used to test for significant mean differences between the gender and race groups respectively. Significance was established at $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

The means and standard deviations summarised in Table 1 show that the participants obtained the highest mean scores on the continuous learning ($M = 5.46$; $SD = 0.07$), ethical and responsible behaviour ($M = 5.43$; $SD = 0.13$) and interactive skills ($M = 5.41$; $SD = 0.13$) variables, and the lowest mean scores on enterprising skills ($M = 5.21$; $SD = 0.13$).

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 2) show that the female participants scored consistently significantly higher than their male counterparts on the eight graduateness variables. Table 3 summarises the results of the Kruskal Wallis test, indicating that with the exception of the analytical thinking variable, the Indian participants scored significantly higher

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations and Cronbach alpha coefficients (n = 272)

Scale	Means	SD	Cronbach alpha coefficients
Overall graduateness Scale	5.33	0.20	0.97
Interactive skills	5.41	0.13	0.92
Problem solving/decision making	5.33	0.15	0.86
Continuous learning orientation	5.46	0.07	0.87
Enterprising skills	5.21	0.13	0.86
Presenting and applying information skills	5.28	0.09	0.78
Goal-directed behaviour	5.25	0.36	0.87
Ethical and responsible behaviour	5.43	0.13	0.75
Analytical thinking skills	5.25	0.10	0.85

than the other race groups on the graduateness variables. The coloured participants scored significantly higher than the other race groups on the analytical thinking variable. The results further reveal that the African participants scored significantly lower than the other race groups on all the graduateness variables. In terms of optimism about future career prospects and level of job satisfaction, no significant differences were detected between the race groups. Table 4 shows that the male and female participants differed significantly only regarding their optimism about their future career prospects, with the fe-

male participants indicating significantly more negative views regarding their future career prospects (females $M = 129.16$ vs males $M = 158.21$).

Table 5 summarises the significant results of the multiple regression analyses. The two regression models explain medium ($R^2 \leq 0.14 \leq 0.17$ at $p \leq 0.001$) practical effect percentages of variance in the optimism about future career prospects ($R^2 = 14\%$) and job satisfaction ($R^2 = 17\%$) dependent variables. In terms of job satisfaction, only the graduateness variable enterprising skills positively and significantly predicts the participants' level of job satisfaction ($\beta \leq 0.42$; $p \leq 0.03$). The graduateness variable continuous learning orientation ($\beta \leq -0.32$; $p \leq 0.03$) significantly and negatively predicts participants' optimism about their future career prospects. Presenting and applying information skills ($\beta \leq 0.22$; $p \leq 0.05$) significantly and positively predict participants' optimism about their future career prospects.

DISCUSSION

The study explored whether individuals' graduateness skills and attributes significantly predict their job satisfaction and optimism about their future career prospects, and whether gender and race groups differed significantly regarding these variables. Overall, the sample constituted predominantly Indian and female participants in the exploration and establishment phases of their careers, employed in the South Afri-

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U test for significant mean differences (gender)

Graduateness scale	Mann-Whitney U	z	Asymp sig	Gender (n)	Mean rank
Interactive Skills	2468.50	-3.73***	0.00	Female (230) Male (35)	139.77 88.53
Problem Solving/Decision Making	2565.00	-3.58***	0.00	Female (230) Male (35)	139.35 91.29
Continuous Learning Orientation	2233.00	-4.55***	0.00	Female (230) Male (35)	140.79 81.80
Enterprising Skills	2356.00	-4.04***	0.00	Female (230) Male (35)	140.26 85.31
Presenting and Applying Information Skills	2779.00	-3.11**	0.002	Female (230) Male (35)	138.42 97.40
Goal-Directed Behaviour	2699.00	-3.16**	0.002	Female (230) Male (35)	138.77 95.11
Ethical and Responsible Behaviour	3107.00	-2.30*	0.02	Female (230) Male (35)	136.99 106.77
Analytical Thinking Skills	3008.50	-2.55**	0.01	Female (230) Male (35)	137.42 103.96

*** $p \leq 0.001$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ * $p \leq 0.05$

Table 3: Kruskal Wallis test for significant mean differences (race)

<i>Graduateness scale</i>	<i>Chi-square Whitney U</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymp sig</i>	<i>Race (n).</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>
Interactive Skills	38.65***	3	0.00	African (56)	89.30
				Coloured (16)	138.59
				Indian (117)	162.51
				White (42)	113.08
				Other (40)	146.86
Problem Solving/Decision Making	39.41***	4	0.00	African (56)	89.29
				Coloured (16)	147.97
				Indian (117)	163.11
				White (42)	117.02
				Other (40)	137.25
Continuous Learning Orientation	50.81***	4	0.00	African (56)	82.93
				Coloured (16)	137.13
				Indian (117)	166.75
				White (42)	125.48
				Other (40)	130.95
Enterprising Skills	38.72***	4	0.00	African (56)	87.00
				Coloured (16)	137.34
				Indian (117)	163.39
				White (42)	124.98
				Other (40)	135.51
Presenting and Applying Information Skills	31.57***	4	0.00	African (56)	96.23
				Coloured (16)	133.06
				Indian (117)	161.35
				White (42)	119.70
				Other (40)	135.81
Goal-directed Behaviour	22.16***	4	0.00	African (56)	98.85
				Coloured (16)	119.09
				Indian (117)	157.12
				White (42)	134.96
				Other (40)	134.10
Ethical and Responsible Behaviour	26.01***	4	0.00	African (56)	100.93
				Coloured (16)	145.78
				Indian (117)	158.65
				White (42)	119.33
				Other (40)	132.43
Analytical Thinking Skills	35.45***	4	0.00	African (56)	88.17
				Coloured (16)	161.59
				Indian (117)	157.50
				White (42)	133.37
				Other (40)	132.59

***p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05

Table 4: Mann-Whitney U test for significant mean differences - optimism about future career prospects (gender)

<i>Graduateness scale</i>	<i>Mann- Whitney U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>Asymp sig</i>	<i>Gender (n).</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>
General Optimism About Career Prospects	3142.50	-2.46**	0.01	Female (230)	129.16
				Male (35)	158.21

***p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05

can service industry at staff level. Overall, the sample reported high levels of job satisfaction and optimism regarding their future career prospects. The Indian and female participants had significantly more positive views about their

graduateness skills and attributes than the other race groups and male participants respectively. Research by Flores (2008) and Themba (2010) indicates that women tend to have higher self-efficacy beliefs than men regarding their pro-

Table 5: Significant multiple regression analyses: Graduateness on level of job satisfaction and optimism about future career prospects (n = 272)

Variable	Standardised coefficient		df	p	F	Adjusted R Square	R
Level of Job Satisfaction	\hat{a}	SE \hat{a}	0.000	3.15***	0.17**	0.50***	
Enterprising Skills	0.42	0.19	1	0.03	4.85**		
Optimism About Future Career Prospects				0.000	3.67***	0.14***	0.44***
Continuous Learning Orientation	-0.32	0.15	1	0.03	4.76**		
Presenting and Applying Information Skills	0.22	0.12	1	0.05	3.61**		

*** $p \leq 0.001$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ * $p \leq 0.05$ + $R^2 \leq 0.12$ (small practical effect size) ++ $R^2 \leq 0.13 \leq 0.25$ (medium practical effect size)

lem-solving and general career decision making abilities. The significantly lower scores of the Africans on the graduateness skills and attributes could be attributed to the historically disadvantaged socio-educational context of the Black South Africans that resulted from the apartheid era.

Although the female participants had significantly more positive views about their graduateness skills and attributes, they had significantly more negative views about their future career prospects than their male counterparts. This is an interesting observation when considering that current employment equity and affirmative action legislation in South African organisations favours the career advancement of women. These results may suggest that the female participants may still experience limited career advancement opportunities in a historically male dominant work environment (Oosthuizen and Naidoo 2010). Notwithstanding these differing perceptions about future career prospects, the results revealed no significant differences between the job satisfaction of the gender and race groups. Research by Coetzee and Bergh (2009) also indicated high levels of job and career satisfaction among women and men in the South African service industry who were in the establishment phase of their careers.

The results showed that enterprising skills significantly and positively predicted the participants' job satisfaction. It appears from the results that being venturesome and having the ability to apply critical thinking, initiative and proactivity when engaging in economic activities or undertakings lead to higher levels of job satisfaction. These findings seem to corroborate

research by Coetzee et al. (2011) and Kidd (2008) which indicates exposure to challenging, interesting and stimulating work that demand initiative, proactivity and creativity as resulting in higher levels of job satisfaction and overall career wellbeing. Research by Dik and Hansen (2011) also suggests that individuals who are able to influence workplace decisions may experience high intrinsic job satisfaction. In this regard, Coetzee (2010) posits that well-developed enterprising skills and the opportunity to apply these enable individuals be a substantial contributor to an enterprise. Enterprising skills have been related to intrapreneurship which concerns the expression of innovative and enterprising practices within the organisation (Culbertson et al. 2011). Finding ways of harnessing the creative energy, innovation, and drive associated with the participants' enterprising skills, and channeling these skills into endeavours consistent with organisational goals, outcomes and strategy may help serve as a catalyst for business and individual success and performance (Culbertson et al. 2011).

The participants' optimism about their future career prospects was negatively predicted by their continuous learning orientation. A continuous learning orientation refers to the ability to keep oneself up to date on technical knowledge and new developments in one's field of specialisation, workplace, industry, sector and profession; looking out for ways for self-improvement, including improving one's knowledge and skills by making use of developmental or training opportunities (Coetzee 2010). Employees or graduates with a continuous learning orientation have developed a cognitive meta-awareness and

openness towards their own learning. They have taken ownership of their continued personal and professional development, and examine and reason about their own learning which facilitates growth in autonomy, the internalisation of task-related goals and standards, and an increased ability to apply them to future efforts (Hart 1999). Having positive perceptions about one's future career advancement and/or career mobility prospects has been indicated by research as important for increasing employees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment (João 2011; Lumley 2010).

Contrary to the expectation that a strong continuous learning orientation would lead to greater optimism about one's future career prospects, the results of the present study indicated a more pessimistic view. Considering that the sample mostly consisted of women, these findings could be attributed to the unique career development needs of women. Women often have multiple roles and responsibilities, and tend to celebrate a greater variety of career forms and lifestyle choices (non-linear career patterns and preferences) rather than paid work and status (or linear career patterns) as the distinguishing features of their career (Cohen and El-Sawad 2009; Schreuder and Coetzee 2011). Research by O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) suggests that the career development needs of women in their 20s and early 30s emphasise personal control, career satisfaction, and achievement, and positive impact on others, and those of women in the mid-30s to late 40s emphasise doing what has to be done, whilst managing multiple relationships and responsibilities. In contrast, men tend to focus on career advancement as an indication of their career success (Schreuder and Coetzee 2011). Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) indicate that women generally evolve from an early career focus on challenge (which may explain the high scores on continuous learning orientation), to a middle career focus on balance, to a late career focus on authenticity. August (2011) also found that women had a high need to grow in their earlier and late career years. They tend to find work motivating because it was inherently interesting and provided them with intellectual stimulation and not necessarily offering them future career advancement opportunities.

Applying and presenting information skills were also shown to significantly predict the participants' optimism about their future career pros-

pects. These skills require well-developed critical thinking skills in presenting and applying information (written or orally) which is regarded as a powerful communication tool that helps to inform or persuade others, and contribute to graduates' success in the workplace (Watson and Adamson 2010; Wendlandt and Rochlen 2008). Cameron (2007) regards critical reading and writing as a transferable skill that enhances graduates' further studies and career progression. According to Watson and Adamson (2010), individuals' success in organisations depends to a large extent on their ability to organise and present (communicate) ideas confidently and with clarity. Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008) also indicate effective oral and written communication skills as a top priority for both securing and retaining employment.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study confirmed the importance of taking cognizance of the differences between race and gender groups' perceptions of their gradueness skills and attributes, and their optimism about their future career prospects. The results of the present study corroborate research indicating that what individuals value from their work environment and how they perceive their abilities tend to vary across race and gender. Notwithstanding the gender and race differences observed in the variables studied in the present study, organisations should also recognise the common needs and expectations of employees, such as having a desire for clear career paths, being exposed to further growth and development initiatives, opportunities to express their skills and talents, and to receive support, feedback and rewards for their performance. Addressing these needs also lead to higher levels of job satisfaction.

The distance learning student is most often an employed adult (as in the case of the present study) who have the opportunity to apply and further develop their gradueness skills and attributes in organisational context. Developing the participants' enterprising skills, and helping them to find an outlet in the workplace for applying their initiative in challenging economic undertakings may increase their level of job satisfaction. Similarly, developing the participants' ability to apply and present (communicate) information in the organisational context may help

to increase their optimism about their future career prospects.

The present study added new knowledge to the extant literature on individuals' career needs and requirements for their sustained employability and general job and career satisfaction in the contemporary world of work. It is trusted that the new insights gained from the results of this study will stimulate further research on the construct of graduateness. The new knowledge obtained may be used to inform organisational training and development and higher educational curriculum design practices concerned with optimising the graduateness of employees in their role as students and lifelong learners in a knowledge-driven global business economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It would seem sensible not to over-interpret the present results with reference to practical implications without further corroborative research. Since the present study has been limited to a relatively small sample of participants predominantly comprising Indian, African and white females in the early career phase employed in the South African service industry, the findings cannot be generalised to other race, age, gender and occupational contexts. Furthermore, given the exploratory nature of the research design, this study can yield no statements about causation.

Given the paucity of research on how individuals' graduateness skills and attributes influence their job satisfaction and optimism about future career prospects, it is recommended that future research consider replicating the study in other occupational contexts and industries with broader samples. Considering that people's career self-concepts evolve and change as they encounter new situations or transitions in their lives, it may be useful to conduct a longitudinal study to deepen one's understanding of the relationship between people's perceptions of their graduateness skills and attributes and their job satisfaction and optimism about future career prospects over the life course of the individual.

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