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Widening access, closing minds? The paradox of career aspiration and graduate employability in South Africa

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Abstract
In the global context of higher education massification and the shifting demands of the labour market, understanding the drivers of student career aspirations is critical. This study interrogates the "graduateness paradox" in South Africa—where expanded access has not yet yielded equitable employment outcomes—by moving beyond simplistic "skills gap" narratives. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field, we analyse the real-time formation of professional ambition among current students. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of $N = 1{,}149$ students across four diverse South African universities, we utilised hierarchical multiple regression to test the influence of employability skills, institutional support (employability stimulating factors), confidence, and work experience on career aspirations. The findings reveal that while perceived skills and beneficial work experience are significant predictors, students' "confidence in educational competencies"—conceptualised as a proxy for a confident habitus—emerged as the most powerful determinant of aspiration ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$). Crucially, the influence of institutional support was markedly attenuated and became non-significant when controlling for internalised habitus and capital. This suggests that conventional support interventions may remain "inert" if they fail to foster a sense of legitimacy and belonging among non-traditional students. This study makes a novel contribution by quantitatively demonstrating the primacy of habitus over institutional resources. We argue that neglecting the symbolic violence inherent in devaluing non-traditional capital renders skills-based policies insufficient and can even reinforce the very inequalities they seek to dismantle. This study carries implications for global employability theory and policy in massified systems.

Keywords Graduate employability · Cultural capital · Habitus · Career aspirations · Widening participation · South Africa

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Introduction

Employability—a graduate's suitability for employment (Yorke & Knight, 2007)—is a central concern for all stakeholders. While students pursue higher education primarily to improve their career prospects, employers increasingly report dissatisfaction with graduate preparedness. This critique frequently cites a deficit in "soft skills" such as communication and teamwork rather than a lack of subject-specific knowledge (Holtzhausen, 2014), creating a significant "employability gap" in which academic competencies do not seamlessly translate to workplace demands. In this global context of "massification," formal qualifications have become effectively decoupled from guaranteed economic returns.

South Africa confronts a profound socio-economic paradox: a chronically high unemployment rate, currently at 32.9% and averaging 29.6% over the last decade (Statistics South Africa, 2025), persists alongside critical skills shortages. This tension is compounded by the imperative to redress apartheid-era inequalities, positioning higher education (HE) institutions as pivotal engines for both economic growth and social justice. The ability of HE to fulfil this dual mandate depends on successfully navigating the intersection of three critical issues: graduate employability, widening participation policy, and the alignment of institutional offerings with students' career aspirations.

Simultaneously, the post-1994 policy of widening participation aims to ensure HE access is not dictated by race, social class, or geography. However, true equity requires equitable outcomes, not just enrolment figures (Akooyee & Nkomo, 2007). Students from underrepresented backgrounds often lack the social capital necessary to navigate both the university environment and the transition to professional life, indicating that access is insufficient without robust support systems. Structural barriers, rather than mere individual attributes, continue to dictate educational and career trajectories (Brown et al., 2003). These challenges directly impact student aspirations. Occupational ambitions are shaped by a confluence of personality, gender, and socio-economic background (Gunkel et al., 2010). In a context of historical disadvantage, aspirations may be constrained by a student's environment or by policies that implicitly devalue certain career paths. Understanding how students perceive their own employability and how their background influences their goals is therefore crucial.

This study examines the relationship between perceived employability, career aspirations, and widening participation. We aim to analyse the alignment—or lack thereof—between these constructs through five specific objectives: (1) Exploring student understanding of employability and labour market preparedness; (2) Examining the nature of career aspirations and goal-setting abilities; (3) Investigating the statistical relationship between aspirations and key predictors (employability stimulating factors, skills, confidence, and beneficial work); (4) Determining the extent to which gender influences these variables; (5) Assessing the impact of control variables (age, level of study, and work experience) on employment preparation.

By investigating these constructs from the student perspective, this research moves beyond simplistic assumptions to offer a richer understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder the transition from education to employment. Practically, these insights can inform curriculum design and policy initiatives, ensuring that widening participation leads to equitable graduate success.

Empirical foundations: the South African "graduateness" paradox

To understand the challenges of graduate employability in South Africa, we must look beyond individual effort to the structural landscape of higher education. South Africa's struggle with the "employability gap" reflects a global phenomenon: the massification of higher education has effectively decoupled formal qualifications from guaranteed economic returns.

The hierarchy of the field: institutional prestige and social capital The higher education field in South Africa is far from level. The historical distinction between Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) continues to dictate the "exchange value" of a degree. Graduates from HBIs often face prolonged transitions into the labour market, as recruitment managers frequently prioritise HWIs due to perceived higher standards (Graham et al., 2019; Moleke, 2005). This institutional branding acts as a form of institutionalised cultural capital, where the university's name serves as a primary signal of quality to employers, often overshadowing the student's actual skills.

This inequality is exacerbated by a deficit in social capital. Black graduates, particularly those from impoverished or rural backgrounds, often suffer from "information poverty," lacking the "bridging social capital" (networks outside their immediate circles) necessary to navigate the "hidden" job market (Harry et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2019). While these students acquire scholastic capital (the degree), they lack the social resources required to convert that degree into a professional position.

The illusion of scholastic capital: skills vs. habitus There is a profound disconnect between student self-perception and labour market demands. While students often report high self-confidence in their skills, employers cite a lack of "proactive engagement" and cognitive flexibility (Koloba, 2017). This "skills mismatch" is not merely technical but cultural. The shift toward "direct employability"—where graduates are expected to "hit the ground running" (Kruss, 2004)—demands a specific professional habitus that includes leadership, business etiquette, and specific communication styles. As South African curricula often remain overly theoretical, they may fail to provide the Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) or "tacit knowledge" identified as crucial in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era (Mageza-Mokhethi & Adekanmbi, 2024; Pitan & Muller, 2021). Addressing this mismatch requires more than technical training; it necessitates institutional validation. Research suggests that integrated mentorship can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional habitus by providing students with role models who have successfully navigated similar structural barriers (Mageza-Mokhethi & Adekanmbi, 2024). Furthermore, the call for curriculum decolonisation (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Wessels & Jacobsz, 2015) is not merely political but pedagogical; it seeks to validate students' existing 'community cultural wealth' rather than treating their backgrounds as a deficit to be overcome.

The "sobering effect": aspiration, confidence, and reality A student's confidence is highly sensitive to their proximity to the labour market. Perceived employability often decreases as students approach their final year and become more cognizant of structural barriers, such as racial prejudice and the high costs of job-seeking (Botha, 2021; Archer & Chetty,

2013). When students realise that their background—race, class, or institutional type—may limit their prospects, it can lead to a sense of "hopelessness" that stifles career aspiration (Mseleku, 2022).

Global resonance While uniquely shaped by decolonisation and redress (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021), these findings resonate with global trends. The South African "graduateness" crisis mirrors "credential inflation" in the UK and Australia, where soft skills and social networks have become the primary differentiators in a crowded labour market (Telling, 2018; Tholen, 2017). Furthermore, the importance of institutional validation for non-traditional students echoes US-based research on belonging, while the 4IR digital divide remains a global imperative for marginalised communities worldwide.

Theoretical framework: a Bourdieusian lens

This study applies Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework to analyse the complex relationship between student agency and structural forces within South African higher education. Given the post-apartheid context of persistent inequality, massification, and decolonisation challenges, a nuanced theoretical approach is critical (Soudien, 2016; Shaik & Kahn, 2021). Bourdieu's core concepts—field, habitus, and capital—are "thinking tools" for understanding how education reproduces social hierarchies rather than operating as a neutral arbiter of merit (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This framework recognises graduate employability not as a static list of individual skills, but as a relational and contextual outcome shaped by the dynamic interplay between individual dispositions and external social forces (Delva et al., 2021).

The field: the South African graduate labour market

Bourdieu defines a field as a structured social space of competition with its own internal logic, power dynamics, and specific forms of currency (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The field of focus here is the South African graduate labour market, currently in flux due to global competition and a digitising job landscape (Herbert et al., 2020).

Within this framework, employability is fundamentally relational. Its value is determined by the alignment between a graduate's assets and the specific demands and ***doxa***—the taken-for-granted beliefs and unwritten rules—of that field (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). As Clark and Zukas (2013) metaphorically put it, true employability involves a graduate becoming a "fish in water," possessing an intuitive "feel for the game." In this field, recruiters act as key "gatekeepers," defining what is valued and effectively shaping the practical meaning of employability through their hiring preferences (Lindberg, 2013).

Habitus: ingrained dispositions and inequality's legacy

Habitus is the system of durable, transposable dispositions—ingrained habits, skills, and ways of thinking—that individuals acquire through their life experiences and social background (Bourdieu, 1984). This "structured and structuring structure" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) shapes aspirations, perceptions of what is possible, and behavioural predispositions.

Professional work often implicitly rewards a specific, typically middle-class habitus, creating a system of social distinction where subtle differences in communication, confidence, and conduct are prioritised (Herbert et al., 2020).

In South Africa, habitus is a critical analytical concept. The educational system has historically validated the culture of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, a mismatch between their habitus and the expectations of the professional field can lead to ***hysteresis***, a disorienting "fish out of water" feeling (Clark & Zukas, 2013). This disconnect can significantly impede their ability to translate educational qualifications into successful careers.

Capital: the currencies of success

Success in the field requires individuals to deploy various forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) outlined that capital extends beyond economic resources to include social capital (networks) and cultural capital. Cultural capital exists in three states: (1) Institutionalised: formal qualifications like a university degree; (2) Objectified: cultural goods such as books or technology; (3) Embodied: long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, including skills, poise and ways of speaking.

While South African universities confer institutionalised capital (the degree), this qualification is often necessary but insufficient for securing employment. This study argues that other forms are decisive. The so-called generic "graduate attributes" are often forms of embodied cultural capital that are not equally accessible to all (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Privileged students often enter university with greater social and embodied capital, giving them a "game-playing" advantage in recruitment (Herbert et al., 2020). Recruiters, in turn, often value this advantage as symbolic capital—the prestige and recognition attached to attributes like "poise" or "drive"—thereby reinforcing existing structures of advantage.

Literature review and hypotheses development

To address the challenges facing South African higher education, this study builds a theoretical bridge between students' internal attributes (skills, confidence, and aspirations) and the external structural realities of the labour market.

Employability skills as embodied cultural capital

From a Bourdieusian perspective, career aspirations are a product of an individual's habitus, which is shaped by the volume and composition of their accumulated capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The "employability skills" that South African employers identify as lacking in graduates (Holtzhausen, 2014) are essentially forms of embodied cultural capital. Non-financial assets—such as communication styles and professional mannerisms—are valued by the dominant group in the professional workplace.

Students from privileged backgrounds often acquire this capital implicitly, exhibiting a natural *aisance* (ease) in professional settings. For others, these skills must be consciously acquired. When students feel they possess the "right" skills, the psychological distance to aspirational roles shrinks, directly influencing their ambition (Gbadamosi et al., 2015).

- H1: *There is a significant positive relationship between students' perceived employability skills and their career aspirations.*

Employability stimulating factors (ESF) as capital-building mechanisms

ESF—including work-integrated learning (WIL), internships, and career guidance—is conceptualised here as an institutional mechanism for capital acquisition. They represent structured opportunities for students to convert their institutionalised capital (the degree) into more potent, embodied forms. In South Africa's context of high inequality, these factors are vital, as many students lack pre-existing professional networks. WIL offers a critical opportunity to accumulate social capital (through networks) and further embody workplace norms (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

- H2: *There is a significant positive relationship between students' engagement with employability stimulating factors and their career aspirations.*

Confidence as expression of aligned habitus

We measure "confidence" using the framework from Allen and De Weert (2007). In this study, confidence is not merely a psychological trait; it is the expression of a habitus that perceives itself as well-aligned with its field. It reflects the student's belief that their university has successfully endowed them with legitimate, high-value cultural capital. A lack of confidence signals dissonance—a feeling that one's habitus and capital are "out of place," potentially leading to "impostor syndrome" (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

- H3: *There is a significant positive relationship between students' confidence in their educational competences and their career aspirations.*

The necessity and desirability of part-time work

While part-time work is encouraged in Western nations for skill development, in South Africa, it is often a matter of profound necessity. Due to high unemployment and significant wealth inequality, many South African students must work to cover essential living expenses (Govender & Wait, 2017; Chili & Sokeng, 2022). A Bourdieusian framework positions part-time work as a mechanism for accumulating economic capital for survival, but also social and embodied capital through exposure to workplace conduct (Wilton, 2011). Successfully navigating a work environment develops stronger self-efficacy, encouraging students to pursue more challenging goals (Bandura, 1993).

- H4: *There is a significant positive relationship between a student's engagement in beneficial work and the ambition and clarity of their career aspirations.*

The gendered habitus and differential capital

Habitus is fundamentally gendered; from early childhood, individuals acquire dispositions deemed appropriate for their gender, which guide them toward specific fields (AlMiskry

et al., 2009). In South Africa, while racial redress is a policy focus, gender remains a critical axis of stratification. The unemployment rate for women (35.2%) remains consistently higher than that for men (30.6%), even with comparable education (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

This suggests the transition to the labour market is mediated by a gendered valuation of capital. A male student's assertiveness may be misrecognised as "leadership potential," whereas the same disposition in a female student might be penalised as "abrasiveness." This "habitus-field friction" can temper female aspirations as a form of "subjective adjustment" to objective market probabilities (Bourdieu, 1990). Consequently, we argue that gender acts as a moderating force across all facets of the student experience—from the perception of university support to the ultimate clarity of professional ambition. This theoretical alignment justifies the final hypothesis:

- H5: *Significant gender differences will exist across the study variables due to the influence of a gendered habitus and the differential valuation of capital.*

Synthesis and research gap: the "graduateness paradox"

Applying a Bourdieusian lens to the South African landscape reveals that while the policy of widening participation represents a direct intervention to legitimate the capital of previously excluded groups, the legacy of historical stratification persists within individuals' habitus. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often experience symbolic violence: a process by which they internalise dominant standards as legitimate while viewing their own cultural capital as deficient. Consequently, structural barriers are misrecognised as personal failings, leading students to conclude, "I lack the necessary skills," rather than recognising that the system was not built for them.

This theoretical synthesis underscores a persistent "graduateness paradox" in South Africa, where expanded access has not yet yielded equitable employment outcomes. While research has mapped the "skills gap" from employers' perspectives (Kruss, 2004) or through post-hoc graduate reflections (Graham et al., 2019), a critical gap remains: the lack of empirical research on the real-time formation of career aspirations among current students. This study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from "employability as possession" to "employability as a relational construct" shaped by the alignment between a student's habitus and the higher education field. By interrogating how the subjective perception of one's own capital—or its misrecognition through symbolic violence—structures aspirations, this study offers a novel contribution to the international literature and a powerful critique of purely skills-based solutions for graduate work-readiness.

Methodology

This section details the methodological approach used to investigate the relationships among employability factors, confidence, and career aspirations of South African higher education students. It covers the research paradigm and design, sampling strategy, data collection, measurement instruments, and ethical considerations.

Research paradigm and design

This study is situated within a post-positivist paradigm, acknowledging that objective reality can only be known imperfectly. This approach is suitable for quantitative research that tests hypotheses and identifies the strength and direction of relationships between variables.

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to collect data on multiple variables from a large sample at a single point in time, facilitating robust statistical analyses of associations. While this design is limited in its ability to establish causality or track longitudinal changes, it serves as a pragmatic and effective method for capturing a national snapshot of student perceptions. This empirical baseline validates the theoretical relationships predicted by Bourdieu's framework, providing a foundation for future qualitative or longitudinal inquiry.

Sampling strategy and participants

The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled at South African higher education institutions. A multi-stage non-probability sampling strategy that combined purposive and convenience techniques was employed.

Stage One: The purposive selection of four major metropolitan hubs—Pretoria, Durban, Gqeberha, and Cape Town—ensuring geographical and institutional diversity. *Stage Two*: The purposive selection of one university within each city, including both traditional and comprehensive institutions. *Stage Three*: Convenience sampling for participant recruitment. Following the acquisition of gatekeeper permissions and ethical clearance from each institution, academics convening large undergraduate classes (typically $N > 100$) were approached for access.

From the total questionnaires administered (ranging between 600 and 1,000 per university), a final sample of $N = 1{,}149$ valid and complete responses were obtained. Demographic variables, including age, gender, level of study, and prior work experience, were collected to function as control variables in the subsequent regression analysis.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using self-administered, paper-based questionnaires administered in person during scheduled lecture periods. This maximised response rates and allowed participant clarification. After securing permission from course convenors, the researcher introduced the study, provided explicit assurances of anonymity, and confirmed that participation was entirely voluntary.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). The analytic strategy employed descriptive statistics to assess baseline levels of aspiration and confidence. The analytical strategy proceeded in three stages. First, independent-samples *t*-tests were used to investigate the gender differences hypothesised in H5. Second, bivariate correlations were conducted to check for initial associations and potential multicollinearity. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression was employed to test H1 through H4 while controlling for demographic factors.

Instrumentation and psychometric properties

The research instrument comprised five scales. Four of these (career aspiration, employability skills, confidence, and beneficial work) are established, psychometrically validated instruments from previous literature. The Employability Stimulating Factors (ESF) scale was synthesised specifically for this study from a comprehensive review of distal drivers of success and subjected to pre-testing for contextual resonance. To ensure reliability within this specific cohort, Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients were calculated for each construct. Items were recoded where necessary so that higher numerical values consistently represent positive outcomes (e.g., higher aspirations or greater confidence), facilitating the interpretability of the subsequent regression models.

Career aspiration scale (DV) A five-item instrument adapted from Gbadamosi et al. (2015) assessed the alignment between academic trajectory and long-term professional identity. Using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree), the construct demonstrated solid internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.73$), comparable to global benchmarks for career development.

Employability stimulating factors (IV) This 17-item scale captures the "distal" institutional drivers of graduate success. Synthesised from the broader employability literature and refined through pre-testing, it exhibited robust reliability ($\alpha = 0.77$), indicating a coherent measure of institutional stimulation.

Employability skills scale (IV) Measuring the development of transferable competencies, this 13-item scale is an expanded iteration of Wilton's (2011) original instrument. By integrating modern digital and communicative competencies, the scale maintained high rigour ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Confidence in educational competencies (IV) Based on the CHEERS study (Allen & De Weert, 2007) framework, this 28-item scale measures the "proximal" readiness fostered by the university experience. As the study's operationalisation of the "confident habitus," it demonstrated exceptional reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), signifying a highly coherent measurement of student disposition.

Beneficial work scale (IV) Adapted from Gbadamosi et al. (2015), this 12-item subscale evaluates the perceived "added value" of part-time employment. It achieved the study's highest level of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$), ensuring precise measurement of work-related capital accumulation across diverse institutional locations.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical principles. Ethical clearance was obtained from the lead author's institutional committee (Reference: ID 9004) and the four participating universities. All participants received a comprehensive information sheet and provided informed consent. Anonymity was guaranteed, and data were stored in a secure, encrypted format used exclusively for this research.

Results

This section presents the study's findings. Analysis begins with descriptive statistics outlining the demographic profile and contextual variables. Following this, the results of the inferential statistical analyses are presented in sequence, beginning with bivariate correlations between the study's core constructs, the hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting career aspiration, and culminating in the independent samples t-tests examining gender differences to formally test the research hypotheses.

Preliminary analysis and descriptive statistics

The final sample consisted of $N = 1149$ students from four universities across South Africa. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are detailed in Table 1.

The sample was predominantly composed of young adults, with 93.0% aged 25 years or younger. There was a higher representation of female students (57.0%) compared to male students (41.3%). The distribution of participants across the four university locations was relatively balanced, with the largest cohort from Gqeberha (31.2%) and the smallest from Pretoria (19.8%). The majority of respondents were in their third year of study (36.4%), followed by first-year (29.3%) and second-year (28.2%) students. A significant majority of students (92.3%) reported not having a job at the time of the survey. It is important to note the apparent contradiction where 16% also claimed to be self-employed; this suggests these may have been separate questions, with some students engaging in informal entrepreneurial activities while not holding a formal job.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents

	Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	475	41.3
	Female	655	57.0
	Other	19	1.7
Age	Below 21	409	35.6
	21–25	660	57.4
	26–30	61	5.3
	31–40	10	0.9
	41–50	1	0.1
University location	Cape Town (Western Cape)	303	26.4
	Pretoria (Gauteng)	228	19.8
	Gqeberha (Eastern Cape)	358	31.2
	Durban (KwaZulu-Natal)	260	22.6
Level of study	Year 1	337	29.3
	Year 2	324	28.2
	Year 3	418	36.4
	Year 4	64	5.5
Job Status	Yes	88	7.7
	No	1061	92.3
Self-employed (e.g. managed SME)	Yes	184	16.0
	No	463	40.3

Note: $N = 1149$. The percentages are the valid percentages

Table 2 Who pays tuition?

		Number	Percent
1	Self	55	4.78
2	Parents/Family	499	43.42
3	Loans	395	34.37
4	Bursaries	214	18.62
5	Others	20	1.74
6	System missing	14	1.22

Note: Multiple answers are permitted, and 49 respondents gave multiple answers

Table 3 Job experience and opportunities ($N=1149$)

Respondents who have:	Yes/No	Frequency	Percentage
Ever worked	Yes	555	48.3
	No	594	51.7
Will take part-time job if offered	Yes	873	76.0
	No	117	10.2
	Maybe	151	13.2
Will take paid holiday jobs	Yes	433	37.7
	No	456	39.7
	Occasionally	260	22.6

As shown in Table 2, the primary source of tuition funding was reported to be parents or family (43.4%). However, a crucial finding emerges when external funding sources are combined. Student loans (34.4%) and bursaries (18.6%) together account for 53.0% of funding mechanisms. This indicates that, contrary to some popular narratives, over half the students rely on external support (e.g., NSFAS, bursaries) to finance their education, highlighting significant financial pressures on the student population.

The data on work experience, presented in Tables 3 and 4, reveal a critical tension between students' financial needs and their academic priorities. Nearly half of the sample (48.3%) reported having prior work experience, despite only 7.7% being formally employed at the time of the survey. A striking 76.0% of students indicated they would take a part-time job if offered, underscoring a significant unmet demand for employment opportunities.

When asked why they do not work part-time (Table 4), the two dominant reasons were "Not enough time" (29.7%) and "Don't want to detract from studies" (29.6%). Together, these academic concerns account for nearly 60% of responses, far outweighing financial security from family (9.3%) or bursaries (2.6%) as reasons for not working. This suggests that students are making a strategic choice to prioritise their academic performance over immediate earning potential, even when the desire for employment is high.

Descriptive statistics and variable distribution

Before conducting the inferential analysis, the descriptive statistics for all study variables were examined to establish a baseline for student perceptions (see Table 5). The sample reported a high level of career aspiration ($M=1.56$, SD = 0.52), suggesting that despite the challenging economic climate, students maintain a strong commitment to their professional futures. Notably, beneficial work reported the lowest mean ($M=1.41$, SD = 1.37), indicating

Table 4 Why don't you work part-time?

	Frequency	Percent
Not enough time	341	29.7
Don't want to detract from studies	340	29.6
Adequate support from family	107	9.3
Sponsorship/Bursaries	30	2.6
Health reasons	9	0.8
Other reasons	183	15.9
Missing / No response	139	12.1
Total	1149	100.0

Table 5 Summary of research variables and correlation analysis, $N = 1149$

(Research Variables)	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Career aspiration	1.56	0.52	(0.73)†	0.09**	0.20**	0.25**	0.11**
Employability stimulating factors	2.01	0.42		(0.77)	0.22**	0.17**	−0.02
Employability skills	1.52	0.32			(0.75)	0.47**	0.00
Confidence in educational competencies	1.63	0.45				(0.91)	0.16**
Beneficial work	1.41	1.37					(0.97)

†. Reliability scores (Cronbach's alpha) are presented in the diagonal parentheses

(***. $p < .001$; **. $p < .01$; *. $p < .05$)

that students who engage in work-integrated learning or part-time employment perceive these experiences as highly valuable to their development. In terms of individual habitus and capital, students reported relatively high levels of employability skills ($M = 1.52$, SD = 0.32) and confidence in educational competencies ($M = 1.63$, SD = 0.45). The employability stimulating factors provided by the institutions received a slightly higher mean score ($M = 2.01$, SD = 0.42), suggesting that while students value university support, they perceive their own skills and confidence as more proximal to their career readiness. These descriptive results provide the necessary foregrounding for the regression analysis by confirming that the sample is characterised by high levels of self-perceived readiness and ambition.

Bivariate correlations and scale reliability

To address the potential for common method variance bias (CMVB), given that all data were collected at a single time point using a single instrument (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we conducted Harman's single-factor test. This test involves performing an unrotated exploratory factor analysis on all study variables to determine if a single factor accounts for the majority of the variance. A single factor accounting for more than 50% of the variance would indicate a significant threat from CMVB. The results showed that a single factor extracted from the unrotated EFA accounted for 35.38% of the total variance. As this is below the 50% threshold, common method bias is not considered a significant threat to the validity of our findings.

Table 5 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients for the five core study variables. Prior to conducting the main analyses, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were assessed and found to be satisfactory.

First, the internal consistency of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with the coefficients reported on the diagonal of Table 5. All scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 0.73$ for career aspiration to $\alpha = 0.97$ for beneficial work, confirming the instruments were reliable for further analysis.

The correlation matrix provides preliminary support for all four hypotheses. As predicted, career aspiration was found to have statistically significant, positive correlations with all independent variables:

Supporting H1, a moderate positive relationship was found with employability skills ($r = .200$, $p < .01$).

Supporting H2, there was a weak positive relationship with employability stimulating factors ($r = .092$, $p < .01$).

Supporting H3, a moderate positive relationship was found with confidence in educational competencies ($r = .251$, $p < .01$), which was the strongest bivariate correlation.

Supporting H4, a weak positive relationship was found with beneficial work ($r = .109$, $p < .01$).

These initial findings confirm that the hypothesised relationships exist within the data. The next step was to determine if these relationships hold when variables are tested simultaneously in a more robust model.

Hypothesis testing via hierarchical multiple regression

To determine the predictive power of the independent variables on career aspiration (H1, H2, H3, and H4), a five-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. The entry order followed a Bourdieusian logic of "distance from habitus," moving from distal structural field factors to proximal, embodied dispositions. The results are presented in Table 6.

In Model 1, distal demographic controls (age, gender, level of study, and work experience) accounted for a negligible 1% of variance $R^2 = 0.01$, $F = 2.17$, $p = .07$). Model 2 introduced institutional factors (ESF), increasing explanatory power to 2% $R^2 = 0.02$, $F = 11.33$, $p < .001$). Models 3 through 5 introduced proximal constructs (habitus and cultural capital). In Model 3, employability skills increased variance to 5% $R^2 = 0.05$, $F = 38.47$, $p < .001$). Model 4 added confidence in educational competencies ($R^2 = 0.09$, $F = 36.13$, $p < .001$), providing the largest predictive leap. The final model (Model 5) included beneficial work; while R^2 remained at 0.09, the model was highly significant ($F = 9.51$, $p = .002$).

In the final iteration, three variables emerged as significant independent predictors: confidence ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$), skills ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .001$), and beneficial work ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < .001$). Notably, ESF was attenuated from significance in Model 2 ($\beta = 0.13$) to non-significance in Model 5 ($\beta = 0.06$, $p > .05$). This statistically validates the theoretical argument that institutional field resources only impact aspiration when successfully internalised by the habitus.

Hypothesis testing summary

H1 (Supported): employability skills remained a strongly significant predictor after controlling for all factors ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .001$).

H2 (Not Supported): The influence of ESF became non-significant ($p > .05$) once skills and confidence were entered, suggesting its initial effect is mediated by internal constructs.

Table 6 Multiple OLS regression results for career aspiration ($N = 1149$)

	Career aspiration				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(constant)	1.74***	1.50***	1.12***	0.99***	0.96***
	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(12)
Control variables					
Age	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05	−0.058*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Gender	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Level of study	-0.03	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04	−0.042**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Work experience	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	−0.003**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Predictors					
Employability Stimulating Factors		0.13***	0.08*	0.06	0.06
		(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Employability Skills			0.32***	0.16***	0.18***
			(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Confidence in Educational Competencies				0.24***	0.22***
				(0.04)	(0.04)
Beneficial Work					0.04***
					(0.01)
R^2	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.09	0.09
Adjusted R^2	-	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.01
F	2.17	11.33	38.47	36.13	9.51

Note: Regression coefficients are reported, and their standard errors are in brackets
(***. $p < .001$; **. $p < .01$; *. $p < .05$)

H3 (Strongly Supported): confidence in educational competencies emerged as the most powerful determinant of career aspiration ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$).

H4 (Supported): beneficial work remained a significant, albeit modest, predictor ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < .001$).

Analysis of gender differences

Potential gender differences were examined using a series of independent samples *t*-tests (Table 7). Participants identifying as 'Other' ($n = 19$) were excluded due to the small sub-sample size, preventing robust comparison.

The results indicate significant gender differences in three areas:

For the gender comparison (Table 7), Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ($p < .05$) for employability stimulating factors, confidence, and beneficial work, indicating a violation of the assumption of equal variances. Consequently, for these variables, we reported the *t*-test results for 'equal variances not assumed,' utilising the Welch-Satterthwaite degrees of freedom adjustment. Female students ($M = 1.59$) reported significantly higher confidence than males ($M = 1.69$; $t(941) = 3.96$, $p < .001$). Conversely, male students (M = 1.34) perceived their work as significantly more beneficial than females (M = 1.37;

Table 7 Summary of gender comparison (Females vs. males; $N = 1149$)

(Research variables)	Gender (means)		Independent t-Test results		
	Male (475)	Female (655)	t	df	*p*
Career aspiration	1.57	1.55	0.66	1128	0.51
Employability stimulating factors	1.97	2.04	-3.02	1127	0.00†
Employability skills	1.52	1.51	0.94	1128	0.35
Confidence in educational competencies	1.69	1.59	3.96	941	0.00†
Beneficial work	1.34	1.37	2.24	1128	0.03†

†. The assumed difference within females for employability stimulating factors (Levene's test $F = 0.492$, $p < .05$), and within males for both confidence in educational competencies (Levene's test $F = 9.64$, $p < .05$) and Beneficial Work (Levene's test $F = 2.49$, $p < .05$)

$t(1128) = 2.24$, $p = .025$). No significant gender differences were found for career aspiration ($p = .51$) or employability skills ($p = .35$), providing partial support for H5.

Discussion

This study investigated the complex interplay between students' perceptions of employability, confidence, and career aspirations within the unique socio-historical context of South African higher education. By interpreting the quantitative results through Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical lens, the findings challenge simplistic, human-capital-driven policy narratives that equate degree acquisition with market readiness. This section synthesises the results in relation to the existing body of literature, explores theoretical and practical contributions, and acknowledges the study's limitations.

Confidence as habitus and skills as capital A primary finding of this research is that Confidence in Educational Competencies emerged as the most powerful significant predictor of Career Aspirations ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$). Bourdieusian theory views this "confidence" as a manifestation of a habitus well aligned with the dominant culture. It represents the *aisance* (ease) students feel when they intuitively grasp the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1990). This aligns with the descriptive data showing a high overall mean for career aspirations ($M = 1.56$ on a scale where 1 is highest), suggesting that South African students possess strong professional ambitions despite the "grim reality" of the labour market (Mseleku, 2022).

While employability skills were also a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .001$), their secondary importance to confidence suggests that possessing a repertoire of skills—a form of institutionalised cultural capital—is less critical than having the embodied disposition to deploy them with legitimacy. This resonates with Koloba (2017), who found that although students often perceive themselves as skilled, their self-confidence mediates their market fit. Furthermore, our findings reflect the "sobering effect" noted by Botha (2021): as students progress through the field (level of study), the friction between their aspirations and the structural unemployment of the South African context becomes more pronounced, potentially eroding the "confident habitus" required for successful conversion of capital.

The limits of institutional support: attenuation and symbolic violence Hierarchical regression showed the influence of ESF was markedly attenuated… after introducing habitus (confidence) and capital (skills). This provides empirical weight to the Bourdieusian tenet that capital cannot simply be "transferred" through institutional services; it must be recognised and activated by the agent.

As Pitan and Muller (2021) argue, South African universities often offer "employability development opportunities" that students fail to engage with effectively. Our results suggest this is not a matter of student apathy but of habitus-field mismatch. Institutional support remains inert if a student lacks the "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) or the bridging social capital (Harry et al., 2018) to navigate these resources. This failure of institutional support to independently drive aspiration highlights a form of symbolic violence: the university field demands a specific, often middle-class or "White-coded" professional habitus that many students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds have not had the social space to acquire. When these students fail to "hit the ground running" (Kruss, 2004), they often misrecognize this structural exclusion as a personal deficiency in "soft skills," internalising the systemic barriers as individual failure.

Gendered habitus and differential valuation The significant gender differences observed in confidence ($p < .001$) and beneficial work ($p = .025$) support the hypothesis of a gendered habitus. Female students reported higher confidence in their educational competencies, yet this did not translate into higher career aspirations compared to their male counterparts. This suggests a "differential valuation of capital" (Bourdieu, 2001) in the South African labour market, where women may anticipate their qualifications being appraised less favourably in a male-dominated professional field. This mirrors the global literature on the "confidence gap" and gendered social capital, in which academic success often fails to translate into equivalent professional status due to entrenched systemic hierarchies (Al Mistry et al., 2009). The fact that male students ($M = 1.34$) reported their work as more "beneficial" than female students ($M = 1.37$) may reflect a gendered socialisation that encourages men to instrumentalise their experiences more aggressively for career advancement.

Theoretical and practical contributions

Advancing the Bourdieusian lens

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions to the international literature on graduate employability. First, empirical operationalisation of abstract constructs. A perennial critique of Bourdieusian scholarship is the difficulty of moving from metaphorical description to empirical testing. This paper provides a robust methodological pathway for the quantitative operationalisation of habitus (proxied by confidence) and institutionalised cultural capital (proxied by perceived skills). By testing these in a large-scale regression model ($N = 1149$), we move the "graduateness" debate from abstract sociology to measurable educational science. Second, the primacy of habitus over institutional field resources. Perhaps the study's most significant contribution is the empirical proof of the "attenuation effect." By demonstrating that the impact of institutional support (ESF) is eclipsed by the student's internal sense of legitimacy (confidence), we refine the Bourdieusian understand-

ing of how capital is activated. We provide evidence that institutional resources remain "inert capital" unless the student possesses the necessary habitus to recognise and deploy them. Third, a critique of symbolic violence in employability policy. The research substantiates the concept of symbolic violence in higher education. When universities and employers frame the "skills gap" as a personal deficiency, they force students from marginalised backgrounds to misrecognize structural exclusion as individual failure. Our findings suggest that the struggle for "soft skills" is often a struggle for a dominant-class habitus that the institution assumes but does not explicitly teach.

Practical and policy implications

To move beyond a "skills-only" model, South African HEIs must move toward validation-centric support. First, integrated mentorship. HEIs should establish mentorship programmes that connect students with role models from similar socio-economic backgrounds to foster a "confident habitus" through vicarious validation. Second, redesigning WIL. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) should be formalised as "social capital building" (Mageza-Mokhethi & Adekanmbi, 2024), explicitly teaching the "hidden curriculum" of professional networking. Third, curriculum decolonisation. Following Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021), institutions must address the "fallacious colonial curriculum" to reduce the friction between habitus and the field that leads to symbolic violence and student alienation.

Limitations and avenues for future research

While this study offers a panoramic view of South African students' perceptions, several limitations warrant further investigation. Methodologically, the cross-sectional design precludes causal claims. Future longitudinal research should observe how habitus and confidence evolve during the transition to work, while qualitative ethnographies could provide "thick descriptions" of habitus-field friction. Also, the lack of full psychometric validation for the newly synthesised ESF scale is a limitation; future research should utilise confirmatory factor analysis to further establish its generalizability and structural validity.

Statistically, the model explained 9.4% of the variance in aspirations, suggesting that uncaptured "distal" factors—such as family income (economic capital) and professional networks (social capital)—play significant roles. Future models should incorporate these variables for a more comprehensive framework. Furthermore, research must move beyond binary gender categories toward an intersectional approach.

We recommend utilising Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework to investigate how marginalised students deploy aspirational or familial capital that is currently misrecognised by the dominant HE field. Such inquiry would shift the focus from student "deficits" to unique strengths, offering a pathway toward decolonising employability practices in post-colonial environments. Finally, linking these aspirations to actual employment outcomes remains a critical next step to provide the definitive link in the chain of social reproduction.

Conclusion

This research challenges the "skills gap" orthodoxy by demonstrating that in the South African "graduateness paradox," formal scholastic capital is secondary to the development of a confident habitus. Our findings provide large-scale empirical evidence that student aspirations are fundamentally structured by perceived legitimacy within the academic field.

While these findings are rooted in the South African context, they offer transferable lessons for global higher education systems facing similar 'massification' pressures. The attenuation of institutional support by individual habitus suggests that 'one-size-fits-all' employability interventions—common in the UK, Australia, and the US—may be insufficient unless they address the symbolic violence of devaluing non-traditional forms of capital. For international policymakers, the takeaway is that fostering a 'confident habitus' through validation is as critical as formal skills acquisition.

By identifying confidence as the primary driver of ambition, we provide a conceptual language for addressing structural challenges. Realising the potential of widening participation requires more than "skills acquisition"; it demands a fundamental restructuring of the university field to validate and empower the diverse habitus of the next generation of graduates.

Authors' contributions Gbolahan Gbadamosi and Johan W de Jager contributed to the conceptualisation and data collection. Gbolahan Gbadamosi was responsible for data analysis and writing. Johan W de Jager contributed to the review of the paper and finalisation of the paper.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Ethical approval was received for the lead author's institution. Reference: ID 9004.

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