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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE SELF-PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER PLANNING OF COMMERCE STUDENTS AT A SELECTED UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

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ABSTRACT

Given how rapidly the world is changing daily, there is a great amount of pressure on higher education institutions to produce adequately skilled graduates in order to be employable. The overall objective of the study is to understand undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted the interpretive research paradigm, whereby the researcher used the exploratory design in order to collect the data. As a result, eleven (11) participants were chosen for the study by using the purposive sampling technique. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to collect data for the study. In order to facilitate this, the researcher prepared an interview guide beforehand. The interview guide contained open-ended questions which allowed respondents to freely express themselves. Thematic analysis on two levels namely; individual data and across all the participants were done. Five sub-themes emerged when undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability was explored. These included (1) The ability and willingness to learn; (2) Possessing particular skills and competencies; (3) Personal attributes; (4) Qualifications attained and (5) Experience. Five sub-themes emerged in exploring the role the university plays in enhancing employability of undergraduate commerce students during/ after COVID-19. These included (1) The impact of COVID- 19 on students' learning experience; (2) Guidance on job expectations; (3) Non-curricular offerings; (4) Job opportunities as a student and (5) Knowledge and skills offered by university. Five sub-themes emerged in exploring if undergraduate commerce students have the perceived necessary skills to go into the labour market post-COVID-19. These included (1) Awareness of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; (2) Perceived gaps in the university curriculum; (3) Suggested improvement of the current curriculum; (4) The influence of technology highlighted during and after COVID-19 and (5) The future of the labour market post-COVID-19. This study has provided insights into undergraduates' perception of employability during or after COVID-19. The study also highlighted that COVID- 19 has had an impact on the learning of students. The study identified the gaps in the curriculum and the importance of possessing particular skills and competencies in order to be employable in the future labour market. The role of universities is equally important in order to equip graduates for the new era of the labour market in terms of digitisation.
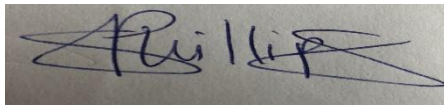
Finally, awareness of the rapid changes within the labour market can be regarded as essential in order to adapt successfully to the labour market.

DECLARATION

I, Stephanie Erica Phillips, declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Unless otherwise stated by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed: **Date**: 8 November 2022

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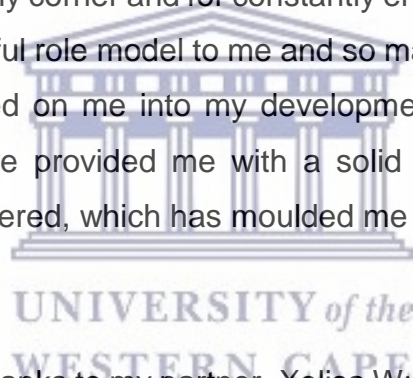
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction to the Chapter

The study attempted to explore the perception of undergraduate Commerce students with regards to employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic. The introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the background of the study, including the uncertain labour and competitive markets and the need for graduate students to adapt to the changing needs; taking into consideration the impact of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and COVID-19 amongst others. In addition, the rationale of the study will also be provided, as well as the aims and objectives of the study. The chapter will also provide the potential impact of the study.

1.2. Background to the study

University students were confident regarding graduate employment opportunities in the past, but currently they are faced with uncertain labour markets and competitive job markets (Harris-Reeves & Mahoney, 2017). The authors highlight the need for university students to adapt to the changing employment environment. University students, as the future generation of the labour force, are urged to prepare themselves for challenging times that are perpetuated by the current economic conditions (Koloba, 2017). Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton (2014) cautioned about the global economy slump, and the subsequent attention and interest in exploring graduate employability because of the limited job opportunities and resultant tougher competition. Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) raised concerns pertaining to the changing nature of the graduate labour market and highlighted trends that could be viewed as concerning for graduates' career prospects. These trends included gig-type work and portfolio careers, the fourth industrial revolution and an economic climate defined by "fiscal fragility", stagnant growth and unemployment. Adegbite and Adeosun (2021) states that the Industry 4.0, commonly referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is rapidly taking root in the modern world. This has accelerated the requirement to reconsider the nuances of employment and employability. In addition, the authors add

that a global wave of technological disturbance is already sweeping the planet. This disruption's occurrence has led to modifications in a variety of human endeavours.

Moreover, the fourth industrial revolution has completely disrupted learning and production systems both in the workplace and inside the educational institutions. Workers must have specialised knowledge to be competitive and remain relevant (Rahmat, Adnan & Mohtar, 2019). Researchers indicate that despite the importance of employability, there are differences in how businesses and higher education students see employability abilities (Kőnig, Juric & Koprivnjak, 2016). In addition to the abovementioned, Pauceanu, Rabie and Moustafa (2020) state that students lack meaningful work experience (outside of internships, work placements, and volunteerism) and as a result, their view of skills may be tainted in some way. Therefore, it is important that the university take on the job to counsel, coach, nourish, and develop them.

To add to these trends, the world is currently overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout human history, pandemics have shaped how work is understood, carried out, and organised (Rudolph, Allan, Clark, Hertel, Hirschi, Kunze, Shockley, Shoss, Sonnentag & Zacher, 2020). Although national governments are concerned with managing the short-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the long term economic and societal implications are also a cause of concern (Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020). Furthermore, the authors note that both short- and long-term individual career experiences, opportunities and trajectories will be affected. In the case of COVID-19, tangible global effects on work-related processes are already evident.

It is recorded that the unemployment rates have increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic, globally, leaving up to 200 million people unemployed (Akkermans et al., 2020). In South Africa, the unemployment rate has been documented at a staggering 29.1% (Stoddard, 2020). However, in 2022, the unemployment rate in South Africa has increased to 34.5%. Additionally, youth unemployment (those aged 15–24 years old) is a global issue, with this segment of the workforce exhibiting an unemployment rate three times higher than that of adults (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Researchers have alerted that the fourth industrial

revolution has a significant impact and the potential to increase the unemployment rate in South Africa even further (Teng, Ma, Pahlevansharif & Turner, 2019). In addition, the researchers highlight that graduate unemployment remains a concern, given the shortage of soft skills required for the labour market. Dludlu (2022) states that the South African population between the ages of 15 to 24 years old has recorded the highest unemployment rate of 66.5%, followed by 43.5% for those aged between 25 to 34 years old. Duly noting that pandemics have historically shaped the world of work in different ways (Rudolph et al., 2020) and the already staggering unemployment rate in South Africa, with an anticipated further increase due to 4IR, it is of interest to gain an understanding of the perceptions of university students with regards to their employability and their understanding of this concept in context of these challenges.

According to Shenoy (2021), COVID-19 has contributed to industries, businesses and employees all around the world significantly change the manner of their operations, with restrictions and regulations in order to control the pandemic from being spread, however, still being able to conduct business. Pauceanu, Rabie and Moustafa (2020) indicated that top technologists, business and industry specialists, including the likes of Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates, have cautioned around the increased unemployment rates in the near future as a result of the heighted dependence on smart technologies. According to additional research, one third of today's occupations are expected to vanish by 2025 as a result of major advancements in artificial intelligence (Brougham & Haar, 2017).

1.3. Problem Statement

Policy makers and the government need to be informed of the fears and opportunities that relate to the current COVID-19 pandemic, especially for groups that need special attention, for informed decision-making. Employability therefore has to be examined from the perspective of individual undergraduate students, to determine their beliefs regarding their chance of success in attaining employment (Rothwell et al., 2008). This study intends to engage/address the problem of graduates' employability in light of COVID-19. There is a paucity in literature on the studies that have looked at the perceptions of university students on employability in relation to COVID-19. This study intends to fill this research gap by answering the research question: "What is the

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perception of undergraduate Commerce students with regard to employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic?"

1.4.   Research Question

What is the perception of undergraduate Commerce students with regard to employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.5.   Aims of the Study

The overall aim of the study is to understand undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.6   Specific Objectives of the Study

- To examine undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability during/after COVID-19;
- To examine the role of the university in enhancing employability of undergraduate Commerce students during/after COVID-19;
- To explore if undergraduate commerce students have necessary skills to go into the labour market post-COVID-19.

1.7.   Potential Impact of the Research

The results of this research could provide guidance on how COVID-19 and future pandemics impact on graduate employability by providing evidence-based advice to direct and deal with these challenges. Industrial psychology researchers could therefore address these challenges highlighted by innovating their work in support of employees, organisations, educational institutions and society at large.

1.8.   Definition of Terms

Student: A student can be defined as "a person who is studying at a school, college, or university" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Undergraduate: An undergraduate can be defined as an individual who is studying towards their first degree at a university or college (Cambridge Dictionary).

Perception: Perception can be defined as an individual's main form of cognitive interaction with the world he or she finds themselves in (Efron, 1969).

Self- efficacy: Self-efficacy can be defined as "a personal belief in one's capability to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Artino, 2012, p. 76).

Employability: Employability can be generally defined as the ability to gain and maintain employment, within and across organisations (Finn, 2000).

Graduate employability: Graduate employability is defined as a "set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (York, 2006, p.8).

Self- perceived employability: The definition of self-perceived employability is "the perceived ability to obtain sustainable employment appropriate to one's qualification level (Rothwell, et al., 2008, p. 2).
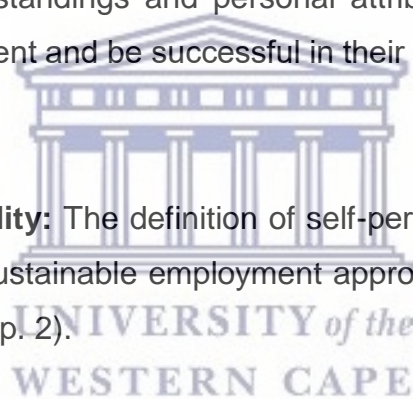
Fourth Industrial Revolution: The fourth industrial revolution can be described as "the staggering confluence of emerging technology breakthroughs, covering wide-ranging fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, the internet of things (IoT), autonomous vehicles, 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, … science, energy storage and quantum computing, to name a few" (Schwab, 2016).

1.9.   Abbreviations used

4IR: Fourth Industrial Revolution

COVID- 19:   Coronavirus Disease

WHO: World Health Organisation

CDC: Centre for Disease Control and Prevention

UWC:	University of the Western Cape
HEI's:	Higher Education Institutions
CV:	Curriculum Vitae

1.10. Outline of Thesis

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the rationale of the study. The chapter highlights the need for employability to be examined from the perspective of undergraduate students to gain an understanding of their beliefs regarding their chances of attaining employment. In addition, the aims and objectives of the study are outlined, as well as the potential impact of the study.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature pertaining to employability, the impact of COVID-19 on the economy in general, the labour markets, and the potential unemployment crisis as a result of COVID-19. In addition, literature with regard to self-perceived employability will also be reviewed. Finally, a theoretical framework for the study will be described.

Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the research methodology used. In addition, the study population, sample and study design are outlined. A description of the data collection methods is also provided. The ethics considered in the study are also provided.

Chapter 4 provides an outline of the results of the data analysed to answer the research objectives of the study. The themes are outlined and illustrated with appropriate quotations.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion on the research findings in relation to previous literature. The conclusion, limitations to the study and recommendations of the study will be provided.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

Unlike the situation in the past, university graduates are now faced with uncertain labour and job markets and therefore should adapt to these changing environments (Harris-Reeves & Mahoney, 2017). The fourth industrial revolution has also caused significant disruptions in the workplace and educational institutions (Rahmat et al., 2019). To add to these, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant increase in unemployment globally (Akkermans et al., 2020), and in addition, research alerted the highest unemployment rate to be for the age group 15-24 years old (Dludla, 2022) and the perception of graduates with regard to their employability under these circumstances are of interest.

This chapter therefore provides an overview of the literature pertaining to the employability of graduates, the impact of COVID-19 on the economy in general, the labour markets, and the potential unemployment crisis as a result of COVID-19. In addition, literature with regard to self-perceived employability of graduates will also be reviewed.

2.2   Employability of Graduates

Several definitions of employability exist in literature, but Bernston and Marklund (2007) state that the concept of employability, in essence, translates to how easy it is for an individual to gain employment. While Hillage and Pollard (1998, p. 24) define employability as "the ability to realise potential through sustainable employment", there is consensus that employability is a multi-faceted concept with both internal and external dimensions (Rothwell et al., 2008). Researchers suggest that employability comprises three construct levels that include government policy, the organisational human resources and the individual levels (Bernston & Marklund, 2007; Rothwell et al., 2008). Some of the factors at the individual level include, amongst others, job-

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related knowledge and skills, the ability to learn and the understanding or grasping of job searching, which all form part of "self-belief" according to Rothwell et al. (2008).

Rothwell et al. (2008) suggests that self-perceived employability for undergraduate job-seekers specifically is "the perceived ability to sustainable employment appropriate to one's qualification level" (p.2). It is worth noting that the external labour market may contribute significantly to the perception of employability (Lane et al., 2000). Hence, the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on this self-perceived employability needs to be investigated as well. In addition to the issues highlighted above, it has been documented that employers prefer or favour higher rated universities (Murray & Robinson, 2001) and this might in turn influence undergraduate students' self-perception of their employability.

Employability skills are basic abilities that are essential in order to get, keep and succeed in one's job (Robinson, 2000). Communication, the ability to work in a team, solve problems, self-management, planning and organising, as well as enterprise skills, such as innovative and original thinking, are considered as employability skills. Employability skills can be regarded as general competencies as well as competencies that are non-technical that are needed to perform various tasks despite the employment level or type of employment (Ju, Zhang & Pacha, 2012). Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) indicate that examples of common graduate characteristic traits are the capacity to think creatively and critically; to work effectively in a team and communicate well; to resolve issues; to be equipped for leadership; and to be ethically and professionally competent. Furthermore, Oraison, Konjarski and Howe (2019) support this statement by stating that with little to no reference to cultural understandings and attitudes toward inclusion and diversity, employers searched for and emphasised graduates with practical skills and 21st century competencies, such as problem-solving and communication. In order for the curriculum to be developed in a way that can fulfill the requirements of both the employer/industry partner and the student in order for the student to change and acquire the necessary graduate traits acceptable for employment, there is a continuing need for partnership between these parties (Pauceanu, Rabie & Moustafa, 2020).

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Whether university courses sufficiently equip students with employability skills for the 21st century is up for discussion. Therefore, it is very important that higher education institutions continually change to retain the relevance of their courses in a workplace that is frequent (Oraison, Konjarski & Howe, 2019). Ramraj and Marimuthu (2021) state that it is of utmost importance, in order to generate graduates who are highly trained and ready for their positions in the future workforce, higher education systems must undergo major restructuring. In addition, the authors emphasise that it has been discovered that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not sufficiently educate students for the labour market or emphasise the importance of developing soft skills. Moreover, Seedat-Khan and Ramnund-Mansingh (2021) claim that South Africa and other developing nations in the region continue to struggle with digital technology infrastructure, particularly in densely populated rural areas. Resistance has been encountered from other academics or teachers when making use of online platforms developed by their universities. This negative reaction implies that they are not persuaded of the significance of digitising the curriculum (Khoza & Mpungose, 2020).

More than a decade ago researchers alerted that due to the changing nature of the labour market, employers seek new and different types of skills from their employees, skills that are more of a technical nature due to the technical advancement era and globalisation (Singh & Singh, 2008). Maree (2012) predicted that in the 21st century workers will have to be critical thinkers who can adapt to various demands made on them by different work contexts so that they can be employable. Additionally, the economic environments have had to face many and quick changes (Wang & Tsai, 2014). Moreover, employability skills could assist employees to adapt themselves in relation to certain changes that may occur. These skills may assist employees to increase their working abilities that may suit the needs of the working environment (Kazilan, Hamzah & Baker, 2009). Consequently, employability skills are seen as a powerful instrument for maintaining work in the future labour market (Pauceanu, Rabie & Moustafa, 2020). Employers, like graduates, recognised oral and written communication abilities as critical determinants of graduate employability. In addition, employers prioritise communication abilities (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Furthermore, the authors indicated that the majority of graduates recognised "hard" fundamental business abilities as an essential component of their portfolio, just like the employers did. Andrews and Higson (2008) continue by stating that although many of them

believed they were more than qualified in terms of their discipline-focused abilities, they believed they lacked the essential level of presenting skills.

Pauceanu, Rabie and Moustafa (2020) state that the fourth industrial revolution is predicted to have a significant impact on how each person experiences their profession in the future by altering the foundations of work, employment, and business. In addition, Chigbu and Nekhwevha (2022) stipulate that significant effects on the graduate skill of the 4IR are anticipated given the challenges that many firms are facing in the fourth industrial revolution era and employment automation. Despite the well-established effects of automation in the 4IR, academic institutions' capability to fulfill the present and future expectations for the 4IR curriculum, as well as their capacity to generate graduates or skill sets that can stay abreast with changes in the labour market and technology, have received relatively little attention (Mkansi & Landman, 2021). Moreover, greater attention and value be put on human intelligence in the age of the industrial revolutions, whereby graduates should possess the required capabilities to survive in a rapidly changing world (Ramraj & Marimuthu, 2021). It is, therefore, of utmost importance that proper preparation of students for a competitive South African labour market, as well as potential international employability must be paid attention to by HEIs (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021).

The global pandemic's ramifications have been severe in a wide range of ways for Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. Mok and Montgomery (2021) indicate that HEIs and students were challenged to respond rapidly to previously unheard-of virtual learning patterns as a result of the rise of online teaching and learning. When they were compelled to leave their residences and return home during the severe lockdown, students in public colleges and universities suffered tremendously (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021). The authors continue by mentioning that students struggled due to a lack of resources and data connectivity, another repercussion of the historical Apartheid laws' systemic disparities in South Africa. Students' efforts to complete the semester's material and evaluations were significantly hindered by their misunderstanding of technology and digital platforms. Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) evaluated how the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected the South African education sector's motivation for digitisation. Their findings therefore indicated that when the educational programmes were transferred to online learning

during the lockdown, a wide range of resources from primary to higher education were being used. Hlobo, Moloi and Mhlanga (2021) mention that e-learning makes it possible to teach and learn at anytime and anyplace, which minimises operating expenses and relieves a number of the logistical problems that are frequently connected with in-person classroom training. Zoom and Skype were primarily used for lecturing and other forms of student engagement to educate pupils on the course material (Khoza, 2020).

Van Zyl (as stated in Magwentshu, Rajagopaul, Chui & Singh, 2019) claims that industries, for example banks, are changing far more quickly than most people anticipate because of technology. In addition, Lewis (2020) supports the above statement by claiming that when visiting a grocery shop, self-checkout devices are already in place of the shop assistant, which is now able to work around the clock without being paid, given breaks, or receiving expensive benefits. Similarly, the monitoring and counting of merchandise can now be done more promptly and efficiently through computers rather than individuals. Furthermore, researchers anticipate that the development of technological intelligence will cause the loss of one-third of today's jobs by the year 2025 (Pauceanu, Rabie & Moustafa, 2020). Therefore, 4IR will undoubtedly have an impact on the way in which things are done.

Due to stringent labour laws that make it difficult to employ and terminate employees, in addition to an education system that does not give sufficient skills, South African businesses find it challenging to fill job vacancies (Naidoo, 2021). South African HEIs must undergo significant change in order to fulfill their function as providers of education in the 4IR and ensure that future generations acquire the appropriate set of skills and knowledge (Enaifoghe, Balogun & Afolabi, 2021). Buheji & Buheji (2020) claims that there is a great mismatch between what the labour market demands versus what the higher education institutions produce. Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) state that as a whole, employability is broad, considering workplaces are changing quickly to embrace 4IR trends. Organisations use cutting-edge technological systems for their selection and recruitment procedures. Although the expansion of the 4IR has piqued the interest of many Africans worldwide, it is still extremely challenging to equip African youth with the knowledge and skills required for employment in the era of 4IR (Enaifoghe, Balogun & Afolabi, 2021). Therefore, considering that the fourth

industrial revolution is emerging at such a rapid pace, it is getting increasingly difficult to anticipate and predict the future, which gives HEIs both challenges and opportunities to re-evaluate the conventional approaches to teaching and learning (Teng, et al., 2019).

2.3   The Impact of COVID-19 on the Economy and the Labour Markets

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a highly infectious virus which was first detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Zhong et al., 2020). By the end of March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the disease a global pandemic, as infection cases were reported across 203 countries and territories (Qin, et al., 2020). More than 8 million cases, and more than 436 000 deaths were reported by mid-June of 2020 globally (Brodeur, Gray, Islam & Bhuiyan, 2020). In an effort to curb the pandemic, several public health measures were adopted worldwide including social distancing, and as part of social distancing, there was a temporary shutdown of businesses, schools and community centres, amongst others (Fong et al., 2020). This pandemic has therefore not only resulted in enormous human tragedy, but also in immense economic damage (Brodeur et al., 2020). According to Statistics South Africa (2020), in South Africa, 2.2 million jobs were affected between March and June 2020. The youth in South Africa, particularly those with less formal education, those who reside in cities, the private sector, non-union members, the informal sectors (especially manufacturing and construction), and low- and semi-skilled individuals experienced the greatest employment loss (Köhler, Bhorat, Hill & Stanwix, 2021). Arguably the most significant, based on demographics, young individuals comprised approximately half (50.6%, or 1.1 million) of the unemployed, although accounting for just over a third (36.6%) of pre-pandemic employment.

Due to the resultant slowdown in economic activities, the International Monetary Fund (2020) forecasted that the global economy would contract by 4.9 percent in 2020 as a result of lower activity during lockdowns and rapid decline in productivity among firms that opened for business. Fagbemi, Osinubi and Olatunde (2022) claim there are an estimated 205 million individuals that are unemployed, the international unemployment rate is estimated to be 5.7% in 2022, continuing to be greater than the pre-COVID statistics of 187 million in 2019. These show that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted employment levels in a variety of nations. Chitiga, Henseler,

Mabugu and Maisonnave (2021) claim that the economy already suffered the combined issues of unemployment, poverty, and inequality in addition to continuously low growth rates and a technical downturn well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Posel, Oyenubi and Kollamparambil (2021) claim that a significant percentage, roughly 17%, of individuals who claimed to have been employed during South Africa's lockdown in April also indicated they were not currently working any hours or earning money. However, they nevertheless had a job they could return to. The authors continue by stating that by June, half of these displaced employees were returning to work, but approximately 40% became unemployed. Moreover, Cloete (2015) indicates that unemployment in South Africa is unquestionably structural or systemic in nature. Structural unemployment refers to the overall inability of an economy to employ the entire (or prospective) labour force, even at the height of its economic cycle.

A publication of synthesised emerging literature on the pandemic, highlights an expected and significant slowdown of economic activities as a result of COVID-19 (Brodeur et al., 2020). The authors stated that the implications of this will be wide ranging and uncertain. Carlsson-Szlezak et al. (2020a) and Carlsson-Szlezak et al. (2020b) outlined three ways in which the economy will be impacted by COVID-19. These included the direct impact as it relates to the decreased spending in terms of goods and services; the indirect impact due to the financial market shocks with household wealth decreasing; and thirdly through supply-side disruptions which could lead to rising unemployment.

According to Ozili (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic affected the African economy similarly to the global economy. Ozili and Arun (2020) stated that a number of industries were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these industries outlined by these authors included air travel as the global demand for air travel decreased significantly. In addition, the financial markets were also affected, such as the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in South Africa and the Nairobi Stock Exchange in Kenya. These markets saw plunges in stock prices. Ozili (2020) further stated that the restrictive measures such as lockdowns implemented in several African countries severely affected many industries. This is partly due to the fact that many parts of the African economy depend on people-to-people interactions.

Barrot, Basile and Sauvagnat (2020) indicated that the industries most affected by social distancing policies include hotels and restaurants, arts and leisure, agriculture, service industries, food, wholesale and retail and construction. However, the industries that were least affected included computer services, telecommunications, consulting, and scientific and technical fields. To support the above statement, Eichhorst, Marx and Rinne (2020) reiterated that only certain countries saw a decrease in manufacturing employment. The health industry, supermarkets, virtual retail trade, and courier services, however, all experienced brief surges in demand at the same time. Dingel and Nieman (2020) claim that if work can be done from home, the effects of social isolation regulations on the labour market could be minimised.

Adrjan and Lydon (2020) argue that many aspects of the Covid-19 health crisis are unusual, particularly how quickly significant quantities of economic activity have been stopped by containment measures. The authors continue by claiming that the demand for labour has thus significantly decreased, particularly for positions and professions immediately impacted by the containment measures (Adrjan & Lydon, 2020). Given that some employees' motivation to seek employment has been limited by the COVID-19 pandemic, the labour market has also declined in most African countries with big economies, such as South Africa and Nigeria which could jeopardise longer-term economic growth and economic expansion (Fagbemi, Osinubi & Olatunde, 2022). Altman (2022) states that in October 2020, the government launched the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan. Its objectives included rebuilding and strengthening the economy as well as promoting rapid measures for economic recovery amid COVID-19.

2.4   Unemployment Crisis after COVID-19

According to Eichhorst, Marx and Rinne (2020), the Coronavirus pandemic's consequences on the economy and society may continue a long time and affect employment, income, and working conditions. In addition, there are notable regional variations in the labour market and social policy solutions implemented to help mitigate against the crisis's immediate effects. Employer reports highlight the need for graduates to be flexible, adaptable, embrace new technologies and be able to transfer their skills across diverse contexts (Cascio, 2019).

Zhang (2018) defined graduate unemployment as those graduates who are unemployed who possess a tertiary level academic degree. In addition, this concept refers to graduates who are employable, seeking employment but are unable and unsuccessful in obtaining employment despite their academic degree and knowledge. Furthermore, a significant reduction in job openings and hiring rates affects a large number of young workers entering the labour market, as well as job seekers generally (Eichhorst, Marx & Rinne, 2020). Shahriar, Islam, Zayed and Hasan (2021) stated that the employment of a country is negatively affected by various economic recessions as large numbers of people lose their jobs and making it extremely difficult for graduates to find jobs in such situations. An economic recession is defined as an economic period in which businesses start to lose profits due to a fall in demand, therefore revenue falls and pressure of debt increases, leading to lay-offs. Businesses are faced with the same type of challenges during a pandemic as the focus of the economy is shifted to coping with the pandemic rather than growing business. According to Ullah (2020), it therefore becomes difficult for new graduates to find employment as millions of people lose their jobs during a pandemic and therefore increase the rate of unemployment in general.

Some examples of economic recessions in the past include the financial crisis of 2007-2009; the Spanish flu of 1918; the Asia financial crisis of 1998 and now more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. Shahriar et al. (2021) opined that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a reduction in opportunities for youth skills development and therefore further reduced employment opportunities for new graduates. Ferdous et al. (2020) alerted that 60% of start-up business closed down in Bangladesh within the first three months of lockdown. This led to an annual loss of approximately $53 million in 2020 and job losses for approximately 1.5 million employees. Shimanta, Gope and Sumaiya (2020) also stated that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the lack of employment opportunities and entrepreneurship facilities and therefore resulted in a further increased rate of graduate unemployment. It is therefore evident that graduates are faced with immense problems and would therefore remain unemployed, as jobs are not created as needed.

Hite and McDonald (2020) asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a worldwide sense of uncertainty and that the information regarding increasing

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unemployment numbers changes as the pandemic progresses. These authors, however, do point out that careers and work have always been in a state of change, with some jobs becoming out-dated and others developing to meet the needs of new eras. Examples of some of these eras noted by these authors are the first industrial revolution, the information age, and now the fourth industrial revolution. Hite and McDonald (2020) therefore conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic forced choices of the future of work into the present, but that it will take time and effort to recover.

Lambovska, Sardinha and Belas Jr (2021) state that one of the most vulnerable groups in the job market are university graduates looking for their first job. Due to a scarcity of employment opportunities for skilled graduates, competition in the South African labour market is too intense. With the COVID-19 pandemic, there is currently a global unemployment crisis (Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy, 2021). According to Chigbu and Nekhwevha (2022), in South Africa, the lack of graduates with marketable skills makes it difficult to meet the government's prospective economic growth target.

2.5   Models of Employability

A huge amount of literature is available on models of employability, and its implementation in higher education. Pool and Sewell (2007) alerted that many models of employability have been suggested recently. These authors, however, stated that although these models assisted in capturing the meaning of the concept of employability, they are either too elaborate or too simple to do justice to this complex phenomenon. The manner in which employability has been described has varied over the decades, moving from a dichotomy of either being employable or not, to it being regarded as having a dynamic nature (Grazier, 1998). Williams, Dodd, Steele and Randall (2016) therefore stated that because of the fluctuations and changing contexts, the theories of employability are becoming increasingly complicated and multi-dimensional.

Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004) proposed that a multitude of person-centred concepts are included in an individual's employability. The emphasis on person-centeredness corresponds with the shift in responsibility for career management from the employer to the employee. Fugate et al. (2004) further argues that employability is conceptualised as "a form of work specific active adaptability that enables workers

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to identify and realise career opportunities". They assert that employability improves an individual's chances of achieving employment although it does not guarantee actual employment.

Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) explained that self-perceived employability is the meaning that an individual attach to the term employability in terms of his/her experiences, ambitions and view of ability to participate in the labour market. Jackson and Wilton (2017) highlighted that students are very positive in their views of their own employability but argue that this could possibly be due to poor awareness of the graduate labour market on their part.

Some of the employability models evident in literature are outlined below:

2.5.1 The USEM Model
The USEM Employability Model, proposed by Yorke and Knight (2006) proposed four key features of employability, i.e. Understanding, Skills, Efficacy Beliefs and Meta-cognition. Understanding is linked to knowledge and discipline, while skills imply the ability of awareness and response to different systems. Efficacy beliefs are the personal qualities of students while meta-cognition is when the student possesses the ability of self-awareness, ability to reflect on and action. The authors further emphasised that the aspects of the USEM Model is interdependent and that some of the "aspects of employability should be developed at the programme or coursework level".

This model separates securing a job from employability as stated by Yorke (2006). The present study aimed to get a better understanding of undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability. As Yorke and Knight (2006) proposed, the curriculum plays a critical role in the students' preparedness for work and this study aimed to explore this concept. The four key features of the model are explored at various stages of the study. Understanding is explored in terms of the students' perception of the knowledge they possess to prepare them for the labour market. The skills of the students are explored to some extent as they could potentially not quite be at the stage where they are fully aware of the different practices out in the labour

market. Efficacy is also explored from the students' perception of how their individual and personal qualities could influence their employability.

2.5.2 The Career EDGE Model

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) developed the Career EDGE Model which builds on the USEM Model described above. In this model, not only are the important components of employability identified, but the direction of interaction is also identified. Career development learning, experience, degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding, generic skills and emotional intelligence are the important features proposed in this model (Dacre Pool, 2016). As indicated earlier, there are some similarities between the Career EDGE Model and the USEM Model in that both models noted reflection as critical and for all the factors should form part of the student experience. Some researchers have stated that this model is the most comprehensive model of employability (Small, Shacklock & Marchant, 2018).

As indicated, this model builds on the USEM Model but the distinct difference here is that the direction of the interaction is emphasised. As was indicated in the USEM Model above, the subject knowledge, the students' understanding of the skills they possess, their generic skills and to some extent their emotional intelligence are all explored in the present study. The Career Edge Model, however, stresses the fact that the components mentioned here should lead to critical reflection on the part of the students with regards to their employability. This study therefore provides an opportunity for that critical reflection to take place as students were given the opportunity to engage on these issues during interviews.

2.5.3 Graduate Employability – A Higher Education Model

An employability framework consisting of six dimensions was conceptualised by Clark (2018) and takes cognisance of the demands placed on employability by the labour market. These dimensions include human and social capital, individual attributes and behaviours, perceived employability as well as labour market factors. Clark (2018) then further asserted that both institutions and the individuals should rethink the concept of graduate employability while at the same time attempting to find new ways to support the requirements of the different role-players.

The demands placed on employability by the labour market was a key feature of the study as it aimed to not only gain an understanding of the students' perception of their employability but in particular in view of the changing labour market conditions as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. This speaks in particular to the "lived experiences" of students not only while at a higher education institution but also beyond as proposed by Tomlinson (2018). The study therefore aimed to explore how higher education institutions contribute to the development of their students' preparedness for employment in the changing labour market.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the relevant literature regarding the employability of graduates, the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market and the economy and finally, the unemployment crisis after COVID-19. A theoretical framework for the study is also provided. The literature clearly highlights the complexity of the concept of employability and how it is continuously changing. The methods used to achieve the study objective will be outlined in detail in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1   Introduction

Although there are several definitions in the literature as to what research methodology is, Babbie (2011) describes research methodology as a scientific method to undertake a research investigation. Babbie (2011) further states that methodology is a research function with the main purpose of exploring or examining data. Others state that the main objective of methodology is "the approach, the design, the model, the procedures and data gathering methods" (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2012, p. 158).

This chapter therefore outlines the methods and procedures that were used to collect data in order to meet the aims and objectives of this study. Additionally, it provides a description of the research setting, the study design, the population and sample, the data collection methods and procedures amongst others. Lastly, the ethics that were considered relating to the study are outlined.

3.2.   Research Setting

This study was conducted at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The University of the Western Cape (UWC), which was established in 1960, holds a distinctive position in South Africa's higher education system. As UWC was established under the Apartheid regime, the intention was for it to serve the "coloured" community of South Africa. However, the university was at the forefront of the struggle against discrimination and therefore a strong force behind the liberation and formation of a democratic South Africa. It is a dynamic organisation dedicated to excellence in learning, teaching, research, and innovation in a setting of global competition while upholding the principles and ethos that have helped to define it as a university with a foundation in the common good. UWC is located in the Northern suburbs of the greater Cape Town (UWC, 2015). UWC is accessible by a wide range of public transport means, such as train and road as well as air. The university pursues the equity agenda and continues to empower historically marginalised communities through extensive community engagement. UWC is home to more than 23 000 students who engage in

undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in seven faculties, namely: Arts and Humanities, Community and Health Sciences, Dentistry, Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Law and Natural Sciences (UWC, 2015). The setting for this study was the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS). The EMS Faculty offers a range of undergraduate and post- graduate qualifications (UWC, 2022).

3.3.   Research Paradigm

The word paradigm originates from the Greek work paradeigma, which means a pattern (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). Neuman (2011) defined a paradigm as a complete system of thinking. The argument has been made for researchers to understand the paradigms as it will help the researcher to explore and have a better understanding of the underlying research philosophy (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). Other researchers (Creswell, Plano & Clark, 2007; Tedlie & Tashakkori, 2009) referred to a paradigm as a worldview, a view of the world in conjunction with several philosophical assumptions. Numerous paradigms exist such as Positivism and Interpretivism with each one associated with certain methodologies such as quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies (Creswell, 2007; Fisher, 2010; Hall, 2013). Paula and Carter (2018) claim that according to some, Max Webber (1864–1920) and Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), who sought to develop an objective science of the subjective, established the foundation for Interpretivism. It was their intention to provide a form of verifiable knowledge of the meanings that comprise and illuminate the social environment. The researchers continue by stating that Interpretivism is a tradition that dates back to the 19th century ethnographic research of non-Western peoples and is still used frequently today in order to describe social phenomena and human psychology (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Kaplan and Duchon (1988) described interpretivism as a paradigm that allows an understanding of the ways to appraise, conceptualise, and understand events and concepts as well as categories since these are assumed to influence individual behaviour". Therefore, Interpretivism was found to be suitable for this study as the researcher wants to get an understanding of a phenomenon through the research participants' experiences. In addition, an understanding of the student experience will be obtained as they live it and the meanings and behaviour they attribute to it.

3.4   Research Approach

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Mouton (1996) described the qualitative approach as one in which the researcher aims to explore and explain the phenomena under investigation. In this study, the researcher aimed to explore and understand undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic. De Vos (2002) asserted that the attempts of the researcher to gain an understanding of individuals in terms of their own definition of the world, is what is a distinguishing characteristic of the qualitative approach. Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated that the qualitative approach allows the researcher to share the world of the participants and to gain an understanding of their behaviour. This approach therefore gives the researcher an opportunity to describe undergraduate students' perception of employability during or after the COVID-19 pandemic and gives credibility to their perceptions.

3.5   Study Design

In this study, the focus is on the perception of employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic of undergraduate commerce students. Creswell (2013) puts forward five research designs for qualitative studies. These designs are phenomenology, narrative, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. The researcher however used the exploratory design as argued by Babbie (2011). Babbie (2011) is of the opinion that the exploratory design offers the researcher a better understanding of a topic, to get an impression if further studies are warranted for a specific topic and lastly, to identify methods for future studies. Furthermore, this design is not only for new studies but could be to delve deeper into a phenomenon. For this study, the researcher therefore used the exploratory design as argued by Babbie (2011).

3.5.   Population and Sampling

The population is described as the group of people that is of interest to the researcher (Babbie, 2009) and where the sample comes from. Vosloo (2014) describes the population as the sum total of the parts from which the sample were selected from that is associated to the inclusion criteria in purposive sampling. According to Vosloo (2014), sampling is when a small group of people is selected from a larger population with the intention of the smaller group being representative of the population. This is done as researchers cannot explore the entire population. The sampling approach

differs between the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Moriarty (2011) emphasised this difference by stating that with the quantitative approach probability sampling is used and non-probability sampling for the qualitative approach. This is due to the fact that with the quantitative approach each participant has an equal chance of being included while the participants in the qualitative approach are selected on the basis of specific characteristics (Moriarty, 2011).

The study population for this study included all undergraduate students, from first to final year, in the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty of a public university in Cape Town. In the latest available annual report of the University of the Western Cape, the 2020 headcount for undergraduate students was 4313 with first-time entering students amounting to 1029.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study. Whitehead and Whitehead (2015) states that purposive sampling involves recruitment of participants based on some pre-selected criteria that is relevant to the aims and objectives of the study. This was confirmed by Howie (2017) who stated that in non-probability sampling, the researcher decides the criteria to be included.

Etikan and Bala (2017) assert that the sampling is complete when no new information is obtainable in the case of non-probability sampling. The sample size in qualitative research is based on the design, e.g. exploratory, and Creswell (2013) states that the sample in qualitative studies are always smaller than in quantitative studies. This is due to the fact that more in-depth information is required from a smaller sample. At first a minimum of ten (10) semi-structured interviews were conducted but continued until saturation was reached. The sample size for this study was 11 participants.

3.6.   Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were used to probe and understand the cultural and societal background to the participants' initial responses in the quantitative phase (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). A semi-structured interview guide was used.

To assist with formulation of the interview guide, a brief questionnaire was administered electronically to undergraduate (Commerce) students. The questionnaire was the "Labour market perceptions and career behaviour" instrument of Jackson and Tomlinson (2020). This consisted of 27 items divided into six (6) distinct sections measuring perceived state of the labour market, perceived employability, career control, career planning, proactivity and developing positional advantage (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). All the items use a five-point Likert agreement scale.

Students who completed the questionnaire were invited to indicate their willingness to participate in the semi- structured interviews. Out of the 39 responses received, a total of 20 participants indicated their willingness to be interviewed. A total of eleven (11) participants completed the semi- structured interview. In addition, the interview guide consisted of open-ended questions which allowed respondents to freely express themselves as they described their understanding of employability and to what extent employability matters. Although the semi-structured interviews guide included pre-determined topics, it still allowed for unanticipated responses or issues that emerged through open-ended questioning.

Governments all across the world imposed severe limitations on commercial activity, public transportation, and people's freedom of movement as a result of the spread of COVID-19 (Wang, Fung & Weatherburn, 2021). This resulted in face-to-face interviews being discouraged. To mitigate the risks associated with face-to-face interactions, semi-structured interviews were conducted online.

Online interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform. Participants who indicated their willingness to participate in the study were provided with a Zoom link. At the onset of the session, the researcher introduced herself and thanked the participant(s) for their willingness to participate in the study. Participants were assured that their participation was completely voluntary and they could stop the interview at any given time. To ensure confidentiality, after the initial introduction, participants were requested to change their online names and switch off their cameras as soon as they granted permission for the interviews to be recorded. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

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After the ninth interview, saturation was reached as no new information was forthcoming. However, two additional interviews were conducted to ensure that saturation was indeed reached.

3.7. Data Analysis

A wide range of literature exists that clearly outlines the assumptions and procedures associated with qualitative data analysis (Thomas, 2003). Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech and Zoran (2009) are of the opinion that transcript-based analysis is the most rigorous method of analysing data. Patton (1980) states that qualitative data analysis is inductive because patterns and themes emerged from the data rather than being imposed on them. The analysis of the individual interviews started with the transcription of the information from the audiotape recordings to produce a manuscript.

Thematic analysis was used in the study. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and a manuscript was produced. A comparison was then made with the notes taken during the discussions, in order to verify accuracy.

Thematic analysis was also done on two levels namely: individual data and across all the participants. The steps, as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) were followed for the analysis, i.e. familiarisation with the data set, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, and defining and naming themes. The processed data was presented to an independent person for critique and verification of the coding, categorisation and arrangement of the themes. Once the final themes were selected it was sent to the thesis supervisor for further verification.

3.8. Trustworthiness of Data

In qualitative research, four criteria are considered to give trustworthiness by a researcher. These criteria are credibility (in preference to internal validity), transferability (in preference to external validity/generalisability), dependability (in preference to reliability) and confirmability (in preference to objectivity) (Guba, 1981).

Credibility: Prolonged engagement with the participants has ensured credibility. Credibility was further achieved through member checking. This included providing the

transcripts generated from the interview to each participant with the request that they read through it. The instruction was that participants should check if the words match to what they intended. Furthermore, a wide variety of participants were included to offer triangulation of the data which also enhanced the credibility of the data. Therefore, the views of the participants could be verified against each other and ultimately provide a rich picture of their perception of employability during and/or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Shenton (2004) also stated that individual viewpoints verified against each other provides a rich picture based on the contributions of a range of people assisted in credibility through triangulation.

Transferability: To address transferability of the qualitative data obtained, the research design, its implementation and the detail of how the data was gathered is reported in detail in the thesis as advocated by Shenton (2004). Therefore, the methods used in the data collection process and the data analysis are described properly.

Dependability: was achieved by a transparent audit trail consisting of the methodology, original transcript, data analysis documents, fields' notes and comments from member checking and ensuring that any researcher that wanted to adapt the process to its own setting could do so. Thick description and purposive sampling techniques ensured transferability.

Confirmability: A process audit trail ensured that confirmability or objectivity of the qualitative data was achieved. This allows any observer and/or non-researcher to trace the course of the research step-by-step. Also, an independent researcher read through the transcription, discussed it and compared it with the researcher's transcription.

3.9.   Ethics

Ethics clearance was sought from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of the Western Cape. Institutional permission was sought from the office of the Deputy registrar at the University of the Western Cape as the study involves university students.   Further permission was sought from the Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences.   The

aim and objectives of the study were explained and made available to all participants in the form of an information sheet. Informed, written consent was obtained from all the participants before data collection commenced. The participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, as well as confidentiality and anonymity of the results. Participants were treated with respect and dignity. All data was stored in password protected files on the researcher's computer. A unique code was used instead of participant's names on the data collection instruments. Information was sent to and saved on a secure network, after submission all information was stored on a password protected device, and data will be kept for five years and then deleted. Audio-tapes were destroyed after they were transcribed and information documented according to themes. All data will only be discarded after five years. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities when results were published. No foreseeable risks were expected in the study but in the event of students experiencing any discomfort, they were referred to the relevant health professional services and student support services at the University of the Western Cape. The results of the study will be disseminated to the relevant parties. The results of the study will be made available to all participants, and the relevant persons.
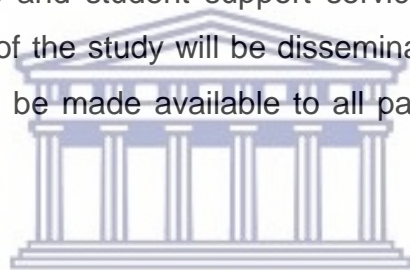
3.10. Chapter Summary
The methods used to address the study's stated objectives were described in this chapter. The steps that were used to collect the data and its analysis were specifically outlined. Additionally, a description of the study's ethics is provided. The next chapter will provide an outline of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the processes and procedures that were done on the analysis of data on the impact of COVID-19 on self-perceived employability and career planning of undergraduate Commerce students at a selected university in South Africa. As indicated in the last chapter, data was collected using semi structured interviews from 11 participants, who were undergraduate commerce students at the University. The data was analysed and interpreted to address the following research objectives:

- To examine undergraduate commerce students' perception of employability during/after COVID-19.
- To examine the role of the university in enhancing employability of undergraduate commerce students during/after COVID-19
- To explore if undergraduate commerce students have the necessary skills to go into the labour market post-COVID-19

4.2 Demographic Data

This section provides the analysis and presentation of demographic data pertaining to 11 undergraduate Commerce students at the university. The students' information was from the public spheres, which makes it sensitive, thus the students' names were withheld, and instead the students who participated in the research were referred to as Participant 1 to Participant 11 to mask their identities, thereby adhering to the ethical requirements of confidentiality and anonymity. The participant demographic data for the 11 participants is shown in Table 4.1:

Table 4.1

*Demographic Data of Participants. **Source:** Research Data, 2022*

Participant	Gender	Year of study	Programme	Age
Participant 1	Male	Year 2	Bcom General	21
Participant 2	Female	Year 4 (Final year)	Bcom General	22
Participant 3	Male	Year 2	Bcom General	20
Participant 4	Female	Year 4 (Final year)	B Admin	25
Participant 5	Female	Year 2	Bcom General	20
Participant 6	Female	Year 2	Bcom General	19
Participant 7	Female	Year 4 (Final year)	Bcom Accounting	21
Participant 8	Female	Year 2	Bcom Accounting	19
Participant 9	Male	Year 4 (Final year)	Bcom General	22
Participant 10	Female	Year 2	Bcom Accounting	20
Participant 11	Male	Year 4 (Final year)	Bcom Accounting	21

4.3   Undergraduate Commerce Students' Perception of Employability

The first objective of the current study was to assess undergraduate Commerce students' perception of employability. Rahmat, et al. (2011) refers to employability as "a term that is often used as a measurement by employers on graduates' marketability". The student participants' perception of employability, based on the interview responses are shown in Figure 4.1. The sub-themes that emerged with regards to the participants' perceptions on employability were; (1) Ability and willingness to learn; (2) Possessing particular skills and competencies; (3) Personal attributes; (4) Qualifications attained and (5) Experience.

1) Ability and willingness to learn: The interviewed participants, viewed employability generally as the ability and willingness to learn. The students denoted employability as referring to someone being able and willing to work, being able to be employed after studying, being able to get a job and this was evidenced by the following comments:

> Employability would be seeing how well, or how ready someone would be for the workplace **(Participant 1);**

> For me, employability is basically when someone is able or willing to work, or has the ability to work **(Participant 3);**

> Being able to work or get a job **(Participant 5);**

> I think it is being able to be employed after studying, or when you're looking for a job **(Participant 7)**; and

> The ability to get a job **(Participant 8)**

2) Possessing particular skills and competencies: Possessing particular skills and competencies was also mentioned as one of the key tenets of employability. Weligamage (2009) highlights the importance of a university or college graduate possessing knowledge skills, critical thinking abilities, interpersonal skills, personal

characteristics, and practical competence. Participant 5 highlighted that employability refers to one having particular skills of the field that he or she want to work in. Participant 3 and 9 supported the notion put forward by participant 5 by saying that, if one does not possess a particular skill for the job, then one is not employable. This was shown by the following excerpts:

For me, there are lots of things that come into play with employability, so… Obviously, it is dependent on where you are going to, but having a particular skill set in the work that you want to go into, that is the core for me, basically **(Participant 5);**

I think it matters because, depending on what you are capable of, it determines what job you are in. At the same time, if you're not able to work or you can't do anything. I definitely think it matters a lot because, you know, if you're not able to work or if you don't have the skills in order to do a specific job, obviously you cannot be employed **(Participant 3);** and

Your interpersonal skills, because you might have to work with people, so those are more core skills and communication skills. I think that those are the most vital skills, in my opinion. And also, your time management is. Yes, time management." **(Participant 9)**

3) Personal attributes: The interviewed participants indicated that possessing particular personal attributes could also aid in employability. Participant 2 highlighted that punctuality and being driven are one of the core attributes that graduates should possess. This was supported by participant 10 who emphasised determination. Creativity was also an attribute that was mentioned as important by participant 6. These are all qualities that cannot be learnt but are possibly naturally possessed by a person. This was demonstrated by the following extracts:

You know, obviously good personal skills as well, like being on time, being driven, basically like that **(Participant 2);**

I think creativity is one of them, if like, you are someone who is creative, because I think creativity is also important… if you have like leadership skills, you will be

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able to be a leader in certain like career fields… To be able to communicate, I think it's also one of the skills that one can have, you know. Yeah, that's all I can think of **(Participant 6);** and

Determination **(Participant 10).**

4) Qualifications: The interviewed participants viewed having a qualification as of the most important pre-requisites to gain employment. Having a qualification was deemed as a basic requirement by Participant 4. This notion was supported by Participant 8 who was of the opinion that qualification is the first requirement for a particular job. Having more than one qualification was also seen as a benefit or advantage as highlighted by Participant 4. The excerpts below demonstrate these notions:

Probably the qualifications, or the necessary acquired qualifications to be able to hold a job, or meet the company that is hiring you, basically meeting their requirements, I would say, so that you are able to fulfill your job, or your role in that company **(Participant 4);**
I think the first core skill will be a qualification, so it's a qualification for that particular job **(Participant 8);** and

Obviously, there's a lot of competition out there, so the more qualifications you have and experience the better **(Participant 4).**

5) Experience: Experience was viewed as an advantage in terms of employability by many of the participants. It seemed that participants were of the view that experience is necessary in addition to a qualification as indicated by Participant 4. This sentiment was supported by Participants 5 and 6 that experience was beneficial in terms of employability.

Definitely also more experience, I would say, because a company would rather take someone with experience with a qualification, than someone with just a qualification **(Participant 4);**

…you need to have experience before most of the time before you can get into like something, your preferable career or something like that **(Participant 6);** and

So, having experience to your name, then you can go to the workplace, and then they're like, okay, you have done something like this before." (**Participant 5).**

4.3   Role of the University in Enhancing Employability of Undergraduate Commerce Students During/After COVID-19

The second objective of this study was to assess the role the university plays in enhancing employability of undergraduate commerce students during/ after COVID-19. The sub-themes that emerged with regards to the participants' perceptions on employability were; (1) Impact of COVID- 19 on students' learning experience; (2) Guidance on job expectations; (3) Non-curricular offerings; (4) Job opportunities as a student and (5) Knowledge and skills offered by university.

1)   Impact of COVID- 19 on students' learning experience: The participants were of the opinion that COVID-19 impacted on their learning experiences as they perceived their experience during the pandemic to be lacking the in-depth and in-person experiences that their peers had before the pandemic, as indicated by Participant 2. Due to the pandemic, tertiary institutions and students were compelled to adapt swiftly to digital learning patterns that were previously unheard of (Mok & Montgomery, 2021). Another view was that the learning experiences of students could have been affected by the lack of access to devices such as laptops and resources such as WIFI as reiterated by Participant 4 as shown in the excerpts below:

I feel like not many… especially the people who are finishing… who are middle to finishing their degree, like, between the start of Covid and now, it really takes away, like, the crucial, like, building… not building stages, but the finishing off touches to, like, how you would be as a graduate, and what attributes you'd have. It's very different to those who have graduated before Covid, where they had, like, that in-depth, in-person experience and as to where people who are still studying and graduating post-Covid, but still online, I feel it would be a bit more difficult for them to put themselves out there and be confident in trying to get a job. So, I feel

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like the labour market might just take its toll with the graduates that are coming through the ranks. **(Participant 2);** and

There's always challenges, for example with this whole COVID thing, like not everyone had access to laptops and WiFi, you know. It would take a lot… they would have to implement that so that everyone has access to WiFi and laptops and education, like free resources where students can learn and everyone has, like, equal opportunities. **(Participant 4)**

2)   Career guidance: Providing guidance in terms of careers and job opportunities were seen as important aspects that should be addressed by the university. Participant 10 indicated that the university should guide in terms of the skills needed after completion of a degree. The same view was expressed by participant 6 as to the role the university can play after graduation. Participant 5 was of the opinion that the university should guide and provide information on alternative skills that can be useful in finding employment. These sentiments are outlined below:

Universities are supposed to, like, guide you and help you, like, with the necessary skills. To provide you with the necessary skills so you can enter the whole job world once you're done with university. Like, technology skills and so forth. **(Participant 10);**

There are so many things that you can study, right, but that doesn't mean that you'll get a job after you're done studying. So, the university should then come in and rather than instead of people studying things and not being employable, the university should come in and rather educate people and tell them: look, there's no job opportunities here, but there's things that you can study and basically give them a list of other things and tell them this is things that you can find work in after university. **(Participant 5);** and

I think immediately after person graduates, I think they should support it, and help, like, people or students to get into the employments, to be employed. So immediately after, they should guide them, and you know, step in to help us students into employment fields. **(Participant 6).**

3)   **Non-curricular offerings:** The non-curricular activities and opportunities created by the university were seen as useful to improve skills and gaining understanding of the workplace as expressed by Participant 2. This sentiment was also expressed by Participant 11 and Participant 9 that noted the many opportunities provided such as workshops, webinars and the Office for Student Development as illustrated by the excerpts below:

> There are lots of workshops, like, available. I'm always getting, like, e-mails on, like, career development. Things like that. **(Participant 2);**

> …from my understanding, webinars and stuff, and meetings and workshops are provided to help give students a better chance at understanding the workplace, and possibly improving their skills. **(Participant 11);** and

> There's also OSD, the Office for Student Development… They have a lot of programmes, and also, that programmes also have, like, sessions where they try to improve your skills, for example, CV writing. A lot of people don't know how to write a CV, but then they have programmes in place to help us, like, learn those skills. It's just, the knowledge. People aren't aware of these programmes, but they do exist, and a lot of them actually. You know, OSD helps students a lot. And also help students with, we see so many job opportunities. Seminars to attend. And seminars can be very informative, because you do talk to people that are already in the workplace, employers and employees. So yeah, those are some of the things I can think of right now, that the university does do. **(Participant 9).**

There was general consensus that the university is doing well in terms of providing non-curricular activities that could assist in finding employment after graduation. Assistance in the application process for jobs are seen as one of the areas that the university is doing well in as indicated by Participant 4. Participant 7 were in agreement that the university is doing enough to equip them with the necessary skills at the undergraduate level. Although Participant 3 agreed in terms of the fact that the university is doing well in terms of organising expositions to assist students in gaining an understanding of the real world, the notion of creating awareness of the role of technology was indicated as seen in the quotes below:

I would say that they're doing quite well. The university has now… not now, but they've obviously started this career portal site, so that, like, helps you to apply for jobs while you're still studying. **(Participant 4);**

I think the university is doing quite a lot to help undergrads because we also have… outside the degree, we also have extra-mural activities that each student can choose to take up in order to enhance their skills, so I think it depends on the student, but the university is doing enough to give us the skills. **(Participant 7);** and

I know at university you have expos where they try and show people what it's like going out into the working world. Like, the first things that needs to happen to tell people… or warn people, technology's taking over. We need to start phasing into it. I definitely think there needs to be more, of like a course or a module that needs to be implemented where this is concerned. **(Participant 3).**

4) *Job opportunities as a student:* The job opportunities available and offered by the university to students were perceived as useful as it provides some experience of what the world of work might be. Helyer and Lee (2014) emphasises the importance of recognising that learning also transpires beyond the classroom is a key component of this more holistic approach to education, and providing students with work-experience opportunities allows them to experience this first hand. This sentiment is expressed by Participant 9 and agreed by Participant 1.

The biggest one is, like, work study. So, you know, working whilst studying as well, as a part time. So, like doing the admin work, or being a tutor, or working as a gym staff. So, those almost, kind of, give you a taste of how the workplace will be like. **(Participant 9);** and

I feel like the university, they give you different job opportunities you could pursue and they help test you to see what you actually want to do further in life. **(Participant 1).**

5) *Knowledge and skills offered by university:* The participants were of the opinion that although the university offers skills and knowledge to enhance their

employability, additional offerings which are not necessarily compulsory could also be considered as indicated by Participant 11. This sentiment was agreed upon by Participant 9 who also added that information regarding possible advice on where and how to apply would be useful. Participant 4 agreed with these statements, but also indicated that the university could do more to prepare them for the world of work as illustrated below:

> The university is a place of education which give you formal documents, so in that sense it's already helping you establish a way forward into the working world. But then again, the university, I don't know if it's part of their conduct, but the university can allow… not necessarily compulsory modules or stuff like that, but secondary or less important modules, where students can participate out of their own volition and decided if they want to improve their skills out of their own. So, for example, an economic student might solely focus on economics, or economics and management, but then on the side, the university can offer maybe a club of some sort, where it just focusses on enhancing basic computer skills, I guess, outside from just… for marks and just for completion**. (Participant11);**

> For me, the university gives me a chance to widen my horizons, so they obviously help me with the skills… firstly, help me with the skills that I need in the workplace because that's obviously something I don't know. So, they need to help me learn the necessary skills and then give me advice on where to go, where to apply, later on in life once I have the skills to apply for a job or if they hear of anything, to let me know. **(Participant 3);** and

> Like I said, they could definitely, you know, implement more, you know, work in terms of, like, how it's preparing us for the working world. We learn a lot, but it's not enough in terms of the qualifications you would need and the knowledge you need to go into information systems, especially with regards to coding and building applications. **(Participant 4).**

In contrast to the above, Participant 10 was of the opinion that the university provided enough knowledge and skills in the form of extra resources such as side notes, for example. Although Participant 6 agreed with this sentiment to a certain extent, it

seems that the participant felt that the university only provides knowledge to a certain degree and once in the world of work, it is not enough as seen below:

> The university just provides you with knowledge of what you must…I mean, yeah, except when you get into your career field, they just give you the knowledge and skills. That's it. **(Participant 6);** and

> I think they are, because they give you more than enough on each module to, like, resources… I think they give you more than enough… Like the audiotapes, the videotapes and then the side notes. **(Participant 10).**

4.4 To Explore if Undergraduate Commerce Students have the Perceived Necessary Skills to go into the Labour Market Post-COVID-19

The third objective of this study was to explore if undergraduate Commerce students have the perceived necessary skills to go into the labour market post-COVID-19. The sub-themes that emerged with regards to the participants' perceptions on employability were; (1) Awareness of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; (2) Perceived gaps in the university curriculum; (3) Suggested improvement of the current curriculum; (4) Influence of technology highlighted during/after Covid-19 and (5) The future of the labour market post-COVID-19.

1)   Awareness of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Pauceanu, Rabie and Moustafa (2020) highlight that the Fourth Industrial Revolution will radically change the principles of labour, employment, and industry and will have an impact on how each person perceives their career in the future. Participants shared various views on their awareness of the fourth industrial revolution and how that can potentially add an extra dimension that should be considered when contemplating the labour market post-COVID-19. Those interviewed were of the opinion that education about the fourth industrial revolution and the consequence thereof in terms of offering solutions is important as indicated by Participant 8. Participant 3 indicated that due to the fourth industrial revolution the labour market could be more efficient while Participant 9 expressed the importance of having the basic skills like computer skills. The quotes below illustrate these sentiments:

…maybe they can try to educate a lot of people about the fourth industrial revolution, so we'll have more people working on how to build more maybe robotics and bring more solutions… instead of being there practically and implementing the solutions, they could work on how to create solutions. (**Participant 8**);

I think five years from now a lot of stuff will be technical, but a lot of stuff will be in person, also. I think, maybe certain jobs will be overtaken by the fourth industrial revolution. I think maybe the labour market will be more efficient. **(Participant 3);** and

The fourth industrial revolution is very important, because it's changing everything, even, like your basic level skills. All businesses want people that know how to code, that programme. You don't need to be very great at it, but you need to have, like, a basic understanding. So, I think the base level of, like, people's computer literacy abilities have, like, increased. **(Participant 9).**

While the sentiments expressed above alluded to the awareness of the participants in terms of the fourth industrial revolution and how it could potentially impact the labour market post- COVID-19, some felt that the fourth industrial revolution is making it more difficult for people to secure employment as highlighted by Participant 11. In addition to this, Participant 7 indicated that machines could actually replace some of the functions during the pandemic usually performed by people. This is highlighted below:

So, I think the fourth industrial revolution just showed us how much the world is changing to people who have information systems skill-sets or any of the likes. It will be harder to find a job. It's still possible, but as the world develops, it's going to be harder and harder to find a reliable job, sustainable job. **(Participant 11);** and

I think Covid is also one of the huge factors that also introduced the fourth industrial revolution, because as we all know, a lot of people were retrenched, a lot of people retired because when Covid was introduced, or when Covid started, a lot of skills were lost, or a lot of people were not able to do the things that they usually do, which is waking up and going to work so they were replaced by a lot of machines. **(Participant 7).**

2) **Perceived gaps in the university curriculum:** During the interviews some perceived gaps in the current university curriculum was communicated. Some of these perceived gaps were the lack of interactive material in place of only reading about real-life scenarios as expressed by Participant 2. The vast difference between the theory received during the time at university and what is expected in the labour market was also indicated by Participant 5. In addition, although the theory is taught, how to enter the labour market and career pathing is not included in the curriculum as emphasised by Participant 11 as seen below:

So, there's lots of real-life scenarios that is put into our curriculum, for examples that we do on, maybe a topic that we learn, but maybe doing, like, something interactive where we don't just, like, obviously read the, like, examples, but like, it's being portrayed as, like, almost like a setting where we can, almost like, place ourselves in that kind of scenario. **(Participant 2);**

Like I said, it's theory… You don't expect things to be like that in the real world… I have done job shadow before, so it's very different, like, the work that you do at school and at university, it's completely different to the work that actually happens in the workplace. It's really different. **(Participant 5);**

I think it does and it doesn't at the same time. Let me just say, it does, but to a certain extend. And I think it's also dependent on what you're studying as well. I think for us, especially, like, EMS Faculty, we do have the luxury of doing modules that are, like information systems. So, they do inform us about what's happening and they try to teach us this, but not everybody will be fortunate enough to have, even like a base knowledge at the first year, to know like, okay, this is the fourth industrial revolution is coming and everyone will be fortunate to have that knowledge. So, I think it does and it doesn't. And also, what you're studying. I think, a certain level of like programming and computer skills, I feel like they should be required in each degree, regardless of what it is. I think you should be learning how to use a computer and use the internet and stuff like that, I think… Not that it doesn't, these seminars that we do, but like, not to an extent to I feel it's good enough. **(Participant 9);** and

No, I think it just teaches you the theory and the practical usage of the module. Like, economics, econometrics and that sort of stuff. It just teaches you what it's all about, but it doesn't teach you how to get into that labour market. Same with information systems, it just teaches you about information systems, not really how you can get into a career path that involves information systems. **(Participant 11).**

3) **Suggested improvements of the current curriculum**: Ramraj and Marimuthu (2021) alluded to the importance of higher education systems to restructure continually to ensure that graduates are highly trained and equipped to take up positions in future workforce. The participants interviewed made some suggestions for improvements in the current curriculum. Some of these improvements included more skills-oriented programmes that will assist with application of these skills too as alluded to by Participant 7. Another suggestion was the sharing of or conversations about personal experiences in the labour market as indicated by Participant 11 below:

I think introducing degrees that have to do more with computers. Degrees or diplomas that will have more skills-orientated programmes than the ones that we're given now, because I think that the ones that we're given now, I don't want to say it's a mental game... I think it's a mental game because we are all given the information and you're supposed to know the information, how to apply it. But we are not really given the skills on how to apply. By skills I mean, we only know... or we can only do the work up to a certain level, which is the level which is given by the university now. So, we're not really given, or equipped for something else, any other problems. Let's say for instance, we have another pandemic, except Covid coming in the future, I don't think we'll be equipped enough to work, or deal with it with the skills that we are given now. **(Participant 7);** and

So, I think the best thing the university can do, is maybe a short one-month module, or something of the sort, which just has a conversation about experiences of... let's say the lecturer goes and discusses with the class about their own personal experience in the labour market and how they got into the labour market. And possibly, the major...curriculums, like engineering and such, maybe explain how those types of people can get their jobs, just give and overall example. **(Participant 11).**

4)   Influence of technology highlighted during/after COVID-19: The reliance on technology and the use thereof during COVID-19 was seen as a skill that are needed to survive in the labour market post pandemic. Participants 1 and 4 highlighted how jobs have moved to online platforms during the pandemic. Van Zyl (as stated in Magwentshu, Rajagopaul, Chui, & Singh, 2019) emphasised that technology is causing industries to transform far more rapidly than most people seem to think. Because of the influence and use of technology, individuals could work from home and therefore the skillset required in terms of the use of computers became very important as expressed by Participant 11 below:

Technology has a huge influence on jobs and careers nowadays. People need to learn new skills and everybody's becoming very reliant on technology. Soon jobs will be purely technology. We can already see now, with Covid that jobs have switched to an online stance, and they rely on on-line and video calls to get things done. Without technology, they would not have been able to survive. **(Participant 1);**

I think it has a big influence. It's definitely the future. I mean, we could even see now during Covid how so many businesses went online. There's such a big market for, you know, having any business online. **(Participant 4);**
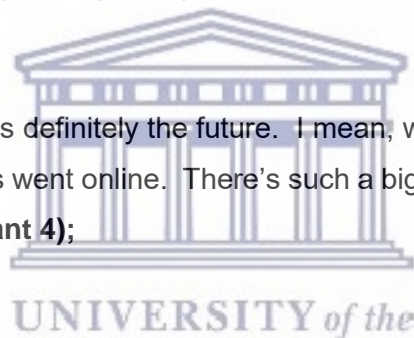
I feel like they brought, especially with technology, they like relied mostly on technology nowadays because of this whole Covid thing. They're basically cutting out the third party and just adding technology into everything, like with the scanners and stuff. **(Participant 10);** and

I think the pandemic clearly showed us why information systems or the fourth industrial revolution is changing the world, because a lot of people were able to work from home and I personally know of one or two people who have completely switched to working from home because it's completely possible for them to now using only the laptop or a computer system. So, in that sense, it makes it a lot easier for people to work from home. But also again, finding a job where you know how to use computers is essential. **(Participant 11).**

5) **The future of the labour market post-COVID-19:** Those interviewed were of the opinion that a big part of the existing labour market could be completely digitised in the next few years, as stated by Participants 4 and 5. This was agreed to by Participant 3, who was of the opinion that a drastic change in the labour market was seen as individuals moved to online platforms to perform their duties. However, this participant also expressed that there are some negatives associated with being completely online and the need to move back to what was before COVID-19. Interviewees also indicated that for certain jobs there are no need to be in actual offices as everything can be done online as stated by Participant 9. This participant further alluded that remote working is going to be more prominent and issues like connectivity will most likely improve in the coming years.

I think that in the next few years everything will be totally digitized and online. Even working from home, for example. How many people have not gone into the office yet and are working from home? And people are seeing that it's actually working. They had to take that sort of mind shift for people to get, you know, to that place and it has happened, you know, because of Covid. **(Participant 4);**

I think the labour market, it changed drastically because people moved online. I think the change was good, because it limited, obviously, the disease spreading, but at the same time I think that it's settled back the labour market should go back to normal. I think at the same time, more people being at home, there's not as much pressure of them sitting in an office. Just sometimes you need to call a company or need to contact someone, it takes longer than expected because someone is sitting at home. So, I definitely think it should go back to normal. **(Participant 3);**

I feel like with the pandemic, everything also now became online, and I think this is also what's making a major shift in everything becoming so technology. And I think this is also, like I said in the beginning, jobs are being taken away now. I think this is also one of the causes for why jobs are getting taken away, which is the pandemic. **(Participant 5);**

For certain jobs, you don't even need to be there. Like, even an example, someone who designs websites and run servers. They don't need to be there physically.

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That's the whole job, they don't need to be there physically. They can stay at home and monitor everything at home. They'll be fine. The company won't fall if he's not there. So, the need is just going to die out for a lot of jobs. Even a therapist. You can have therapy via Zoom, you'll be fine. **(Participant 9);** and

So, a lot of, I expect, a lot more remote working, I don't really expect myself to be in the office, as for example, to conduct my job. And I also think connectivity's going to improve. You have to be more on your phone, on your laptop, checking e-mails, being aware of what's happening. And it will require a lot of… for you to better your computer skills and know what the company… **(Participant 9).**

6)   Automation in the labour market: Interviewed participants were of the opinion that the human element in the labour market may be completely replaced by automation in the near future as indicated by Participants 8 and 10. Lewis (2020) affirms that when visiting a supermarket, self-checkout devices have indeed assumed the role of the shop assistant, which is now capable of working constantly without getting paid, granted breaks, or receiving exorbitant benefits. This notion was also supported by Participants 3 and 11 who made reference to McDonald's and Amazon making use of machinery and robotics in order to replace employees.

Because times are changing, like, each year things are changing, because maybe previously, it was easier to get a job. And now it's not easier. I feel like when times are changing, and when things are changing, they should tell us that, okay, because now, you will find that when you want to maybe to be an engineer, or something like that, they must tell us that, okay, this robot that is being implemented to do this certain type of job. So that means your skills won't be required that much. So, you must expect that, okay, you have to like, and tell us what to do. **(Participant 6);**

I feel like…everything is going to be online. There's not going to be human interaction, or human communication. Basically, I feel like it will be only technology at the rate it's going now**. (Participant 10);**

…it requires less humans to get certain tasks done for companies. And, you know, it doesn't require a lot of people. So, I'd say that with the fourth industrial revolution

it will make it kind of difficult for a lot of humans to get job, you know, because we'll have… maybe we'll have robotics and things that wouldn't need humans in order to function, maybe we'll need one person to monitor them, instead of having like ten different people doing it by hand. **(Participant 8);**

And certain jobs will be in danger, I don't think you will need, like, accountants, like, I mentioned accountants will probably be in danger, through work and supply, some of them will probably be in danger, because you don't need as many people. And also, because of machinery, lots of machinery and artificial technology, it could also lead to less jobs, but will probably also create more jobs. Because you do need somebody to monitor the computers, the AI, but then the question is, like, what's the deficit like? Is it creating way more jobs than it is reducing jobs? And that is the tricky part we are at, because for the fourth industrial revolution, we're creating way more jobs it's going to replace or undermine. **(Participant 9);**

Like I said, it's taking some people's jobs. Machines are now doing people's jobs for them. Like, if I look at… I'm going to use McDonalds as an example. Whatever McDonalds you walk in now, because of Covid, you don't have a physical teller anymore. There's a machine where you order your own food, you put in your own money. There's no-one that's physically handling it. And normally there used to be like five girls, and that's five people that's no longer standing there, earning an income, doing their job. They've been replaced by machines. **(Participant 3);** and

I think a lot of manual labour might fall away. Like, we've seen how big companies like Amazon uses machines to organise their packages and their stock, instead of people. I mean, five years ago, maybe even ten years ago, there would have 50 to 100 people having to work in those warehouses, sorting out all those packages and stuff that people buy, but right now, we know it's being done with machinery, so that could also apply to any other factory work. **(Participant 11).**

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the interpretation of the analysis of data on the impact of COVID-19 on self-perceived employability and career planning of undergraduate commerce students at a selected university in South Africa. The research results were obtained

from 11 participants through individual interviews. The next chapter will discuss the result and compare it with the salient literature.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

The study attempted to explore the perception of undergraduate commerce students with regard to employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic are. Data for this research was collected through individual interviews with 11 participants. This chapter will discuss the results obtained from the individual interviews and compare it with the salient literature within the area. Praharaj and Ameen (2021) highlight that in this section the researcher provides context and interpretations of the results. The primary intent of the study was:

- To examine undergraduate commerce students' perception of employability during/after COVID-19;

- To examine the role of the university in enhancing the employability of undergraduate commerce students during/after COVID-19; and

- To explore if undergraduate commerce students have the necessary skills to go into the labour market post-COVID-19.

Therefore, this chapter is divided into three (3) independent subsections, with reference to literature.
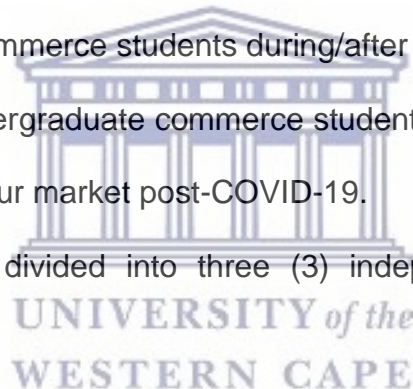
5.2 Employability: Undergraduate Commerce Students' Perspective

In a review on the concept of employability, Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet and Rossier (2016) were of the opinion that it is a concept that represents a scientific challenge with several definitions and operationalisations. These authors then quoted Gazier (1998) who stated that the concept of employability is sometimes described as "being a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all". Based on the findings of the current study, the participants' perceptions were classified into five (5) distinct categories. In the first category, the participants viewed employability generally as the ability and willingness to learn and the ability to gain employment after graduating. Over two decades ago, Wilson (2001) supported this notion and stated that graduates are most often than not, quick to learn, open to new ideas, eager and well-informed about the new technologies, which will result in adequate employability

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skills if they receive education on how to understand and master these skills. However, the transition from undergraduate is often difficult and competitive especially when unemployment is high as indicated by Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson and Walker (2015). This could be applied to the current scenario that the labour market is facing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the second and third category, participants highlighted the importance of possessing particular skills and personal attributes in order to be employable within a particular industry. Graduates must compete in an increasingly competitive labour market and possess a diverse range of skills in order to promote their abilities and academic qualifications. This trend has been continuing for several years (Kamaruddin, Aghmod, Hussain & Hamid, 2021). It is expected that graduate employability is bound to become much more challenging due to COVID-19, as several businesses closed due their inability to survive during the pandemic. Some of the skills and attributes illustrated in this study include among others interpersonal skills, communication skills, leadership skills, creativity as well as time management skills. Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) supports this concept by stating that common graduate characteristic traits are, for example, the capacity to think creatively and critically; to work effectively in a team and communicate well; to resolve issues; to be equipped for leadership; and to be ethically and professionally competent.

The fourth and fifth category were related to the qualifications and experiences obtained at university. Interviewed participants were of the opinion that having a qualification was one of the most important pre-requisites in order to acquire employment. The notion that there are gaps between the performance of graduates in the workplace and what is expected from employers despite the skills provided in higher education, have been documented in literature almost a decade ago already (Jackson, 2013). The participants in this study, however, viewed having one or more than one qualification as an important requirement to gain meaningful employment. They also viewed experience as an important factor in gaining employment. However, the literature highlights that obtaining a qualification should not be the only responsibility of universities, instead added to this is to prepare students for employability and a constantly changing world (Uhomoibhi & Ross, 2013). A South African study by Ndebele and Ndlovu (2019) showed that university graduates do not

have the necessary job market information and/or experience needed to embark on the employment journey.

In addition to these perceived challenges with regards to gaining employment during or after a pandemic such as the COVID-19 pandemic, literature highlighted that the labour market has become extremely competitive and graduates need to be in possession of several skills to demonstrate their capabilities and qualifications (Kamarudin, Ahmad & Hamid, 2020). These graduates, however, fail to demonstrate these skills by only showing their academic merit. These only add to the myriad of problems as COVID-19 has a disruptive effect on most of the sectors of society including the higher education sector (Aucejo, French, Araya & Zafar). All of these could be a contributing factor to the current graduate unemployment and Ndebele and Ndlovu (2019) reiterated that graduate unemployment has indeed "become widespread among those students who have finished their university studies".

5.3. Role of the University in Enhancing Employability of Undergraduate Commerce Students During/After COVID-19

The South African higher education sector faces many difficulties, in conjunction with the disastrous COVID-19 pandemic's impact in 2020, which have compelled universities around the world to transform the way they continue to do business (Coetzee, et al., 2020). These difficulties were also expressed by Gill (2020), who indicated that the Australian higher education sector has been struggling for decades with the skills and attributes graduates should have to result in securing employment. The current study highlighted five (5) categories with regards to the participants' perception of the role in which universities play in enhancing graduate employability.

In the first category, participants indicated that COVID-19 had an impact on their learning, as they perceived that their experiences during the pandemic were limited in contrast to the in-depth and first-hand experiences that their peers had prior to the pandemic. This is supported by Webb et al. 2021) who claims the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has compelled HEIs, together with organisations, governments, and other institutions, to rapidly increase the amount of digital services they provide. In doing so, it has expedited a variety of pre-existing trends. As a result,

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student support, teaching, and research have been shifted to online formats, requiring new techniques, procedures, and skill sets. In addition, participants were also of the opinion that their learning experiences were somehow affected due to lack of resources such as laptops and access to Wi-Fi. Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) supports this viewpoint by stating that students struggled as a result of insufficient resources and data connectivity. The authors continue by stating that students' understanding of technology and online platforms severely impacted their efforts to complete the course material and assessments.

In the second category, participants indicated that universities should provide students with the necessary guidance in relation to the various skills required once they have completed their undergraduate degree. Literature supports this notion by claiming that HEIs play an important role in ensuring that graduates have the qualifications they need to succeed in the labour market (Menon, 2019). In addition, interviewed participants highlighted the need for guidance in terms of finding employment once they have graduated. Franco, Silva and Rodrigues (2019) supports this viewpoint by stating that internships can be viewed as an opportunity to develop interactions and a programme that contributes to the students' training, so maintaining the social role of the university and establishing connections between HEIs and businesses. The researchers also claim that Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been encouraged to take an active role in commercialising academic knowledge so that it is more focused on what firms want and need right away rather than what HEIs might like to present as their educational supply (Franco, Silva & Rodrigues, 2019).

In the third and fourth category, participants viewed non-curricular activities and job opportunities available through the university as relatively useful in order to improve skills and gain an understanding of the workplace. Similarly, participants were of the opinion that job opportunities available and offered by the university were perceived as useful since it provides some experience of what to expect when entering the world of work. Burnside, Wesley, Wesaw and Parnell (2019) agreed as they stated that, in addition to assisting students with their financial needs, on-campus employment programmes can provide students with excellent opportunities that will assist their career-readiness skills if designed effectively. Irrespective of what has been shown in literature, students have worked for decades and will continue to do so while at

university. What is, however, important, is that institutions of higher learning should determine how best to improve the positive features of student employment (Pierard, Baca & Schultz, 2022).

In the fifth category, interviewed participants expressed their opinions, whereby they stated that, although the university offers various skills and knowledge in order to enhance their employability, additional offerings which are not necessarily compulsory could also potentially be considered. Yan (2008) highlights that university students may find valuable opportunities to observe and practise the jobs in which they may be interested through internships and work fellowships at businesses. However, the researcher continues by stating it may not be a simple task to set up this type of off-campus experiential learning for a substantial number of students. This is also primarily dependent on the collaboration and placement-providing capabilities of local businesses and industries. In addition, participants indicated that information regarding possible advice on where and how to apply would be useful too. Sun and Yuen (2012) supports this opinion by highlighting common topics covered in career counselling, including familiarising oneself with employment policies, providing employment information, offering resume preparation advice, and refining interviewing techniques. Participants' views were further supported where literature highlighted that students determining their options and entering the development period of their career will be made simpler for them should they receive the appropriate guidance and assistance (Keshf & Khanum, 2021).

5.4. To Explore if Undergraduate Commerce Students have the Perceived Necessary Skills to go into the Labour Market Post-COVID-19

The nature of education has evolved as a result of the changing nature of the labour market, especially since the emergence of digital and mobile technologies. As a result, higher education institutions are under greater pressure to produce graduates who are employable, placing less emphasis on philosophical and higher-order thinking abilities and far more emphasis on being prepared for the labour market (Bridgstock, 2009). The shift in what is needed is reiterated in the comments of the participants as

explained here. According to the study at hand, the perceived skills required for the labour market post-COVID-19 were divided into six (6) categories.

In the first category, participants offered a wide range of perspectives on how they perceived the Fourth Industrial Revolution and how it may add an additional element to take into consideration when thinking about the labour market after COVID-19. Lloyd and Payne (2003) emphasises that a significant restructuring of the educational system is essential to integrate 4IR and stimulate the economy. Furthermore, researchers highlight that whichever industry, it remains a challenge to somehow be equipped for a period of disruptions, nevertheless it is necessary not only to maintain a competitive advantage but also to remain relevant (Rahmat, Adnan & Mohtar, 2019). In addition, participants were of the opinion that it is important to be educated on the 4IR as well as understand the consequences thereof. Researchers support this concept by emphasising that the fourth industrial revolution is now radically altering the nature of labour and the way it is carried out. Many individuals now have a plethora of new prospects, and university graduates simply cannot afford to lag behind (Rachmat, Adnan & Mothar, 2019).

In the second and third category, participants communicated that there were some perceived gaps in the current university curriculum, however, suggested some improvements to the current curriculum. In addition, participants highlighted a significant gap between the theory acquired in university and what is required upon entering the job market. Menon and Castrillón (2019) argues that the current environment in which HEIs operate in South Africa do not support the industry's need for agility in order to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving labour market, student expectations, learning and knowledge flexibility, as well as inter-disciplinary accountability. This notion is supported by Hlobo, Moloi and Mhlanga (2022) who state that it has become undeniable that a digital revolution is currently taking place to which students and educators both need to adapt, given that it is modifying how learning and teaching are conducted. Coetzee (2020) supports this by stating that the curricula HEIs offer would need to be increasingly more dynamic and adaptable, almost, it can be argued, simultaneous to the demand for new skills dictated by the 4IR. Interviewed participants highlighted the need for more skills-based programmes in order to be adequately equipped for the current/post pandemic labour market. More

than a decade ago, Kumar (2007) highlighted that universities must prepare students to fill occupations that do not currently exist, use technologies that have not been developed, and solve issues that no one has yet considered. However, Mkansi and Landman (2021) argue that although the effects of automation in the 4IR have been extensively outlined, academic institutions' ability and willingness to meet the demands of the 4IR curriculum both now and in the future, as well as their capacity to produce graduates or skill sets that are compatible with changes in the labour market and future technologies, have received very little attention. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that HEIs alter their curriculum in order to equip graduates with the required skills needed for the labour market.

Moreover, interviewed participants suggested that various changes need to be made in order to update the current curriculum. Ahadi, Kitto, Rizoiu and Musial (2022) indicate that producing graduates who are equipped for the workforce is a common goal of HEIs. As a result, it is expected that the knowledge and capabilities provided in professional degrees would meet the demands of the job market. However, it can be challenging to guarantee that this alignment takes place considering how volatile the job market is. Among these improvements, participants suggested that programmes should be offered whereby lecturers or those within industry share their personal experiences in the labour market through conversions and discussions. This notion is supported by Hamman-Fischer and McGhie (2021) who emphasise the importance that professionals from the workplace should be active as they afford students the opportunity to build the skills they might need post-graduation. In addition, the researchers highlight that industry experts ought to participate both inside and outside of the classroom because they assist in providing real-world situations, guidance, and authentic collaborative learning spaces (Hamman-Fischer & McGhie, 2021).

In the fourth and fifth category, participants perceived technology dependence and usage during COVID-19 as skills required for survival within the labour market post-pandemic and potentially be completely digitised within the next few years. This concept was supported by literature, whereby Cook (2020) states that as the labour market transitions from a 20th-century man-powered workforce to a 21st-century technology-powered workforce through a Central Processing Unit (CPU), work-ready

and valuable competencies are constantly changing. In addition, participants highlighted that technology can be regarded as the future as many businesses proceeded to operate online, especially during the pandemic. This afforded many employees to work from home. Zemtsov (2020) supports this concept by demonstrating that there are likely to be a large number of opportunities and a demand for remote work facilities, through virtual offices as well as internet services both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Autor and Reynolds (2020) reiterate the above opinion that long after the COVID-19 crisis has passed, it may appear almost probable that a significant percentage of employees who work partially or fully from home will be significantly higher than it was prior to the pandemic. Furthermore, interviewed participants highlighted the importance of having the adequate skill set, particularly digital skills, in order to operate successfully within the new technological era. This notion was supported by Lestari and Santoso (2019), who indicated that employers want individuals who are able to start in a new position productively, and they believe that applicants possessing digital skills are more effective employees who also produce more for their companies.

In the sixth category, participants were of the opinion that automation may potentially be taking over the labour market in the near future through machines, robotics and artificial intelligence (AI). Vyas (2022) claims that in the post-pandemic era, adjustments in the labour markets are essential for maintaining the operation of organisations. The researchers continue by highlighting that the most apparent transformation in the labour market is technological adoption. In addition, interviewed participants highlighted that machines are potentially taking over many jobs; manual labour in particular. Interviewed participants made examples of McDonald's, which makes use of machines where patrons can now order your food instead of a cashier, as well as Amazon that uses machinery to organise their packaging. This is supported by Kosslyn (2019) who states that automation will completely replace work opportunities such as truck driving, cashiers, and warehouse picking and packing. Moreover, Shin (2022) highlights the utilisation of robots and artificial intelligence in production and business will continue to rise for as long as the COVID-19 pandemic remains. Thus, with the adoption of social distancing that has become the new normal, the pandemic is most likely to accelerate the deployment of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), resulting in a dramatic change in the nature of labour.

5.7 Conclusion

This study has provided insights into undergraduates' perception of employability during or after COVID-19. Drawing on thematic analysis of narratives from the respondents, a variety of themes and sub-themes emerged. The identified themes include undergraduate commerce students' perception of employability; the role of the university in enhancing employability of undergraduate commerce students during/after COVID-19; and the exploring if undergraduate commerce students have the perceived necessary skills to go into the labour market post-COVID-19.

In addition, the study explored the respondents' perspectives on the term known as employability of graduates, and five sub-themes were identified. These sub-themes included: (1) The ability and willingness to learn; (2) Possessing particular skills and competencies; (3) Possessing certain person attributes; and (4) Having a qualification, as well as having certain experience. In addition, participants perceived that having certain skills were essential in being employable. These skills included interpersonal skills, communication skills and critical thinking skills among others.

The study also illustrated that COVID-19 had an impact on the learning of students. This was due to students having to adapt to online learning despite some students having limited resources. The participants expressed that although the university provides skills and information to enhance participants' employability, additional offerings that are not necessarily compulsory should also be taken into consideration. These additional offerings were also in relation to the non-curricular offerings the participants expressed as essential in preparing graduates for the workplace. These offerings include, amongst others, workshops, assistance with CV writing, webinars as well providing guidance in relation to how and where to apply for jobs.

The study explored whether undergraduate students have the necessary skills required to enter the labour market during or after COVID-19. Participants expressed their awareness of 4IR by making reference to the influence of technology in the labour market. Interviewed participants indicated the importance of being educated on 4IR in order to gain or possess the required skills. Furthermore, participants expressed their perception of the various gaps in the current curriculum. These perceived gaps include the absence of interactive material in place of only reading about real-life scenarios as

well as the significant gap between the theory acquired in university and what employers expect. However, participants also provided suggestions for improving the current curriculum at university. Among these suggestions were more skill-focused programmes that will aid in applying these skills and competencies as well as industry professionals sharing, through conversations or presentations, their personal experiences in the labour market.

The study also revealed the perceived change in the labour market post-pandemic. Interviewed participants highlighted that a great portion of the existing labour market could be completely digitised in the next few years. In addition, participants alluded to the fact that remote working would become more prominent in the future. This could potentially be influenced by automation. Participants were of the opinion that in the near future, automation may entirely eliminate the human component of the labour market.

In conclusion, the study has highlighted the perceived importance of possessing particular skills and competencies in order to be employable for the future labour market. The role of universities is equally important in order to equip graduates for the new era of the labour market in terms of digitisation. Finally, awareness of the rapid changes within the labour market can be regarded as essential in order to adapt successfully within the labour market.
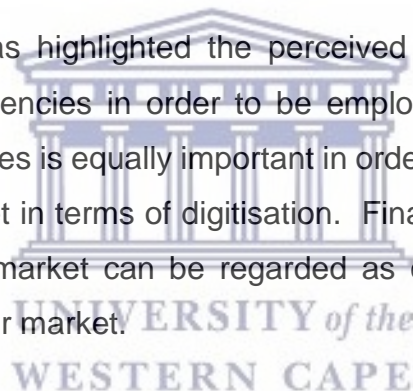
5.5. Limitations of the Study

This study has accomplished its aims and objectives; however, various limitations were encountered.

The interviews were originally intended to be conducted face-to-face. However, due to COVID- 19 restrictions in South Africa, it was fairly difficult to interview participants face to face due to fear of the virus, as well as obeying the safety rules that were implemented to mitigate the risk of COVID-19. The researcher therefore made use of online platforms to conduct the interviews to adhere to guidelines and restrictions imposed. These online platforms include Zoom and Google Meets. In addition, the use of the qualitative research method can also be regarded as having some forms of limitations. Common limitations are outlined below:

The sample size: As this was a qualitative study, the sample size was small. However, despite the small sample size, the researcher was able to collect in-depth information from the participants.

Quality of the questions: All the questions and interpretation of data are regarded as subjective. Therefore, the researcher had to ask followed up questions. This resulted in the responses to be more accurate.

Bias: Respondents may respond with a generally accepted opinion instead of responding with their genuine opinion. As a result, this can have an adverse effect on the study's results. However, the participants were encouraged to speak freely and share their opinions and or perceptions.

5.6   Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in context of the findings and in accordance with the study's result.

1. The current university curriculum should be restructured by HEI's as issues were brought to the fore. The most important would be to incorporate various programmes whereby the gap between the theory and the practical aspect of the labour market are fulfilled.

2. Based on the above recommendation, the use of technology should be incorporated more frequently throughout the duration of the undergraduate degree. This could be in the form of making use of systems or software in order to practice on those that are already being used with industry.

3. A closer relationship with industry professionals should be encouraged by HEIs where industry professionals are invited to collaborate and contribute to the curriculum by means of lecturing more often with the objective of delivering relevant skills and knowledge sharing to undergraduate students.

4. A compulsory internship or professional placement component can be integrated into the current curriculum of undergraduate commerce students.

This could potentially enhance their skills in the workplace, improve their teamwork and networking abilities.

5. Based on the above recommendation, the industry placement component could be offered as an extra year added to the undergraduate degree. Alternatively, it could form part of the degree as a six-week practical element in the final year of study.

6. Graduate attributes need to be revised. These attributes should be in line with the rapidly changing labour market. It is suggested that these attributes are communicated with students throughout the various modules offered during their undergraduate degree.

7. Career guidance and student support services need to be more prevalent during students' undergraduate degree. This will assist students in making career decisions but also contribute to additional skills required for the labour market.

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60 YEARS *of hope, action & knowledge*

17 November 2021

Ms S Phillips
Industrial Psychology
Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

HSSREC Reference Number:	HS21/9/24
Project Title:	The impact of COVID-19 on the self-perceived employability and career planning of commerce students at a selected University in South Africa
Approval Period:	**16 November 2021 – 16 November 2024**

I hereby certify that the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape approved the methodology, and amendments to the ethics of the above mentioned research project.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval.

Please remember to submit a progress report by 30 November each year for the duration of the project.

For permission to conduct research using student and/or staff data or to distribute research surveys/questionnaires please apply via:
https://sites.google.com/uwc.ac.za/permissionresearch/home

The permission letter must then be submitted to HSSREC for record keeping purposes.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse events and/or termination of the study.

Ms Patricia Josias
Research Ethics Committee Officer
University of the Western Cape

Director: Research Development
University of the Western Cape
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Tel: +27 21 959 4111
Email: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

NHREC Registration Number: HSSREC-130416-049

FROM HOPE TO ACTION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

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INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: The impact of COVID-19 on the self-perceived employability and career planning of commerce students at a selected University in South Africa

What is this study about?

This is a research project being conducted by Stephanie Phillips at the University of the Western Cape. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you are currently registered as a student in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of the Western Cape. The purpose of this research project is to examine undergraduate commerce students' perception of employability during/after the COVID-19 pandemic, the factors associated with it and their understanding of employability.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate?

You will be asked to complete an online survey that includes demographic variables such as your age, gender and year of study. In addition, you will be asked to participate in an interview to explore your understanding of employability during a pandemic.

Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?

The researcher undertakes to protect your identity and the nature of your contribution. To ensure your anonymity, the surveys are anonymous and will contain no information that may personally identify you. Details of any information provided during the interviews will also be kept strictly confidential. Data collected will be kept in a password protected file on my personal computer and other saving devices. If I write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible.

What are the risks of this research?

All human interactions and talking about self or others carry some amount of risks. No foreseeable risks are expected in the study but I will act promptly to assist you if you experience any discomfort, psychological or otherwise during the process of your participation in this study. Where necessary, an appropriate referral will be made to a suitable professional for further assistance or intervention.

What are the benefits of this research?

The results of this research could provide guidance on how COVID-19 and future pandemics impact graduate employability by providing evidence-based advice to direct and deal with these challenges. Industrial psychology researchers could therefore address these challenges highlighted by innovating their work in support of employees, organisations, educational institutions and society at large.

Do I have to be in this research and may I stop participating at any time?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

What if I have questions?

This research is being conducted by Stephanie Phillips from the Department of Industrial Psychology at the University of the Western Cape. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact:

Stephanie Philips
Dept. of Industrial Psychology, UWC
3330725@myuwc.ac.za
mobile number: +27 72 842 5377

Should you have any questions regarding this study and your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact:

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Head of Department: Industrial Psychology
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bmahembe@uwc.ac.za

Prof Michelle Essau
Dean: Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
University of the Western Cape
Private Bag X17
Bellville 7535

This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.
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Appendix C

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CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: The impact of COVID-19 on the self-perceived employability and career planning of commerce students at a selected University in South Africa

The study has been described to me in language that I understand. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to participate of my own choice and free will. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed to anyone. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits.

☐ I agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.
☐ I do not agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.

Participant's name…………………………

Participant's signature……………………

Date………………………