

From the Deterioration of Higher Education to the Depression of Tunisian Graduates

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Abstract. The duration of unemployment, when it exceeds one year, mainly affects the psychology of unemployed graduates. They become discouraged and lose hope about their employability. In this article, we will deal with the psychological effects of unemployment among Tunisian graduates and propose employment policies that could remedy this scourge.

Keywords: unemployment of graduates, discouragement, hope for employability, devaluation of Tunisian diplomas, collapse of the Tunisian education system

Psychological Reactions to Unemployment: Theoretical Survey

Marie Demers (1983) has analyzed the literature from the United States, France, Great Britain and Australia, which highlights the changes that have taken place as well as the social problems that 'leads to this phenomenon.

For young people who find themselves unemployed, it is above all an individual situation in which their psychological condition and their daily experience will be affected. Their attitudes and behaviors will undergo changes which, sometimes, will last well beyond the period of unemployment.

The specificity of youth unemployment lies in the fact that it occurs at the time of professional integration; it therefore affects entry into working life by opening or closing access to certain jobs, by marking the first years of work, decisive years for becoming a professional (Demers, 1983).

According to the author (Demers 1983): "In the first weeks of looking for a job, young people do not consider themselves truly unemployed. Their free time makes them feel like they're on vacation". For many young people, this is due to the fact that the constraint of school attendance is over. This stage is described by Levine (1979) as a period of optimism where the individual feels free and relaxed. He thinks little about the long-term consequences of his inactivity; he has few responsibilities and seeks immediate gratification.

For some, this period would already be felt as an unpleasant shock (Harris, 1980), especially since they do not expect to be unemployed or to have difficulty finding a job. There appears to be a relationship between the length of schooling and expectations relating to a professional career.

In this context, the most affected individuals would be college and university graduates who had set fairly high professional employment goals.

This would then follow a very active period of job search in which all known avenues are explored. Moreover, young unemployed people make greater efforts to find work than older unemployed people (Winschuttle, 1979) and they are more successful than other age groups in their efforts (Girard, Gauthier & Vinet, 1978). It is during this period that many find work and it would last on average three months. For those who have not succeeded in their approach, hope and optimism turn into apprehension and pessimism (Harris, 1980). Levine (1979) describes this period as the stage of ambiguity. Inactivity becomes more difficult to endure, especially for unemployed young people whose friends go to school or work. Boredom predominates but there is also a feeling of isolation, of exclusion from the normal course of events.

Now the young unemployed person is exposed to social pressure (implicit or explicit) to find work, pressure which comes mainly from his parents and friends. At this stage, he

questions his competence and his personal value (Demers 1983). A survey of 314 young Germans, about half of whom were unemployed, revealed that almost all respondents accepted to some extent the idea of individual responsibility for unemployment (Braun, 1979). Despite the large number (one million) of unemployed people in their country, they tended to perceive unemployment as the consequence of a personal failure. According to the widely held belief, those who look for work will find it. According to Schneider (1977), this view of things can be explained by the fact that young people do not always understand the economic problems relating to the recession. They end up internalizing society's opinion of them.

Finally, the young unemployed person stops looking for work; he withdraws into himself and resigns himself to living without work. A survey carried out in Australia (reported by Demers, 1983) revealed that young unemployed people became irritable, withdrawn from the world, and often slept during the day so that time would pass more quickly. Those from lower socioeconomic levels were particularly lethargic and frequently gained weight. Many also developed negative attitudes toward work.

This is the stage of despair (Levine, 1979). The individual loses confidence in himself and in those around him. He is often angry with himself, with the education he received, with his parents. Depending on the level of support from the peer group, their distress may take the form of actions such as drug use, vandalism or other anti-social activities.

Repeated failures in job searches can lead to psychological changes in which fear of rejection and the desire to avoid it become the predominant motivation. In these circumstances, the best way for the individual to preserve psychological health is to completely cease the demoralizing search for employment (Winschuttle, 1979). This would explain, at least partially, the position of certain young people who claim to be lazy, not to want to work and to make better use of their time by not working (Braun, 1979). The acceptance of a marginal status in society would constitute a defense mechanism in response to repeated rejections from the world of work. But this struggle to adjust to repeated rejections would often lead to the development of behaviors that reduce the chances of success in obtaining employment. These behaviors can be seen as the result of the unemployment process and not as a cause of it (Harris, 1980).

Aside from adjustment reactions to unemployment, certain specific characteristics of the young person's personality have been studied in relation to being unemployed. It's about independence, identity and self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a variable of primary importance in the way young people perceive themselves and the world. It also has significant maturation power for several types of behavior. Moreover, it is inextricably linked to the emotional state of the individual. A reduction in self-esteem following job loss or inability to find work has been observed among unemployed people of all ages (Cohn, 1977; Harris, 1980; Hill, 1977).

Low self-esteem leads to demoralization and susceptibility to negative influences (Levine, 1979). According to Winschuttle (1979), it is the most important factor of depression; people who value themselves low are most likely to display social problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, mental illness and suicide.

The same author points out that low self-esteem would encourage two types of behavior: on the one hand, people would be more inclined to take risks and get involved in dangerous activities such as crime and drug use; on the other hand, they would also like to escape from themselves and their environment.

In a longitudinal study carried out among 412 young Australians, Gurney (1980a) observed no difference in self-esteem measured before the end of studies as well as four months later among those who had not found a job. But this could be due to the fact that these young people only had the impression of having experienced a prolonged holiday period and would

therefore not yet feel like truly unemployed. As summer vacations usually last a few months, the time frame considered would be too short to produce significant changes.

Even though many young people have not yet had a job, they have formed expectations about work. For many, the environment and socialization have encouraged the development of a self-concept where occupational function is important. In others, the self has not integrated work values as deeply. The experience of unemployment would be linked to the valuation of work (Demers, 1983).

Young people who live with their parents cope better with unemployment than adult workers who are heads of household, mainly because of the financial assistance they receive (Demers, 1983). But this period of inactivity makes them more dependent on the family, whether or not they have left the family home. The family then becomes the fallback structure for the young unemployed person. The period of unemployment is accompanied by a tightening of ties with it, whether in terms of housing, financial assistance or total support (Balazs, 1980).

Professional Aspirations and Expected Employability

The professional aspirations of young people have been the subject of a number of studies in the context of research on attitudes towards work.

The modification of professional aspirations following the experience of unemployment is, on the other hand, a theme that is still little explored. Many express their fears that the time spent unemployed would encourage the development of a negative attitude towards work.

According to Winschuttle (1979), one of the worst aspects of unemployment is that it forces young people to reevaluate their future and abandon the long-term plans they had envisaged for their career. Many have given up looking for a job of their choice and are willing to take on just about anything.

A study carried out in Federal Germany among 300 young people, the majority of whom were unemployed, shows that the occupational motivation of young people was centered on two points: interest in an activity bringing personal satisfaction, and the construction of a secure position for them. As job security becomes more important than personal interest in work, it makes it difficult to develop a positive attitude towards work. According to Schneider (1977), who reported this study, young people are not disinterested or unmotivated, but simply resigned. This is easy to understand if we look at the career prospects available to them.

Recent research suggests that the shrinking of the job market is one of the multiple factors which have contributed, among young people, to a questioning of work as the centrality of an individual's life. Rising unemployment, layoffs and the absence of job prospects are the fate of the majority of young people and are increasingly leading them to formulate new conceptions and adopt new behaviors with regard to work (Demers, 1983).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1980) notes the same characteristics among young people in their attitude towards work. Many young unemployed people with no qualifications present themselves as increasingly apathetic and cut off from their social environment; they hardly seek to improve their career prospects or actively escape the dead-end jobs that their low qualifications open up to them. Despite the lack of interesting opportunities on the local job market, many young people from low socio-economic families refuse to leave their locality to find better employment.

Beyond the individual experience of unemployment, this situation seems to favor the development of certain social pathologies. At least that is what emerges from the fears expressed about the possible effects of unemployment.

Brenner (1976) showed that changes in the unemployment rate impact a range of indicators of social stress.

The main problems are mainly: mental health, suicide, drug and alcohol use and crime.

Work on the Psychology of the Unemployed

- Unemployment has a negative impact on psychological well-being.

Research into the impact of unemployment on psychological health has a long history. The majority of authors emphasize in their research that job loss is a traumatic event, which generates stress and negative consequences. Generally speaking, the absence of employment would in itself be detrimental to psychological well-being. All literature, even the most recent, agrees on this point.

“The negative consequences of unemployment were first described in the 1930s by researchers such as Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel (1933/1972), Bakke (1933) and Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld (1938). These studies, based on a wide variety of both qualitative and quantitative research, show that the experience of unemployment is clearly negative and psychologically destructive (Ezzy, 1993). However, at that time, there was no scale to measure psychological health.”

In this context, more recent research has demonstrated that job loss leads to a decline in psychological well-being, compared to control groups of people who remain employed and independently of the level of psychological well-being prior to the job loss (e.g. Kessler, Turner & House, 1989).

This observation is also valid for self-esteem, both in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies (Waters & Moore, 2002a). These two authors emphasize “that low self-esteem can, in turn, negatively influence the probability of finding employment (Waters & Moore, 2002b). This is what Kasl (1982) calls the “reverse causal hypothesis.” For example, Iversen and Sabroe (1988) report that unemployed people who find work within a year have better psychological well-being (measured using the G.H.Q.) than those who remain unemployed. Similarly, Vinokur and Schul (1997) found that a perception of mastery (reflected in particular by self-esteem scores) significantly predicted re-employment over a six-month period.”

- The effects are not homogeneous.

Although Fryer (1995) notes that the results converge towards the general conclusion that unemployment is associated with poor psychological health, he also notes that the effects are not homogeneous. In other words, “while unemployment tends to be associated with low average psychological well-being scores for groups of unemployed people, not all individuals are similarly affected. Some suffer more than others and there may even be some whose psychological health improves” (Feather, 1997, p. 37).

Thus, unemployment cannot be considered “uniformly” negative, just as employment is not “uniformly” positive. We find these nuances from the first studies on unemployment. Thus, Bakke (1933) observes that certain people adapt to unemployment, finding it less unpleasant than employment, which for them refers to an oppressive occupation. Similarly, Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel (1933/1972, p. 53) note that while some families develop an attitude of resignation, others manage to maintain their psychological well-being, in which hope and plans for the future are maintained. In more contemporary studies, we find this type of results. Thus, Andersen (2002) observes on a sample of unemployed people that 34% of long-term unemployed people have a decline in psychological well-being but that 28% have an improvement in psychological well-being during their unemployment.

- Mediating variables: some examples.

The experience of unemployment can change significantly depending on many very diverse factors: age, gender, income, social supports, reasons for job loss, commitment to employment, satisfaction in previous employment, hope of finding a job again, duration of unemployment, causal attributions, etc.

It therefore seems entirely possible here to illustrate all the mediating variables studied. Martine Roques (2004) takes these few examples into consideration:

- Age:

Individuals experience unemployment differently depending on their age. For example, Broomhall and Winefield (1990) show that young people and those close to retirement are less affected than those in intermediate age.

- Genre:

Psychological reactions to unemployment would be different depending on gender. For example, Muller, Hicks and Winocur (1993) find that unemployed men have less energy, greater distress, tension and fatigue than unemployed women. In a longitudinal study, Lahelmo (1992), measuring psychological well-being using the G.H.Q., showed that men react more negatively to job loss than women. However, other studies produce opposite results. Thus, unemployed women would have significantly lower self-esteem scores than men (Warr and Jackson, 1983).

- Economic deprivation:

If “financial deprivation was frequently mentioned as being a major cause of the negative effects of unemployment during the great depression of the 1930s” (Feather, 1997, p. 37), in contemporary research, this factor has taken a less prominent place and rather plays the role of a moderating variable. Whelan (1992), in a study of 6764 people measured primary economic deprivation (e.g. lack of food, problem paying debts, etc.), family income and well-being. He observes that poverty mediates the impact of unemployment, in the “expected” direction: it is those who have the greatest financial difficulties who show the greatest deterioration in psychological well-being.

However, is the negative psychological effect of unemployment due only to financial pressure or does it also depend on the loss of other potential benefits of employment? The answer is not yet clear. On the one hand, studies report that financial pressure is the only factor that affects the psychological health of the unemployed. On the other hand, other studies have found negative effects on psychological well-being associated with job loss, even for unemployed people who received 90% of their previous income during the first year of unemployment (cf. Winefield et al., 2002).

- Awards:

According to attribution theories, the reasons invoked can be either internal (i.e. refer to factors specific to the person: personality, motivation, effort, capacities, skills, etc.), or external (i.e. that is to say, they refer to factors external to the person: circumstances, luck, chance, etc.). Attributions would constitute a mediating variable because they would influence the psychological and behavioral consequences of both positive and negative events. Research shows that attributions regarding job loss influence self-perception. Thus, making oneself personally responsible for one's unemployment (internal attribution) is associated with low self-esteem, whereas assigning responsibility to environmental factors (external attribution) would be associated with strong self-esteem or would not influence perception of oneself (Winefield et al., 1992). Likewise, an internal attribution to explain job loss would decrease life satisfaction and increase depression. Thus, “unemployed people who think they have been treated unfairly because of a personal factor (e.g. age) are those who feel the greatest psychological distress. The variability of psychological consequences is above all a function of the different attributions given to explain job loss” (Hanisch, 1999, P. 193). Likewise, higher internality would encourage the search for work (Fournier, Pelletier & Pelletier, 1993).

Without continuing this review of questions here, what are the first conclusions that we can draw from it?

1) On the one hand, the effects of unemployment are not homogeneous and linear, as the first studies suggested. This is not to deny that unemployment is a difficult situation, which can generate significant negative effects. However, like any traumatic situation, unemployment will lead to differential reactions, with some people reacting very negatively, others a little less and others finally managing to overcome and positive this situation.

2) On the other hand, these differential experiences, which are now recognized as obvious in contemporary literature, can be explained by taking into account variables mediators. However, these cannot be considered independently of each other, at the risk of leading to contradictory results. It is necessary to combine these mediating variables to analyze their combined effects on the experience of unemployment.

Recommendations for Employment Policies Inspired by our Approach based on Psycho-Sociological Characteristics

We will divide our recommendations into the following types of measures:

1. Measures relating to the socio-psychological characteristics of the unemployed

Indeed, the authorities must think about creating pre-employment or training positions before employment. These positions could be the same as those of SIVP1 but they will be filled by workers retiring soon. In this case, we will have a system of flows of outgoing workers and incoming workers. This measure will, on the one hand, ensure sustainable and sustained creation of job positions and on the other hand ensure the psychological factor of usefulness and importance both for the retiring worker and for the newly recruited trainee.

They must also encourage graduates to create their own projects and help them to better study them and promote employment for at least one young graduate for each low-income family. This recommendation was already cited in the Ben Ali regime but the implementation of which is ambiguous. After the revolution, the new leaders also promised to guarantee employment for at least one graduate in each family, but this did not go beyond the stage of promises. The problem, here too, is that employment offices do not carry out studies on the individual characteristics of graduates to know who are those who belong to really poor families. Also, it should be noted, several graduates have been included under the label of graduates belonging to a needy family when they are only acquaintances of a manager or having highly placed pistons. Such a measure could help reduce the unemployment rate if employment offices in all regions of Tunisia carry out an in-depth study on the individual characteristics of job seekers. Thus, those responsible could well target the graduates in question and reduce considerably both the number of unemployed graduates but also their feeling of exclusion and downgrading.

A second section of measures concerns employment offices. Indeed, according to the results of our fourth chapter, we were able to understand that the monitoring of the BNEC carried out since the start of the establishment of PAEs is not carried out in accordance with the standards and has not been improved in any way year to year. It would therefore be appropriate to follow up on registrants as required: trainee files must be carefully completed. Follow-ups must be carried out even after termination of the contract while indicating the causes of the trainee's departure from BNEC. To distribute BRECs throughout the republic in an equitable manner. To carry out inventories each year to count all graduates by name and specialty while indicating the individual characteristics of each graduate. To establish a link between universities and employment offices to be able to efficiently register new graduates at the end of each academic year. It would also be appropriate to carry out training cycles for the most disadvantaged graduates whose duration of unemployment exceeds 2 years and help them to always have hope.

2. The need to adopt job search assistance policies

Until today, job search activity is not considered as a strategy or an activity that should be oriented and managed also by employment offices. Indeed, ANETI and BNEC, in their various reports, have not yet considered that the trajectories of job seekers are often arbitrary. The unemployed, not being well informed, find themselves faced with a job market in which they do not know all the information.

On a practical level, this measure can be applied in collaboration with university establishments which should also better guide their graduates.

3. Measures relating to academic establishments

Indeed, the government must review the policy followed in terms of success in secondary and higher education. It must also eliminate mass successes which only increase the mass of unemployed graduates.

We must also think about slowing down creations or controlling private universities and high schools which only inflate the grades awarded and which make the diploma like a commodity to be sold to the wealthiest.

It is also necessary to limit access to specialties which are saturated in terms of hiring and create sectors adapted to the requirements of the Tunisian labor market.

In this context, a study carried out by ANETI recommended that “universities must identify mechanisms to adjust the flow of students who follow the different diplomas/specialties and better align the supply of skills with the needs of the economy. Future readjustments should encourage an increase in engineering training, the share of which remains small in order to comply with the requirements of a knowledge-based economy. At the same time, flows into legal sciences and the tertiary sector should be reduced. If the Tunisian university is judged not to be reactive, not to adapt to market trends, to be disconnected from the needs of businesses, to launch graduates onto the market who are incapable of integrating into it, and so on. be largely the source of massive unemployment among higher education graduates given the imbalance between the skills of young university graduates and the qualifications that employers seek; this judgment can only be fair if we take into account the means and fields of action available to it.

Among the solutions that have been proposed are those suggesting that the university must listen to its environment, local and international, and attentive to its needs. This could be achieved through openness to the socio-economic environment by allowing its representatives to take part in the governance of universities and by ensuring the passage of scientific and/or human discoveries towards society and the economy. Others have suggested making university courses more flexible and creating sectors that converge with new professions and new technologies.

The reform projects follow one another and are similar, and follow the cycle of ministerial reshuffles. Their contents end up resembling electoral manifestos, as the objectives, sub-objectives and actions to be undertaken are disconnected from the reality on the ground and inapplicable given the legal framework which governs Tunisian higher education.

Could this therefore be a problem linked to its internal mode of operation, to the inertia and compartmentalization of teaching staff or even to the legal framework governing it?

To be practical and operational, let us start from the results of the work of the National Reform Commission and recorded in the “Higher education and scientific research reform project 2015 – 2025”. The latter, through a diagnosis by the Tunisian university, highlighted eight observations:

- Deterioration in the level of entrants to the University.
- Mismatch between student characteristics and available resources.
- Deterioration of teaching and university life conditions.
- Absence of quality measurement indicators in training and supervision.
- Increase in graduate unemployment.
- Lack of good governance, university autonomy and management flexibility.
- Lack of anchoring of universities in their regional environment, regional imbalance and dispersion of the university map.
- Weak performance of the scientific research system, particularly in the area of innovation, development and the creation of businesses with high added value.

In this regard, two questions arise:

- What role was played by the Tunisian university? Did she participate actively or passively in the degradation of her environment?

“The creation, suppression and evaluation of the training course and research structures are the exclusive responsibility of the ministry through national commissions whose sole role is to ensure that existing legal texts are respected.

The establishment of the LMD system was not preceded by an upgrade of the administration so that it was capable of managing inter-branch and inter-institutional mobility which are the very essence of this system. Furthermore, this system was "Tunisified", that is to say completely distorted and denatured for purely political and populist considerations through the standardization of training programs on a national scale, the introduction of a system compensation between subjects, the principle of the higher grade, repurchase, etc. Finally, the ISETs, whose primary role was to train senior technicians in order to meet the needs of an industrial fabric made up of 97% SMEs, saw their mission diverted following their integration into the LMD system, which led to the removal of the higher technician diploma and its replacement by that of the applied license. Recently, these institutions have even been authorized to issue Master's degrees, which will completely erase their primary specificity. (ISETs have the best employability rate)”.

4. Some recommendations concerning the education system

Universities and academic institutions should be considered as companies producing a service and operating in a competitive environment. And therefore, subject them to a management mode specific to companies operating in a competitive environment and where quality control at all stages of the production process is the rule (inputs and outputs).

In order to remedy the shortcomings already mentioned, we are submitting for debate some reform proposals proposed by ANETI which can revitalize the sector and make it capable of facing both international and national competition.

- “Establish competition between university institutions in terms of training provision. This competition will make it possible to remedy the leveling down introduced by the standardization of training and programs and also to adapt training to the environment in which the institutions are anchored.

These institutions, either within themselves or at the level of the universities to which they are affiliated, will have to set up monitoring services for their graduates, and thus evaluate the performance of each of their diplomas in terms of placement. The aim is to strengthen the capacities of efficient training courses by making adjustments, or to intervene in time to eliminate those which are not performing well.

- Establish invoicing for services offered by university institutions to the Ministry of Higher Education, with the latter responsible for recovering the amounts invoiced from beneficiaries by modulating it according to the level of parents' income. Because it is not normal for all students to be treated in the same way regardless of their parents' income level. This will allow the ministry to free up funds which will enable it to improve the infrastructure. Thus, families and students will have an idea of the expenses incurred by the community for their benefit, and will prevent some from fleeing their responsibilities towards the community by refusing to reimburse part of the sacrifices made by the community by performing civil service in the regions (especially doctors).

- Establish teaching and research institutions of excellence in all branches. Generalize the experience of the "Tunis Business School" to all other branches (economics, physics, chemistry, etc.), in order to attract the best teachers and researchers and thus constitute locomotives which would have the function of pulling upwards the sector”.

- What is the role of the ministry: operator or regulator?

According to ANETTI, it is necessary to clearly “clarify the role of the ministry, knowing that the regulatory bodies are themselves responsible for the control and production of the public service. Sometimes the distribution of tasks and responsibilities between the State and the private sector are not sufficiently clear. Is the role of the private sector to complement public education or compensate for inefficiencies in the public sector?”

At the ministry level, there is a confusion of roles and a blatant conflict of interests, knowing that the regulatory bodies are themselves responsible for the control and production of the public service. The sector is not regulated effectively and is not really closed to the private sector either. It is controlled by the public sector even though the latter does not have the means (material, human and especially in terms of governance) to be efficient. In this case, a choice is inevitable. If private education is accepted, there would need to be a reform of the way the sector is regulated. The two functions of the ministry, namely regulation and control on the one hand and production of the service on the other, must be separated. If the management of the system and the production of the education service remains the responsibility of the ministry, the role of accreditation and control of private establishments should fall to independent bodies. To do this, an autonomous and independent evaluation and accreditation body should be established.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to analyze and explain integration, precisely its weakness, by the individual characteristics of SIVP1 trainees.

Faced with the absence of empirical data concerning personal and psychological variables, we conducted, on our own, a telephone survey of 1180 trainees. The investigation lasted 21 days and, to facilitate its completion, we deployed four collaborators whose assistance was invaluable. The interviewees were interviewed in a professional manner, presenting us as BNEC executives whose mission was to complete their registration files.

Thanks to this survey we were therefore able to complete the BNEC database, which was provided to us after a long period of waiting. We were therefore able to have a database including the identification variables provided by the BNEC, the personal and psychological variables provided by our survey.

In the first section of this chapter we presented the data relating to the three categories of variables, namely identification variables, personal variables and psychological variables. In the second section, we presented our estimation methodology and we presented our results which confirmed that psychological variables largely affect integration and explain its weakness. This is how we have proven that the most disadvantaged are the trainees belonging to interior areas, whose study specialty is other than engineering or technical branches, whose parents have a low to medium income, whose number of brothers in the care of the parents is quite high, and the number of non-integrated trainees is high. We were also able to demonstrate that psychological variables positively or negatively affect the effort of trainees and therefore their integration. Positively to know: the intention to participate in this internship, motivation by employment, optimism, compatibility between internship and qualification and the willingness to lower the expected salary. Negative things to know: access to the internship without pistons, monitoring of the BNEC, supervision during the internship and integration.

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