

# Exploring the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Employability of First-generation College Graduates in the Israeli Periphery

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## Abstract

While the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students of higher education has been studied extensively, the impact of the pandemic on the employability of fresh college graduates has received relatively limited scholarly attention. This exploratory study deciphers the job-seeking experiences of first-generation college graduates in the periphery of Israel who began their attempts to enter the labor force in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted during 2021 with a sample of 24 participants. The findings indicate that these freshly graduated first-generation academics experienced challenges that hampered their chances of both short- and long-term employability. This study provides a critical perspective on the capacity of academic institutions to prepare graduates for volatile post-Covid19 labor markets. Practical implications are offered.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, employability, first-generation college graduates, higher education

## 1. Introduction

While the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students of higher education has been studied extensively (e.g., Aristovnik et al., 2020), the impact of the pandemic on the employability of fresh college graduates has received relatively limited scholarly attention. This study aims to fill this lacuna. Considering the market-oriented turn in academia and given the vast taxpayers' resources spent on public higher education, there is an ongoing debate regarding the impact of academic credentials on employability. Employing Clarke's (2017) analytic framework of graduate employability, this ethnographic study aims to explore the job-seeking experiences of first-generation college graduates living in the periphery of Israel during the first year of Covid-19.

### 1.1 The debate regarding higher education graduate employability

There is an ongoing debate regarding the impact of higher education on social inequality, particularly in terms of graduate employability (Dey & Hurtado, 1995; Gurin et al., 2002; Mayhew et al., 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Quaye et al., 2019). On the one hand, some consider higher education to be a valuable tool for the upward mobility of underprivileged groups due to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are valued in the labor market (Stoll & Brown, 2019). Students of higher education worldwide are encouraged to see their learning as an investment that will be rewarded by prospective employers, even though the relationship between educational credentials and their returns in the labor market has changed

significantly (Tomlinson, 2008). In response to increasing pressure from stakeholders such as governments and employers, academic institutions have incorporated various skill-based learning outcomes into degree programs. The latter are expected to increase graduate employability (Clarke, 2017; Holmes, 2013). Examples of market-oriented content embedded in higher education include entrepreneurship education programs (Komulainen et al., 2020; Kuna & Nadiv, 2021) and work placements (Allen et al., 2013).

On the other hand, evidence suggests that higher education may not provide all its presumed advantages. The various mechanisms through which academic institutions might create and exacerbate social inequality have been studied extensively (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2019; Allen, & Hollingworth, 2013; Gabriel, 2020; Morales, 2014). For example, Allen et al. (2013) identified practices and discourses through which students in higher education work placements were produced as “neoliberal subjects.” Some students, however, were excluded from this process, because normative evaluations of ‘successful’ and ‘employable’ students were classed, raced and gendered. Allen et al. (2013) concluded that work placements operated as a domain in which inequalities within both higher education and the labor market are reproduced and sustained. In a similar vein, entrepreneurial narratives presented as identity models in higher education were not equally accessed by lower-class students and women (Komulainen et al., 2020).

### **1.2 The concept of graduate employability**

While graduate employability has become a key driver for academic institutions worldwide (Holmes, 2013), the concept of employability has been analyzed from different perspectives. Holmes (2013) examined three competing concepts of employability, which he termed the “possessive,” “positioning” and “processual” approaches. The possessive approach, which is based on notions of human capital (skills and attributes), dominates the discourse of policy and practice. The positioning perspective focuses on social capital (networks, social class), and the processual approach focuses on the concept of graduate identity, which sustains career self-management (Holmes, 2013). Claiming that the instrumental approach of academic institutions to graduate employability has failed to incorporate critical factors, Clarke (2017) developed an alternative framework that incorporates six key dimensions – human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviors, perceived employability and labor market factors. This study employs Clarke’s (2017) analytic framework of graduate employability.

### **1.3 The research context: The Israeli labor market**

Israeli society is complex in terms of socioeconomic diversity and inequality (Kuna & Nadiv, 2019; Nadiv & Kuna, 2020). Over the years, neoliberalism has intensified income inequalities besides exacerbating the marginalization of minorities in the Israeli labor market (Mundlak, 2017). Consequently, a sharp hierarchy in the stratification system has become institutionalized in the Israeli labor market. While the success of Israel’s hi-tech sector has attracted ample attention from the global business press, this wealth does not characterize all of Israel’s regions but only its center. The Israeli geographical periphery, on which this study focuses, is typically associated with educational disparities and poverty.

Regarding Israeli higher education and inequality, Abu-Rabia-Queder (2019) claimed that, paradoxically, policies designed to promote minority groups (e.g., Ethiopian Jews) by providing them with opportunities in institutions of higher learning bolster the reproduction of national and religious supremacy of hegemonic groups in Israeli academia. Considering

the economic tensions between the Israeli center and periphery, a college in the southern Israeli periphery provides a suitable setting for exploring the experiences of first-generation fresh college graduates as jobseekers during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the following section, I specify the methodological approach. Then I present the findings. In the final section, I briefly discuss the findings and offer practical implications.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Sample

The participants in this study were 24 (12 women, 12 men) first-generation college graduates who graduated towards the end of 2019. All of them graduated from a college in the southern periphery of Israel, where they live. They began their attempts to enter the labor force in early 2020, along with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants responded to a written invitation regarding the research that was sent by email to a group of 60 former students of the author. Their average age was 27, and 50% of them were single.

### 2.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilized to facilitate participants' descriptions of their experiences as jobseekers. The author conducted such interviews individually with each participant. The author employed Clarke's (2017) theoretical framework by presenting questions relating to six key dimensions of graduate employability – human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviors, perceived employability and labor market factors. Several predetermined questions that were presented to each interviewee explored their conceptions of these six dimensions. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes on average. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. All interviewees gave their informed consent to participating in the study and were assured confidentiality.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

In the subsequent phase of thematic content analysis, guided by Creswell and Poth (2017), the author coded each interview. For each interview, codes were assigned to units of several sentences. The first round of open coding yielded several initial codes, such as job-seeking challenges, the benefits of higher education credentials, and more. Each interview yielded coded categories, which were then analyzed to discover major systematic content themes. Further analysis assisted in narrowing down the categories into several major themes. Finally, the author analyzed the interactions between the different themes and their possible meanings. This systematic process continued until all the data was analyzed thoroughly.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 First-generation college graduates' perceived employability

As fresh college graduates, the participants in this study had initially felt optimistic regarding their prospective employability. They had assumed that their diploma would open many doors and enhance their employability both in the periphery and in the center of Israel, to where some planned to commute. This positive expectation was reported as significant by the study participants, considering that they live in an economic and geographical periphery where attractive employment opportunities are relatively scant. Furthermore, as first-generation college graduates, the study participants had expected academic credentials to

bolster their employability in comparison to members of their age cohorts who had not acquired academic credentials.

After graduating from college, however, all the participants in this study have struggled constantly to find degree-relevant work in the periphery. Soon after their graduation, the outbreak of Covid-19 exacerbated the scarcity of degree-relevant jobs in the periphery, which also led to rising polarization between “bad jobs” (part-time, low-skilled and temporary) and “good jobs.” During 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the study participants were offered mostly low-skilled part-time jobs that did not require academic credentials or provide them with meaningful occupational experiences. Consequently, these first-generation academics reported having lowered their occupational expectations and intentions, perceiving their employability to be very low.

### **3.2 Labor market factors**

Macroeconomic factors, including the nature of demand for labor in the instable and volatile economy of the pandemic, have significantly impacted the number of job vacancies and where those vacancies are located. The first year of the pandemic has been a period of reduced labor market demand, so even highly employable graduates living in the Israeli periphery (e.g., computer science graduates) have struggled to find degree-relevant work. Given their low geographical mobility, these fresh graduates have been hampered by the fewer work options in their region. Furthermore, considering the unprecedented economic uncertainty, employers have increased their use of part-time, temporary or casual employees rather than hire fulltime workers.

### **3.3 Human capital and social capital**

Despite having acquired skills and knowledge during their academic studies, which are considered valuable human capital, the graduates in this study conceived social capital to be a prerequisite for their success in the Israeli labor market during the first year of Covid-19. Considering their limited social capital (low social class, small networks, and no access to gatekeepers in the labor market), the study participants reported recurring experiences as unwelcome job candidates in comparison to other jobseekers who had better social capital. Social class differences between the periphery and center generated obstacles for these fresh first-generation academics that were already underprivileged with respect to access to the social capital associated with prominent employers who represent hegemonic groups in Israeli society.

### **3.4 Employability**

Considering the above interrelated dimensions, first-generation fresh graduates have reported hardship in securing proper degree-relevant employability during the first year of Covid-19. The outcome of these constraints has been long-term unemployment (4 months and upward) for 75% of the participants in this study. Furthermore, the participants’ negative experiences as jobseekers have significantly affected their prospective employability. The participants reported that the pandemic has hampered their chances of both short- and long-term employability, because the lack of occupational experience in the short run exacerbates their chances of finding stable skilled jobs which require prior experience, and vice versa. This vicious circle has led some of the interviewees to conclude that their monetary investment in higher education has exacerbated rather than alleviated geographical and economic disparities.

## 4. Discussion

Based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with a sample of first-generation college graduates in the periphery of Israel, the aim of this study was to explore their job-seeking experiences in the unprecedented setting of the Covid-19 labor market. The findings indicate that these freshly graduated first-generation academics experienced significant challenges that hampered their chances of both short- and long-term employability. While they acknowledge the unusual effect of the pandemic on the labor market, these college graduates' experience of low employability has aroused their skepticism as regards the potential of academic credentials to alleviate geographical and economic disparities. Considering the ongoing debate regarding the impact of higher education on social inequality, these findings contribute to the critical perspective of higher education as an avenue of social mobility through employability (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2019; Clarke, 2017). The findings also echo previous analysis of the pandemic as exacerbating social and economic inequalities (Bapuji et al., 2020; Maestriperi, 2021).

Practical implications are offered. The findings shed light on the role of academia in preparing students in their last stages of study to contend with the foreseen obstacles they are expected to encounter as jobseekers, particularly in times of economic crisis and unusual circumstances. Being properly prepared for the hardship of job-seeking may advance the success of young academics, particularly first-generation graduates with limited social capital, during their attempts to find proper degree-relevant work.

### 4.1 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This exploratory study has some limitations. First, I have not included a comparison to students in other academic institutions in Israel. Second, the study is based on a medium-sized sample of former students who expressed their willingness to be interviewed. Finally, this qualitative study did not obtain quantitative data. Prospective research may overcome the limitations of this study by delving further into an array of issues: Do specific environmental circumstances trigger different types of challenges for fresh college graduates? What factors may foster graduates' success in entering the labor market during times of crisis? I hope that future research will provide the necessary insights.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has explored the job-seeking experiences of first-generation fresh college graduates living in the Israeli periphery during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. In sum, contrary to their expectations as regards their academic credentials, first-generation graduates experienced job-seeking challenges that hampered their chances of proper employability.

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