

III INDIVIDUALS AND EMPLOYABILITY IN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

Graduates' Vulnerability and Struggles with Long-Term Unemployment in Tunisia

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Introduction

Unemployment remains a major structural challenge in developing countries, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Tunisia exemplifies this challenge, recording one of the highest rates of graduate unemployment in the region (Assaad & Krafft, 2023; Ateb, 2020; Belgacem & Vacher, 2023). As of January 2025, the overall unemployment rate stood at approximately 15%, while unemployment among university graduates reached around 25%, up from 23% in 2024 (INS, 2025). This pattern indicates that individuals in Tunisia with higher educational attainment are particularly exposed to labour market exclusion, pointing to a persistent mismatch between education systems and labour market demand (Garraoui, 2024).

While research generally indicates that the risk of unemployment declines with age, this pattern does not consistently hold for Tunisian graduates. Many continue to face prolonged difficulties in securing stable employment that matches their qualifications and career aspirations, making long-term and recurrent unemployment a structural characteristic of Tunisia's graduate labour market. This finding aligns with comparative research highlighting contrasting patterns across contexts: in developing countries such as Tunisia – the focus of this study – highly educated individuals often face greater labour market vulnerability (Assaad & Krafft, 2023), whereas in developed countries, higher education typically reduces the risk of long-term unemployment (Garrouste et al., 2010; Pohlen, 2019).

Long-term unemployment carries substantial economic and personal costs, undermining labour productivity and reducing returns on education (Lockwood, 1991), while also producing social and health consequences such as income loss, financial insecurity, declining well-being, and adverse mental health outcomes (Aaronson et al., 2010; Couch et al., 2013; Mossakowski, 2009). Over time, skill depreciation and the erosion of professional networks further weaken employability, particularly compared to short-term unemployment (Abraham et al., 2019; Jackman & Layard, 1991).

Building on these theoretical insights, this study examines the dimensions, causes, and consequences of long-term graduate unemployment in Tunisia, focusing on individuals aged 40 to 44 who have perceived themselves as unemployed for over 15 years – an understudied group in the labour market. Using a mixed-methods approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with four graduates in Greater Tunis, while quantitative data from a broader PhD study – including 360 graduates aged 24 to 44 with diverse employment experiences – were used to contextualise personal narratives within broader social and demographic patterns. While quantitative data provide structural context, qualita-

tive narratives offer nuanced insights into the personal, social, and economic impacts of persistent unemployment.

The study addresses three main research questions: How can the multifaceted dimensions of long-term unemployment be effectively analysed given discrepancies between official statistics and societal perceptions? What are the key factors contributing to long-term unemployment among graduates aged 40 to 44 who have remained unemployed for over 15 years? What are the social, psychological, and economic impacts of long-term unemployment on graduates?

The chapter is structured into eight sections. Following this introduction, a literature review outlines theoretical frameworks guiding the study. The methodology section details sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures. Subsequent sections present the participants' demographic, academic, and professional profiles, explore definitions and perceptions of graduate unemployment, and examine the rise of graduate unemployment in Tunisia. The factors and impacts of long-term unemployment are then discussed, followed by a conclusion synthesising key findings.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have explored the subject of long-term unemployment from various perspectives. Some have concentrated on the measurement aspects, investigating how to quantify unemployment duration through models and statistical hypotheses, as well as identifying the indicators that might influence it. Garrouste et al. (2010) and Pohlen (2019) examine the relationship between long-term unemployment and educational attainment, finding a negative association in developed countries, where higher education is linked to lower long-term unemployment. Conversely, in developing nations, the trend appears to be reversed, as demonstrated by Assaad and Krafft (2023).

In addition, the impact of long-term unemployment on both the economy and individuals has been extensively analysed, revealing significant and multifaceted consequences. Lockwood (1991) pointed out that long-term unemployment among skilled workers leads to a decrease in labour force productivity, as valuable human capital remains underutilised. This underemployment results in a loss of economic efficiency and slows down overall economic growth. Graduates who have invested substantial time and resources in their education, skills, and health find that prolonged periods of unemployment severely diminish the expected returns on these investments, weakening both individual career trajectories and national development prospects (Becker, 1964; Sweetland, 1996). Furthermore, long-term unemployment can erode professional networks and reduce employability over time, creating a vicious cycle of exclusion from the labour market. At the individual level, persistent unemployment exerts a substantial psychological toll. The mental health consequences are significant, with long-term joblessness associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and emotional distress. Empirical studies further link chronic unemployment to increased risks of substance abuse and elevated mortality rates (Couch et al., 2013; Mossakowski, 2009). Beyond these direct effects, the social stigma attached to prolonged unemployment often leads to social withdrawal and marginalisation, intensifying psychological strain and further impeding individuals' reintegration into the labour market.

Moreover, long-term unemployment negatively affects individuals' incomes and financial stability, resulting in a downturn in their savings and essential resources needed to support themselves and their families (Aaronson et al., 2010). It also jeopardises social stability, affecting their ability to keep their families safe, remain integrated into society, and fulfil their roles as active social participants (Currie & Schwandt, 2014; Hiswåls et al., 2017; Marcus, 2013; Oesch & Lipps, 2013; Pohlen, 2019; Schöb, 2021). This situation is compounded by the erosion of skills, qualifications, and social networks, which significantly hinders an individual's ability to secure employment and manage the length of their unemployment, particularly when compared to those facing short-term unemployment (Abraham et al., 2019; Hahn et al., 2015; Jackman & Layard, 1991). The aforementioned authors agree that individuals experiencing long-term unemployment are less equipped to cope with their situation, report lower satisfaction upon returning to work, and are more likely to struggle with job retention.

Methods

The data utilised in this study was gathered as part of a fieldwork for a PhD research project. The fieldwork was conducted in the Greater Tunis area, covering four governorates (districts): Tunis, Ariana, Manouba, and Ben Arous in Tunisia. The data collection for the PhD research took place over four months from July to November 2021, with the specific data used in this paper being gathered in October 2021. It is worth noting that during the summer of 2021, Tunisia was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing its highest recorded rates of infection and mortality (World Bank, 2021, 2022). This situation may have directly or indirectly impacted the collected data, with female participants exhibiting more caution and reluctance to take part in in-depth interviews due to concerns about the risk of infection.

This study involved qualitative data collected from interviews with graduates aged between 40 and 44 who have perceived themselves as unemployed for over 15 years and are currently residing in Greater Tunis. The interviews were conducted in public places such as coffee shops and lasted between 60 minutes and 2 hours and 37 minutes. Each interview consisted of 10 key semi-structured questions, carefully designed to explore the interviewees' academic background, employment history, and perspectives on the underlying causes of long-term graduate unemployment. Additionally, the questions aimed to capture the personal and societal impacts of prolonged unemployment, including its effects on career development, mental well-being, and social integration. To ensure effective communication, the interviews were carried out in the Tunisian dialect.

The qualitative data were collected through phone interviews, transcribed manually in Arabic, and analysed using MAXQDA. A combination of deductive and inductive coding strategies was employed. Initially, deductive codes were developed based on predefined keywords and analytical categories. These were subsequently refined through a thematic, inductive process that captured emerging patterns related to participants' profiles, educational trajectories, and professional experiences. During coding, some categories were revised or replaced to reflect clearer or more relevant findings.

The analysis then focused on identifying relationships between expressions, themes, and narratives across interviews. Comparisons between respondents revealed recurring factors, shared experiences, and points of divergence. Specific episodes and individual trajectories were highlighted to illustrate

key phenomena, supported by memos, colour coding, and thematic clustering. In the final stage, quotations were selected, organised by theme, translated into English, and incorporated into the analysis as empirical evidence supporting the study’s arguments.

To provide a broader context for the qualitative data, I supplemented it with quantitative data collected from a sample of 360 graduates aged between 24 and 44, representing diverse employment statuses and residing in the Greater Tunis area (Garraoui, 2024). This quantitative data was gathered during the same research period and analysed using SPSS software to produce statistical tables, descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations, thereby highlighting significant relationships between key variables. The integration of quantitative findings enriched the overall analysis by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns and trends underlying graduate unemployment. Moreover, it helped to contextualise the qualitative narratives, offering participants and researchers alike a clearer framework within which to interpret individual experiences and perceptions.

Biographical profile of the interviewees

To fully comprehend the content presented in this paper, it is imperative to establish a profile of the selected interviewees. Gaining insight into the background and identity of the individuals involved is crucial in shedding light on the subject matter. Participants were selected based on criteria such as age, year of graduation, and the duration of their unemployment. All interviewees are over 40 years old, indicating that they have completed the transition from education to the labour market and from youth to adulthood, often accompanied by changes in family status, such as marriage. Age is closely associated with year of graduation, with older participants having completed their degrees further in the past. A central focus of this study is the prolonged duration of unemployment: all participants reported, from their own perspective, experiencing unemployment for 15 years or more following the completion of their higher education degrees (see Table 12.1).

Table 12.1. *Biographical profiles of the informants*

Names*	Age	Official employment status	Self-perceived employment status	Marital Status	Year of graduation	Degree	Discipline	Sectors	Duration of unemployment **
Ahmed	40	under-employed	unemployed	married	2005	BA	physical sciences	informal	16
Hanan	43	under-employed	unemployed	married	2002	BA	Manufacturing electricity	informal	19
Hafedh	44	under-employed	unemployed	single	2002	BA	Arabic studies	informal	19
Rami	42	under-employed	unemployed	married	2006	BA	geography studies	private	15

* Pseudonymised names were assigned by the author to protect the identity of the participants and do not reflect their real names, in accordance with ethical research practices.

** The duration of unemployment among participants is based on their self-reported information.

Source: Authors’ original work derived from field research data

The paper highlights an uneven gender distribution among the informants, with three male and one female participant. In terms of marital status, three speakers are married, while one male speaker is single (see Table 12.1). All speakers hold a bachelor's degree in various fields such as physical sciences and electricity manufacturing, Arabic studies, and geography studies. The diversity in their academic backgrounds is crucial as it provides a range of voices and experiences.

Rethinking Unemployment Duration: Insights from Official Statistics and Social Perceptions

The employment status of the informants; whether unemployed, employed, or underemployed; illustrates the challenges of defining unemployment, particularly when societal perceptions diverge from official definitions. Discrepancies exist between the labour market's official perspective and social expectations, especially regarding public sector positions in Tunisia. Since the 1990s, government policies have reduced public sector job creation, encouraging graduates to seek employment in the private sector or pursue entrepreneurship (Ben Sedrine, 2000; Gouider, 2013; Ridha et al., 2018). Despite these measures, graduates continue to favour public sector roles due to perceived job security, social prestige, and superior working conditions (Assaad & Krafft, 2023; Belgacem & Vacher, 2023; Boughzala, 2016; Flayols et al., 2019). Consequently, society often regards public-sector employees as "truly employed," while those in the private sector, informal work, or family businesses are frequently considered unemployed or underemployed (Garraoui, 2024).

In Tunisia, the official definition of graduate unemployment, as applied by the National Institute of Statistics (*Institut National de la Statistique*, INS), follows the standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO). According to the ILO, unemployment refers to working-age individuals who are not engaged in paid employment or self-employment during a reference period, are available for work, and are actively seeking employment. Graduate unemployment applies these criteria specifically to holders of higher education degrees (INS, 2014; International Labour Organization, 2013; 2018). The duration of unemployment is defined as the period during which individuals aged 15 and older remain without paid work or self-employment while being available for and actively seeking employment, with long-term unemployment identified when joblessness exceeds two years (INS, 2014).

However, applying these official definitions to the experiences of graduates is often problematic, as societal perceptions of unemployment frequently diverge from institutional criteria. Graduates may include periods of informal, intermittent, or precarious work in their own understanding of being "unemployed," creating a gap between lived experience and formal measurement (Garraoui, 2024). Understanding this discrepancy between official statistics and social perceptions is central to this study, as it shapes how long-term graduate unemployment is experienced, interpreted, and navigated in practice.

Beyond the issues discussed above, an important distinction emerges between the participants' subjective perceptions of unemployment duration and its official statistical definition. While the participants self-identified as having been unemployed for 15 years or more, they were, in practice, engaged during this period in informal activities, private-sector jobs, family businesses, or unpaid labour. According

to official statistical standards, such forms of activity would classify them as employed when formally declared, or as unemployed when undeclared (INS, 2014), thereby highlighting limitations in the official measurement of unemployment (Garraoui, 2024). This discrepancy constitutes a key finding of the study, revealing a significant gap between institutional definitions of employment and socially constructed perceptions of unemployment. It underscores the need to analytically distinguish between these two frameworks, as they rest on fundamentally different assumptions and lead to divergent interpretations of labour market trajectories and processes of exclusion. To reconcile the complex positions of the understudied discussed here within a broader context, I utilised a larger sample as it provides more insights regarding the positions, contexts, and larger groups and categories for whom the interviewed in this paper speak.

In my analysis, I focused on two specific approaches. The first approach involved a set of targeted questions aimed at understanding the interviewees' current employment status. These questions addressed whether the individual is currently employed; if employed, whether their job aligns with their field of study; if unemployed, the reasons for their unemployment; whether they have actively sought employment within the past four weeks; and whether they are available and ready to work. This helped establish the interviewee's official employment status.

The second approach examined graduates' perceptions of their own employment status. To capture their self-identification, I asked: "Do you consider yourself unemployed?" By combining this subjective dimension with the official classification, the findings reveal three distinct categories: (1) individuals who are officially classified as unemployed and perceive themselves as such; (2) individuals who are officially classified as employed but consider themselves unemployed; and (3) individuals who are officially classified as unemployed but do not perceive themselves that way (Garraoui, 2024). Table 12.2 demonstrates that 20 employed graduates, who work in the same field as their education, nonetheless identify themselves as unemployed. In contrast, 33 graduates who are underemployed (working in a field different from their education) also consider themselves unemployed. Additionally, there are 110 individuals who are officially classified as unemployed and perceive themselves in the same way. The first two groups support the earlier findings regarding the categories of unemployed graduates, as they see themselves as unemployed despite being officially employed.

Table 12.2. *Graduates' Self-perceptions of employment status crossed with their officially defined employment status*

Graduate's Self-perceptions of employment status	Employment status based on the official definition			Total
	Employed in the same field of their education	Underemployed (working in a different field of their education)	Unemployed	
Yes	20	33	110	163
No	114	55	28	197
Total	134	88	138	360

Source: Authors' original work derived from field research data

The four individuals discussed in this study are officially classified as underemployed graduates, particularly when informal sector work is recognised as valid employment. Until 2021, the INS did

not formally distinguish between formal and informal employment, given the undeclared nature of informal activities, nor did it clearly differentiate between unemployment and underemployment. This lack of distinction persists despite the significant expansion of informal work in Tunisia (Ben Cheikh, 2022; Garraoui, 2024; World Bank, 2022). However, the participants perceive themselves as unemployed. To reflect this distinction, this study uses two categories of employment status – unemployed and underemployed (Table 12.1) – highlighting the gap between official definitions and societal perceptions. All four work in jobs unrelated to their qualifications: three in the informal sector without contracts, social insurance, or guaranteed earnings, and one in the private sector with a formal contract and benefits. Despite being underemployed, they consider themselves unemployed. These four interviewees represent 12% of a larger group of 33 participants (Table 12.2).

In addition, this study examines unemployment duration by focusing on the interviewees' perceptions rather than on official definitions. Their accounts often include informal, short-term, or temporary work, which official statistics rarely capture. In Tunisia, informal-sector jobs are undeclared and lack formal recognition (Ben Cheikh, 2022; Garraoui, 2024; World Bank, 2022). Consequently, graduates without private-sector contracts or social insurance remain officially registered as unemployed, even if they are working informally, as illustrated by Hafedh, Hanan, and Ahmed. In contrast, Rami held formal private-sector positions, making his perception of unemployment inconsistent with official data. In this context, Ahmed remarked:

Since 2005, when I graduated, I have been unemployed. Since then, I have not worked in any profession in the public or private sector. I have only done a few tasks in order to keep life from stopping, I do some private tutoring (October 2021).

Hanan confirmed this when discussing her own employment status as well as that of her brothers and sisters:

We are all unemployed. Although my brother works in the agricultural sector, my sister manages her household, and my other brother moves from one job to another in private companies (October 2021).

The discrepancy between the official definition of unemployment and the societal perception of what constitutes a job has added complexity to the analysis of the unemployment issue and its duration. This has heightened the concerns of graduates who fear that their unemployment duration may be extended, despite being engaged in temporary work to make ends meet.

Graduates' Increased Vulnerability and Concern Regarding Long-Term Unemployment

In Tunisia, unemployment has long been a major concern, affecting various social groups before and after independence in 1956. Initially, it primarily impacted those without higher education, while graduates benefited from public-sector job creation and faced minimal unemployment. By the late 1980s, however, graduate unemployment began to rise (Boughzou, 2016; Ridha et al., 2018). Official statistics show that in 1984 the graduate unemployment rate was only 0.7%, increasing slightly to 1.6%

in 1994, while rates were higher among other education levels – 48% for primary, 24% for secondary, and 26% for illiterates.

This trend reversed in the subsequent decades, particularly following the socio-economic transformations of the 1990s and the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which promoted privatisation and significantly reduced the state’s role as the main employer (Ben Sedrine, 2000; Boughzala, 2019; Ridha et al., 2018). These reforms contributed substantially to the rise in graduate unemployment and to the prolongation of unemployment duration among graduates, as discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section. By 2014, graduate unemployment had surged to 31%, compared with 41% for secondary, 22% for primary, and 7% for illiterates (INS, 2014). By May 2021, overall unemployment stabilised at around 18 %, with 2 % for graduates, 19% for secondary, 12% for primary, and 1 % for illiterates. In 2025, total unemployment reached approximately 15%, while graduate unemployment remained around 25%, highlighting the persistent vulnerability of highly educated individuals in the labour market (INS, 2022; 2025).

The 2014 data on unemployment duration – the most recent available until the end of 2025 – highlights significant disparities by educational level. For durations under one year, the illiterate group is the most affected at 46%, followed by individuals with primary education at 25%, secondary education at 16%, and higher education at 13%. In contrast, for longer unemployment durations of three years or more, the illiterate group and individuals with primary education have rates of 25% and 27%, respectively, while those with secondary education have a rate of around 19%, and individuals with higher education are the most affected at 29% in 2014 (Table 12.3) (INS, 2014). These statistics are supported by Assaad and Krafft (2023), who, in a comparative study of Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt, observed that Tunisians, particularly educated women, experience longer periods of unemployment, often preferring to remain unemployed rather than accept positions they consider unsatisfactory (Assaad & Krafft, 2023).

Table 12.3. *Distribution of unemployment duration by educational level in 2014*

Duration of unemployment	Illiterate	Primary	Secondary	Higher	Total
Less than 1 year	45.8	40.9	33.6	24.6	33.3
From 1 to 2 years	25.3	27.1	30.3	27.3	28.3
From 2 to 3 years	15.7	16.2	17.6	19.2	17.6
3 years and longer	13.2	15.8	18.5	28.9	20.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

** Due to rounding errors, the percentages may not add up perfectly*

Source : Institut National de la Statistique, 2014

The disparity in unemployment duration across educational levels reflects deeper structural dynamics within the labour market. Individuals with lower educational attainment generally have greater access to available jobs, resulting in shorter unemployment spells, often lasting less than one year. In contrast, graduates with higher levels of education face a greater risk of long-term unemployment, as they have fewer opportunities that align with their qualifications and employment aspirations. This situation cannot be explained solely by the nature and quality of job opportunities available in the Tunisian

labour market; it must also be understood in relation to the employment strategies, expectations, and preferences adopted by job seekers themselves, as discussed in the following section.

Explaining Long-Term Graduate Unemployment: Structural and Social Factors

Understanding the causes and dynamics of long-term graduate unemployment requires an analytical framework that goes beyond statistical indicators and purely institutional explanations. Although official data offers essential insights into labour market structures, they are insufficient to capture the full complexity of the phenomenon. A comprehensive analysis must also incorporate the lived experiences, narratives, and perceptions of those most directly affected, namely, university graduates. Graduates often interpret employment and unemployment through subjective frameworks that do not always align with official definitions, adding an additional layer of complexity to the analysis. Accordingly, this section adopts a cross-analytical approach that combines official statistics, existing academic literature, and graduates' narratives to examine the factors underlying the persistence of long-term graduate unemployment in Tunisia.

From an institutional perspective, graduate unemployment in Tunisia constitutes a structural problem that has deepened since the 1990s. The implementation of SAPs promoted the expansion of the private sector while reducing the state's role as the primary employer, particularly in the public sector, thereby redirecting graduates toward private-sector employment (Gouider, 2013; Ridha et al., 2018). This transition disproportionately affected disciplines such as economics, management, and law, where public-sector recruitment became increasingly limited (Ben Sedrine, 2000). These reforms were based on the assumption that the private sector would generate sufficient and sustainable employment – an expectation that has largely remained unmet (Amara et al., 2023; Ben Sedrine, 2000; Gouider, 2013; Ridha et al., 2018).

In line with SAP reforms, labour market flexibility increased, with temporary and short-term contracts progressively replacing permanent employment. Although this shift generated new job opportunities, it also intensified labour market segmentation, reduced job quality, and contributed to the expansion of informal employment (Ridha et al., 2018). Despite the implementation of extensive macroeconomic stabilisation programmes and reforms in trade, fiscal, and financial markets aimed at stimulating economic growth and employment creation, overall outcomes have remained disappointing (Amara et al., 2023). As a result, Tunisia's private sector has struggled to absorb the growing number of highly educated job seekers.

At the sectoral level, persistent structural weaknesses continue to characterise key areas of the private sector. These weaknesses include high rigidity, an unfavourable business climate, bureaucratic constraints, limited access to investment, and ineffective labour market policies (Amara et al., 2023; Challenge Fund for Youth Employment, 2022). The tourism sector remains highly vulnerable to external shocks (such as political instability, security concerns, and global crises) resulting in unstable and seasonal employment. The manufacturing sector is geographically concentrated, technologically constrained, and largely oriented toward low value-added production, which limits its capacity to

generate skilled employment. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which dominate the private sector, generally offer limited job opportunities and primarily demand low- to medium-level skills (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2014; Challenge Fund for Youth Employment, 2022; World Bank, 2014).

In terms of job quality, private-sector employment in Tunisia is often characterised by low wages, informal or insecure contracts, limited access to social and health protection, discriminatory practices, unethical recruitment processes, and excessive or illegal working hours – conditions that fall short of decent work standards. These shortcomings significantly reduce the attractiveness of private-sector employment for university graduates (Garraoui, 2024; 2025).

Taken together, these dynamics have produced a persistent mismatch between the limited supply of low-skill or low-quality jobs and the growing number of highly educated graduates. This mismatch has been widely documented in the literature (Challenge Fund for Youth Employment, 2022; Kthiri, 2019; Masmoudi & Ferchichi, 2024) and was also confirmed by the interviewees in this study. From a structural and institutional perspective, the absence of sufficient and adequate job opportunities in an increasingly competitive labour market has contributed not only to graduate unemployment but also to its persistence over time, leading to long-term graduate unemployment.

As the number of graduates continues to rise without a corresponding increase in the quantity or quality of suitable job offers, unemployment becomes more widespread and prolonged. This situation was illustrated by Ahmed, who emphasised the limited capacity of private sector to absorb highly qualified workers, stating:

There is no private sector in Tunisia, but there are some private individuals who exploit people. This is not debatable. The private sector has been made to exploit Tunisians, whether university graduates or ordinary workers. There is no orientation of the state to create a labour system in the private sector (October 2021).

He continued, stating:

There is no private sector in Tunisia capable of meeting and absorbing all university graduates. The private sector, according to my own perception, is only able to absorb a portion of the total number of higher education graduates (October 2021).

After that he shared his wife's experience in the private sector as follows:

(...) There is no private sector in Tunisia. My wife has been unemployed for 12 years. She got a job in a factory that specialises in making a type of refreshment. She was only earning (...) 450 TND (around 137 Euro) for 12 hours of work per day. I swear she only got 450 TND. I can't talk about the harassment she is subjected to or the sexual harassment that female workers in the factory and in most firms in the private sector are subjected to. The Tunisian state has not provided the necessary protection for Tunisian citizens to be able to work in the private sector (October 2021).

Hanan confirmed the poor working conditions in the private sector, declaring:

(...) I had social insurance coverage, but the pay was very low. (...) I was earning between 650 Tunisian dinars (TND) (around 198 Euro in October 21, 2021) and 700 TND (around 213 Euro in October 21, 2021) per month from the factory (...) After that, I accepted a wage of only 500 TND (around 152 Euro in October 21, 2021) due to the favourable working conditions (October 2021).

Consequently, in a context marked by limited and poor-quality private-sector employment opportunities, graduates develop specific strategies that increasingly orient them toward the informal sector, thereby contributing to its expansion. Despite precarious working conditions, informal employment can offer comparatively higher earnings, greater flexibility, and immediate income opportunities, making it an attractive alternative for many graduates (Belgacem & Vacher, 2023; Flayols et al., 2019). As a result, informal employment has become widespread in Tunisia: 44.8% of employed individuals work informally, 42.5% are self-employed or employers, and 6% are unpaid family workers (Nari & Di Vozzo, 2022). At the same time, many graduates engaged in informal activities remain officially registered as unemployed while continuing to seek public-sector employment. This behaviour reflects persistent structural, cultural, and economic factors, notably strong perceptions of job security, social prestige, and superior working conditions traditionally associated with public-sector positions (Amara et al., 2023; Assaad & Krafft, 2023; Belgacem & Vacher, 2023; Boughzala, 2016; Flayols et al., 2019).

In a survey of interviewed graduates regarding their “dream jobs” (i.e., the positions they aspire to even if currently employed), 58% indicated a preference for public-sector employment, 26% for self-employment, 12% for private-sector employment, and 3% reported no preference. The four graduates highlighted in this study belong to the first group, expressing exclusive interest in public-sector positions. This attachment to public-sector employment shapes graduates' strategies toward unemployment: some turn to informal sector work while remaining officially registered as unemployed for extended periods, whereas others – particularly women – may choose to remain unemployed for long durations.

For female graduates, the dynamics are somewhat distinct. Many benefit from family support, first from parents and later from husbands after marriage, which allows them to remain unemployed or inactive strategically for extended periods. These women often wait for positions that meet their career aspirations or continue studying, starting a family, or otherwise deferring employment until the conditions align with their professional goals (Assaad & Krafft, 2023; Garraoui, 2025). This strategic inaction underscores the intersection between social support, gender, and labour market behaviour, highlighting that long-term unemployment is not solely a reflection of job scarcity but also of graduates' selective employment strategies.

The Impact of Long-Term Unemployment on Graduates

The interviewed graduates experiencing long-term unemployment exhibited high levels of insecurity and uncertainty despite their diverse backgrounds. Insecurity refers to the absence of stability in the present, closely linked to limited access to economic, social, and cultural resources, while uncertainty relates to concerns about the future as graduates grapple with doubts regarding their employment prospects (Gertel, 2018). This lack of security stems from restricted access to key forms of capital necessary to ensure social stability and a secure social position, as conceptualised by Bourdieu.

Graduates struggling to secure stable employment often face significant barriers in accessing cultural, social, and financial resources. Applying Bourdieu's framework to the individuals examined in this study, cultural resources (such as knowledge, professional experience, and employer-recognised values) are essential for facilitating the transition from education to work and mitigating the risk

of long-term unemployment. Social resources, embedded in formal and informal networks, provide critical access to information, guidance, and support, fostering connections with potential employment opportunities and enhancing labour market integration. Financial resources, including income and capital, enable graduates to maintain economic stability and sustain job-search efforts during prolonged periods of unemployment (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Koch, 1987). Conversely, the absence or weakness of these resources significantly hampers graduates' ability to access fulfilling employment opportunities and leads to increasingly precarious, insecure, and uncertain social positions, particularly as the duration of unemployment lengthens.

The scarcity of financial resources renders unemployed graduates in Tunisia especially vulnerable. Without sufficient financial support, many struggle to meet basic needs and provide for themselves and their families, which in turn limits their ability to finance a sustained and secure job-search process. In terms of cultural capital, prolonged unemployment leads to the erosion of professional skills, qualifications, and competencies acquired through education and early work experiences. This deterioration reduces graduates' ability to meet employers' requirements and diminishes their competitiveness in a highly demanding labour market. Socially, extended absence from the labour market weakens the networks that are critical for re-entering employment. Over time, both the density and relevance of these networks decline, reducing access to job referrals, advice, and support (Aaronson et al., 2010; Currie & Schwandt, 2014; Lockwood, 1991; Marcus, 2013; Pohlan, 2019). This combination of skill loss and diminished social capital substantially lowers employability, particularly compared to those experiencing only short-term unemployment (Abraham et al., 2019; Hahn et al., 2015; Jackman & Layard, 1991), making it increasingly difficult for unemployed graduates to regain stability and secure meaningful employment.

This lack of stability further constrains graduates' ability to mobilise the financial and social resources required to form families, as economic security and social recognition remain key prerequisites for marriage and family formation. Several interviewees emphasised that prolonged unemployment and financial precarity directly shape their personal life trajectories. One unmarried participant explained that his current situation; marked by long-term unemployment from his own perspective and unstable income; leaves him feeling unprepared for marriage. Hafedh stated:

(...) If a graduate does not achieve some kind of financial stability at a certain level, he will not be able to marry or make a family (October 2021).

This pattern is further confirmed by Hanan, a married woman, who indicated that long-term unemployment and employment discontinuity shaped her decisions regarding childbearing, including her choice not to have a second child after marriage. She explained that persistent economic insecurity constrained her reproductive choices and broader family planning decisions. As Hanan said:

(...) They (unemployed graduates among her colleagues) didn't get married because they didn't have enough money to support a family. Long-term unemployment has stopped us from living. I have only one child and I wanted to have another child but due to health issues that require financial resources for treatment, I could not make it. Even when I think about it, I find it difficult to support one child, let alone two. Long-term unemployment has stopped our lives and our thinking (October 2021).

Additionally, Rami, a married man, expressed his concerns about the instability of his job in the private sector and limited resources, emphasising their potential negative impact on his family. He highlighted that these challenges not only affect his personal situation but could also significantly impact his partner and family as a whole, particularly in terms of resource scarcity and the health consequences of employment instability, especially for his wife, as he mentioned. This perspective aligns with Marcus (2013), who noted the substantial mental health costs associated with long-term unemployment for spouses.

In addition, long-term unemployment has severe consequences for mental health. Empirical studies show that it is strongly associated with depression, social isolation, and diminished self-esteem, and may even contribute to increased mortality rates (Couch et al., 2013; Mossakowski, 2009). These psychological burdens often intensify feelings of exclusion and marginalisation among unemployed graduates, significantly hindering their social and professional integration (Lamloum & Abd Baki, 2022; Pohlan, 2019). From the perspective of those experiencing prolonged unemployment, this exclusion extends beyond the labour market to encompass economic participation and political engagement, resulting in restricted access to fundamental rights such as health insurance, stable employment, and civic or political involvement.

As a result, unemployed graduates frequently perceive themselves as constrained and disempowered, unable to fulfil social responsibilities or access the support systems available to employed individuals. Many describe their situation as one of blockage and stagnation, characterised by dependence and enforced passivity. As Hafedh explained:

(...) I am a 44-year-old man who has never been married, never had a family, never had a house, and never had a job. I am a person who thinks about a lot of things. What can I tell you? I have gone so far as to hope to do the Hajj and then die. There is no more hope in life. There is nothing left (October 2021).

Not only Hafedh, but many unemployed graduates experience profound disappointment upon realising that holding an advanced degree does not guarantee stable employment or positions that align with their career aspirations. Hanan reflected on the contrast between her expectations before graduation and the realities she faced afterwards, sharing her experience as follows:

(...) All my dreams were on a completely different side. We (graduates) were shocked to find that employment is done exclusively through favouritism. If you have enough money, you can bribe your way into national competitions. But if you don't have enough money, you will work in the private sector. You are exploited for a year or two and then you get fired. The pay is low, there is no social insurance, and overall, you can end up regretting your education (October 2021).

This feeling of regret experienced by the speakers arises from the awareness that their dedication and hard work in pursuing higher education did not yield the expected results. This sentiment holds special significance for individuals from underprivileged backgrounds, whose families made substantial financial sacrifices to prioritise their children's education (Boughzou, 2016; Garraoui, 2024; Lamloum & Abd Baki, 2022). Despite the investment of significant money, time and effort, many individuals find themselves unable to secure stable employment or access the necessary resources for their sustenance. Hanan said:

Personally, I would have opted to do a training course or work as a trader by purchasing and selling. This would have enabled me to earn the money that my father used for my university studies and my situation would have been better (October 2021).

The feelings of disappointment, deception, and regret are intertwined with the self-perception of the individuals speaking. Particularly for those hailing from less privileged backgrounds, education is viewed as the primary avenue for advancing their social status. They perceive their higher education as an investment made by their families, with the expectation of yielding favourable returns (Garraoui, 2024; Lamloum & Abd Baki, 2022). Tunisian families take on the role of a social institution, providing crucial support for the graduates and leveraging various resources to propel their children towards obtaining a higher degree, which is seen as a safeguard for a brighter future for both the children and their families. In turn, the children after graduation assume the role of social institutions themselves, offering support to their families by assuming caretaking responsibilities, providing financial assistance, and more. But, for the individuals in question, the inability to secure a stable job prevents them from reciprocating the support they have received (Garraoui, 2024; Lamloum & Abd Baki, 2022). Consequently, they experience feelings of disappointment, regret regarding their advanced studies, and a sense of timidity as they find themselves unable to meet either their own expectations or those of their families. Hanan stated

(...) My mother and father were not educated, but they worked hard for us children. They wanted to invest in us. They thought that education was the only weapon we had, because we come from a rural area. I come from a rural area in Sidi Bouzid. In rural areas, parents insist on pushing their children to attend school in order to improve themselves and their families. The son saves himself and his family from poverty... (October 2021).

Ahmed approved that when saying:

(...) Tunisian families used to invest in their children's education. The father insists on supporting his children to complete their education. It is a parent's dream come true when their child obtains a university degree. Upon graduation, the father wants his son to work in the best jobs and live in the best social conditions. Unfortunately, this idea is gradually disappearing, and Tunisian families are realising that a university degree is no longer enough to guarantee a future in Tunisia (October 2021).

Moreover, the speakers frequently experience feelings of inferiority. Families often compare graduates to siblings, cousins, or neighbours to encourage them to engage seriously in the job market. Ahmed, a married graduate, faced this pressure and ultimately opted to teach individual tutoring classes to avoid these negative comparisons. Despite earning an income through this informal work, Ahmed still considered himself unemployed, not only from his own perspective but also, at least in part, from his family's viewpoint. He stated:

Even within families, we (unemployed graduates) encounter a certain degree of scorn, indifference, and dwarfism. My family views me differently than they do my employed brother, who earns a monthly salary and has a family. I am unemployed, and this is why he holds a higher position in the family than I do (October 2021).

Such feelings reflect the psychological struggles experienced by the speakers as they grapple with the challenge of establishing a stable and recognised role for themselves, both within their families and in the broader society. These emotional responses reveal a deeper sense of uncertainty, identity tension, and social displacement often associated with prolonged unemployment and underemployment

Conclusion

This paper highlights the structural and social dimensions of graduate unemployment in Tunisia, with particular attention to prolonged unemployment lasting more than two years. The findings reveal conceptual ambiguities between long-term and recurrent short-term unemployment, driven by divergent institutional and social understandings of employment. While official institutions rely on standardised statistical measures to define and quantify unemployment duration, graduates' own perceptions of employment – especially in temporary, informal, or private-sector jobs – challenge these classifications. This discrepancy reflects a broader structural tension between state-led policies promoting privatisation and graduates' persistent aspirations for public-sector employment. The state's withdrawal from its role as a major employer since the late 1980s, combined with the rapid expansion of higher education and increased labour market participation of young people and women, has significantly contributed to rising and persistent graduate unemployment.

The experience of long-term and recurrent unemployment places graduates in a precarious position, limiting their ability to accumulate economic and social resources and undermining their sense of security regarding the present and future. Resource scarcity generates chronic uncertainty and constrains their capacity to achieve financial stability, form families, or support dependents. These conditions foster feelings of marginalisation, social inferiority, and regret over educational investments that have not translated into expected social mobility. Overall, the findings underscore that long-term graduate unemployment is not only an economic issue but also a deeply social and psychological phenomenon, requiring policy responses that address job quantity, job quality, and the long-term social consequences of prolonged labour market exclusion.

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