

II LABOUR MARKETS AND EMPLOYABILITY IN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

Gendered Graduate Unemployment and Social Mobilization in Tunisia

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Introduction

Employment represents the primary vehicle for social integration in Tunisia. It is the most reliable means of improving living standards, mitigating poverty and vulnerability, and serves as a key indicator of social cohesion. Moreover, employment plays a crucial role in wealth creation and income distribution. Consequently, promoting employment and addressing both unemployment and precarious work conditions should be central priorities within any well-structured economic and social governance framework. However, since the onset of the economic crisis in 2009, Tunisia has experienced significant disruptions in its labour market. These challenges were exacerbated by the 2011 Revolution and further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred between 2020 and 2021. The impact has been particularly severe on youth, especially those holding higher education degrees. In contrast to individuals with lower educational attainment, university graduates have faced heightened vulnerability to economic downturns. Young people, particularly recent graduates, express increasing concern about their future employment prospects, not only in terms of access to jobs but also in terms of job security and stability (Garraoui, 2024).

Building on this observation, this chapter explores graduate unemployment in Tunisia within the larger context of the country's economic and social structures, highlighting its importance as a reflection of a more profound structural economic crisis that has incited a broader societal response. To achieve this objective, the chapter utilises various methodologies, each detailed in its respective section. A statistical approach, based on recent official data, is employed in the second section to present an updated picture of the labour market where the issue at hand is situated. Additionally, empirical qualitative methods, utilizing both online and offline data, are implemented in the third section to depict the collective reaction of graduates to their unemployment challenges.

Throughout our investigation, we focus on addressing the following research questions: (1) How can graduate unemployment in Tunisia be analysed within broader economic theoretical frameworks, and what are its key forms, aspects, and dimensions? (2) What are the key characteristics of the Tunisian labour market, as revealed by a statistical analysis, in which graduate unemployment becomes evident? And (3) what are the significant aspects of the collective reactions of unemployed graduates in Tunisia as they confront challenges in securing meaningful employment?

This chapter is organised into three sections. The first section examines the theoretical foundations that illuminate the relationship between economic growth and labour market outcomes, with a specific focus on key related concepts and emerging problem trends. The second section examines

the structural crisis impacting Tunisia's labour market, highlighting graduate unemployment as a critical issue supported by statistical evidence. The third section evaluates the responses of university graduates, emphasizing their participation in innovative social movements to advocate for what they refer to as the right to employment. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings and discusses future research directions and important implications.

Understanding Labour Market Outcomes in the Context of Economic Growth: A Focus on Graduate Unemployment

This section explores the link between economic growth and labour market outcomes, with a particular focus on graduate unemployment. In countries like Tunisia, sustained investment in higher education has not led to corresponding employment opportunities, revealing a structural mismatch between academic training and labour market needs. This disconnect challenges assumptions about education as a straightforward driver of growth and highlights the need to reassess policies related to employability, education quality, and economic integration of graduates.

Education Expenditure and Economic Growth: Competing Perspectives

Economists consider expenditure on education – across all levels – as an investment rather than a cost. Countries that industrialised during the Twentieth and early Twenty-First Centuries dedicated a significant share of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education. In 2023, these countries allocated just over 5% of public spending to education. Developing countries dedicated an average of 4.7% in 2022. Some countries, such as Tunisia, invested even more significantly, with public education expenditure representing 7.3% of its GDP in 2016. Morocco and Kenya followed closely, at 6.7% and 5.1% respectively in 2020. A central question that has preoccupied economists for decades is whether such investments in education translate into wealth creation and improved societal well-being. This debate traces back to Adam Smith and has since divided economists into two major schools of thought. Classical and neoclassical economists argued that education positively impacts economic growth. In contrast, more recent economists such as Pritchett (2001), Gurgand (2000) and Altinok (2006) have questioned whether education truly produces economic externalities, suggesting its benefits may be more relevant to human development (e.g., literacy reduction) than to economic growth.

Classical economists like Smith and Marx made a distinction between workers who possess only their labour power and those who design and operate machines—reflecting the broader knowledge base that drives production and societal advancement. Marshall (1890) described knowledge as “our most powerful engine of production”. Later, Schumpeter (1935) emphasised innovation, Arrow (1962) explored the link between knowledge, production, and learning, and Becker (1964) developed the concept of human capital, all reinforcing the idea that education and training play critical roles in growth. Endogenous growth models position human capital at the centre of economic development. Romer (1992), in particular, emphasised the role of the state in fostering knowledge accumulation

through public investment, especially in research and development, which requires both a large and highly skilled labour force.

However, at the turn of the Twenty-First Century, critical perspectives emerged that highlighted the limitations of education's impact on economic growth. These critiques focus on two main aspects: the quality of education provided, and the effectiveness of public spending in the education sector. Gurgand (2000), for instance, argued that mere investment in education does not guarantee economic growth. Pritchett (2001) went further, suggesting that such spending could have negative effects – particularly when the education provided is of poor quality. Altinok (2006) pointed to additional limitations in Romer's (1992) endogenous growth theory, which assumes that education has a uniform effect on all individuals. This assumption, according to Altinok (2006), fails to account for the challenges in measuring educational outcomes and the highly contextual nature of educational systems across countries.

The observable limitations of education investments are particularly evident in developing countries and emerging economies. These include high levels of graduate unemployment, difficulties faced by graduates entering the job market, and a growing trend of brain drain, as highly educated individuals choose to emigrate in search of better opportunities. This leads to a broader discussion about the need to prioritise the quality of education over quantity. For instance, high enrolment rates do not necessarily reflect meaningful learning outcomes; likewise, producing a large number of university graduates does not guarantee their economic absorption or employment. The challenge lies in aligning general education with employability, and in ensuring that elite formation does not translate into large-scale brain drain.

At a time when many developing countries face mounting budgetary constraints the direction of education policy becomes increasingly critical. The case of Tunisia highlights how public investment in education, while well-intentioned, can produce counterproductive outcomes. These critiques of quantitative expansion in education should not be seen as arguments against investment in human development. Rather, in the context of shrinking public budgets, it becomes necessary to reassess the composition of educational spending and critically evaluate its outcomes.

These concerns are particularly salient in developing countries and some emerging economies facing structural challenges such as high illiteracy rates (e.g., 25% of the Tunisian population in 2014), poor education quality, misalignment between academic programs and labour market needs, graduate unemployment, low employability, and a growing brain drain. Addressing these structural issues requires a shift in focus – from expanding access alone to ensuring educational quality and labour market relevance.

University Education, Mismatched Academic Tracks, and Graduate Unemployment

In numerous African nations, higher education is not mandated, which is reflected in various statistics and indicators. To begin with, there are strikingly low Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in higher education. For instance, Ghana and Kenya Tunisia experienced some of the lowest GER rates with respectively 16% and 12% in 2017, while Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria reported GERs of 31%, 33%

and 49%, respectively. In contrast, the United States boasts a GER exceeding 88%, while South Korea achieves an impressive 94% (World Bank, Group Data 360).

Despite these relatively low higher education enrolment ratios, graduate unemployment has become a significant concern across African nations, revealing a disconnect between the expansion of educational opportunities and job creation, which in turn leads to a devaluation of academic credentials. A paradox has emerged: the higher the level of education, the greater the unemployment rate. In some cases, graduates face unemployment rates up to four times higher than those of individuals without formal education – a phenomenon referred to as “paradoxical unemployment” in demographic studies.

At the end of 2019, university graduates in Tunisia accounted for approximately 30% of the total unemployed population (630,000 individuals). Their unemployment rate was two and a half times higher than that of non-graduates. Female graduates faced an unemployment rate of 38.1%, significantly above the national average of 14.9%, and made up 30% of all unemployed individuals. Male graduates had an unemployment rate of 15.7%, close to the national average, and represented 11% of total unemployment. In contrast, only 6.2% of individuals – even without a primary school education – were unemployed, and they represented just 3% of the unemployed population and 8.1% of the employed. Conversely, individuals holding higher education diplomas or technical vocational certificates (28% of the labour force) accounted for 18.4% of the employed population but 39.8% of the unemployed. (Ateb, 2023).

These are national averages, but regional disparities are significant. All African countries experience regional imbalances in employment and unemployment. National unemployment rates are generally higher in economically disadvantaged regions. Plus, graduate unemployment is disproportionately concentrated in these areas, becoming a major source of social and political instability. In Tunisia, this was evident in 2011 and subsequent years. In 2019, graduate unemployment in interior regions averaged 42%, compared to 23.2% in more developed coastal regions. In several governorates, unemployment rates surpass those of employment. For instance, Kébili and Gafsa have reported unemployment rates of 54.8% and 53.6%, respectively. Other regions, including Sidi Bouzid (49.5%), Kasserine (49.3%), Gabès (48.7%), Tozeur (47.7%), Jendouba (47.5%), Tataouine (47.1%), and Béja (47.1%), have also shown rates ranging from 47% to 50%. (Ateb, 2023). Social movements led by unemployed graduates in these areas have been particularly intense, often extending their reach to the capital, Tunis. In some cases, these movements have originated in Tunis before spreading nationally. The visibility of these unemployed graduates in public discourse and civic spaces has increased, not just in Tunisia, but also in Morocco, Algeria, Senegal, and Nigeria. Therefore, the political economy perspective on this issue is essential and will be discussed in the final section of this study.

Revisiting and Contextualizing the Concept of Employability in African Countries and Tunisia

According to the International Labour Organization, employability refers to the “portable competencies and qualifications that enhance an individual’s capacity to make use of education and training opportunities, to secure and retain decent work, to progress within the enterprise or to move to

new employment, and to cope with changing technology and labour market conditions” (ILO, 2005). Employability is thus a key outcome of quality education and training, coordinated within a broader framework of complementary policies.

The concept of employability includes foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy; behavioural competencies like self-confidence, integrity, and motivation; technical competencies at all levels and in various sectors (e.g., ICT); and organisational competencies such as teamwork, autonomy, communication, problem-solving, and lifelong learning in diverse professional settings. Social and political skills are also part of this comprehensive definition. However, this broad understanding raises concerns about whether the concept shifts responsibility from employers to individuals, especially considering that many specific competencies can only be developed through real-world work experiences.

In many African contexts, the primary challenge is not only acquiring employable skills but gaining access to decent employment. In Tunisia, the supply of job opportunities for university graduates remains significantly below demand, as discussed in second section of this paper. The country’s manufacturing sector – like those in other African nations – generates limited demand for skilled labour. As a result, competition arises between graduates and non-graduates for the same low-skilled jobs, depressing wages for the former (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2014). This raises important questions: Is employability merely a set of attributes and competencies acquired through university learning, which continues to evolve during one’s professional and social life? Is it a product of the education system alone, or is it more accurately conceived as a lifelong learning process?

To address this challenge, several African countries have introduced initiatives aimed at enhancing student employability by integrating relevant competencies into academic curricula and extracurricular programs. In Tunisia, two recent initiatives stand out: Career and Competency Certification Centres (4C) and Student Entrepreneurial Hubs (PEE). These programs aim to develop soft skills and entrepreneurial capacities among students. However, their effectiveness and institutional integration remain to be fully assessed. After nine years of operation for the former and three years for the latter, it is critical to evaluate their reach and impact, both by central institutions and higher education establishments. Key questions remain: Do these initiatives have the capacity and visibility to engage faculty, researchers, and students effectively? Are their ambitions feasible given declining public funding for universities?

In summary, the issue of graduate unemployment in Africa, particularly in Tunisia, has developed into a deeply entrenched structural challenge with extensive implications that extend beyond education. It impacts economic performance, social cohesion, and political stability. Tunisia serves as a representative example of the broader regional trends characterised by a misalignment between higher education systems and labour market demands – reflecting a crisis that is prevalent in many African countries. These systemic discrepancies have played a significant role in the rise and ongoing nature of graduate unemployment across the continent.

Overview of Employment and Unemployment in Tunisia (2005–2024): A Crisis of Education Without Opportunity

Tunisia’s labour market has struggled to absorb its growing number of university graduates, particularly since the 2011 Revolution and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite rising educational attainment – especially among women – job creation has stagnated, leaving many graduates unemployed or underemployed. This section analyses three periods (2005–2010, 2010–2019, 2019–2024), revealing a widening gap between education and employment. Key trends include declining economic growth, gendered disparities and rising emigration among skilled workers.

Dynamics of Job Creation and Evolving Labour Demand (2005-2024)

Employment and unemployment trends will be analysed below, with a focus on the employment situation of university graduates. This analysis is structured around the above-mentioned three time periods (P1: 2005–2010; P2: 2010–2019; P3: 2019–2024). Unless otherwise specified, the data presented here correspond to the second quarter (May–June) of each year and are drawn from the various rounds of the National Employment and Population Survey (*Enquête sur l’Emploi et la Population*, EEP), conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (*Institut National de la Statistique*, INS). The surveys have been conducted on a quarterly basis only since the fourth quarter of 2011. Prior to this time, these surveys were carried out annually during the second quarter of each year. The National Institute of Statistics (INS) adopted the ILO criteria for defining the active population starting with the 2004 census and has subsequently applied these standards consistently to all EEP surveys. This explains why our analysis begins in 2005.

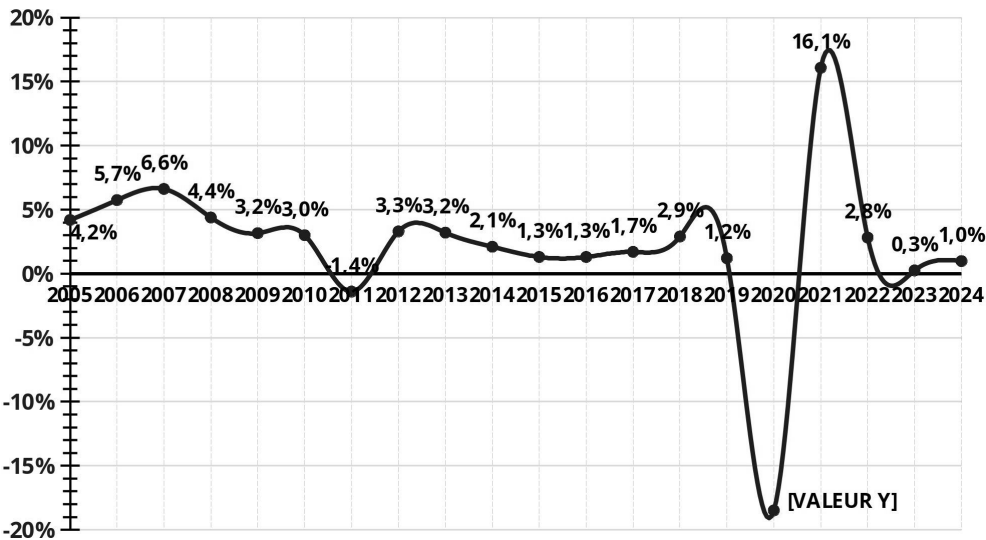


Figure 7.1. Year-on-year GDP growth rate (2nd quarter)

Source: INS, National Account, 2024.

Figure 7.1 shows the year-on-year evolution of GDP growth (measured in the second quarter). It reveals that the three identified periods experienced very different economic trajectories. The average growth rate was 4.57% during (P1), 1.72% during (P2) – a phase of stagnant growth – and -0.31% during (P3), indicating economic regression. Over the span of twenty years, the Tunisian economy shifted from a period of strong growth (generating on average 75,000 jobs per year), to a decade of minimal job creation, and finally, to the most recent five-year period marked by a complete halt in employment generation.

These economic changes are reflected in the structure and evolution of the labour market, particularly when examining the dynamics of labour supply and demand. Based on the data presented in Table 7.1, three distinct periods or phases of labour market evolution can be identified.

Table 7.1. *Evolution of additional demand and job creation (annual averages), in Tunisia, 2005–2024*

	2005–2010	2010–2019	2019–2024	2005–2010	2010–2019	2019–2024	2005–2010	2010–2019	2019–2024
	Additional Demand - All			Net creations – All			AD coverage – All		
Men	56,020	22,410	-20,440	55,710	15,180	-24,920	99.4%	67.7%	-
Women	26,000	21,320	17,100	14,430	12,650	16,220	55.5%	59.3%	94.9%
Total	82,020	43,730	-3,340	70,140	27,830	-8,700	85.5%	63.6%	-
	Additional Demand - HEG			Net creations – HEG			AD coverage – HEG		
Men	18,260	9,160	-7,280	12,780	7,464	-3,800	70.0%	81.5%	-
Women	24,400	24,900	-600	13,240	13,926	6,840	54.3%	55.9%	-
Total	42,660	34,060	-7,880	26,020	21,390	3,040	61.0%	62.8%	-

All: total population; *HEG: Higher Education Graduates; *AD: Additional Demand

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005, 2007, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2021, 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

During P1, job creation covered approximately 85.5% of the additional labour demand, which was relatively high exceeding 82,000 individuals per year. Employment growth was particularly favourable for men, with 99.4% of their additional labour force demand being met. Nevertheless, outcomes were less favourable for women: job creation addressed only 55.5% of the additional labour demand among women, whose labour force grew by just 26,000 individuals annually – representing only 46.4% of the increase observed among men. For university graduates, the situation was more critical (see Table 7.1). Job creation within this subgroup covered only 61% of their additional labour demand (70% for male graduates and 54.3% for female graduates).

P2 was characterised by a less favourable environment for employment growth. Job creation during this phase met only 63.6% of the additional labour demand – 67.7% for men and 59.3% for women (see Table 7.1). Among university graduates, the demand for employment declined significantly compared to P1, primarily due to a reduced rate of male entry into the resident labour force. Nevertheless, the number of jobs created for graduates also declined proportionally, further widening the gap between labour supply and demand in the graduate labour market.

During P3, the labour force itself contracted, particularly among men, who exited the labour force at a rate of over 20,000 individuals per year. This contraction was accompanied by net job losses, estimated at approximately 25,000 per year. The situation differed for women: job creation (an average of 16,200 jobs annually, including 6,800 for female graduates) was sufficient to meet nearly 95% of the additional labour demand among women. However, this demand was relatively low – slightly above 17,000 new entrants per year.

With economic growth stagnating since 2010, Tunisia is no longer able to generate sufficient employment opportunities to meet the needs of its growing labour force—particularly among higher education graduates, and even more so among women. Paradoxically, since 2019, there has been a notable decline in additional labour demand. Could this trend be directly attributed to increased emigration flows among Tunisians? These migratory movements predominantly involve university graduates, especially men. This abrupt shift in the trajectory of additional labour demand warrants further in-depth analysis.

Evolution of Unemployment in Tunisia (2005–2024): A Gendered “Paradoxical Unemployment”

Since 2007, when the unemployment rate reached its lowest point in at least 25 years (12.4%), the number of unemployed individuals in Tunisia has increased by 52%, rising from 436,600 in 2007 to an estimated 661,700 unemployed individuals in 2024. Unemployment disproportionately affects individuals under the age of 35, who constitute nearly four out of every five unemployed persons. Additionally, the burden of unemployment falls most heavily on men without higher education qualifications (58.6% in 2024) and on women with higher education degrees (22.3%).

Table 7.2 presents data for each of the three periods (P1, P2, and P3), detailing unemployment rates, the absolute number of unemployed individuals, and the distribution of unemployment among higher education graduates and non-graduates by gender. A consistent increase in both the overall unemployment rate and the number of unemployed persons is evident across the periods. However, a decline in the unemployment rate among higher education graduates has been observed since the fourth quarter of 2020. In our view, this trend is primarily attributable to the sharp decrease in additional labour demand within this subgroup (Table 7.1), despite a relatively stable number of new graduates. This phenomenon likely reflects the large-scale emigration of this segment of the population – particularly male graduates – seeking opportunities abroad. The exact impact of migration on the figures is difficult to establish, however, because the INS also changed the methodology for calculating the number of unemployed graduates (several experts had previously argued that the unemployment rate of graduates had been overestimated by 4 to 5 percentage points in earlier surveys).

7. Gendered Graduate Unemployment and Social Mobilization in Tunisia

Table 7.2. *Evolution of unemployment rates in Tunisia, by gender, 2006-2024 (for graduates and non-graduates)*

	2006-2010			2011-2019			2020-2024		
	%	Number*	TC**	%	Number	TC	%	Number	TC
All	100%	459,360	12.7%	100%	643,040	15.8%	100%	674,370	16.4%
Non-HEG Men	55.6%	255,380	10.9%	47.3%	304,281	12.1%	50.4%	339,585	13.7%
HEG – Women	14.1%	64,600	30.7%	25.4%	163,031	40.6%	22.8%	153,435	33.0%
Women's Non-HEG	21.5%	98,980	13.0%	15.8%	101,658	13.9%	18.1%	121,985	15.7%
HEG – Men	8.8%	40,400	13.8%	11.5%	74,069	19.6%	8.8%	59,365	15.1%
DS	22.9%	105,000	20.9%	36.9%	237,100	30.4%	31.6%	212,800	24.8%
Non- HEG	77.1%	354,360	11.4%	63.1%	405,939	12.5%	68.4%	461,570	14.2%
Women	35.6%	163,580	16.8%	41.2%	264,689	23.0%	40.8%	275,420	22.2%
Men	64.4%	295,780	11.2%	58.8%	378,351	12.9%	59.2%	398,950	13.9%

*Number: Number of unemployed

** TC: Average unemployment rate

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005, 2007, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2021, 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

Based on the statistical data presented in Table 7.2 and earlier discussions, several key observations arise. First, Tunisia has been experiencing a structurally high unemployment rate for decades, affecting the entire population.

Second, recently, a structurally high unemployment rate has also emerged for HEGs, with 30% of the total unemployed population being graduates (starting from the mini census conducted by the INS in 1999). This situation disproportionately affects women more than men. This gendered unemployment paradox suggests that the more educated a woman is, the more she faces difficulties in entering the labour market (Garraoui, 2025). This presents another significant paradox, that challenges the foundational principles of the Tunisian social contract, established since independence in 1956: educate the entire population to ensure upward social mobility and the overall improvement of living conditions through decent and rewarding work, especially for women.

Third, the unemployment of female graduates resembles patterns observed in rentier economies, such as oil-rich countries, where women are educated, earn university degrees, yet remain largely at home, engaging in household chores with little contribution to national wealth creation or the well-being of their families.

Finally, the pattern of graduate unemployment represented in the data is detrimental to the Tunisian economy, as it deprives the country of a highly qualified labour force – one that has been costly to develop and is ultimately underutilised (cf. the theoretical section above).

Labour Market Snapshot in Tunisia, 2024: An Unfavourable Situation for the Labour Market, Particularly for Graduates and Women

Graduate unemployment is a structural issue with multidimensional aspects, reflecting complex labour market dynamics and deep-rooted socio-economic challenges. In 2024, the total number of unemployed individuals reached 661,700 (273,900 women and 387,800 men), with an unemployment rate of 16.0% (21.3% for women and 13.6% for men), compared to 634,900 unemployed individuals and a 15.3% unemployment rate in 2019 (Table 7.3). In short, Tunisia is experiencing a structurally high unemployment rate, which has not been alleviated by either modest economic growth, the relative increase of women in the labour market, or the massive international migration of a large portion of the employed population, particularly graduates. Is the labour market becoming more international? Could this internationalisation of the labour market become structural? And could it contribute to reducing domestic unemployment?

Table 7.3. *Employment and unemployment, Tunisia, Q2 2024*

Indicator	Total	Men	Women	% Women
Working-age population (> 15)	9,012,300	4,386,300	4,626,000	51,3%
Active population	4,146,100	2,857,700	1,288,400	31,1%
Employed labour force	3,484,400	2,469,900	1,014,500	29,1%
Unemployed labour force	661,700	387,800	273,900	41,4%
Activity rate	46,0%	65,2%	27,9%	***
Unemployment rate	16,0%	13,6%	21,3%	***
Youth unemployment rate	41,0%	42,2%	39,8%	***
HEG Labour Force	862,600	381,100	481,500	55,8%
Employed HEG Population	664,200	330,000	334,200	50,3%
Unemployed HEG	198,400	51,100	147,300	74,2%
Unemployment rate of HEGs	23,0%	13,4%	30,6%	***

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005; 2007; 2012; 2015; 2017; 2021; 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

Between 2019 and 2024, the total number of unemployed individuals increased by 26,800, and the unemployment rate grew by 0.7%. It is noteworthy that the unemployment rate of 16.0% represents the highest level recorded in the second quarter, excluding the exceptional years of the Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 7.3). This structural unemployment in Tunisia can be characterised as “gendered structural unemployment.” The higher the level of educational attainment, especially university education, the more difficult it is – for women especially – to integrate into the labour market. In reality, over half of the total unemployed population (50.9%) consists of men without higher education qualifications, with an unemployment rate of 13.6% (2.5 percentage points lower than the overall unemployment rate). However, women with higher education degrees face a particularly high unemployment rate of 30.6%, which is much higher than that of men (13.6%) (see Table 7.4). In other

words, the Tunisian state and households still uphold the principle of gender equality in education and training, but they are powerless in the face of a dysfunctional labour market that offers no serious opportunity for women (and even men) to secure decent and lasting employment. Disappointment was expressed through the social movements that preceded the Revolution (2008) and those that followed it (2011-2024). This generational disappointment has had a profound impact on Tunisian society and politics as discussed in the third section of this paper.

Higher education graduates represent about one-third (30%) of all unemployed individuals in 2024. Their unemployment rate is more than one and a half times (1.6 times) that of non-graduates (23% compared to 14.1%). This seemingly modest rate marks a fundamental sociological shift in Tunisia's unemployment patterns over the past thirty years: unemployed individuals perceive themselves, rightly or wrongly, as holders of a meritocratic educational capital, which they have acquired through personal, familial, community, and institutional sacrifices. As a result, they feel frustrated, oppressed, "marginalised," and often disrespected, including by their families, but especially by the state (Gar-raoui, 2024). This sense of indignation and injustice drives them to organise and defend their interests, culminating in the emergence of social movements led by Tunisian graduates.

Table 7.4. Distribution of the unemployed population, in Tunisia, by gender, for HEGs and non-HEGs (June 2024)

	Q2 2024		
	% unemployed / total	Number of unemployed	Unemployment rate
All	100%	661,700	16.0%
Non-HEG Men	50.9%	336,700	13.6%
HEG – Women	22.3%	147,300	30.6%
Women Non-HEG	19.1%	126,600	15.7%
<u>HEG – Men</u>	<u>7.7%</u>	<u>51,100</u>	<u>13.4%</u>
HEG	30.0%	198,400	23.0%
Non-HEG	70.0%	463,300	14.1%
Women	41.4%	273,900	21.3%
Men	58.6%	387,800	13.6%

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005; 2007; 2012; 2015; 2017; 2021; 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

Another concerning record: the unemployment rate among youth (those under 25) reached 41% in the second quarter of 2024, compared to 33.2% in 2019 (Table 7.3). Unemployed youth have become a major issue not only for Tunisia's economy but also for its governance and international relations, as a significant portion of them sees international migration to northern Mediterranean countries as the solution to their problems. This demographic is deeply disappointed by the EU's increasingly right-wing political stance and its border policies, which are contributing to a "clash of civilisations" (Huntington, 1996).

Moreover, between the second quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2024, Tunisia lost over 32,000 manufacturing jobs and more than 135,000 jobs in the construction sector. In contrast, 75,000 jobs were created in agriculture and 64,000 in services (Figure 7.2). The newly created jobs in agriculture and services are almost entirely informal. The most vital and growth-driving sectors of the Tunisian economy – the construction and manufacturing industries – are beginning to lose irreplaceable jobs in the short term. While job creation in the informal sector is appreciated in the short term for alleviating unemployment, especially at the local and regional levels, it contributes to the informalisation of the national economy. This trend poses long-term risks, both economic and social. The public no longer believes in the social mobility that was once promised by a meritocratic education system.

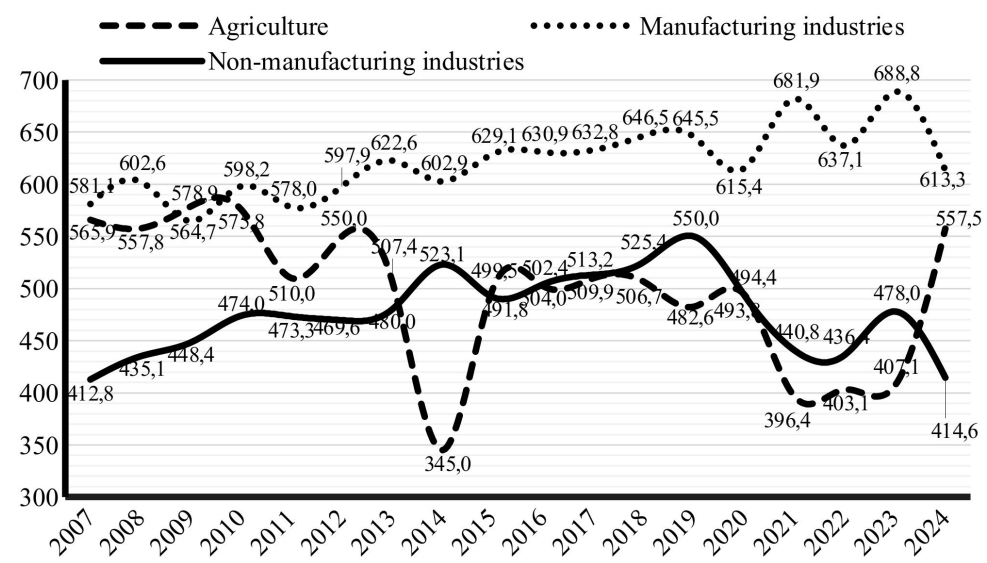


Figure 7.2. Distribution of the employed labour force in Tunisia by sector of activity 2007 to 2024* (in thousands)

*Excluding the service sector

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005; 2007; 2012; 2015; 2017; 2021; 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

Surprisingly, despite already high unemployment rates, Tunisia's unemployment figures have not dramatically increased in a context of weak growth over the last decade. This can largely be attributed to the massive emigration that took place over the past five years. From the second quarter of 2019 to the second quarter of 2024, the active population (both employed and unemployed individuals) decreased by nearly 17,000 people, even though the working-age population (those over 15 years old) increased by 156,000. This suggests an exceptional vitality in Tunisian society to confront the issue of unemployment, particularly among graduates. Nonetheless, what is alarming in this unprecedented situation is that the search for solutions remains an individual pursuit, with no comprehensive public policy that addresses the issue. This policy deficit, particularly in economic matters, has been a characteristic of the post-2010 period. Does it persist to this day?

Regarding higher education graduates (with an unemployment rate of 23% in 2024, see Table 7.4), the active population decreased by nearly 40,000 (approximately 8,000 per year) over the past five years, despite more than 210,000 new graduates entering the job market. This decrease is also a consequence of large-scale emigration. Furthermore, between 2022 and 2024, nearly 30,000 net job losses were recorded in this category. In other words, graduates – especially men, who are more mobile than women – are increasingly participating in the international labour market. They do so out of necessity; to avoid long periods of waiting for their first job. This trend is beneficial in the short term as it alleviates local labour market pressures. However, it is structurally detrimental to an economy that aims to recover from its crisis and transition to a more technology-driven economy, particularly in the manufacturing sector. This shift is crucial to breaking free from the "middle-income trap" and achieving sustainable economic growth.

The year 2023, with a growth rate of zero per cent (0.0%) over the whole year, is the one that has seen the most serious deterioration in employment for at least two decades. To see this, we have calculated the average employment rate per year since 2005. In 2023, we recorded the lowest employment rate (even lower than in 2011 and 2021) for at least two decades (38.7% in 2024, see Figure 7.3).

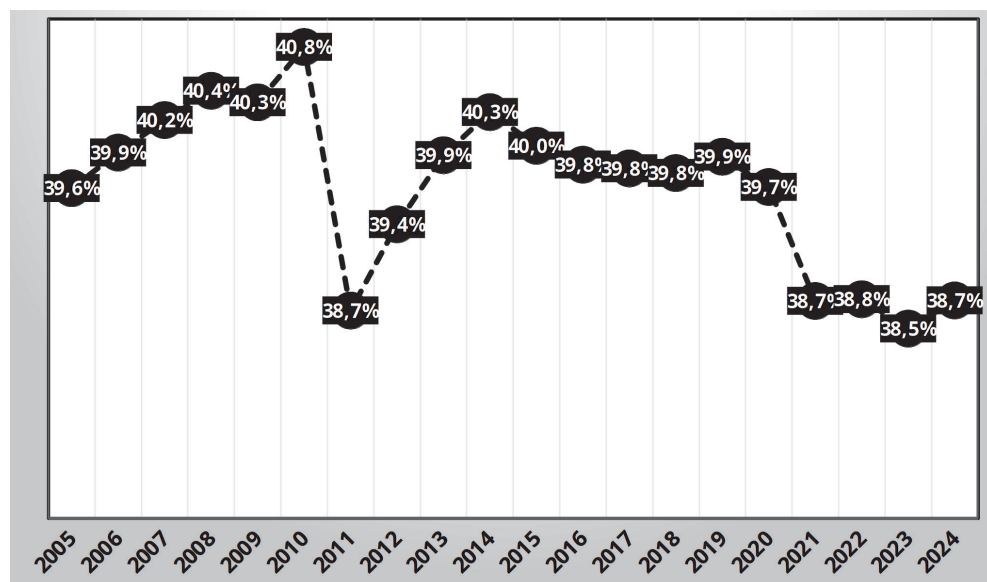


Figure 7.3. Evolution of the employment rate (15 years and over), in Tunisia, 2005–2024

*2nd quarter for 2005 to 2010 and annual average for 2011 to 2024

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005; 2007; 2012; 2015; 2017; 2021; 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

This low employment rate, compared with other countries that are achieving higher growth rates by far than Tunisia, will facilitate weak economic growth in Tunisia, since the labour factor, one of the engines of growth, has broken down. This engine can only function well with employment rates above 65%. The reverse can be achieved by improving the overall activity rate, especially that of women and

graduates, where there is a great deal of room for manoeuvre. Meanwhile, the female activity rate in Tunisia remains low, at around 30%.

Economic Growth vs. Job Creation

Aside from the “exceptional” years of 2011, 2020 and 2021, economic growth logically influenced the volume of job creation (see Figure 7.4). Specifically, each percentage point of growth resulted in an average of 18,310 jobs annually during the 2007-2010 period, 21,310 jobs during 2013-2016, and 19,370 jobs during 2016-2019. This corresponds to an average of approximately 19,810 jobs ($\pm 1,500$) per triennium.

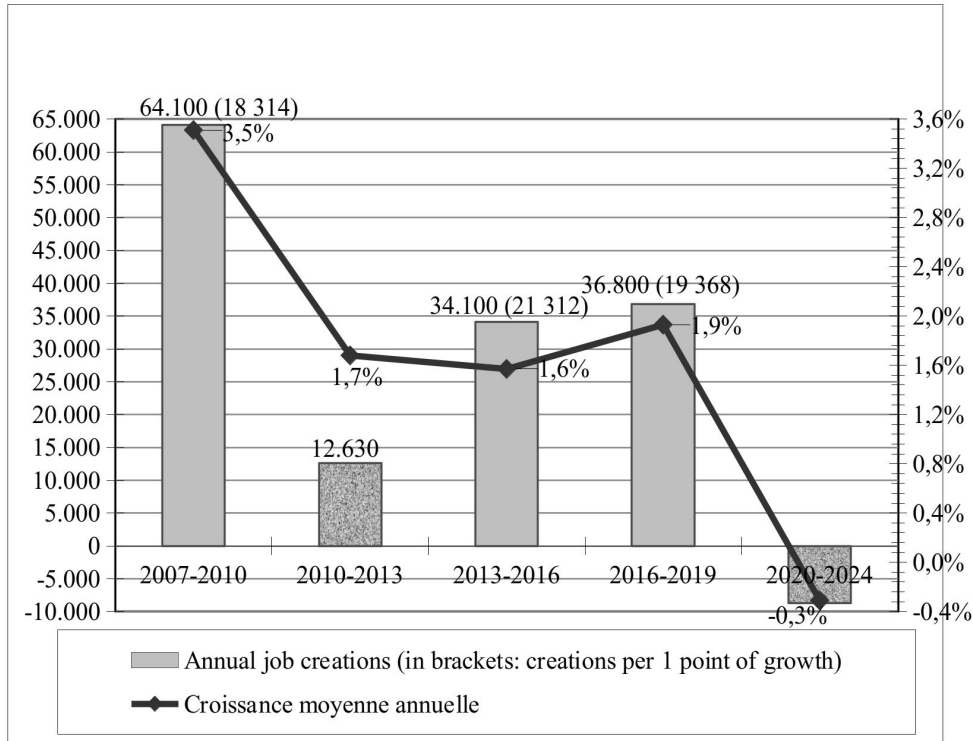


Figure 7.4. Evolution of job creation and growth rate, by three-year period, 2007-2024*

*General population

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005; 2007; 2012; 2015; 2017; 2021; 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005–2024.

However, this relationship no longer holds when applied to HEGs (see Figure 7.5). Indeed, 1% growth generated 7,940 jobs annually for HEGs during the 2007-2010 period, 13,940 jobs during 2013-2016, and 19,260 jobs during 2016-2019. The economic growth rate was not a decisive factor in the job

creation process for higher education graduates. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the Tunisian economy is characterised by low value-added sectors that rely on unskilled labour. For example, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which has a high level of workforce integration (63%), contributes only 2.9% of GDP and employs less than 1.5% of the workforce. In another instance, financial services and insurance (with a workforce integration rate of 64%) account for just 3.8% of GDP and less than 1% of the employed population. In contrast, the sectors with the largest share of the employed population, including construction (13.6% of the workforce), agriculture (15.2%), commerce and repairs (12.8%), textiles (7.2%), and hospitality and catering (3.7%), which collectively employ over half (53%) of the working population and account for 32% of GDP, provide limited opportunities for higher education graduates. These sectors employ only 17% of the total employed graduates, with an average workforce integration rate of just 7%.

There has been a significant increase in Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP), such as the SIVP-CIVP programs and equivalents, as well as the Karama Program, specifically for HEGs, between 2007-2010 (32,840 daily beneficiaries on average), 2013-2016 (65,470), and 2016-2019 (82,760). This increase may partially explain the significant disparity in job creation between the three triennia.

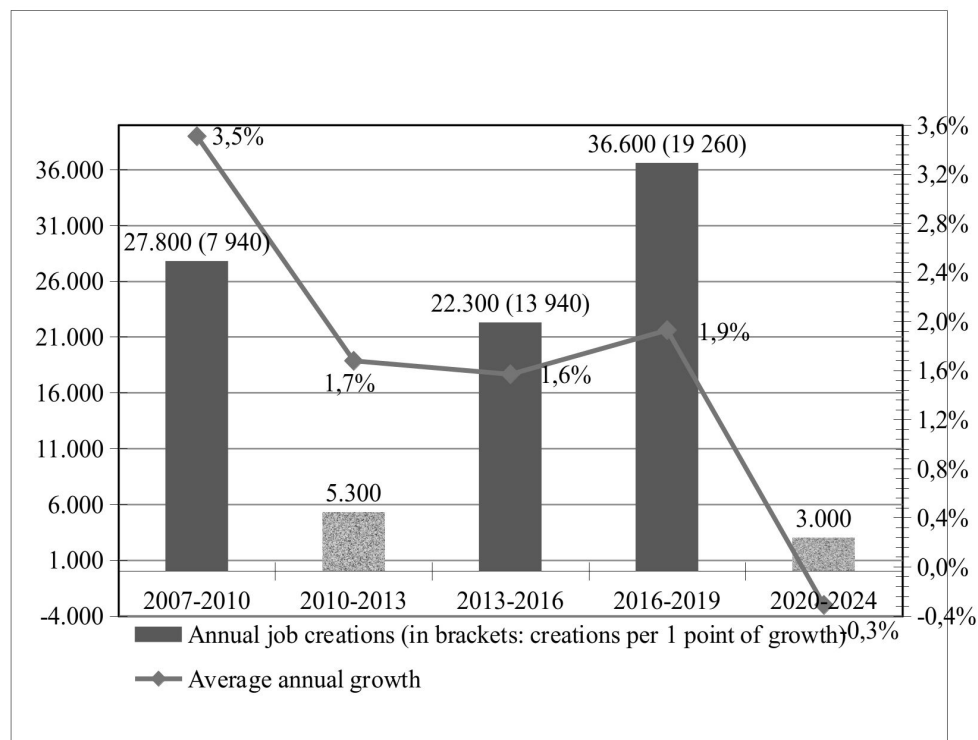


Figure 7.5. Evolution of job creation and growth rate (tertiary graduates) by three-year periods, 2007-2024

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Enquête sur l'Emploi et la Population (EEP)*, quarterly and annual datasets (INS, 2005; 2007; 2012; 2015; 2017; 2021; 2024), as well as INS (2025), *Premiers résultats du Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2024*, covering the period 2005-2024.

The rise in unemployment among HEGs in Tunisia is primarily linked to two forms of unemployment: disequilibrium unemployment and, to a lesser extent, mismatch unemployment. On the one hand, disequilibrium unemployment results from the low level of job creation for this group compared to the rapid increase in the supply of graduates. Since 2005, the number of graduates has increased at an average annual rate of over 42,000 individuals, while the annual average of net job creation between 2005 and 2024 has been less than 18,000 per year. These jobs are distributed across various sectors, including public wage employment, private wage employment, self-employment, and ALMPs, with more than half being filled in the public sector. Mismatches in unemployment, on the other hand, can be explained by the qualitative mismatch between the supply and demand for labour. Specifically, certain fields of study do not align with the real needs of the Tunisian economy (Garraoui, 2024).

Another serious issue related to graduate unemployment is the distribution of job seekers by the age of their degree. In 2019, 61% of unemployed HEGs had a degree that was at least five years old, with nearly three-quarters of these individuals being women. A prolonged period of unemployment or inactivity early in one's career can have a lasting detrimental impact on employability, future earnings, and access to quality jobs. The limited prospects of finding employment often lead to discouragement, which in turn may contribute to inactivity or emigration. It is the role of the state to find solutions and develop effective active policies tailored to this long-term unemployed group.

Finally, it is important to note that these graduates have not been passive in the face of this situation. Even before the 2011 revolution, they began organizing social movements to assert their rights, which represents a form of social innovation.

Graduate Unemployment and the Rise of Social Movements in Tunisia

Graduate unemployment in Tunisia first garnered significant attention in 2008, when unemployed graduates initiated their first collective actions. Their activism played a crucial role in the 2011 revolution and the broader Arab Spring. Since that time, these graduates have been instrumental in shaping Tunisia's political and socio-economic landscape by advocating for employment rights, justice, anti-corruption measures, educational reforms, and other socio-economic issues (Garraoui, 2024). This section examines the theoretical framework and discusses how unemployed graduates have organised and sustained social movements to assert their right to employment, both before and after the revolution. It also highlights the limited outcomes of their efforts.

The data used in this paper consists of two types: offline and online qualitative data. The offline data was gathered through in-depth interviews with nine activists involved in mobilisations to defend the employment rights of graduates. Among them, three were group leaders and six were ordinary members. Fieldwork was conducted in Greater Tunis during two phases: October–November 2021 and October–November 2022. The interviews were conducted in the Tunisian dialect, recorded via smartphone, and manually transcribed using Microsoft Word. The second dataset comprises online data collected from December 2019 to December 2022 from the official Facebook pages of three groups examined in both the dissertation and this study: the UDC (Union des Diplômés Chômeurs) and the UDCT (l'Union des Docteurs Chercheurs en Tunisie), and the Coordination of Tansiqiyyat

al-Intidāb Ḥaqqī (translated in English as The Coordination for Recruitment is My Right). The online data includes posts, texts, pictures, and videos.

The data was analysed and interpreted using a theoretical framework focused on collective action and resource mobilisation. Olson's theory, drawing upon historical studies of collective actions in social movements from the 1960s, provides valuable insights into the motivations that drive individuals to engage in social movements, highlighting their involvement as stemming from shared social and economic interests (Snow et al., 1980). In Tunisia, the collective aspiration for public sector employment serves as a crucial socio-economic interest that motivates the organisation of social movements. This common goal encourages graduates to participate actively, advocate for their demands, and make sacrifices along the way. The prevailing belief among activists that securing public sector jobs is a fundamental right, and that social movements represent the most effective means of asserting this claim, significantly influences their level of engagement.

Furthermore, resource mobilisation theory (RMT) posits that social movements are systematic rather than arbitrary collective actions. These movements are rooted in the availability of various resources – moral, cultural, social-organisational, human, and material – which, when effectively mobilised during periods of governmental tolerance, can lead to the formation of impactful social movements and facilitate change (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1973; 2002; Oberschall, 1973). In this context, the social movements of unemployed graduates in Tunisia should not be seen as isolated or random events, but rather as organised collective actions that have the potential to bring about change at multiple levels, despite the limited outcomes concerning employment.

Graduates Social Movements before 2011

The first societal response to the issue of graduate unemployment emerged in 2008, when unemployed graduates in Gafsa organised their initial social movement. This mobilisation not only captured the attention of political actors but also brought the challenges of graduate unemployment to the forefront of public debate. Plus, it marked the beginning of a sustained period of societal activism aimed at confronting rising inequalities, persistent labour market challenges, and the systemic barriers faced by graduates seeking employment. Scholars widely recognise the Gafsa uprising of 2008 as a critical precursor to the broader wave of protests that ultimately culminated in the 2011 Arab Spring (Allal & Geisser, 2011; Bakari, 2015; Jaldi, 2021).

On 6 January 2008, a group of unemployed graduates initiated a social protest following the announcement of recruitment competition results at the Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa (CPG), one of the largest public sector employers in the Gafsa governorate, located in Tunisia's interior regions. Many unemployed graduates, along with non-graduates, voiced their dissatisfaction with the results, which they perceived as unjust and marred by allegations of nepotism and corruption. Most of the protesters were youth marginalised by systemic exclusion, persistent unemployment, and corrupt recruitment practices. The rejection of the competition results served as a catalyst, crystallizing shared feelings of refusal, marginalisation, and exclusion among both graduates and non-graduates. These common grievances fostered a collective sense of injustice that motivated widespread participation in the uprising, supporting scholarly findings that emphasise the role of shared interests as key drivers of

engagement in social movements (Snow et al., 1980). Over the following six months, demonstrations spread across multiple locations in the mining basin. The state's response was repressive: the regime of Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (in power from 1987 to 2011) imprisoned hundreds of protestors, left ten injured, and resulted in the deaths of three individuals (Allal, 2010; Allal, & Geisser, 2011; Antonakis-Nashif, 2016; Weipert-Fenner, 2020).

The immediate and evident catalyst for the 2008 uprising was the public outcry over the announcement of recruitment competition results at the CPG. However, the underlying cause can be traced to a disconnect between the substantial investments in education – discussed in the earlier section – and the rising rates of graduate unemployment. A degree did not guarantee employment, nor the accumulation of meaningful social and economic benefits.

Graduate Unemployment and the 2011 Tunisian Revolution

Not far from Gafsa, where the 2008 uprising had taken root, youth in Sidi Bouzid – another interior governorate of Tunisia – ignited the Revolution of 2011. This revolutionary wave quickly spread across the Arab world, sparking what became known as the Arab Spring. Young people in Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, and beyond voiced their collective frustration over deepening socio-economic crises, political repression, and widespread inequality. Across these movements, the youth demanded political freedom, social justice, dignity, economic opportunity, and a fairer distribution of resources, with unemployed graduates playing a leading role in articulating and driving calls for systemic reform.

In Tunisia, participants held banners featuring the phrase 'Shughl, Hurriyya, Karāma waṭaniyya' (Hmed, 2016; Jaldi, 2021). This slogan is the most prominent representation of the revolution's motives, participants, and demands (Weipert-Fenner, 2020). Its linguistic structure is significant, consisting of three core components: *Shughl* (Arabic: شغل), meaning "work"; *Al-ḥurriyya* (Arabic: الحرية), meaning "freedom"; and *Karāma waṭaniyya* (Arabic: كرامة وطنية), meaning "national dignity". These terms are presented together in sequence, creating a clear message: work and freedom are the foundational pillars of citizen dignity. By placing 'Shughl' at the beginning, the emphasis is on the importance of work for individuals, highlighting one of Tunisia's most pressing issues: unemployment, particularly among young graduates (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2014). 'Hurriyya' is primarily raised by young people and journalists who are frustrated with systemic control and limited freedom, seeking civil and political rights. Finally, "Karāma waṭaniyya," or national dignity, encompasses everything citizens aspire to achieve through decent jobs, freedoms, participation, equality, and justice (Garraoui, 2024; Yerkes & Ben Yahmed, 2018).

The Tunisian revolution began with Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010, highlighting the frustrations of unemployed graduates and marginalised citizens under Ben Ali's regime. Bouazizi, a graduate street vendor and symbol of state oppression, sparked mass protests that spread from rural areas to urban centres, uniting various social groups against systemic injustice. As a reaction Ben Ali initiated attempts at reform, but demands for his resignation grew. Social media played a key role in organizing resistance and exposing state violence (Dakhli, 2011). The revolution led to Ben Ali's ouster on January 14, 2011, marking a significant moment in the Arab world and signalling a shift toward democratisation amid ongoing socio-economic challenges, particularly youth

unemployment. The positive outcomes of the revolution included the collapse of Ben Ali's corrupt regime. For the first time, an Arab population successfully ended a political regime, inspiring similar uprisings in Egypt and Libya. This generated enthusiasm among the youth, who became confident in their ability to enact change through social movements and street protests to advocate for their rights and drive societal transformation (Garraoui, 2024).

The Mobilisation of Unemployed Graduates in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: Resource Inequalities and the Diversity of Collective Actions

The post-revolutionary period in Tunisia created a unique opportunity for political and civic engagement, particularly among marginalised groups such as unemployed university graduates. This more open political climate fostered the emergence and institutionalisation of various social movements throughout the country, aligning with scholarly perspectives that highlight the critical role of political opportunity structures in facilitating collective action (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1973; 2002; Oberschall, 1973). Among the institutionalised movements, the UDC has achieved formal recognition and gained legal status to organise and participate in collective action. This institution has emerged as a key advocate for the right to employment for graduates, a demographic significantly impacted by high unemployment rates and regional disparities (Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2020). The UDC's official spokesperson (H.) described the institution as follows: "The UDC is a national institution that defends the rights of all unemployed individuals. It engages with all national issues, maintains a bias towards the poor and working classes, and defends the right to equitable development" (November 2022) (UDC, n.d.).

In addition to the UDC, two other significant institutions emerged in 2019. The first is the UDCT, which was established to advocate specifically for the employment rights of PhD holders. This organisation provided a structured platform for mobilizing social movements among PhD graduates, who united in their pursuit of secure employment opportunities. This initiative embodies the principles of organisation and participation in social movements as described by Snow et al. (1980). M. (anonymised name), a leader of the UDCT, characterised the institution as follows: "An institution with a unionist spirit, dedicated to defending the rights of unemployed PhD holders in terms of employment and dignity..." (November 2021) (UDCT, n.d.).

The second institution that emerged in 2019 is Tansīqiyyat al-Intidāb Ḥaqqī. This organisation was established to advocate for and protect the employment rights of unemployed graduates who have been out of work for 10 years or more. As one of its leaders elaborated: "This coordination includes a group of individuals from different governorates who share a common characteristic: the long unemployment period (10 years and more)" (A., Tansīqiyyat al-intidāb ḥaqqī coordinator, November 2022) (Tansīqiyyat al-intidāb ḥaqqī n.d.).

Moreover, the period following the revolution in Tunisia created a more open political climate that allowed these institutions to enhance their mobilisation efforts. Nevertheless, the degree, variety, and particularly the significance of these social movements varies in importance among the three institutions analysed. This variation is attributed to the significance of the resources they mobilise,

particularly in terms of identity and quality, as demonstrated by Resource Mobilisation Theory scholars (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1973; 2002; Oberschall, 1973).

The UDC received significant backing from the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), a key player in Tunisia's democratic transition (Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2020). This support was essential for mobilizing resources, which included material assistance (such as housing and transportation), cultural aid (encompassing knowledge and activism experience), moral encouragement (support from union members, syndicalists, and the media), institutional backing (legal recognition and strategic locations), and human involvement (participation from celebrities and widespread citizen engagement). Together, these resources were instrumental in facilitating a series of intensified, diverse, and large-scale social movements spearheaded by the UDC. As a result, the UDC effectively organised, took part in, and coordinated numerous prominent protests, strikes, and public demonstrations (notably on December 17, 2021, in Sidi Bouzid; November 25, 2021, in Kasserine; and January 6, 2021) as well as protests in Tunis throughout 2021 (on January 8, March 24, March 31, October 27, September 8, June 1, and June 29). These activities not only showcased organisational continuity but also reflected a growing urgency among graduates facing ongoing structural unemployment (Garraoui, 2024).

The UDCT demonstrates a lower capacity for resource mobilisation compared to the UDC. However, members managed to engage in more sustained and intense forms of activism, notably through prolonged sit-ins and hunger strikes. One of the most significant and visible actions undertaken by the UDCT was a sit-in at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which lasted from June 29, 2019, to September 2021. Demonstrators maintained a continuous, around-the-clock presence for over two years, symbolizing both their resilience and growing frustration over the state's continuous neglect of their demands. The longevity of this sit-in was sustained by limited material resources, a committed participant base capable of enduring difficult conditions, moral support reinforced by celebrity involvement and media exposure, and cultural resources rooted in a strong belief in participants' rights. These factors collectively enabled its continuation for more than two years, in line with the propositions of Resource Mobilisation Theory. The sit-in was reinforced by a series of demonstrations and protests held on January 8, March 24, March 31, October 27, and September 8, 2021, in Tunis. The hunger strike that was conducted from January 11 to 16, 2021, further heightened public awareness and political pressure (Garraoui, 2024). This hunger strike gained critical momentum following the visit of President Kais Saied, who expressed empathy with the strikers' cause. As S., one UDCT member, recounted: "The first hunger strike wasn't violent. When the President visited me, he admitted he lacked the authority to resolve the problem but promised to hold an emergency cabinet meeting on Monday..." (October 2021).

The third group, *Tansiqiyyat al-intidāb haqqī*, founded in 2019, fragmented into smaller sub-coordinated groups by the end of 2021, primarily due to a lack of essential resources. Unlike the UDC and UDCT, it operated without official legal status, resulting in weak institutional support, and was further constrained by limited experience in activism, as well as insufficient moral, cultural, and material resources, including the absence of celebrity backing. These limitations reduced both the scope and effectiveness of its mobilisation efforts, contributing to its relatively brief existence and limited influence, in line with the expectations of Resource Mobilisation Theory.

Despite these constraints, the movement organised several notable actions, including the “9/9 sit-in” launched on September 9, 2020, regional sit-ins in Kasserine, Sousse, and Gafsa in October 2021, and major demonstrations on March 16, 2020 (which mobilised around 3,000 unemployed graduates), as well as on January 6 and October 20, 2021, in the Kasbah of Tunis (Garraoui, 2024). However, its activism remained limited in both intensity and frequency, which ultimately contributed to its fragmentation in 2021. In contrast, better-resourced groups were able to sustain more continuous mobilisation, achieve more substantial outcomes, and maintain a longer presence in the political landscape.

In addition to the previously mentioned factors, the effectiveness of graduate mobilisations can be evaluated through two primary perspectives: their organisational strength and the degree to which they have met their objectives, especially in generating employment opportunities (Garraoui, 2024). On the organisational side, unemployed graduates have successfully established legitimate and varied social movements that have received official acknowledgement and led to formal discussions, such as the 2021 negotiations between unemployed PhD holders and Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. This interaction demonstrates their ability to shape public discourse and foster dialogue with authorities. However, regarding concrete results, the employment landscape remains largely inadequate. Despite initiatives such as the March 2021 UDCT agreement, which aimed to create 2,400 academic positions over a three-year period starting in 2021 across various ministries and public institutions, progress has been hindered by implementation delays, mismanagement, and widespread discontent. The same situation applies to the UDC, *Tansiḡiyat al-intidāb ḥaqqī*, and those who were supposed to benefit from the announcement of Law 38.2020 on August 13, 2020, which was intended to establish a platform for recruiting certain groups (based on specific criteria) for public sector employment. This law was revoked on November 19, 2021. By the conclusion of 2023, no significant advancements had been reported from other institutions, highlighting the limited effectiveness of these mobilisations in tackling structural unemployment among graduates.

Conclusion

Economic theory predicts a virtuous cycle driven by improvements in human capital, particularly through extended university-level education in African countries. However, the persistent and high levels of unemployment among university graduates, coupled with the poor quality of higher education programs, have severely disrupted this mechanism. As a result, Tunisia like many African countries now face some of the highest rates of graduate unemployment globally, with particularly high rates among youth and females. These two categories are among the most affected by graduate unemployment, which explains their active participation in various social movements and collective actions to defend what they consider their right to employment in countries such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

A sustainable solution to graduate unemployment requires a profound transformation of traditional sectors and the accelerated development of new, labour-intensive industries that are innovation-driven and capable of generating high added value. These emerging sectors must be able to absorb qualified human capital and create meaningful employment opportunities.

However, the belief that economic growth alone will solve the issue – even in the medium term – is no longer credible. While stronger economic growth remains essential for overall job creation, it is insufficient to significantly reduce graduate unemployment in the short or medium term. As a result, urgent measures are needed to enhance the employability of graduates, particularly those who have been waiting for years and are now on the verge of discouragement and detachment from the labour market.

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