

REWRITING THE RURAL STORY

25 years of opportunity for students on the
Rural Education Access Programme



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Foreword

The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) is an associate body of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Association (SACBC), which was registered as a South African not-for-profit organisation in 2001. It currently employs 42 staff members, spread between Cape Town (head office), Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, Northern Cape and Limpopo. This includes 22 graduates in the fields of social sciences or psychology who work directly with students and learners. REAP is governed by a national board with 14 members which meets three times per year. REAP has Level 1 BEE status and is independently audited.

Our vision

To reduce rural poverty in South Africa by developing self-sustaining, ethically responsible caring graduates.

Our mission

To offer motivated young South Africans from disadvantaged rural households the support and guidance they need to access post-school education & training (PSET), graduate, sustain themselves and become ethically responsible citizens.

In 2026, REAP celebrates 25 years of faithful service to our founding vision. This report was commissioned, with the generous support of the DG Murray Trust, to document at least some of the fruit of our work over the last 25 years, both in statistical analysis and also in narrative. It is a story of access to opportunity, skills and qualifications obtained, careers established and lives transformed. The spillover impact on families and communities will be impossible to adequately measure, but will live on for generations.

Read and be inspired!

Russell Davies (REAP Director)

May 2026



KELEBOGILE *KOMANE*

Kelebogile (25) was born in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, where she grew up mostly under the care of her grandmother. Her mother was a cleaner at a bank, while her grandmother relied on the state pension. Of her upbringing, Kelebogile says: “It was a background that alerted me into finding myself and hoping that I am better, because most of my peers, I wouldn't say they didn't really care about their future, but it's an area where you don't have role models, so I had to decide as an individual exactly what I want for my life,

which was to be successful; to be somewhere else. I wanted change; I wanted something better; I didn't want the background of where I come from to kind of define my future and who I want to be.”

At school Kelebogile was good at the sciences and always knew she wanted to work in the health field. She discovered radiography and decided to pursue this subject at the University of Johannesburg. She came across REAP during her application process and was awarded a bursary. Much as the financial support was essential, it was the academic support that stood out: “I used to be such a big procrastinator. Also, having to adjust from high school to varsity, where no one is monitoring you, you just do things at your own pace. I would delay, and then the next thing, it's already too late, it's test week, the pressure is too much. So, REAP would have these consultations with the Student Development Advisors to keep track on where you are, set goals of what you need to do at a certain period, and check if you completed the tests. So, that helped me a lot in terms of managing my time and preparing for my exams to keep myself on track and on par to make sure that I don't fall behind.”

Kelebogile graduated in 2024 and undertook her community service at Mamelodi Regional Hospital. Thereafter, she obtained a job as a radiographer at a private practice in Bryanston. Very quickly, she was offered a permanent position and an opportunity to specialise in CT radiography. REAP's support helped her to make such rapid progress: “I used to be a very shy person, and my field of work obviously demands me to interact with people, because I talk to a lot of patients ... So, that helped me to work on my shyness, and be confident and fluent in communicating with people ... That was also something that was really important from REAP.”

NOLUTHANDO

MINGADI



Noluthando (31) was born in Cato Ridge, KwaZulu-Natal. She never knew her father, and her mother died when she was 8 years old. Fortunately, Noluthando and her brother had a loving extended family who took them in and brought them up. Although the family was large and of humble means, Noluthando recalls having her basic needs met and never going to bed hungry. Always very good at mathematics, Noluthando eventually decided to pursue studies in industrial mathematics after her matric. When other scholarships did not work out, she registered at UKZN for a BSC in applied mathematics and statistics.

Noluthando first heard of REAP at school through her teachers. At the time of her university registration she had not yet received a confirmation of the REAP support, but went with her NSFAS pre-offer. Not knowing her father's details derailed her application: "The officer, she just threw the forms in my face and asked me, 'Do you want me to go and look for your father?' ... The fortunate part was in that week, I got a call from REAP that I had been successfully selected."

REAP's support was invaluable, especially in helping Noluthando make the transition to university: "In your first year, you don't know anything about university, especially if you're from a family where no one has been to university. So you don't know how to register, how to do your basic timetable, how to select your electives ... And you're from a very disadvantaged school that did not have a computer. Now, you need to do your stuff online. So they allocated me a Peer Mentor; I think he was a third-year student, but he was the one who was assisting me. He was my toll-free number!"

After Noluthando graduated in 2015 she obtained a job as a data scientist at several well-known companies, including current employer Cell-C. She has not only progressed in her career and built a house for her family, but is currently balancing parenthood with work and her PhD studies. Noluthando reflects: "I'm living a very comfortable life. They gave me the access to education, they gave me the key to unlock the future. I think in South Africa, it's quite a privilege to have a good-paying job, have access to opportunities, and having the right skill. And I think they gave me bread for life. Even my kids are living comfortably. They're going to private school and I've got a full-time helper that I'm able to afford to pay for, and I don't think all of these luxuries would have been possible without me getting the education or an opportunity to actually study."

1. Introduction

As South Africa battles perpetual high unemployment, young people continue to bear the brunt of joblessness. The country's youth unemployment rate has reached "crisis" proportions: the official unemployment rate for youth aged 15-34 has increased from 36,9% in 2015 to 46,1% in 2025.¹ This trend highlights deteriorating prospects for millions of South Africa's young people.

While those without school-leaving certificates or tertiary qualifications are most at risk of unemployment, even tertiary graduates are facing an increasingly difficult battle to secure employment opportunities and build careers in their fields of study.² Graduate unemployment has almost doubled in the last two decades, growing from 5,8% in 2008 to 11,8% in 2023.³

Within this broader context, children growing up in rural areas face a particular set of barriers, not only in accessing quality basic education and completing their secondary schooling, but also in accessing tertiary study opportunities thereafter. As scholars have pointed out, there has been "an inadequate focus on empowering rural learners to choose paths that will allow them to flourish as socially responsible, engaged and creative global citizens."⁴

The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) was registered as an NPO in 2001 to address the barriers faced by promising rural learners in accessing higher educational opportunities, and flourishing in their studies and further careers. REAP evolved out of the Catholic Education Assistance Programme, established during the apartheid years. It is still affiliated with the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference.

REAP's model has largely revolved around identifying promising rural learners and providing them not only with financial assistance (through access to bursary support and stipends for key study-related needs), but also a package of support and training during their time in tertiary education that helps them negotiate the academic and social aspects of their studies, and sets them up for the world of work. Since 2019, the model has expanded to provide this support to matriculants who live in particular geographical areas in which REAP works who are accepted to study at a university or a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college.

Celebrating 25 years in 2026, REAP sought to follow-up on previous tracking and impact studies (2011; 2016), which demonstrated its impact on its alumni. REAP currently has 1,122 individuals on its alumni database. These individuals do not represent the entirety of those supported by REAP over 25 years. Some, who have not completed their studies, have fallen off REAP's database; some may have shifted to another support programme; while others graduated but have not maintained links to REAP. Nevertheless, the 1,122 individuals on the database represent the majority of those supported by REAP. The aim of this tracking study was to include as many of these individuals as possible to tell REAP's story of impact over the last quarter of a century. This report presents the findings from this study.

2. Tracking study methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach in order to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data and perspectives from, and on, the REAP alumni. The following methods were employed:

The electronic survey

To gather both quantitative and qualitative data on REAP alumni, an electronic Google Forms survey was designed. This survey explored not only where the alumni were living and what they are doing, but their experiences of REAP support – skills acquired through tertiary studies and REAP mentoring, post-study employment experiences, work and earning history, family dynamics and community involvement. The survey was made available via an online link, which the respondent could access and complete themselves in 10-15 minutes.

Sampling the alumni

While hoping for as comprehensive a view as possible on the whereabouts and position of REAP's alumni, it was recognised from the outset that getting hold of all 1,122 alumni from a 25-year period was unrealistic. Even where database email addresses or phone numbers may still be accurate, response rates to surveys are typically low. We aimed for at least a 20% response rate to the survey. The survey link was sent to the alumni database on 20 February 2026 and close to 90 responses came back within the next two weeks, following two email reminders. Thereafter, it was realised that a more personal approach was necessary to ensure that more alumni would respond.

Mpho Thabane, a young social science graduate based in Bloemfontein, was contracted to go through the database systematically and attempt to contact each remaining former REAP student directly by telephone or WhatsApp. Ms Thabane spent the month of March making these calls, which enabled us to obtain 255 responses by the end of the month. We thus managed a 23% response rate. Sampling for the study was thus based on who could be reached and who was willing to respond. The potential biases introduced by these sampling realities will be discussed below, but two in particular deserve foregrounding here. One such is that Ms Thabane contacted a few alumni who told her they had not yet been successful in their careers, and were therefore put off responding to the survey questions, especially those around earnings. We were also more successful in finding more recent graduates than those from earlier years, with an associated bias towards early career dynamics in our findings.



DINEO *MAKO*

Dineo (29) was born in Vanderbyl Park, Gauteng, the third born of five children. Struggling to support the family, Dineo's parents sent her to live with her grandmother and aunt in an informal settlement in Grasmere. Dineo remembers: "Up until Grade 6, life was hard. There were times when I didn't even have school shoes, or shoes to wear at home. I remember when I went to get my transfer letter from my primary school in Grade 7, I walked to class from home barefoot, and I look back at it now and I think it was just weird, but at the time it was a norm to me." Dineo's situation improved when she moved to stay with her great-aunt in Lichtenburg at the start of high school.

Dineo was a gifted science and mathematics student, even winning a district prize in Grade 11. She recognises how lucky she was that she escaped life in Grasmere, where children grow up hopeless: "When I lived in Gauteng, I could not see life beyond the circumstances that I was in. If anything, growing older scared me, because what was going to happen? I was surrounded by young people who fell pregnant from as young as 14, 15, 16. And it seemed as if it was inevitable, like we were all headed there. There was no other way out of this, and that was scary for me. And then, when I moved to Lichtenburg, for a few years, I stopped dreaming and just enjoyed being a kid. And then, from Grade 10 ... I started thinking about what I'm going to study." Dineo chose to study mining engineering at Wits University, and she applied for a REAP bursary in Grade 12.

Like other REAP alumni, Dineo found REAP's academic and psycho-social support interventions especially crucial. She found life very fast-paced, failing her first semester. The Student Development Advisor got her to take a career assessment, which motivated her to try again "That's when I was able to fight harder and try to finish first year as best as I could," Dineo explains. She graduated in 2021, despite her last year being interrupted by COVID-19.

With good work readiness support from REAP Dineo also secured a job while she was still completing her studies. She moved to her current job as a mine planning engineer to further her ambitions of working in a technical field and becoming a mineral resource manager. When asked about her greatest achievement, Dineo replies: "I think it is escaping poverty ... and just being able to live in comfortable conditions. Sometimes I still get shocked when I walk into my apartment that this is really my home because I spent a lot of time in a shack."

ERICA

MANHICE

Erica (25) was born in Katlehong, Gauteng, the third-born of five siblings. She was initially raised by her grandparents while her father was working as a miner and studying to be a paramedic. When Erica was in Grade 3, her father obtained a permanent paramedic position in Postmasburg, Northern Cape. The family joined him there, where Erica enjoyed a small-town upbringing.

Erica's parents took education very seriously, which ensured she worked hard at her schooling and was the recipient of a scholarship. One of her greatest challenges was learning Afrikaans, but her older siblings were an important source of guidance and encouragement. Her parents had high expectations of them: "We were told that one of us has to study medicine, so with the conversation I had with my parents in primary school that ambition was still there. I'm like, okay, cool, I can do it. It's not that hard." However, as she grew older, Erica developed an interest in law, after briefly considering engineering: "In high school I realised that maths and physics were not my strongest subjects. But also, I took part in moot court competitions, oral history and debate competitions, I resonated way more with law ... I think from Grade 10, I knew that I wanted to study law."

Erica was accepted for a five-year law degree at the University of the Free State. Finding the transition from high school to university intimidating she decided to apply for REAP support: "When I started, it was during COVID, so the transition from high school to varsity was just not how it's supposed to go. I was still back at home, and I just did not understand all this online situation, because I'm so used to face-to-face learning systems and having relationships with your teachers ... Just adapting to online and university itself was very difficult."

Benefitting from the ongoing support of her REAP Student Development Advisor and Peer Mentor, Erica herself became a Peer Mentor in her third year. After two years in this role, Erica noticed that there was no standard approach to peer mentoring, and that some students lost out as a result. She found herself in a position to make a lasting contribution to the way REAP works: "I suggested that we introduce a Peer Mentor coordinator ... Because Peer Mentors felt like they were not mandated to do certain things. And, because there was no structure, they also did not know what to do." In 2025 Erica became the first Peer Mentor coordinator, setting up a WhatsApp group for all Peer Mentors across the country, and ensuring they received the framework and guidance needed to provide effective mentoring. Having graduated in 2025, Erica is now completing her articles at Africa's largest law firm, ENSafrica. She credits REAP's support for helping her put such a positive first step onto the career ladder.



Qualitative case studies with a small sample

To obtain more qualitative case-study data, a small purposive sample of survey respondents was selected for in-depth interviews. The target was between 15 and 20 such interviews, of which 18 were conducted by the primary researcher. Alumni with interesting careers in a range of fields were purposively chosen to illustrate the impact of REAP on their journey and to showcase how support at a critical time for a rural student can shift them onto a different trajectory.⁵ Dr Hartnack contacted all selected alumni via email, setting up half-hour Zoom calls for each interview. All interviews were recorded (for the purposes of making a transcript) and detailed notes were also taken during the process. Once case studies were written up, each participant was sent their case study for feedback and sign-off. Case study participants also provided a photograph of themselves to go with each case study.

Desk study

A desk study of previous REAP reports and comparative statistics and documents on graduate employment (e.g. Quarterly labour force surveys, government and NGO reports and studies on related issues and programmes) was conducted to provide a baseline against which to compare REAP's achievements with its alumni.

Data analysis

The survey data was analysed thematically and descriptively in an Excel spreadsheet, with comparison by factors such as gender, study institution, field of study, field of work and others. The qualitative data was also analysed thematically and descriptively, largely informing case-study development.

3. Tracking study findings

3.1 REAP alumni demographics and characteristics

Before discussing the characteristics of the study sample, a broader sketch of REAP's entire alumni is warranted.

Of the 1,122 rural students who have been supported by REAP since 2001, 604 (54%) are women, and 518 (46%) are men. The database records 1,026 (91%) as black and 96 (9%) as coloured, with no other races recorded among REAP students.

As shown in Figure 1, a third of REAP's alumni come from KwaZulu-Natal (33%), more than double the proportion from the next most common provinces of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo (both 14%). The Free State (11%) and Western Cape (10%) account for a slightly smaller proportion of alumni, while the other four provinces are comparatively poorly represented.

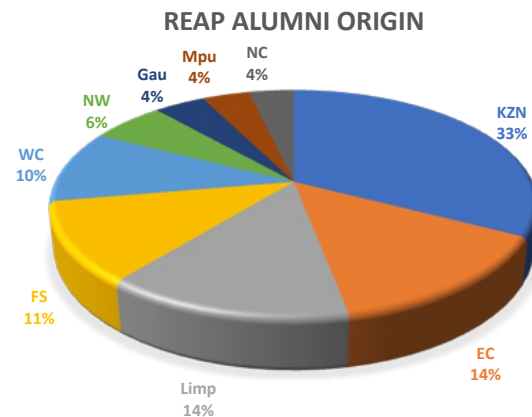
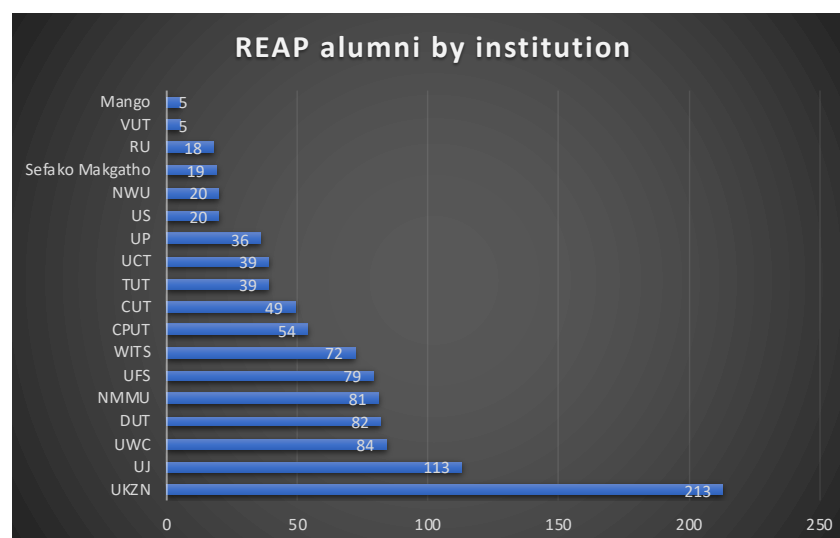


Figure 1: Provincial origin of REAP's entire alumni

Figure 2 shows the tertiary institutions which REAP's alumni have attended. As can be observed, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), unsurprisingly given REAP student origins, has been the most popular institution, training 19% of the students (n213). The University of Johannesburg (UJ) has also been popular, accounting for 10% of the students (n113). The University of the Western Cape, Durban University of Technology, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, the University of the Free State (all 7% each) and University of

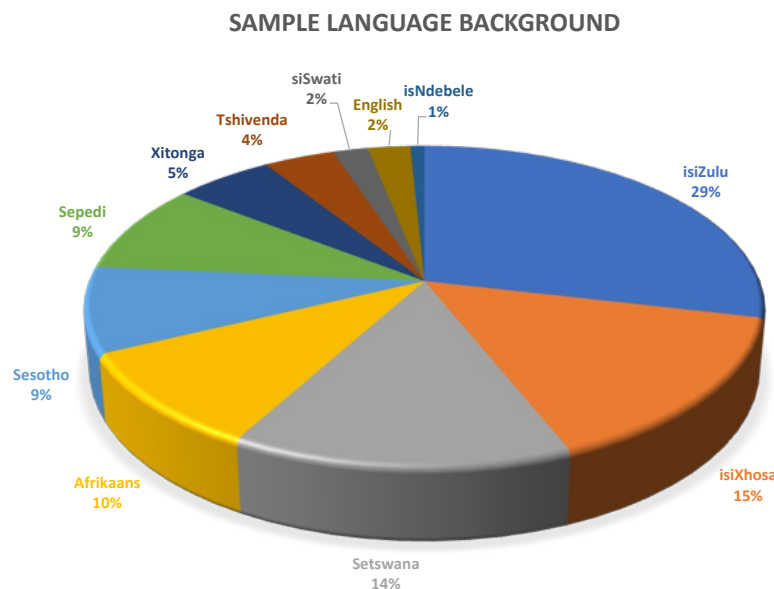


Witwatersrand (6%) all hosted similar numbers of REAP students. Much smaller proportions (below 50) were hosted across a number of other institutions, including some technical and vocational (TVET) colleges.

Figure 2: Institutions attended by REAP's alumni since 2001

3.2 Study sample background and demographics

Moving on to the tracking study sample of 255 REAP alumni, the gender characteristics closely mirror those of the overall REAP alumni cohort. One-hundred and forty-four females (56%) replied to the survey, compared to 111 males (44%). The tracking study did not ask about race, but rather sought to understand the language groups which REAP alumni come from.



As Figure 3 shows, the largest proportion of those surveyed (29%) have isiZulu as their primary home language, with isiXhosa and Setswana (15% and 14% respectively) also well-represented. Afrikaans (10%), Sesotho (9%) and Sepedi (9%) are also notable languages among surveyed alumni, with South Africa's other official languages being less common.

Figure 3: REAP Tracking study language background

The provincial origins of the sample are fairly similar to the overall REAP alumni origins. The highest proportion (27%) come from KwaZulu-Natal, slightly lower than the overall alumni cohort's 33% from the same province. There are slightly more (18%) from Limpopo, than there are overall (14%); and similarly, there are slightly more from the Free State (14% vs 11%), and from the Northern Cape (6% vs 4%). There is a smaller proportion of survey respondents in the Western Cape (7% vs 10% in the overall REAP records), and in Gauteng (1% vs 4%).

When indicating where they lived, most respondents mentioned a rural village, small settlement or outlying township, confirming them as the ideal targets for REAP's support. Almost a third of the sampled alumni lived with both of their parents when growing up (32%; n81), but the same number grew up with only a single parent. Forty-five individuals (18%) were raised by their grandparents, while 26 (10%) grew up in a household containing a single parent and other relatives, and 20 (7%) grew up with other relatives. The dynamics and challenges of these childhood situations are illustrated in several of the case studied provided throughout this report.

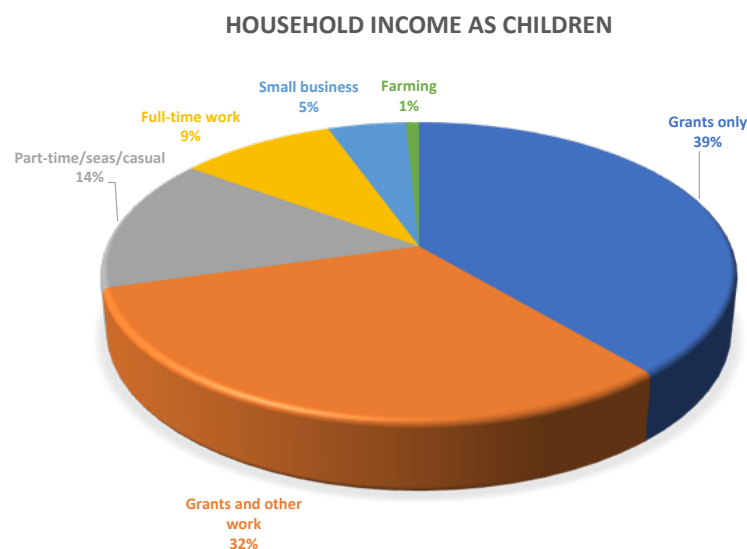


Figure 4: Alumni childhood family livelihoods

As can be expected, the household income for such rural families was low and often insecure (Figure 4). The largest proportion (39%; n99) survived only on state social grants, while the families of another 81 alumni (32%) got by on a combination of grants and insecure work opportunities. Only the families of 24 individuals were supported by a parent with full-time work (9%), while a larger proportion (14%; n37) relied on casual, seasonal or piecework opportunities. A very small proportion grew up in homes where the caregiver ran their own business (5%; 12 individuals), while only in two cases were their parents full-time farmers. In fact, only 10 respondents mention agriculture as contributing in any way to their household livelihood, showing the extent to which even where rural families do farm the land, this is for subsistence purposes only.

With students who started their studies in the early 2000s right up to students who are still completing their undergraduate programmes, the age range of respondents varies widely.

Table 1: Age range of alumni respondents

Age range	Number	Percent
20-25	50	20%
26-30	77	30%
31-35	82	32%
36-40	23	9%
41-45	4	2%
Not indicated	19	7%
Total:	255	100%

Table 1 shows the age range of the 255 alumni who responded. As the table shows, most alumni who participated fall between the ages of 26-35 (62%). A fifth are young recent graduates between 20-25, while the older categories are not well represented. REAP's statistics on alumni years of support shows that this is not only due to the difficulty in finding alumni from the first 10 years of REAP's existence, but also because the intake was comparatively low during the first decade, as shown on Table 2.



SIPHOKAZI *TSHEFU*

Siphokazi (33) was born near Mthatha, Eastern Cape. Like her family, the community she grew up in struggled socio-economically, with most surviving on social grants. Although she was a good student, Siphokazi's family environment was tough, and her mother became ill towards the end of her high school years. Witnessing painful family situations at home and in the community influenced Siphokazi's choice of study: "I wanted to be a social worker, even during my high school years because of the

situation at home and in my community. Because I could see that there is a lot of change that needs to be done in our community. You'll find out that people are lacking most of the stuff they need help with, but they don't know about the available resources within the community, so I wanted to close that gap as a social worker."

Siphokazi overcame her challenges to pass her Matric and was accepted to study social work at NMMU. The financial support from REAP was invaluable, as were the other forms of support: "REAP made me a better person, I've learnt about good leadership skills. I've also learnt about the importance of taking care of your mental health as I used to struggle with personal issues during my university years, and they linked me for psychosocial support. This really helped me and thus currently I'm able to motivate people to be open as sometimes balancing your mental health and studies becomes difficult."

Graduating in 2016, Siphokazi moved to George in the Western Cape, and volunteered for a few months at an NGO, before securing a contract position at a Cape Town social development organisation. Another contract at a youth organisation followed before she went back to university and completed her Master's degree. Thereafter, she volunteered for a year for her current employer, another youth-focussed NGO based in George. Seeing her value, they made her a permanent employee after her stint as a volunteer: "That's why I always recommend people to volunteer before getting a job. Because if you just sit at home, then it's gonna be difficult for you to get something."

Siphokazi speaks of the value of REAP's community service component after holiday work at her local clinic helped prepare her for her current job: working with youth engaging in substance misuse. She has also gained team leadership skills and aims to study further in order to build her career.

NTOMBIZODWA ZWANE

Ntombizodwa (29) was born in the Egudu area of northern KwaZulu-Natal. Her father worked piece jobs in Gauteng while her mother farmed at their rural home. Life was tough growing up: Ntombizodwa recalls realising they were not well off when she saw other fathers bringing buckets of KFC takeaways to their families. Luckily, Ntombizodwa engaged well with her schooling: “I was very smart from a very young age, so I was always a kid that teachers would gravitate towards because they were impressed with how I did things. So school was one place that gave me solace, through everything that was going on. I enjoyed going to school and I was a prefect from Grade R until Grade 12. I even became president of the Learners Representative Council.”



Ntombizodwa’s love for debating made her older sister encourage her to consider a career in law. She duly applied to study law at UKZN at the same time as submitting a REAP application. She received a full bursary from REAP, something that was particularly helpful, and which she credits for the fact she does not carry student debt today. The support and guidance from the Student Development Advisors was also important in helping Ntombizodwa through her studies: “It felt like I had family, even away from my own family. They were constantly checking up on me, and how things were going. And they would even ask you about things that did not have to do with your academics. Are you coping fine? How is your family? If you’ve got problems, those ladies would actually ask, how can we assist? Do you need counselling? What other things do you need?”

Ntombizodwa graduated in 2018 with her LLB. She then did her Articles at a Durban law firm before moving to Pretoria when she did not secure a permanent position there. She currently works as an Attorney and aims to become a partner in the firm one day, and even establish her own law firm eventually. While balancing work, single parenting and studies for a conveyancing qualification is challenging, Ntombizodwa remains positive about the future, and grateful to REAP for its role in her journey.

Table 2: Sample REAP support eras vs overall REAP database

Years	Sample		Full database	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Before 2006	0	0%	21	2%
2006-2010	15	6%	114	10%
2011-2015	61	24%	357	32%
2016-2020	86	34%	384	34%
2021-2025	93	36%	246	22%
Total	255	100%	1122	100%

The study sample includes no individuals who graduated before 2006, but it does include 15 individuals from 2006-2010 (6%). There is also a smaller proportion sampled from 2011-2015 (24%; n61) compared to the overall REAP cohort from the same era (32%). Those who graduated between 2016-2020 are in

proportion to the overall REAP alumni, but the highest proportion of the sample (36%) is from the more recent REAP graduates. This is because their contact details were more accurate and current, and they are also still well engaged and in touch with REAP – which in recent years has also adopted more measures to keep in contact with the alumni.

There is therefore a bias in the sample towards more recent REAP graduates, with an associated bias in the findings around career development, since a high proportion of the sample are in their very early careers.

3.3 Alumni tertiary studies

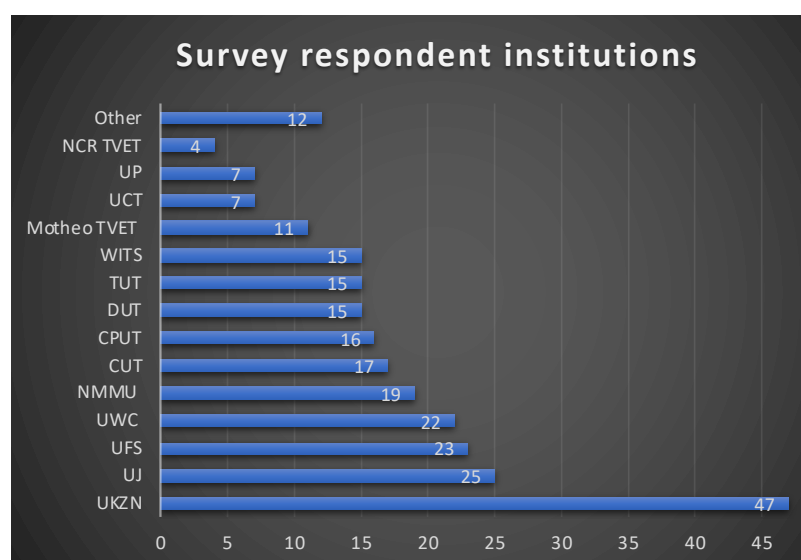


Figure 5: Survey respondent tertiary institutions

We have already explored which tertiary institutions were attended by the overall REAP student body. The study sample (Figure 5) shows a similar range and proportion of tertiary institutions, with UKZN the frontrunner by a large distance (18%), followed by UJ (10%), UFS (9%), UWC (9%) and NMMU (7%).

Students from the universities of technology (CUT, CPUT, DUT and TUT) are similarly represented, with between

15 and 20 students each. Wits and UCT graduates are less common, while the other respondents were from a number of other institutions, including TVET colleges.

As can be expected, REAP alumni have studied a wide range of undergraduate programmes, including university Bachelor degrees, and vocational diplomas. Bachelor degrees predominate, however, with 195 students (76%) studying for these degrees, and only 60 (24%) studying for a diploma. Figure 6 shows the main categories of study programme taken by those in the sample.

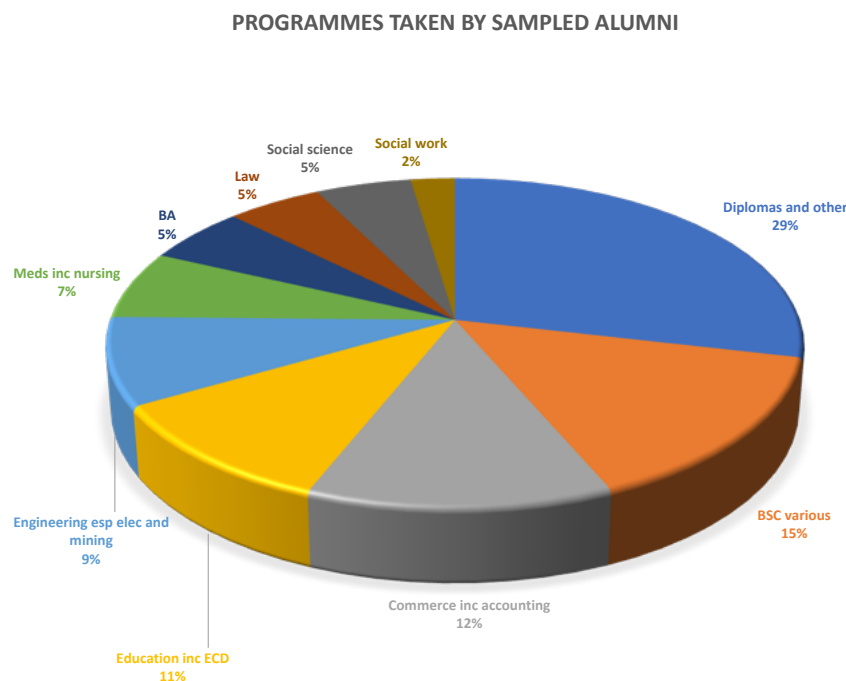


Figure 6: Study programmes of sampled alumni

The largest proportion of alumni did a range of degrees and diplomas that are too broad to capture into one category (29%; n73). Of those which can be categorised, Bachelor of Science graduates are the most common (15%; n38), with such respondents studying a wide range of subject areas, including geology, chemistry, biotechnology and so on. Commerce and accounting graduates

are the next most common category, with 12% of respondents. A similar proportion studied education, including early childhood development. Engineering, especially mining-related subjects, is also strongly represented (9%; n22), while medicine (including nursing diplomas) are a reasonably significant area of study too among the sample (7%; n17). Less common are graduates in the arts, law, social science and social work.

Students coming from rural backgrounds are known to take extra time to complete their study programmes given the adjustment and bridging that is often required, as well as the high frequency of other problems they face which may derail them. REAP has taken this reality into account in terms of its financial and other support.

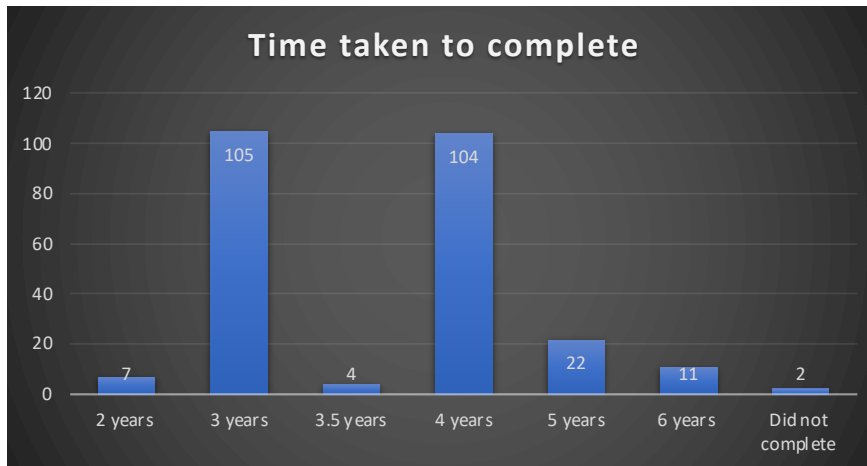


Figure 7: Length of time taken to complete undergraduate studies

there were also many diplomates in this category whose courses were only two years in duration. Likewise, most of those taking four years to complete were degree students taking an extra year, or even diploma students completing with extra time. Most of those completing in six years were medical students whose course is of this length. For the most part, REAP supported students for the extra years they needed to complete their undergraduate programmes, where necessary. In only 27 cases (11%) did REAP not support the entirety of a student's journey during undergraduate studies.

As Figure 7 shows, the majority of students took either three years or four years to complete (just over 100 in both cases). Although many of those who graduated after three years were studying programmes of the same duration,

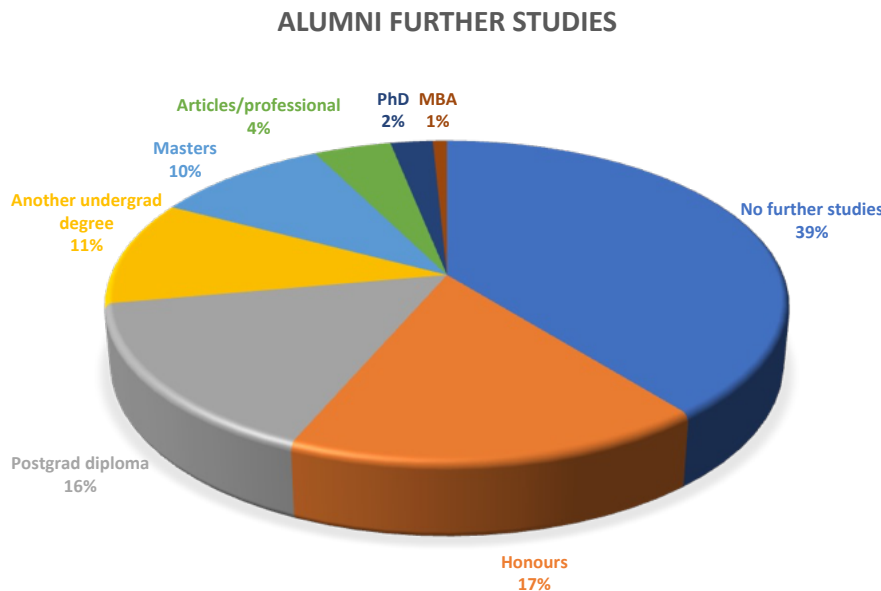


Figure 8: Postgraduate studies among sample

undergraduate studies. The remaining 61% had obtained further qualifications. Seventeen percent have completed an Honours degree (n44); 16% have been awarded a postgraduate diploma (n40); 11% have obtained another undergraduate degree (n27); and 10% have obtained a Master's degree (n25). Much smaller numbers have either completed a professional qualification or an MBA, while six individuals (2%) have earned a PhD. There is strong interest

Survey respondents were asked if they have gone on to *complete* further studies, as shown in Figure 8. One hundred of those who participated (39%) had not yet completed any further studies – a finding probably influenced by the fact that a high proportion have only recently completed

in further studies among the respondents, with many being registered for higher degrees while working.

There is a gender discrepancy in the findings on further studies. Sixty percent of those who have not yet obtained another qualification are women. Overall, 58% of female respondents have completed further studies, compared to 64% of men. This may be due to additional pressures on female graduates, such as work responsibilities, family responsibilities, or raising a child.

3.4 The value of REAP support during studies

Both the survey and the in-depth interviews underlined the importance of the financial support provided by or through REAP in getting these individuals into their tertiary studies. Sixty-two percent (n159) of survey respondents rated REAP's financial support throughout their studies as the most important form of support they received. The mentoring provided by REAP was only mentioned as the most significant form of support by 15% of respondents (n39), while a similar number (n38) said that the training workshops were the most important input they received from REAP.

Of the non-financial support, Table 3 shows the rating respondents gave to four different types: academic; job-seeking skills; workplace preparation; and linkages to work opportunities. As can be observed, academic support is rated the highest of any form of support, with 91% of respondents (n233) giving it the highest score.

Table 3: Rating of types of non-financial support

Type of support	Support ratings (least to most valuable)			
	1	2	3	4
Academic support	2 (0.8%)	6 (2%)	14 (6%)	233 (91%)
Job-seeking skills (CVs interview)	21 (8%)	48 (19%)	67 (26%)	119 (46%)
Workplace preparation	15 (6%)	41 (16%)	82 (32%)	117 (46%)
Employment finding (links)	28 (11%)	64 (25%)	76 (30%)	87 (34%)

The ratings for the other forms of support were less emphatically positive, although a high proportion still gave job-seeking skills and workplace preparation a score of 3 or 4. These alumni were not as enthusiastic about linkages to work – unsurprising since REAP does not directly assist students to access work opportunities, in most cases.



MBALENHLE *GWACELA*

Dr Mbalenhle Gwacela (37) was born in Mariannhill, outside Durban, growing up mostly with her maternal grandmother and other relatives while her mother worked in distant Richard's Bay. She admits that "times were a bit tough" during childhood. While very active in school, Mbalenhle also developed an entrepreneurial streak, selling

hotdogs and brownies to classmates, and even lending money. She explains: "Whilst I was active in the environment club and so on, I was aware of my financial situation. So I just wanted to be independent, so that I don't place a lot of financial strain on my caregivers, who were not my biological parents."

Mbalenhle heard about the REAP bursary through her local Catholic priest. She applied, and received REAP support alongside NSFAS funding for her Bachelor of Social Science degree. She found the financial support valuable to supplement the NSFAS funding, but it was the other support that really stood out: "As an undergraduate, sometimes you don't quite know what is available to you as a student, because all you know is high school and your teachers. But when you enter a space like a university, first of all structurally, it's beyond your comprehension. Physically, it's just bigger than what you thought you could have ever imagined. And not having family there, not having friends as a first year. So, REAP is able to direct you to resources that can be of value to me as a student, or as a person, rather, because it's the person that is the student, first and foremost."

Mbalenhle believes obtaining her undergraduate qualification in 2010 would not have been possible without REAP's support. She has since gone on to graduate with a PhD in food security and works as a lecturer at UKZN in Pietermaritzburg. Recently, she has become a Board member of REAP: "It's a full circle moment, because now I get to analyse the organisation's activities as an outside person looking in." Mbalenhle is also passionate about championing access to opportunities for black female researchers in her field, which is still dominated by white males.

HULISANI *MATODZI*



Hulisani (36) was born near Thohoyandou, Limpopo, the second of four brothers. He was raised mainly by his grandparents, in a household supported by factory work, social grants and income from his father's building piecework. Hulisani enjoyed his childhood and was a very active and involved youth. However, he faced some deprivations growing up: "It was a challenge to have a proper school uniform and go on school trips, both recreational and educational. I did not attend those and that was challenging. If it was a local trip around the town, I would find a piece job to raise the funds, but bigger trips I would have to sit out."

Hulisani developed an interest in accounting, but he believed he would never be able to choose that as a career: "In Grade 11 I had a conversation with my parents about university, and the outcome was that they did not have the financial means to fund my studies. So I decided not to talk about it when others were talking." However, he then heard about REAP, which rekindled his interest and allowed him to dream of attending the University of Cape Town to study accountancy. He was accepted for the programme and received REAP funding, which allowed Hulisani to commence his studies.

Hulisani says that as excited as he was, being 17 and never having left Limpopo, university was a "daunting" prospect. However, REAP supported him from the offset. When all the paperwork and requirements overwhelmed him, the mentors and advisors guided him and ensured he settled in well: "It was tough adjusting into the space: from a rural school with few facilities, and where the standard was not high. But thanks to regular contact with my Student Development Advisor in the first few weeks and months, that helped in terms of pointing me in the right direction." As his studies continued, the support from REAP ensured he could concentrate and perform well: "Being able to focus on my academics without having to focus on financial issues was more than a gift to me; to have all-round support was crucial."

Upon graduation in 2012, Hulisani worked as a Finance Manager for several companies. He was also invited to be the first REAP Alumnus to sit on the REAP Board. When REAP's longstanding financial manager retired, it was to Hulisani that they turned, appointing him their Head of Finance and Business Support in March 2025. Hulisani feels that his career is headed in the right direction, with new opportunities in a senior role to contribute to strategy, business development and leadership: "Coming back to REAP, the organisation that funded my studies, is a good feeling. I get a great sense of giving back and that through this work I will impact the lives of those who are fortunate to be part of REAP, and see how it works on the other side. I am happy to be dedicated to giving students a comfortable experience."

Respondents of the alumni survey were asked how they think their studies and careers would have been impacted if they had not had any support from REAP. The responses were overwhelmingly clear that without REAP's support, they would not currently be where they were in life. Many mention that they might have dropped out, pointing to struggles and stresses they faced while studying, and the difficulties they experienced while making the transition to student life. Others mentioned the high student debt they were saved from through REAP's financial support. Some argued that their character would not have developed as it has, which would have impacted their career chances. The following selection of quotes from alumni sum up the responses:

"Completing undergraduate would probably have placed a great financial burden on an already financially struggling household and possibly resulting in lots of student debt."

"I believe I would have decided to quit in the hopes of finding something else easier to do that would put food on the table for my family."

"I don't think I would be where I am in my career. The financial support and mentoring they gave me contributed a lot to the person I am today."

"I think I would have been a beggar on the street or somewhat having a stagnant life. With pressure of studies I think I would quit studies if REAP was not there to support me."

"I think I wouldn't have had the opportunity to develop my character, to have confidence in myself because I really found myself during my contact sessions with Sis Xoliswa. I really had the ambition to develop my skills during my varsity time because I knew during my contact sessions or when I complete self-development assessments I am going to have to talk about what I have improved or worked on. REAP was really a boost in my character."

"I think we have to start with just knowing about REAP. If I had not heard of REAP, I am not sure if my matric results would have been good enough to enter into university or getting other bursaries."

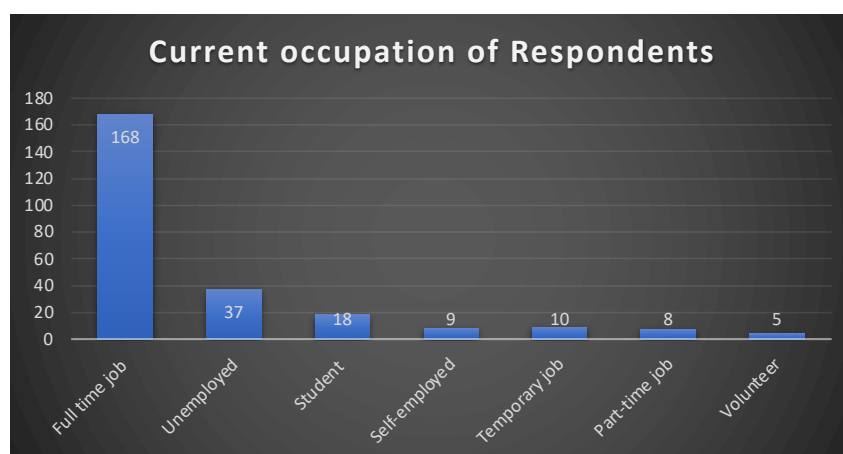
"If I had not received support from REAP, my academic journey would likely have been much more challenging financially and emotionally as I witnessed my varsity friends who were funded by NSFAS going through financial difficulties. REAP was an answered prayer for me as they not only provided funding but also mentorship and personal development opportunities."

"Without REAP's support, I believe my career and life would have progressed much slower, with fewer opportunities and less direction at critical stages."

3.5 Occupations and careers of REAP alumni

Current occupation of alumni

Figure 9 shows the current occupations of the respondents. As can be observed, most respondents have a full-time job (65%; n168), while a further 11% (27 individuals) are employed part-time, temporarily or self-employed. Eighteen respondents are currently full-time students (7%), leaving only 37 (15%) unemployed. While noting a possible skewing in who



responded to the survey, this outcome must nonetheless be seen in the light of the broader youth unemployment crisis and graduate unemployment challenges, as summed up in a 2025 Quarterly Labour Force Survey:

Figure 9: Occupations of surveyed REAP alumni

Education continues to play a pivotal role in determining young people's employment prospects. Those without a matric qualification face the steepest uphill climb, with an unemployment rate of 51,6%—the highest across all education levels. For those who complete matric, the situation improves marginally, though the unemployment rate remains high at 47,6%. Youth who obtain vocational or technical training (classified as "Other Tertiary") fare somewhat better, with the unemployment rate reduced to 37,3%. The clearest advantage is seen among university graduates, whose unemployment rate drops significantly to 23,9%, illustrating the protective effect of higher education in a tight labour market.⁶

The REAP alumni in this survey have a significantly lower unemployment rate than those suggested for the general population of youth who have obtained a tertiary qualification.

The same StatsSA article shows that of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET), females were predominant: "48,1% of women were NEET, compared to 42,2% of men, highlighting a persistent gender gap in access to work and skills development." The REAP alumni surveyed in our study show some gender differences in employment, as shown in Figure 10 (below), although the gap is not as wide as that suggested by broader studies.

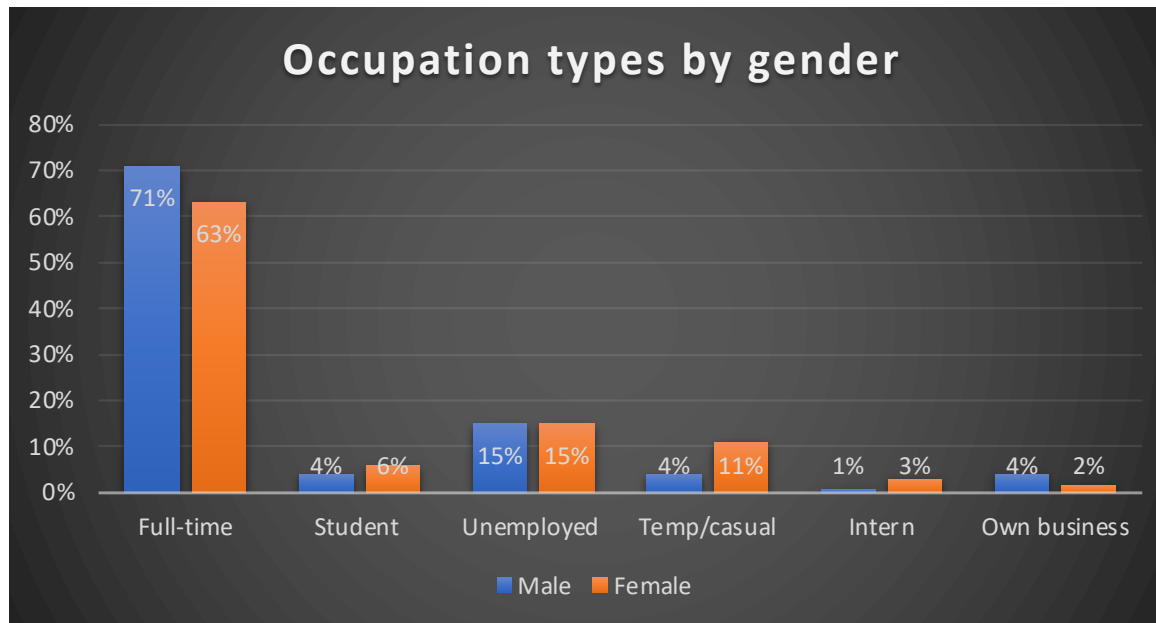


Figure 10: Occupation by gender

Of the female alumni surveyed, a lower percentage are employed full-time than their male counterparts, with 71% of men employed full-time, compared to 63% of women. As observed in Figure 10, more women are casual or temporary workers than men (11% vs 4%). This may be due to the gendered nature of the labour market, or barriers to full-time work faced by women engaged in rearing a child, for example. However, the unemployment rate of men and women in the sample is almost identical, suggesting that REAP has provided female rural students with an opportunity to compete with their male counterparts for job opportunities.

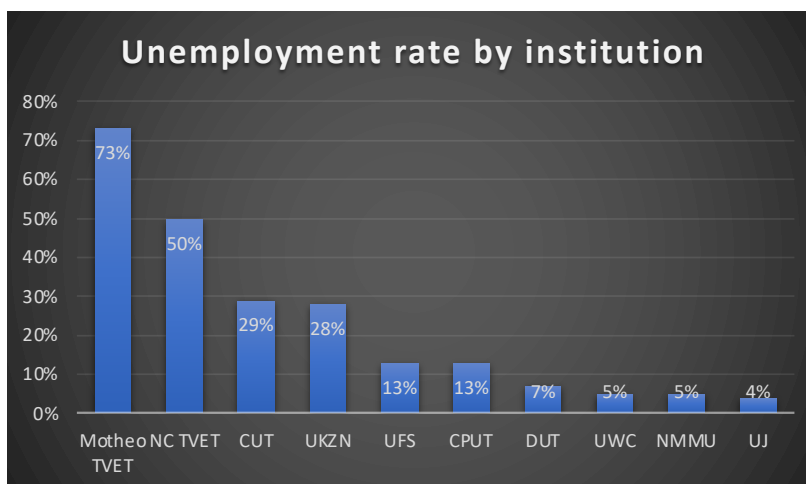


Figure 11: Unemployment rates by institution

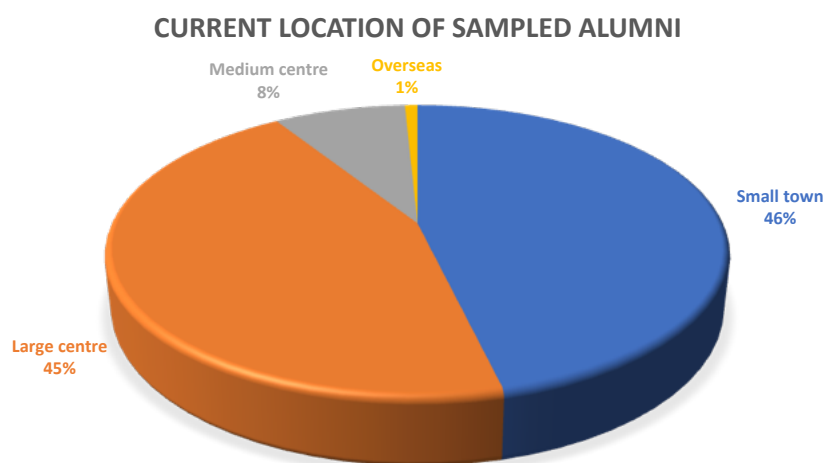
Unemployment rates may not differ by gender, but as Figure 11 shows, there are some institutions whose graduates appear to be struggling significantly more than others. The rural TVET colleges in particular, along with some Universities of Technology, feature among those institutions whose graduates are NEET at

present. Eight out of the 11 Motheo TVET graduates (73%) are unemployed, while the Northern Cape TVET also shows a 50% unemployment rate among its surveyed graduates – all of whom

graduated recently. CUT and UKZN also have an unemployment rate of almost 30% among those surveyed. Although there may be several factors behind these patterns (including a small sample size, the recency of their graduation, and their rural location), it does also suggest that certain kinds of qualifications (diplomas and higher certificates), especially from TVET colleges, are not as marketable to potential employers, compared to others.

Location of alumni

Before further exploring the career dynamics of the REAP alumni, it is important to understand where those who participated in the survey are located. Interestingly almost half (46%; n118) are located in a small town – often, but not always, close to their area of origin. Less surprising is that a similar proportion (45%; n114) are located in the large centres of Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town, Gqeberha, or Bloemfontein, where career opportunities are more common.



The fact that such a high proportion are based in small towns is encouraging as it suggests that REAP alumni are finding employment opportunities even in these often-marginalised areas, and using their skills in these rural areas. However, at least 30 of the individuals in small towns are unemployed,

Figure 12: Location of sampled alumni

which also illustrates the lack of opportunities there, and how they use their rural homes as a fallback when urban opportunities may fail. Indeed, 30 out of the 37 who are unemployed (81%) are currently living in small towns. Only 21 individuals (8%) are located in medium centres such as Polokwane, Mbombela, Kimberley, Pietermaritzburg, or George. Two of those who responded are currently based overseas, in the Far East.

It is interesting to compare the above findings with the findings of REAP's 2016 employability research.⁷ In that study of 276 alumni, 58% were located in large cities; 25% in small or medium towns; and 17% were in a rural area or town. There thus appears to have been a shift over the last decade, with a lower proportion now located in large cities than in 2016.



SELLO *MOKOENA*

Sello Mokoena (30) is the last born of three in a family from rural Bethlehem. His parents lived off SASA grants and piecework on farms and in people's gardens and houses. They frequently moved when Sello was young, but life became more stable in 2007 when they were allocated an RDP house. Sello says "From a child's perspective, life was normal as you don't realise things are not the way they are supposed to be."

Sello became interested in politics and international relation in high school, joining the debating team. He realised that a career in law would be a fruitful path to follow. At his school, the top 10 Grade 12 learners were given REAP forms, which he submitted alongside his Bachelor of Law application for the University of the Free State. He explains why his successful REAP application was important: "It assisted me a lot; it really lifted the burden of worrying about whether NSFAS would come through. At that time, because of reported instability in NSFAS, it was preferable to find an external body to fund you because that provides you with stability and mentorship throughout the process."

The mentorship was very important for Sello: "Getting my first degree was the most important milestone and REAP played a big role in that – both financially and with psycho-social support. You realise the value of this support when you first encounter failure. You are from a school where you are performing above average because people have other ideas of what can be achieved, and then you get into an environment where everyone is a high- performer. So now you are just one of a pack. A big learning was navigating failure for the first time."

Upon graduation in 2019 Sello worked in real estate for a while, before getting a job at a firm of attorneys in Bloemfontein. While completing his Articles Sello realised that there is a gap in the provision of estate planning advice and administration in rural South Africa: "The current legal system and black lived experience differs drastically . . . there are a lot of unreported estates and estates not being wound up. So I wanted to know how can I use my knowledge to share the right information with black families." He obtained an advanced diploma in estate and trust administration, and in 2025 Sello opened his own legal practice in Bethlehem. While it is challenging building his practice from below, Sello has a vision of helping families to plan well and manage their estates while he runs a successful business that is one of only five black law firms in his hometown's history.

SNQOBELE *ZUNGU*

Dr Snqobele Zungu (29) was born near Mtubatuba, northern KwaZulu-Natal. His mother relied on domestic work for an income, while his father was a labourer in Durban. When Snqobele was in Grade 3 his mother became ill, requiring him to live first in Durban with his father, before returning to live with his grandmother when his mother died in 2009. This environment did not allow Snqobele to dream big: “I didn't think I'd make much of myself. I grew up thinking the best thing I could probably do for myself would be a truck driver. And then in Grade 10, when they started introducing us into some career guidance, even then I thought that maybe the best thing I could get is a diploma.”



An older relative who was a medical doctor then took Snqobele to visit a hospital and he fell in love with the idea of studying medicine. In Grade 11 Snqobele learnt about REAP and applied for a bursary for his medical degree at UKZN. REAP provided him with a full bursary and support through the tricky registration process in Durban: “From there on, it was like family. I was onboarded and they got someone to assist me ... It was just swift work, and they made sure that I was taken care of.” The Peer Mentor was especially helpful in ensuring Snqobele settled down at UKZN: “I would never have transitioned into the institution without them. For me, it was a big jump from high school to medical school. Academically and socially, it was a big jump.”

It was only in the fourth year of his medical degree that Snqobele learnt the true value of REAP's support: “I started having problems academically, so they started offering me academic support, which was very much needed, and I really appreciate it because it helped me work through whatever I was dealing with at the time.” This included losing his grandmother in 5th year, after which REAP offered him psychological support. Snqobele graduated in 2020 with a Bachelor of Medicine before completing his internship at Addington Hospital and Community Service at Hlabisa Hospital, closer to home. Thereafter he took medical officer positions, first at Mbongolwane District Hospital, and then back at Addington Hospital.

While working, Snqobele studied for a postgraduate diploma in anaesthetics, which has allowed him to launch himself as a consulting anaesthetist in the private sector. In 2026 he also opened his own family medicine general practice in Durban. He feels strongly that he would not have been in this position if it were not for REAP's support through his medical degree.

Post-REAP journey

Survey participants were asked what they did immediately after completing their undergraduate studies and how long it took them to find employment. As can be observed in Figure 13, the largest proportion of respondents (38%; n98) registered for further studies. Around a third of these individuals (n38), however, also looked for internship or employment opportunities at the same time. The second largest proportion (23%; n58) sought work opportunities after their graduation.

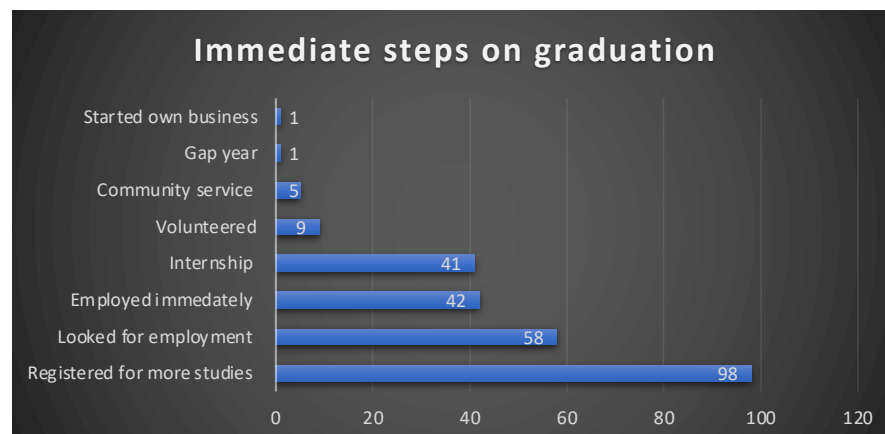


Figure 13: Alumni immediate steps after graduation

A minority of lucky students (16%; n42) secured employment immediately. In fact, some of these were already offered a job during their final year of study. A similar number obtained internships in a range of institutions and

companies as a way to work their way into full-time employment. A small number either volunteered or undertook the community service year that forms part of their professional pathway.

Sectors and types of work

For those who are currently economically active (the 200 individuals who are not full-time students or unemployed), an analysis of the sector they work in was undertaken.

Of those who are employed (any capacity, including self-employed), just over half are in the private sector (53%; n111). The public sector has employed 43% of the respondents (89 individuals), while the NGO sector has absorbed only 4% (8 alumni).

Within the private sector, a range of job types have absorbed the REAP alumni in this study, as shown in Figure 14 (below).

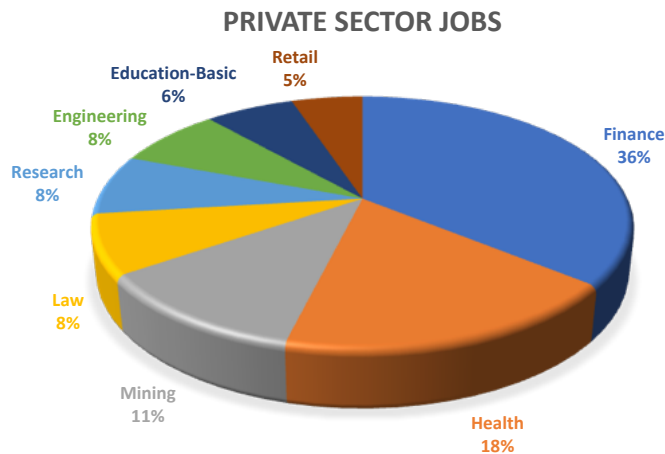


Figure 14: Private sector jobs

Figure 14 shows that by far the largest group of private sector workers (36%; n28) are employed in a job that involves finance. This includes, for example, accountants working in retail, auditors, and those in the banking or investment fields. The field of health is the next largest, with 14 individuals, or 18% working in this sector. These are individuals who work within private hospitals in various capacities, or who run their own practices. Mining has also attracted a notable portion (11%; n9), while law, research and engineering also feature among the group. A handful of surveyed alumni are currently working as teachers in private schools. Other REAP alumni are working in the environmental field, in construction or in services of various kinds.

The public sector is not as diverse in terms of the range of jobs, as shown in Figure 15. Basic education is the most common public sector occupation (46%; n31), with many women in particular working as teachers at state schools. Health-sector jobs, such as nurses, physiotherapists and other related occupations are also common (22%; n15). Two-thirds of the public sector jobs are therefore in these two critical social sectors. Local government has also absorbed a few REAP alumni (15%; n10), with most of these individuals working in various mid-or senior-level capacities at local municipalities. Some of the surveyed REAP alumni also work in research or teaching at one of South Africa's public universities (9%), having pursued an academic pathway. A similar portion work in finance, for example at state-owned entities such as SARS. Other individuals working within the public sector are employed in the environmental or legal field.

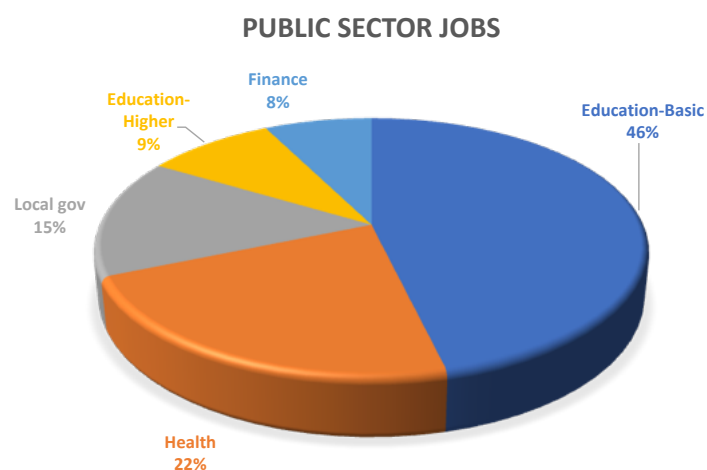


Figure 15: Public sector jobs

Of the eight individuals working in the NGO sector, they are either in administrative jobs within social development organisations, or are working as social workers for such institutions.

Career progression and dynamics

Analysing REAP alumni career progression was a central aim of this study. Respondents were asked to provide a detailed history of their working lives, including the various positions in which they have worked and when these were held; any promotions they have had; and their income range. Career progression was measured using five main indicators, namely career alignment with studies; length of career; evidence of promotion or progression; future potential; and earnings. These factors were used to make a judgement on whether a career has been “excellent”, “promising”, “weak” or “stalled”. A career has been judged “excellent” where there is evidence that it relates well to the qualifications of the alumnus; it has lasted for around 10 years or more; there has been progress up the career ladder, either within the same company, or through moves to better positions in other institutions; there is potential for further growth into senior leadership; and the income range is good for the sector. “Promising” careers show potential but may have only lasted five years or less, or there is limited evidence of progression and earning potential. “Weak” careers include those who are unemployed or working insecure jobs with tenuous relevance to their studies.



Figure 16: Career quality of alumni

“excellent” career – despite their relative youth. Some have progressed up the career ladder remarkably quickly – as indicated below and in the alumni case studies. A few individuals were previously working in promising jobs, but find themselves currently unemployed, while 25% of the sample currently have “weak” careers, as they are struggling to find jobs, or if they do have employment, it is insecure work not related to their studies. Many of this last group are very recent graduates, so their position may shift with perseverance.

Table 4 provides examples of careers which have been judged “excellent”.

As Figure 16 shows, the largest proportion of surveyed alumni (44%; n113) are still in the “promising” phase – unsurprising in that many are fairly recent graduates in their early careers. This includes, for example, government teachers who have held permanent positions for a few years, but have not yet secured any promotions to departmental head. Encouragingly, 29% of respondents (73 individuals) can be said to have put together an

Table 4: “Excellent” careers of REAP alumni

Sex	Qualification	Grad	Current job	Previous 1	Previous 2	Previous 3	Monthly Income
Male	Diploma in Accountancy	2017	Old Mutual Group Internal Audit – Senior Internal Auditor – since November 2024	Old Mutual Group Internal Audit – Auditor – April 2023 – October 2024 (1 yr, 5 months)	Old Mutual Group Internal Audit – Internal Audit trainee – January 2021 – March 2023 (2 yrs, 2 months)	Ernst & Young (EY) – Internal Audit Graduate – February – December 2020	R40-50,000
Male	Social Sciences in Psychology and Organisational Psychology	2013	Operations Manager at SARS. Started the current position in 2023.	Operations Specialist at SARS from 2021/22 to 2023.	Coordinator at SARS from 2017 till 2021/22.	Graduate Trainee at SARS from 2015 to 2017.	R50-60,000
Male	National Diploma in Building	2007	Eastern Cape Department of Public Works and Infrastructure. I started in 2014. I am an Assistant Director	Eastern Cape Department of Public Works & Infrastructure. I was an Intern	Site Quantity Surveyor	N/A	R50-60,000
Male	Bachelor of Arts	2015	Self-employed and run my consulting firm.	Regional Manager for East and Southern Africa for an International Development Organisation	Country Director for South Sudan at Journalists for Human Rights.	Lecturer for Peace, Security and Post Conflict Reconstruction and Development at Nelson Mandela University.	R30-40,000
Female	BCom general Accounting	2010	State Accountant at SASSA (from July 2014)	Finance clerk for Dept of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries August 2011 – June 2014 (2 years 9 months)	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	R30-40,000

Female	LLB	2016	Legal Services Manager at FASSET as at 05 January 2026.	Senior Associate at Seanego Attorneys Incorporated for 3 years 7 months.	Risk and Compliance Officer at Access World for a period of 1 year 5 months.	Associate at Seanego Attorneys Incorporated for one year.	R80- R90,000
Male	Bachelor of Social Science in Media and Management	2014	Lecturer – University of Johannesburg	Lecturer – Varsity College	Lecturer – KZN Community Education College	Tutor – UKZN	R70- 80,000
Female	National Diploma Internal Auditing	2012	Accountant, Emperors Palace, 02 January 2018	Internal Auditor, Umnotho Business Consulting, June 2016- December 2017	Intern Internal Auditor, Newcastle Municipality, February 2014- June 2016	Not Applicable	R30- 40,000
Male	Biomedical Technology	2007	Fresenius Medical Care, Regional Sales Manager: Export Sub Sahara Africa, started 1st September 2024.	Abbott, Distributor Operations Manager: Southern Africa, 4 years 4 months.	Alere Healthcare, Business Development Manager: Southern Africa, 11 months	Sysmex, Territory Manager: Southern and East Africa, 4 years 3 months	R90- 100,000
Female	Biotechnology	2014	Director / Quality Assurance and Regulatory Affairs Scientist – LeBasi Pharmaceuticals (Pty) Ltd	Quality Assurance Officer – Akacia Medical (Pty) Ltd	Intern – Biovac Institute	Research Microbiologist – CPUT	R40- 50,000
Female	Bachelor of accounting science	2016	Assistant audit manager at Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) since 2023	Trainee auditor at AGSA from 2020 to 2022	Pensions audit clerk at BDO from 2018 to 2019	N/A	R50- 60,000

Female	Environmental Health	2016	Permanently employed by Govan Mbeki Municipality as an Environmental Health Practitioner: Waste Management from November 2024.	Temporarily employed by City of Tshwane Municipality as a contract Environmental Health Practitioner on a 12 months contract (July 2024 – June 2025).	Temporarily employed by National Department of Health as an Environmental Health Practitioner on a 11 months contract (January 2024 to November 2024)	Held a range of contract positions over the course of several years.	R50-60,000
Female	National Diploma Biotechnology	2015	Laboratory Manager – Royal Van Zanten, started 1 September 2025	Laboratory Manager – Haygrove Small Beginnings- 4 years	Laboratory supervisor- TCF – 1 year	Laboratory Technician- Westcape Biotech/ Enza Zaden	R60-70,000
Male	Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery	2020	Self Employed General Practitioner from Feb 1 2026	Addington Hospital 2024 Jan – 2026 Jan Medical Officer	Mbongolwane Hospital 2023 April – December 2023 Medical Officer	1. Addington Hospital 2020 April – 2022 March Internship 2. Hlabisa Hospital 2022 April – 2023 March Community Service	Over R100,000
Male	Bachelor of Education	2016	Lecturer at Wits University, current role started on 1 January 2024	Associate lecturer at Wits University, between 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2023	Tutor at Wits University between 2016 and 2020 (while studying full-time)	High School teacher at Ekukhanyiselweni Christian School.	R60-70,000



SANELE *GAMEDE*

Dr Sanele Gamede (36) was born in Ndumo in northern KwaZulu-Natal, growing up in a modest household as the third of eight children. His parents relied on farming and casual labour to support the family. “Dreaming was not part of our socialisation,” he reflects, describing a childhood shaped by limited exposure and opportunity. His trajectory shifted in Grade 11 when he encountered university students visiting his school as part of an outreach programme called Student Dynamics. They helped him discover media studies; an interest inspired by his brother’s work in photography and videography.

Introduced to REAP by a teacher, Sanele received crucial financial and personal support upon his acceptance for a media studies degree at UKZN. “I found them different from any other bursary programme. REAP were active in not only checking their investment, as most bursary programmes do, but it was more personal, and more caring. In those monthly meetings you would have one-on-one with your Student Development Advisor, they would talk beyond your academic progress to your life beyond, including in how to manage money.” Sanele became a campus entrepreneur, raising extra income through selling food and other items to his peers. REAP helped him to balance this with his studies: “The idea of taking responsibility is something I started learning from the REAP team. They became like family members, people you can talk to even if you have a problem.”

REAP’s support enabled Sanele to graduate with his degree in 2014, and he went on to pursue further studies through to PhD level. Now a lecturer at the University of Johannesburg, Sanele also developed a passion for helping young people from rural backgrounds, becoming a youth development practitioner. Through his organisations Ilada Holdings and Make a Mark Africa, he mentors young people across the African continent, and enjoys a strong reputation as a facilitator and motivational speaker. “We were able to fight because someone gave us a chance,” he says, an ethos that continues to drive his work empowering others.

ZAMASHENGE

BUTHELEZI

Zamashenge (27) was born in Esikhawini, near Empangeni in northern KwaZulu-Natal. Her parents were Christian pastors, and she describes her family as “very loving and warm”. From a young age, she was a bright student with a bubbly personality. At the age of 15, her world was turned upside-down when she lost her mother; her hero and greatest inspiration who had always encouraged her to pursue her dream of becoming a Chartered Accountant. Her passing became a turning point in Zamashenge’s life: “When I lost her, that was a very difficult time for me, and things were really not making sense at the time because I really wanted my mom to see me finishing school, see me graduating, see me going to varsity, see me in my first job, and see me pursuing my dreams and her manifestations coming true. Unfortunately, all of those things did not happen, but I carry her blessings and love with me every day.”



At school, Zamashenge loved accounting and knew early on that she wanted to become a Chartered Accountant. She loved the subject so much that she often gave her classmates extra lessons. Determined to make her late mother proud, Zamashenge did well in her exams and earned admission to a BCom Accounting degree at UKZN. She was delighted when REAP awarded her a bursary. She found the support she received from REAP through her studies highly valuable, including the provision of her first laptop computer. While still at university, as part of her REAP community service, Zamashenge taught Accounting to Grade 11 and 12 learners from her former high school. It was during this time that her passion for teaching fully developed.

Zamashenge also found REAP’s career preparation initiatives to be of great value: “In third year we had a gala dinner or workshop where they invited professionals from different industries ... So many professionals were there to assist us to get ready for the real world. And that really helped me, and made me excited to go into the real world. I remember I had this conversation with a Chartered Accountant who was there and he really helped me to register for my postgraduate diploma in accounting, and he was constantly there to guide me.”

After completing her articles, Zamashenge secured a role as an accountancy lecturer at Milpark Education, an accredited online education institution. Here, she combines her love of accounting with her passion for teaching and mentoring. Beyond her professional work, she also runs a content creation and beauty social media channel aimed at empowering women. She is also part of the KwaZulu-Natal Executive Committee of AWCA, a South African non-profit organisation established to identify, nurture, and advance Black female chartered accountants. In her role, she mentors and supports young professionals as they navigate their careers. Zamashenge’s journey is one of resilience, purpose, and service — a testament to the power of education, community support, and staying true to one’s dreams.

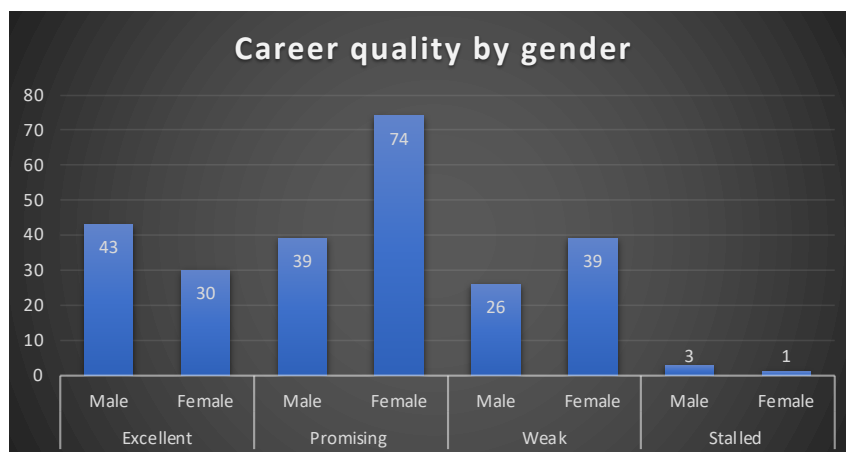


Figure 17: Career quality of alumni by gender

Figure 17 shows that there is a gender discrepancy evident in this career analysis. It can be observed that there is a fairly significant larger number of males (43) compared to females (30) who demonstrate “excellent” careers.

This means that 59% of those adjudged to have “excellent” careers are men, suggesting that it is easier for men to climb the career ladder. There is an inverse pattern with “weak” careers, with a similar gap between women (39) and men (26), such that 60% of those with “weak” careers are women. Women also by far dominate the “promising” category (74 vs 39). This suggests that women are more likely to get stuck in careers where there is a glass ceiling, or limited career progression opportunities. This can be observed with the many female alumni who are government school teachers; who have been so for many years but who earn relatively little and have never been promoted. Indeed, 57% of the male respondents have been promoted in their careers, compared to only 42% of females.

There are also differences in the quality of career depending on the sector the respondents are in. This is most apparent with the “excellent” careers, where 64% come from the private sector, while only 36% are working in the public sector. There is no difference between sectors among those in “promising” careers, but it must be said that some in this category appear stuck in certain jobs where progression is difficult, but not impossible.

Entrepreneurship

A minority of surveyed alumni run their own businesses (22%; n55). Only 9 (4%) have this business as their main income and job, but a further 46 (18%) run a side-business while working another job. The full-time businesses include those who have established their own medical practices, law firms or consulting companies, but also include some smaller-scale retail enterprises. The “side-hustles” also range from private consulting or services after-hours, to selling various products and even farming projects. Among those who run their own business as a main livelihood, there is not a great gender differentiation, but there are more women than men undertaking side-businesses (28 vs 18).

There is some modest employment creation evident from these businesses. Among the full-time businesses, five of the nine are single owner-operator businesses, with no other employees, but of the other four, three employ between one and five employees, and one

claims to employ over 16 staff. Most of the side businesses are also simply owner-operated, but in a few cases, they appear to have created jobs for a few others.

Income of surveyed alumni

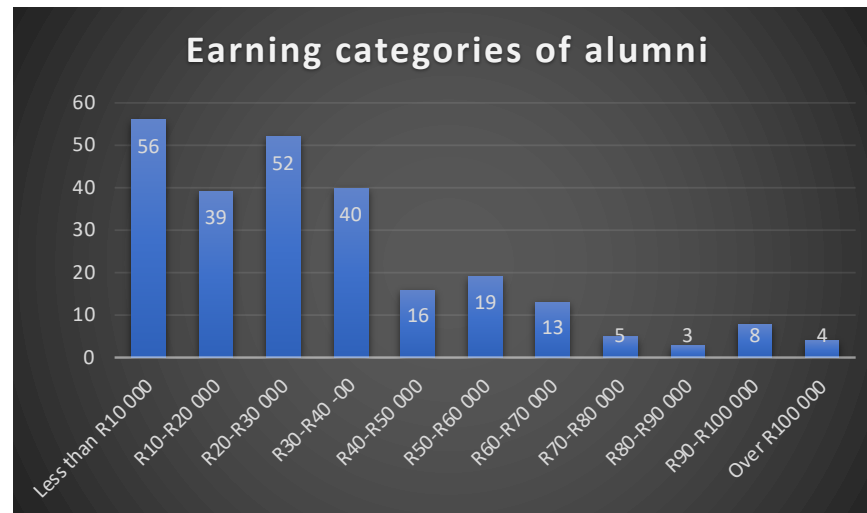


Figure 18: Income of surveyed alumni

Surveyed alumni were asked to provide an indication of their personal income per month, from all sources (before tax). As Figure 18 shows, almost a quarter of respondents (22%; n56) earn less than R10,000 per month. This includes all of those who are currently unemployed (n37),

and who may rely on child grants, for example. Likewise, interns and those with part-time or casual jobs fall into this category. The bulk of respondents (73%) earn R40,000 or less per month, so on the whole, while those who responded to the survey are doing reasonably, they are by no means among the top earners yet. The remaining 27% of respondents (68 individuals) earn over R40,000 per month, with a fair number earning impressively all the way up to and above R100,000 per month. Given the relatively young age and career profile of the sample, this is a significant achievement.

Again, there are gender discrepancies when it comes to income. Of those who earn less than R10,000 per month, 64% are female, and women dominate the lower income brackets. In the mid-to high income brackets, men predominate. Only in the very highest income brackets (with small numbers) do females hold their own, although the four individuals who earn over R100,000 per month are all men. There are clearly still advantages associated with being male when it comes to career progression and earning power.

Student debt

The survey also explored student debt to see if these alumni, who have benefitted from REAP bursaries and other support, are still burdened in this way. As surfaced in the in-depth interviews, many of these individuals are grateful to REAP specifically for helping them avoid financial worries, including student debt. Indeed, two-thirds say they do not have any student debt (67%; n171). There are 77 individuals (30%) who are still paying student fees or study loans. However, many owe this money for postgraduate courses rather than their undergraduate studies. A small number say they do not know if they still owe anything.

Skill deficits and other workplace challenges

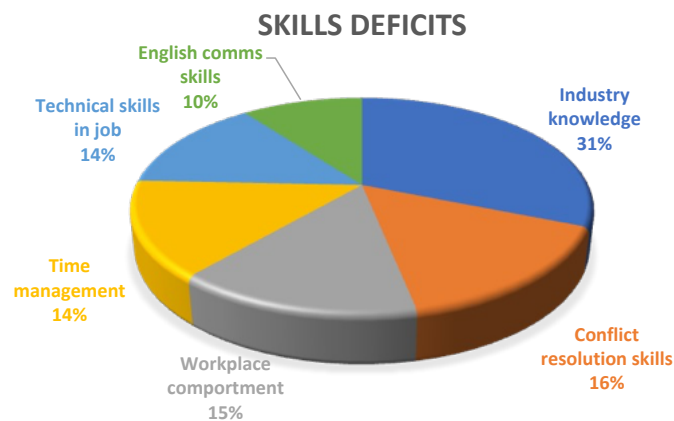


Figure 19: Most common skills deficits

which REAP seeks to provide mentorship and training for its students – conflict resolution, workplace comportment, and time-management – are commonly cited as things these alumni find challenging, confirming the value of focussing on these areas in mentoring approaches.

The survey also explored common deficits and other challenges that the alumni may be facing as they build their careers. Figure 19 shows that lack of sufficient industry knowledge is the most commonly cited skills deficit. This is unsurprising given the relative inexperience of most alumni, who are still building their experience. Relatedly, lack of technical knowledge about their job was also cited commonly. Three areas on



Figure 20: Common workplace challenges

respondents), along with low wages. Surveyed alumni also said they struggle with difficult colleagues (19%), and managers who do not display good leadership skills (18%). Twelve percent of alumni also name job insecurity as a challenge.

The most common challenges faced by these survey respondents in the workplace are reflected in Figure 20. Encouragingly, sexism and harassment hardly feature at all for these young graduates from a rural background, although five percent do say they have experienced racism in the workplace. Lack of career progression is the most commonly cited frustration (23% of

Value of REAP support for alumni careers

Respondents were asked what they have learnt through REAP that they still apply today in their life or work. A large range of positive responses was received (virtually nothing neutral or negative), mostly pertaining to certain attitudes, ethics, values and practices they had gained as a result of being part of REAP. These included developing a positive attitude; good planning

practices and time-management; the development of self-discipline; ensuring accountability; sound financial management; a strong work ethic; an ethos of kindness, generosity and giving back to society; living with positivity and appreciation; the acquisition of life skills; the development of self-belief and confidence; the ability to stand up for themselves; better communication skills; treating others with respect; an attitude of humility; being dedicated; the fostering of teamwork; the ability to work and live independently; the acquisition of leadership skills; the desire to mentor others; greater resilience; and generally taking on positive values. The following quotes from alumni sum up the value of REAP's support:

"REAP helped me build confidence and professionalism, especially in how I communicate and present myself. I learned how to interact respectfully with others, work in a team, and maintain a positive attitude."

"REAP made me a better person, I've learnt about good leadership skills. I've also learnt about the importance of taking care of your mental health as I used to struggle with personal issues during my university years and they linked me for psychosocial support. This really helped me and thus currently I'm able to motivate people to be open as sometimes balancing your mental health and studies becomes difficult."

"REAP SDAs [Student Development Advisors] helped me appreciate that I do not have to go through life alone. There is professional help for all kinds of problems I may be experiencing. I have since embarked on a journey to tackle my traumatic childhood experiences. The programme has also taught me the importance of giving back to the community in whichever way possible to me at any stage of my life."

"REAP taught me resilience, responsibility, and effective time-management. I learned to stay focused, take accountability for my growth, and balance different responsibilities. It also strengthened my confidence and instilled a strong sense of giving back, which continues to guide how I approach my work and interact with others."

"REAP taught me how to work and commit myself in doing work and also being financially free."

"REAP taught us about teamwork at our meet and greet camp and that stayed with me till this day."

"REAP transformed the way I see myself. It taught me confidence – the belief that I am capable and deserving of opportunity. REAP taught me that where I come from and how I was raised do not define my limits and that my background is part of my story, not a boundary on my potential. REAP showed me that my upbringing and circumstances do not determine the size of my dreams. Instead, they fuel my drive to dream bigger and work harder. And that confidence, grounded in resilience and self-belief is something I carry with me every day."



PRETTY *MUKHARI*

Pretty (31) was born in Tshamahansi village near Mokopane, Limpopo. The second of seven children, she was raised by a single mother who was employed part-time as an adult education teacher. Of her upbringing she says: “We mostly struggled financially because my mom didn't have backup; it was only her having to provide for us.

So, as we were growing up, we wished to be in a situation where we would be able to relieve her of the burden she was carrying on her own. That was the motivation and drive for all of us, that one day we must just see that we make something of ourselves, so we can assist her with our siblings as well.”

Pretty attended a boarding school in Polokwane with a payout from the Road Accident Fund following a vehicle accident suffered by herself and her sister. She excelled at school and decided to study Environmental Health at Tshwane University of Technology. Applying for a REAP bursary in Grade 12, she found REAP's support critical to her success; both the financial aspect and the broader support: “They would host workshops for us, allocate a Student Development Advisor to each and every student. my Student Development Advisors are the people who mentored me and held my hand through the whole journey. They would also connect us with peer buddies – other students that are part of REAP that are within the same institution. And then we all formed our mini-community, and it assisted us in navigating the challenges through varsity, being alone, far from home.”

Once she graduated in 2016, Pretty struggled to find a permanent job in her field. She attended 18 interviews but only found short-term contract jobs in different provinces, working for such entities as Exxaro Matla Coal, City of Tshwane, the National Department of Health, Humana People to People, and private companies. With periods of unemployment in between, Pretty spent nine years moving from contract to contract, gaining multi-sectoral experience but lacking job security.

Her story is not just one of struggle and hardships, but of resilience; a strong-willed young woman who faced the odds and continued to rise above them. Even without stable employment, Pretty was committed to supporting her family, contributing where she could and helping long before she secured a permanent position. In November 2024, her perseverance finally paid off when she secured a permanent mid-managerial role as an environmental health practitioner responsible for solid waste management at the Govan Mbeki Municipality in Secunda.

Today, Pretty continues to honour her mother's sacrifices. she plays an active role in supporting her younger siblings through their education and contributes to the upkeep and furnishing of the family home her mother built for them. In doing so, she is not only easing her mother's burden but making a meaningful impact on her family's stability and future. Beyond her personal hardships and achievements, Pretty strives to become a better person and making a meaningful difference in society. she uses her journey to inspire others, especially young people facing similar challenges.

TSHEPO

KHOETSA



Tshepo (33) was born in Moboloka village near Brits in the Northwest Province. He and his five siblings were brought up by their single mother, a domestic worker who also relied on state welfare grants. As a child, Tshepo thought he would like to become a teacher or a police officer, but in Grade 11 he realised that he wanted to study psychology. He did well at school and was admitted to a psychology degree at the University of Cape Town. Tshepo heard about REAP through his science teacher, and successfully applied for their support.

In first year Tshepo realised that his English might be a barrier in pursuing clinical psychology. He therefore chose to major in organisational psychology before transitioning to postgraduate studies in industrial sociology. REAP's support was invaluable to Tshepo: "We underestimate the role that REAP played as a community, when we would have regular meetings with our Student Development Advisor, and we would meet with students of REAP from other institutions when everything was overwhelming. You knew that in two weeks' time, you would meet someone who understands and you would meet your peers who are going through what you are going through. We would share life experiences, and I think that lightened the burden of being in a new environment. Being in a university as big as UCT."

Tshepo completed an Honours degree in 2014 and obtained a junior position working at the South African Revenue Service. Since then, he has moved up several positions to his current role as an Operations Manager at SARS, a role with a great deal of responsibility and leadership potential. He also obtained a Master's degree while working there. He reflects on his journey: "If it wasn't for REAP, all those milestones – I wouldn't have gone through them. I think If there's a parallel universe out there where I didn't get a REAP bursary, I doubt I would have achieved what I have to date. And the nice thing about the experience and the support that I got in my undergraduate years, is that by the time I got to my Honours, I was so confident that I was able to have my Honours paid through other bursaries."

3.6 Family lives, responsibilities and community involvement

The alumni survey also explored the family lives and situations of REAP alumni, and the extent to which they participate in wider activity in their communities.

Property acquisition

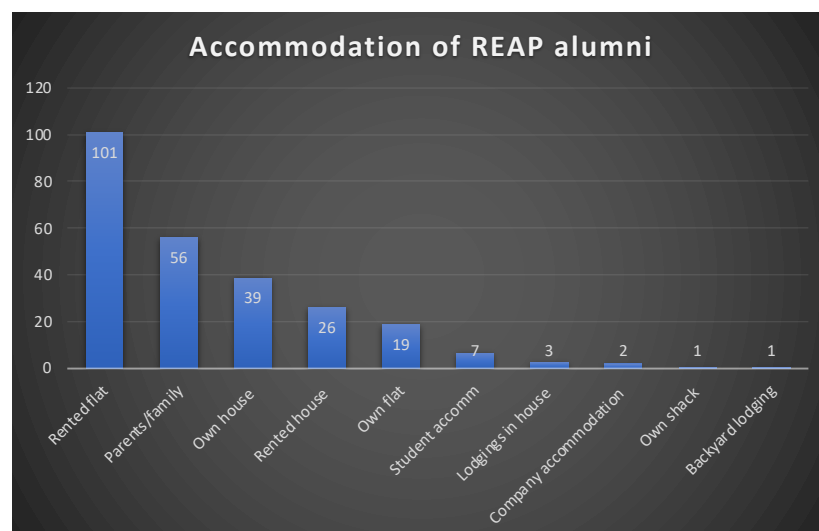
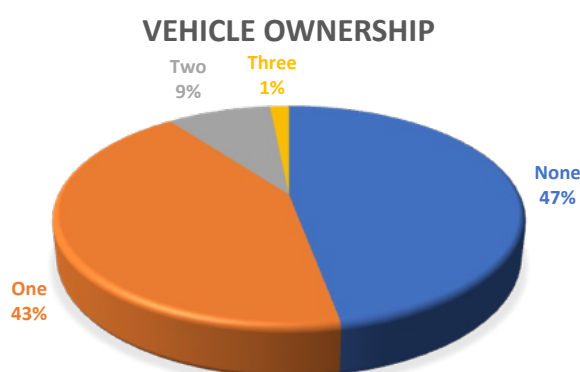


Figure 21 shows the accommodation types currently lived in by the surveyed alumni. It suggests that, on the face of it, these young graduates have largely not yet been able to get a foot onto the property ladder. Only 58 individuals (22%) live in a house or flat that they themselves own.

Figure 21: Alumni accommodation types

However, it must be borne in mind that some of those living in rented accommodation may well be renting out properties that they have bought, and that many of these individuals have also invested significantly in upgrading family-owned property in the rural and urban areas. The largest proportion of those surveyed (40%; n101) live in a rented flat, while just over half of those (22%; n56) live with their parents or other family. The latter group often includes unemployed respondents. Fifteen percent of respondents (n39) live in their own house; while 10% are renting a house. Much smaller numbers still live in student accommodation; in lodgings; or company accommodation (e.g. at a mining site). Only two of those surveyed currently live in informal dwellings



Another potential proxy of success is vehicle ownership. Figure 22 shows that almost half (47%) do not own a car, perhaps unsurprising given that three-quarters of respondents are earning below R40,000 per month – and some may well not have a driver's licence. Forty-three percent own one car, while only 10% of respondents own more than one car. The fact that a high proportion of these REAP alumni also live in smaller

Figure 22: Alumni vehicle ownership

centres, rather than large cities, may also mean that car ownership is not as much of a priority. It may also be that their partners/spouses own the family car in some cases.

Family life

Given the age of most surveyed alumni (62% between the ages of 26 and 35), it seems surprising that 65% of respondents (n167) claim to be currently single. A few generations back, most young people in this age bracket would have been married or would have a long-term partner. However, this finding is in line with general trends. StatsSA has found that fewer young people are getting married, and that marriage is often being delayed, which seems to be the case in this cohort.⁸

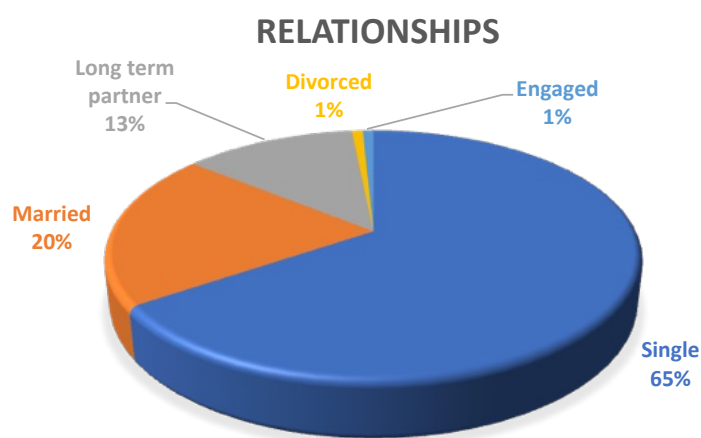
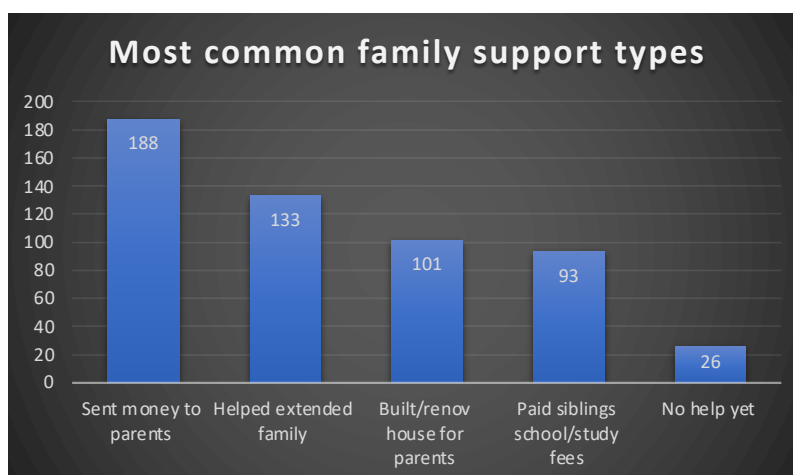


Figure 23: Alumni relationship status

Only 20% (52 individuals) are married, and only another 13% (n32) have a long-term partner. A small number are divorced.

In line with this, almost half (46%; n118) do not have any children yet. Of those who do have children, over half (53%; n73) only have one child; 32% have two children (n44); and 15% have three or more children.

The low number of REAP alumni who are in relationships or have children could also be influenced by other responsibilities that they have to their birth families or extended family members. Often known as “black tax”, this is a well-documented phenomenon, burdening young black professionals from rural or low-socioeconomic backgrounds in particular. Figure 24 (below) shows that 90% of survey respondents have helped their families in some way to date. Many have helped in multiple ways. The most commonly cited form of support they have provided is sending money to their parents (cited by 74% of respondents, or 181 individuals). The next most common form is support (52%; n133) is helping extended family members in various ways.



Another common form of support (mentioned by 40%, or 101 individuals) is building or renovating a house for their parents, often in their rural home. A similar number (93 individuals, or 36%) have paid for younger siblings to go to school or tertiary studies.

Figure 24: Alumni support to family

Community involvement

REAP alumni commonly cite their REAP experience as highly influential in their attitude to giving back to society. Despite being in their early career and having various other responsibilities, at least 47% of the surveyed alumni are currently active in community projects, sometimes in multiple ways. Of the 53% (136 individuals) who are not currently involved in social or community projects, 56 have never been involved, while 80 (59%) have been involved in the past. The rest are presently involved in their own community projects, through their church, or with friends.

Asked how REAP has influenced their involvement in social or community projects, the surveyed alumni make comments such as the following, which illustrate the motivations of those who are active:

“One of the core lessons from REAP was the importance of uplifting the communities we come from. This continues to influence my work as an audiologist because I am passionate about improving access to hearing healthcare and educating communities about hearing health.”

“Make a change or impact on one's life was a key motivation to also make an impact in other people's life.”

“I am able to help other young people in the community that are looking for study opportunities and bursaries.”

“Community involvement continues to be a pillar in my life, whether in my professional life or in my personal life. Professionally, I have engaged the local community radio and have a dedicated slot where I unpack matters of deceased estates. Personally I have joined the local sports NPO and I provide pro-bono hours to the NPO regarding its compliance matters.”

“I am one who has been involved in my community through organisations (NPOs) and churches. I’ve been helping young learners in Dealesville with tertiary applications, empowering them to lead community.”

“It opened my eyes to the value of ubuntu, making sure that others also get where they need to be in life.”

“My REAP experience strengthened my sense of responsibility to give back to my community. Receiving support made me more aware of how access to opportunities can change someone’s life, which motivated me to be more involved and supportive of others facing similar challenges. It encouraged me to share information about bursaries and educational opportunities, mentor younger students, and serve as a positive example within my community. Because REAP invested in me, I feel a strong commitment to uplift others and contribute in ways that create opportunities for the next generation.”

“With my friend, we are working with two schools from the rural areas, where we mentor students, help them in choosing better careers that will help them in future. The main reason behind this was that we do not want students to go to university and study but struggle to find employment like me. I went and studied community development, but here I am working a different thing. I am working as a police officer. While I am grateful I have the job, it’s not what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a community development practitioner and I went to school for that yet I am still struggling to get the job related to my degree.”

3.7 The personal and overall legacy of REAP

Surveyed alumni were asked what the legacy of REAP has been for them personally. Most responses reflect deep gratitude for the many things that alumni gained through the support offered by REAP. As reflected in the quotes below, alumni feel that REAP’s legacy for them is a sense of privilege and giving back; a legacy of hope and opportunity; a foundation of their careers, a deep experience of mentorship; the opportunity for self-discovery; the development of confidence; and the acquisition of leadership skills:

“It gave me hope and encouraged me to do better for myself and make a difference in other people’s lives, especially those who are less privileged than I am.”

“I will forever be grateful for the experience as it assisted with providing a great foundation for my career and shaped how I approach life as a whole.”

“My REAP journey has completely changed my life and it has grounded me. My career is only possible due to the support I received. Post the Fees Must Fall era, REAP really organised itself again to support some of us even outside the NSFAS model.”

“REAP made me, and I remain grateful for the opportunity and the assistance of my SDA in particular, Ms. Robyn Pritchard.”



SIWAPIWE

MPONDONKULU

Siwapiwe (28) was born in the Mqanduli area, near Mthatha, the third of four children. Her mother was reliant on government social grants, bringing them up alone while their father was away at the mines. Siwapiwe remembers: “Life was difficult in the sense that I would say we were poor, because my mum wasn't working, and we were dependent on social grants. And you'd go to school, and you obviously see some kids are different. Maybe they have new jerseys every year, and they've got nice school backpacks. There were still other children that were like me, but I still felt that there was something lacking in my life.”

At school, Siwapiwe developed a love for the commercial subjects and dreamed of being a Chartered Accountant. In Grade 11 she had a life-altering experience: “It was that moment where my fate changed, or it allowed me to rewrite my story in a way ... Two REAP beneficiaries came to our school. They were people that I knew: we used to go to church together; one of them is a distant cousin. I knew that they were in university: They were those people that you look at and you think ‘Oh, if they can do it, so can I’. And when they came to my school, they explained and actually came to help us apply, which I learned was part of their REAP community service. So I latched onto that opportunity, I spoke to them frequently, I took the forms, and I filled in the forms.”

Siwapiwe was accepted to study accounting science at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Gqeberha. She says that her Peer Mentor and Student Development Advisor were particularly important in helping her to adapt to university life in a strange new city: “Access to education is not just about finance, it's about really understanding the underprivileged situation and environment, and being able to guide someone to transition through for their lives to change.” Upon graduation in 2017, Siwapiwe worked in Investment Management for seven years with Allan Gray, before starting her own accounting firm and moving to the Apex Group. While working she pursued further studies and qualified as a Chartered Management Accountant in 2024.

One of Siwapiwe's proudest achievements to date has been her appointment to the REAP Board and election as the Board Treasurer. She explains: “One of my proudest achievements has been returning to REAP as a Board member. Re-engaging with the organisation as an alumnus contributed to this full-circle moment that ultimately led to my appointment to the Board. This reflects the lasting impact of REAP's work and the importance of continued connection with the alumni community.” Siwapiwe has also managed to build a house for her mother in Mqanduli and is actively working on an agricultural development initiative with her home community, despite living in Cape Town.

EVALT

MALESELA LEBESE



Evalt (29) was born near Polokwane, Limpopo. He and his two older brothers were raised by their mother, who worked as a domestic worker and child-minder. His oldest brother left school after Grade 9 to find work that would assist the family. This work, says Evalt, “cushioned me against the harsh realities of extreme poverty.” Although introverted and bullied in primary school, Evalt was a bright child who naturally attracted the attention of his teachers. Growing up surrounded by the richness of nature in his home village, he developed a strong interest in the natural sciences. What began as a quiet fascination grew into a lifelong calling.

Evalt heard about REAP from a high school teacher: “When I first heard about it in Grade 11, it quickly became a household name in our school – everyone was talking about it, because we all carried the same dream of furthering our studies. I knew I wanted to go to Wits University; I wanted a better life for myself. I could already see a future beyond Molejie, and I knew I didn’t want to spend my whole life there.” Evalt was accepted at Wits for a BSc, with the REAP bursary being crucial: “When I received the bursary in 2015, it truly felt like a dream come true. I often think about how different my life might have turned out had I not received that bursary.” Besides the financial support, Evalt really benefited from the psycho-social support from REAP as he struggled at times with anxiety.

On graduating in 2017, Evalt went on to obtain both Honours and Master's degrees, before joining the corporate sector. The workplace preparation was invaluable: “I think that’s one of the things they really got right. Even while we were still in the programme, they would bring other alumni and young professionals to speak to us, which gave us a real sense of what the workplace looks like and how to prepare for it. I remember in our final year, we had a graduation celebration where other Alumni were invited, and you would sit around tables, connecting and having honest conversations about the industry, the realities of work, and what comes after graduation. Those moments stayed with me ... That’s why to this day, I am still part of the alumni network. Whenever there are opportunities like that, I make myself available – to share, to guide, and to speak to the next generation of young professionals.”

Today, Evalt is already a Senior Impact Insights Manager at Wild Impact, a non-profit organisation supporting both conservation and local community development. He credits his rapid rise to the support he obtained through REAP: “REAP opened the front door, and I never looked back!” His goal is to become increasingly involved in strategy development for his company and to register for a PhD. However, he is aware that as the last-born son in his Pedi culture, it is his duty to look after the family home, which he will do even as he travels the world.

“When I entered the REAP program in 2012 I would not have been able to comprehend what my future would look like. My mother had a big health change during my first 3 months of being a first year. If it was not for REAP who ensured that we had to see a psychologist ... I don't think I would have been able to mentally cope with all the problems I faced after that incident. The support that we received, I will forever be grateful for. I learned to be an independent young lady that does not shy away from tough situations and tackles them head on, with confidence.”

“I greatly appreciated the holistic support I received from REAP. It greatly shaped me as an individual to prioritise the interest and needs of others.”

“It helped me a lot, particularly with the basic discovery of who I am.”

“REAP equipped me for real life skills that I still apply today. REAP taught me how to interact and lead people, and I'm doing that currently.”

“Without REAP maybe I could be on the street even today.”

“I really appreciate the help and support I got from REAP. I am a husband and father today and I'm proud to say it was because of the effort and consistent support we got from the student advisors. Thank you!”

“My journey with REAP has led to my personal growth in ways I cannot explain. The professionalism I learned through the workshops, trainings and one-on-one meetings with my mentors was amazing. I can only thank everyone at REAP for continuing to change lives of the less privileged!”

The alumni who participated in in-depth interviews were also asked to reflect on what REAP's broader legacy has been over the last 25 years. The following quotes sum up their perspectives:

“It is a legacy of allowing for ‘firsts’ to happen. The first person in the family to go to university, to graduate and to get a job. A legacy of hope and showing that where you start is not necessarily where you are going to end. I am bringing hope to those who are still growing up in the community. And a legacy that access to education is not just about finance – it's about understanding the underprivileged environment and what is needed to bring someone through to university. Institutions often talk about students not being ready for university, but they never talk about universities not being ready for rural students.” – Siwapiwe Mpondonkulu

“Its legacy has been opening up opportunities for first generation students to access and excel in higher education – whether in college, FET, university, or anything post-school. It is a first-generation service provider: a lot of REAP students are the first in their homes. So it opens up opportunities to others who are following. For myself, I'm one of the pioneers for my community – and I give back quite a lot. I give back with more knowledge,

experience and mistakes that I can share so others don't have to go through them." – Dr Mbalenhle Gwacela

"REAP has given us a chance and opportunity in life to show us that our upbringing and background do not limit our dreams. We are also deserving of opportunities regardless of background. Opportunities to fulfil our dreams and uplift our families." – Pretty Mukhari

"REAP's legacy is impact. By that I'm talking about meaningful change. One thing I feel REAP will be known for is the kind of change it has brought in a lot of people. They fund someone for three years, but that three years is a defining moment in that child's career."
– Evalt Malesela Lebesa

"It's a saving grace. Because that is one of the things that discouraged us. Looking at your background, and your family can't afford getting you new shoes and all these things. And you don't fathom the possibility of getting to university and going there without incurring debts. It becomes daunting as you think about the debt that you will incur. So if you get something like REAP you can see yourself getting a better life. And the support in 'varsity': it is a solid structure that is in place. They monitor you and counsel you if you go off-track. A lot of people they have produced and they are now doing very well and have managed to get their family out of a dire situation." – Zenanile Zwane

"I will be honest: I don't think REAP is curating itself and its work properly. I can tell you, there are many other stories that will put REAP higher than it is. And the impact is not visible to the extent it should be. There are many leaders out there; REAP opened many doors and where I come from, they not only opened the door for me, but many families that are dependent on me. And through the work we do in communities REAP has unlocked great potential. But REAP has not promoted itself as well as it could have. They are selling themselves short there. I think REAP can do better to collate and curate their work better. REAP has a very rich legacy. There are lots of people who have achieved, and many professionals who owe their success to REAP. The chapters of our lives, and our books won't be complete without a chapter on REAP. So they need to narrate their own story properly." – Neithel Mashiane

"Outside of ensuring we access tertiary education, it has also played a role in building the kind of citizens that know that we have to give back to our communities. And that this is not about grand gestures, but that in whatever area we are in we must do it. I had an LO teacher at school; she was a REAP volunteer and she had an impact. Without her, I don't know if I would have accessed tertiary education. They have helped us to build a better South Africa, and we need as many as possible to access tertiary education, because nobody can take that away from us. You have a fighting chance in life if you get that." – Dineo Mako

"The legacy is that it is changing lives; giving someone from the villages an opportunity to go to higher education to get closer to their dreams or get further from the poverty we were growing up in." – Noluthando Mngadi

"REAP's legacy is in giving a chance to young people. REAP has given a number of young people a chance to have a shot in life. Most of the young people in REAP are successful ... We were able to fight because someone gave us a chance to fight. We all had a similar story; we did not come from a decent background. We reminded each other of where we come from ... Our work is an extension of what REAP did for us, and that's their legacy." – Dr Sanele Gamede

"REAP's legacy can be summed up as going to spaces and places where not many people go, and starting the conversation, and approaching young people who have no means to secure meaningful education. And believing in them that although they don't come from best and brightest high schools in the country, they also deserve a chance. It's also a legacy of trust, as REAP stays the course with students even if they struggle with academics or health: REAP assists them to achieve their dreams." – Hulisani Matodzi

3.8 Strategic directions REAP should explore

The in-depth interviewees were also asked what strategic direction REAP should take as it looks ahead to the next 25 years. Most interviewees felt that REAP should continue with its efforts to reach young people with potential in rural schools, and to provide them with the same suite of holistic support measures which they enjoyed. Their main suggestions were that REAP should claim its achievements and impact more, and use these to market itself and spread the word about the opportunity to funders and rural students. They felt that more schools should be visited and there was a strong sense that the alumni body should be used to help reach schools and isolated areas, and to market the role that REAP is playing in society. The following quotes sum up these suggestions:

"The footprint of REAP must increase as it's not widely known. There is also an opportunity to use the alumni, like in "Bring a girlchild to work" days and so on. Or they should pair us with people who are studying courses in the same discipline and we can motivate and encourage and show them the way, as we have walked the same path as them and climbed a few steps, so we can hold their hands. They should also link us more through social media." – Noluthando Mngadi

"It may be a big challenge to go the length and breadth of South Africa's rural areas, but you have got the pioneers already – the alumni. So use the alumni to get to the rural schools and identify learners. Maybe once a year, use the alumni where time allows. If there is a particular programme, request the alumni to participate to assist in that space, and advocate for REAP to other kids." – Neithel Mashiane

"I'm not sure how much access kids have to the internet in rural areas. We hardly had internet to look at sites and check what's available. So REAP must visit more schools in the rural areas to explain what they offer and what kind of things they are looking for. And bring alumni to testify, to bring spark to other learners who think it's not possible for them to get out of their situation." – Zenanile Zwane

“The place we are now: we have invested a lot into developing the programmes, which have been in place for some years. And the next step is more to just expand the scope; to reach more rural communities that are untouched right now. We have broken ground this year into the Northern Cape, and we want to break into other areas of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal to establish these programmes, which are proven now. And we want to expand the donor base with all the plans in the pipeline.” – Hulisani Matodzi

4. Conclusion

This report explores the impact that REAP’s work over the last 25 years has had on the study opportunities and career prospects for rural students it has supported through their tertiary studies. The timescale of the tracking study did not allow us to trace all 1,122 REAP alumni or get them all to fill in the survey. However, the 23% of alumni who did respond (255 individuals) provide us with a good sample that enables a reasonably accurate picture of REAP’s impact on the lives of its alumni. What is striking is that even for those who are currently unemployed, they remain deeply grateful for the support REAP has given them, and confident that the tools they have been given will enable them to find future opportunities. Many REAP alumni have also progressed remarkably quickly in their careers, citing the support and values they were exposed to through REAP as key enablers of this success.

The case studies, in particular, illustrate the backgrounds that most of the REAP alumni come from, and the real barriers they faced in even considering tertiary studies. For many, the transport cost to get to their institution of choice, or even the money required to submit an application form, were insurmountable obstacles. REAP’s combination of financial, academic, peer, career and psycho-social support – a holistic and wrap-around yet empowering combination – has been proven as a model for allowing rural students to flourish during their tertiary studies, and also in their careers. It is also clear that the “soft-skills” provided through mentoring, workshops and community service, play a vital role in the success of these young people. REAP really has enabled its alumni to choose paths that will allow them to flourish as socially responsible, engaged and creative global citizens. Yet, as is apparent, these young people are also deeply committed to South Africa, and to their rural homes, through not only family investments, but for many, community projects and broader initiatives.

Looking to the future, REAP’s task is to continue to spread its impact through, not only reaching new areas and rural learners, but also through partnerships with schools and other organisations working to provide opportunities to South Africa’s hidden talent pool in rural areas.



LETHABO *MALULEKA*

Lethabo (25) was born in Bode Village near Giyani, Limpopo. She was raised by her grandmother while her parents worked away from home. She reflects, “Everything I know now I was taught by that woman,” describing a childhood where “we had basic needs, but not all of our wants.” With limited career guidance in rural schools, she initially aspired to study medicine but discovered physiotherapy through a teacher, earning admission to the University of the Western Cape.

Originally securing only NSFAS funding, Lethabo encountered REAP once she arrived at university. From the outset, she found REAP’s support invaluable: “I knew REAP had my back because of the way they made me feel during the first interview. I knew these people had my best interests at heart. And ever since then, REAP has been consistently like that. I knew with everything that I needed in terms of books, support, counselling, REAP has always been there. And they created a community for me. Some of the people who are still in my life now, I met them through REAP, which I’m very grateful for.” REAP provided both academic and psychosocial support, as well as preparation for the workplace.

Graduating in 2023, Lethabo now works as a physiotherapist for the South African National Defence Force, based in Makhado. She credits REAP for her success: “I would not have obtained my degree without REAP. It was the parent that I needed there: they had my back in each and every step of me obtaining my degree.” REAP’s support also helped Lethabo secure employment confidently. She aims not only to rise through the ranks in the SANDF, but also to start her own physiotherapy practice.

NEITHEL *MASHIANE*



Neithel (32) was born in Moletsi, near Polokwane, the middle of three children. He was raised by his mother, grandmother and uncle. His upbringing was mainly supported by his mother, who worked as a cashier at a fast food chain; his uncle, who worked as a semi-skilled worker in local factories; and grandmother, who was a recipient of a social grant. From Grade 10 at Kgakoa Senior Secondary School, Neithel aspired to study geology at the University of the Western Cape, an ambition he says “was just a dream, as financially it was not possible by any stretch of imagination.” In Grade 12, his teachers picked him out as a student with potential, to whom they offered the REAP application forms. Yet, he almost missed the UWC application date because he did not have the application fee – he had to raise the funds (R150) for a late application.

REAP assisted Neithel in every way to get to Cape Town and thrive in his studies: “My journey with REAP has touched every aspect of my life: be it financial; be it emotional; be it academic ... and also professionally. They provided me with the assistance from my village all the way to Cape Town. And when I got to Bellville, there was someone (Mr Melvin) waiting for me to pick me up and ensure that I've got access to accommodation, I've got access to meals, I am also registered. So REAP's help started as soon as I left the gate at home.” In second year, when Neithel's mother passed away, his REAP student advisor, Ms Robyn Pritchard, supported him through regular visits and arranged professional psychological assistance to ensure he did not drop out.

It was also at a REAP final-year work preparation event that he met Mr Zuko Madotyeni, who introduced him to the Council for Geoscience (CGS), where he now works as a Scientist and a Technical Assistant to the Executive. He joined the CGS as a Master's degree bursar before the organisation employed him.

Having risen quickly through the ranks, Neithel has ambitions to develop as a sound geoscientist, thereby contributing to the scientific knowledge necessary to unlock the mineral potential of the country. He is currently pursuing a PhD in mineral prospectivity mapping of the Northern Cape. He credits REAP with giving him the platform for this success: “REAP laid that foundation upon which I am enjoying and building my career. Without them, perhaps there would have still been a foundation of some sort – however, I am certain that it would've been characterised by significant obstacles, chief amongst them the financial burden that would've reshaped my development or the lack thereof. I honestly don't know where I would have been and I am grateful to REAP.” Neithel is also heavily involved with sports development in his community.

Notes

- 1** StatsSA (2025). “South Africa’s Youth in the Labour Market: A Decade in Review.” Available at: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18398#:~:text=Education%20continues%20to%20play%20a,reduced%20to%2037%2C3%25>.
- 2** See <https://witsvuvuzela.com/2025/06/09/feature-south-africas-vanishing-promise-of-guaranteed-work-for-graduates/> and <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2025-10-06-sa-graduates-face-toughest-path-to-adulthood-yet>
- 3** MacGinty, H. and E. Whitelaw (2025). “Degrees of Uncertainty: What is happening to graduate unemployment in South Africa?”. *Econ 3x3*: <https://econ3x3.org/article/degrees-uncertainty-what-happening-graduate-unemployment-south-africa>
- 4** Manyonga, T. and P. Ngubane (2023). Chapter 11: “Preparing Rural Learners for Life After High School in South Africa.” In Mphahlele, R.S. and Maphalala, M.C., (eds). *Contextualising rural education in South African schools* (Vol. 3). Brill.
- 5** The case studies deliberately focused on more successful REAP alumni in order to showcase successes, and how adversity was overcome with the assistance of REAP.
- 6** StatsSA (2025). “South Africa’s Youth in the Labour Market: A Decade in Review.” Available at: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18398#:~:text=Education%20continues%20to%20play%20a,reduced%20to%2037%2C3%25>.
- 7** Hartnack, A. and A. Muteti (2016). “Success and Struggle: Employment and career prospects for former students supported by the Rural Education Access Programme.” Cape Town: REAP (see https://reap.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/employability_research_project.pdf).
- 8** See StatsSA (2025). “The rise of late marriages: A new era of commitment”. Available at: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18313#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20decade%2C%20the,marrying%20for%20the%20first%20time>.

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