Coping Strategies of Delayed Transition-To-Work of Higher Institution Graduates in Sebeta, Oromia Region

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Abstract

The school-to-work transition marks a critical turning point, making young individuals' shift from formal education to the labor market and their quest for economic independence. In Ethiopia, however, a growing number of higher education graduates, coupled with limited job growth, have made this transition increasingly complex and challenging. This study investigated the coping strategies graduates employ to navigate these challenges. Using a qualitative case study approach, 16 participants were purposefully selected from two groups: unemployed and underemployed graduates. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, supplemented by secondary source review. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that graduates adopt a combination of coping strategies rather than a single approach. These include seeking familial and network support; marriage and cohabitation; casual labor; commuting for work; leveraging political connections, volunteerism and freelance services; and religious engagement. These strategies are not mutually exclusive. The support graduates receive is often contingent on situational factors, necessitating dynamic switching between mechanisms. For policymakers, these findings highlight the need for interventions that address graduates' specific needs, considering situational nature of their coping strategies and local opportunities to enhance effectiveness.

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Introduction

The school-to-work transition, a critical stage in a youth's life, marks the shift from formal education to the labor market and the pursuit of economic independence from parents (Elder, 2009). However, in Ethiopia, a growing number of higher education graduates, coupled with limited job growth, have made the transition to decent employment-employment that offers fair remuneration, job security, safe working conditions and promotes personal development and dignity-nonlinear and increasingly challenging (Abeje 2021; Kassa & Abebe 2016).

Consequently, many graduates in Africa, including Ethiopia, are trapped between the education system and the labor market (Elder & Koko, 2014). This issue is particularly pertinent for the youth population, as they constitute a significant proportion Ethiopian population. The World Bank (2023) reports that youth-individuals aged 15 to 24 years-represent approximately 24 percent of Ethiopian's total population.

Along with youth demographic pressure, the rapid expansion of universities and technical and vocational training institutions over the past three decades has led to an alarming increase in the number of graduates entering the labor market (Asmera, 2017; Amare et al., 2018; Zeru et al., 2018). As a result, a significant rise in graduate unemployment defined as graduates who are available for and actively seeking employment but remain without work has been documented in Ethiopia (African Development Bank, 2021; Ethiopian Ministry of Education, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

In addition to unemployment, the graduates' transition challenges are exacerbated by the prevalence of informal, unstable, low-paying, and precarious employment in many African countries, including Ethiopia (Elder & Koko, 2014; Melese, 2016). Unemployment problems coupled with underemployment, engagement in jobs that do not fully utilize their skills or qualifications, manifest in two primary ways; first, those graduates earn wages that are insufficient relative to their educational background and professional experience; second, those employed in positions for which they are overqualified indicate that their jobs do not align with their level of education. This traps a significant number of higher education graduates in a midpoint between the education system and the formal labor market, subsequently delaying their transition from education to work (Elder & Koko, 2014; Melese, 2016).

The delayed transition due to prolonged unemployment-inability to find significant employment for an extended period, specifically more than a year-as well as underemployment has a substantial impact on graduates, their families and the nation as a whole (Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, 2020; ILO, 2010;

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Martha, 2012; UNDP, 2014;). Their profound impacts manifest in social, economic, and psychological circumstances of unemployed youth (Martha, 2012; Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, 2020). As a result, graduates compel multiple coping strategies-defined as a variety of assistances that an individuals' receive- to cope with the social, economic and psychological impacts of the delayed transitions.

The main aim of this study was to explore the coping strategies graduates of higher education institution employ to cope with the social, economic, and psychological impacts of delayed transition in Sebeta, Oromia Region.

Coping strategies of delayed transition: A brief overview of literature

Literature shows that studies on coping strategies have gained greater attention in academia and scientific literature, particularly strategies used to cope with the economic, social, and psychological impacts of delayed transitions. This section presents research on coping strategies from various contexts.

A study by Solove et al. (2014) identified three types of delayed work transition coping mechanisms: personal self-esteem, social support, and financial support. The authors noted that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem and social support are more likely to benefit from problem-focused coping and have a higher likelihood of being re-employed. In addition, Baddeley (2009) presented rich qualitative data through in-depth interviews, showing the variety of ways individuals coped with their unemployment. The findings show that social support from family and friends can make a huge difference in how people respond to prolonged unemployment. He stressed that love and support from close networks can help individuals feel that unemployment can be endured. Lorenzini and Giugni (2011) further observed that support from family can reduce financial difficulties by providing assistance in finding a job as well as through emotional support. A key point that emerged from their investigation is that support provided by friends and family is related to emotional coping strategies and to some extent to financial support.

A study by Ellis Paine et al. (2013), on the other hand, illustrates that individuals who couldn't find significant jobs are engaging in volunteerism to enhance their employability and attachment to the community. This trend is similarly observed in Tumuti et al. (2013) who noted that African graduates participate in various community support activities to gain work experience and enhance their social ties, which in turn relieve the emotional pressure of being unemployed for a prolonged time.

On the other hand, Chen and Wang (2021) noted that job seekers in Asia are employed in informal and casual labor jobs to cope with problems of getting jobs they aspire to. The study by Tesfaye et al. (2024) from Ethiopia, in addition, suggested that individuals who couldn't find formal jobs may find themselves in precarious jobs. The author identified that commercial motorcycling, shoe cleaning, and radio and/or watch maintenance are the main coping strategies among the study population.

Marriage and cohabitation are other practices suggested in literature to cope with the challenges of prolonged job loss and underemployment. Lorenzini and Giugni (2011) in their findings stressed that the sharing of emotions among close friends has vital importance in reducing the negative impacts of unemployment on psychological well-being. They observed that having someone to talk to and to share one's problems, as well as having persons with whom to share everyday-life activities, can reduce a feeling of isolation.

Moreover, the observation by Kumar and Sharma (2022) suggests that attending supplementary education or vocational training can bridge the gap between the skills of individuals and the skill demand of the labor market, which in turn improves the employment prospects and emotional well-being of individuals.

To comprehend, in summary, multiple coping strategies have been utilized by individuals to cope with the employment challenges. This study aimed to explore specifically the lived experiences of graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) regarding the coping strategies they employed. Through in-depth qualitative case studies conducted in Sebeta, Oromia Region, the research investigated the various approaches that these graduates utilized to cope with their post-graduation challenges.

Methods
The Study area
The study was conducted in Sebeta, Oromia Region. Several features make this area suitable for this study. It is a suburb neighboring Addis Ababa, characterized by diverse livelihoods, including on-farm and off-farm activities, and urban and rural lifestyles. Furthermore, the study area experiences high levels of labor force in-migration (Abate, 2014).

Research design
The qualitative approach was used to depict the graduates' experiences and feelings regarding the coping strategies of delayed transition. It was advantageous for examining ongoing processes and allows for iterative data analysis that enables

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researchers to move back and forth between data, which is particularly useful when new situations may arise during the overall progress of the research (Fossey et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021). It also allowed for deeper engagement with the data, facilitating the emergence of themes and insights (Fossey et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021).

Sampling and sampling techniques
Sampling for the qualitative approach involved the selection of participants using purposive sampling technique. A total of 16 participants were selected from two categories of graduates: (a) four unemployed graduates, and (b) twelve underemployed graduates. These participants were eligible due to their prolonged periods of unemployment or underemployment. Underemployed graduates were included in this study because underemployment is a more serious issue, alongside unemployment, for graduates in the study area.

The sample of underemployed graduates consists of those earning insufficient wages that do not adequately meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, as well as those employed in positions that do not align with their level of education. These factors prevent them from achieving a decent standard of living. Efa and Gutema (2017) suggested that though the study area is concentrated with industries, employment remains far from being stable and satisfactory for graduates due to the prevalence of precarious and irregular jobs. Consequently, both unemployment and underemployment are labor market challenges that compel many graduates to adopt various coping strategies in the study area. The profile of in-depth interview participants is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participants (Fake names)	Profile of Participants								
	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Education Track	Field of Study	Level of Education	Duration since Graduation	Labour market Status	Employment Category
Yonas	M	28	Married	Academic/ TVET	Civil Eng./ Electricity	B.Sc./ Level 4	5	Employed	Self Employment

Emabet	F	26	Married	Academic/ TVET	Accounting/ Computer	B.A/Certif.	4	Employed	Self Employment
Fraol	M	27	Married	Academic	Agricultural Economics	B.Sc.	4	Employed	Government Org.
Bethy	F	18	Unmarried	Academic	Economics	B.A	2	Employed	Micro Enterprise
Leyla	F	23	Married	TVET	Textile	Level 4	3	Employed	Private Enterprise
Yasin	M	24	Unmarried	Academic	Post-Harvest Management	B.Sc.	3	Unemployed	-
Bilise	F	23	Unmarried	Academic	Acc. Finance	B.A	4	Employed	Self Employment
Dereje	M	26	Married	TVET	Textile	Level-4	5	Employed	Private Enterprise
Misrak	F	22	Unmarried	Academic	Civil Eng.	B.Sc.	2	Unemployed	-
Mebrat	F	24	Unmarried	Academic	Acc. & Finance	B.A	4	Employed	Government Org.
Chuchu	M	27	Unmarried	Academic	Urban Planning	B.Sc.	4	Employed	Micro Enterprise
Yeab	M	24	Unmarried	Academic	Management	B.Sc.	3	Unemployed	-
Semira	M	23	Married	TVET	Drafting	Level 4	4	Employed	Government

									Org.
Shime	M	29	Married	Academic	Mechanical Eng.	B.Sc.	6	Employed	Self Employment
Ayantu	F	21	Married	Academic	Social Work	B.A	4	Unemployed	-
Letarik	F	23	Unmarried	TVET	Concrete Work	Level-3	4	Employed	Private Enterprise

Data sources

The primary data was obtained from graduates of higher education institutions while secondary sources included relevant domestic and international journals on labor market, school-to-work transition, coping mechanism of employment challenges and periodic reports of the Ethiopian central statistical agency labor force survey (2019); and urban employment and unemployment survey (2020) were reviewed to contextualize the findings within broader national and international frameworks.

Data collection procedures and instruments

Data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews to capture participants' experience, opinion, and emotion. An interview guide was developed to facilitate data collection from the participants. The interview was conducted from October 15, 2022 to February 28, 2023. The interview duration and interview venue were decided with the consent of the participants. Interview sessions lasted for 75 minutes on average, while a minimum duration was 55 minutes and a maximum was 95 minutes.

The interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent, and notes were taken during each session. An iterative process of data collection and analysis was used to detect the data saturation points. This approach offers the advantage of analyzing data concurrently while collecting it rather than waiting until all interviews are complete. The iterative process also allows movement back and forth between data sets (Fossey et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021). It also facilitates the detection of whether additional data is a necessity and a point to cease ongoing interviews to avoid redundancy. Interviewing was ceased when an ongoing interview did not yield new and significant insights.

Data analysis

The study employed a thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis was suitable due to its flexibility and capacity to explore the lived experiences and complex nature of the coping strategies. Data transcription, coding, categorization of codes into themes and sub-themes, interpretation and story development were the entire activities undertaken to analyze the data and report the findings.

Subsequently, Six major themes, each supported by sub-themes, emerged from the reflections, opinions and insights of the participants. Theme 1, support from family and close networks, emphasizes the importance of close ties and their support to cope with the impacts of delayed transition. Theme 2, volunteerism, freelance service, and political connections, emphasize the roles of freelance service in the public office, voluntary social services in the community development efforts, and participation in political party activities. Theme 3, marriage and cohabitation, focuses on the contribution of sharing living costs and space. Theme 4, engagement in informal and precarious jobs, explores participants' involvement in precarious jobs, commuting to urban centers for informal employment, and commission-based work. Theme 5, the pursuit of further education and skill enhancement, demonstrates the commitment to continuing education through enrollment for additional degrees, short-term skills training, and supplementary technical skill development. Theme 6, religious and philanthropic engagement, emphasizes the significance of religious service and self-initiated local philanthropy.

Research ethics and trustworthiness

This study adhered to rigorous ethical considerations. Before engaging with study participants, security clearance was obtained from local officials in the study area. Informed consent was secured from all participants to manage expectations and communicate the purpose of the research. Furthermore, empirical findings were analyzed concerning existing literature, facilitating a robust and comprehensive understanding of the adaptive strategies of graduates facing delayed transitions.

Results

Support from families and close networks

The experiences of in-depth interview participants indicate that family and close networks were a primary source of financial and emotional support for the graduates' experiencing delayed transition. This was echoed by many participants. Dereje shared the role of his family as follows:

> Following my graduation, I faced considerable obstacles in securing employment within my field. During this period, the financial assistance provided by my parents proved to be invaluable, as it allowed me to cover essential living expenses. This support not only alleviated the immediate financial strain associated with extended unemployment and insufficient employment but also facilitated my ability to cope with the associated psychological pressures. My family played a crucial role in providing emotional support, which significantly bolstered my self-esteem. This encouragement empowered me to persist in pursuing my career ambitions, despite the frustrations and feelings of inadequacy and the challenges I encountered (Dereje, G., personal communication, February 13, 2023).

The experience of Mebrat reflects a similar story to that of Dereje, emphasizing the significance of family support, particularly from her elder brother. In her own words:

> The support I received from my family, particularly from my elder brother, was great during my lengthy job search in my field of study. Without his presence at my side during the difficulty in finding a job, I couldn't be where I am today. I got his all-around help with shelter, food and transportation. In addition to financial assistance, he offered me advice and connections to employment providers (Mebrat, G., personal communication, February 15, 2023).

The opinions of participants illustrate that support from family can serve to cope with the financial and emotional impacts of delayed transitions. Though support from family is a general fact, striking features of support from family and close relatives emerged from lived experience of graduates at study area. Graduates utilize support from family under varieties of circumstances.

Yasin shared his experience, stating:

> During "Meher" [a harvest season in Ethiopia], my family comes together to support each other. It's not just about receiving help; it's a time when we all contribute to the harvest. My parents cover my basic needs while I assist in the fields (Yasin, M., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

He emphasized the support received not only alleviates financial burdens but also fosters a sense of self-esteem by stating, "Knowing that I can contribute during the harvest makes me feel valued. It's reassuring to know that I am part of a system where we help each other."

Dereje shared similar experience concerning the issue. He noted, "When I help my relatives during the harvest, it's like an unspoken agreement. I got financial support in return; I am part of the family efforts. You know it creates a sense of belonging" (Dereje, G., personal communication, February 13, 2023).

An experience from Dereje further notes that this arrangement strengthens social cohesion among family members and reduces feelings of dependency, stating "My involvement in family work is not a burden. Instead, I am contributing to strengthening an attachment among family members. It helps to stay connected in addition to the economic support for me" (Dereje, G., personal communication, February 13, 2023).

Opinions and experiences of this participant reflect a mutually beneficial relationship between support recipient and supporters where support seekers do not feel entirely dependent, and families do not feel exploited. Such mutual support not only aids graduates economically but also alleviates the psychological stress associated with relying on parents during unemployment.

On the other hand, many participants often compelled to engage in casual labor in local markets or commute to nearby towns in search of alternative sources of income when support from family and close networks diminishes.

Fraol discussed his situation as follows:

> When the support I receive from my family declines, I have to find alternative work, like casual labor in local markets or traveling to nearby towns for jobs on weekends. This period is stressful for me. I am forced to engage in laborious, low paying and fatigue work situations. Though it is tough I have to hustle just to make money.

Sometimes this experience has taught me resilience (Fraol, G., personal communication, February 3, 2023).

Volunteerism, freelance services and political engagement

Opinions gathered from participants indicate that graduates engage in volunteer work and freelance services under the umbrella of local leadership in community development programs and interventions to cope with the problem of job loss. This engagement provides the financial benefits in the form of pocket money, a sense of meaning and mental relief for helping others. For instance, Emebet shared her experience as follows:

> Volunteerism and freelance service opportunities in our locality allowed me to obtain the financial rewards l received as pocket money during house-to-house visits of the needy and community meetings (Emebet, T., personal communication, February 1, 2023).

Ayantu shared her experience; she was voluntarily engaged in several municipal activities and a range of social services mobilized by the city administration. In her own words:

> I involve in mobilizing social contributions through door-to-door community visits and participated in the "Green Legacy" initiative. It was a popular avenue for youth in the city like me to survive (Ayantu, K., personal communication, October 19, 2022).

Similarly, Misrak noted her involvement in urban landscaping, sanitation, and beautification projects for seeking opportunities. Yasin reported his involvement in tutorial classes for children and students prepared for matriculation, offering support to the elderly and people with disabilities in repairing their homes with his friends.

Mebrat and Samira noted that party affiliation and involvement often served as financial coping mechanisms and pathways to secure stable jobs. Mebrat stated:

> By establishing connections with local administration and political parties, we accessed several opportunities, such as non-payroll payments in the form of pocket allowance, while participating in volunteer-based community development activities, awareness creation and lobbying. The network developed through political

engagement often led us to opportunities that are not announced publicly (Mebrat, G., personal communication, February 15, 2023).

Chuchu echoed a similar sentiment:

> I believe engagement in political party activities has provided me with opportunities that have significantly shaped my career path. I was able to participate in local government initiatives, which enhanced my experience and connection with actors in my field of study (Mebrat, G., personal communication, February 15, 2023, February 17, 2023).

Mebrat and Samira reported their skeptics concerning the role of political connections and participation in creating opportunities for the future while they later understood its advantage in coping with the challenges of delayed transition and creating stable employment for the future.

Samira shared her perception as follows:

> Earlier, I felt that politically affiliated opportunities are often nepotistic. However, my later involvement in political party activities, mostly in the ruling party, taught me that political participation could create legitimate opportunities, instead of simple favoritism (Semira, H., personal communication, February 20, 2023).

Samira's opinion illustrates a perspective on the role of political involvement in shaping legitimate pathways for advancement, emphasizing that active involvement in such spheres can lead to meaningful opportunities. Mebrat added:

> In my judgment and experience, being involved in volunteer activities and attending community meetings of the local administration and governing party can open doors for several opportunities. For me, I met influential people who later helped me connect for my career development. I observed that these connections were not just about gaining favors but about building relationships based on shared interests (Mebrat, G., personal communication, February 15, 2023).

The insights of two participants, Samira and Mebrat, highlight the potential for political participation to serve as a catalyst for social mobility and professional development in addition to coping with immediate financial problems.

In general, opinions of participants reflect how engaging in volunteer activities and attending community meetings with local administration and governing parties can significantly enhance career prospects. It is a means to forge meaningful relationships that can significantly influence career trajectories. Opinions and experiences of participants further reflect such relationships are founded on shared interests rather than mere favoritism. Their insights advocate political and community participation as vital strategies for professional development, driven by genuine connection and collaboration rather than opportunism.

Marriage and cohabitation

Marriage and cohabitation also emerged as a coping strategy for graduates. Data shows participants experienced marriages to cope with the impacts of delayed transition, and participants shared living costs and space with close friends to cope with the financial burdens of delayed transitions. For instance, Leyla shared her experience as follows: "I got married to relieve a challenging job search" (Leyla, A., K., personal communication, February 9, 2023).

Similarly, Ayantu shared her feeling that marriage provided her emotional support and managed the financial challenges of job loss. In her own words:

> After I came here [study area], I struggled to find stable employment in my field. I joined a micro and small enterprise (MSE) with other youth for vegetable marketing, but it was closed down because the location wasn't suitable. I couldn't even afford rent. Around that time, someone [laughing] from my birthplace, who had been persistently proposing marriage, was still interested. I hadn't been keen on accepting his proposal earlier because I was jobless. But when my job situation worsened, I decided to accept. Now I am a housewife, raising my two children and continuing my education (Ayantu, K., personal communication, October 19, 2022).

Leyla explicitly states that she married as a means to alleviate the pressures of a difficult job search, suggesting that relational commitments can serve as a

coping mechanism in times of economic uncertainty. Similarly, Ayantu has revisited a marriage proposal from someone she had previously dismissed due to her joblessness. This choice shows how dire circumstances can recalibrate priorities, leading to decisions that may not have been considered previously.

The experience of these participants indicates a pattern where financial and employment challenges influence personal decisions, particularly regarding marriage. Both participants reveal the interplay between economic pressures and personal relationships, illustrating how circumstances can shape life choices in profound ways.

Yasin's insight on the other hand reflects a collaborative living arrangement formed with friends in their search for employment. He expressed his feeling:

> I came here [study area] to search for jobs after completing my education. There were close friends of mine in similar situations. Soon, we decided to share space (shelter) and living expenses, as we couldn't afford the cost of living separately (Yasin, M., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

The same participant strengthened his argument by adding; "sharing things with close friends was not only a matter of sharing the living costs but also emotions" (Yasin, M., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

The views shared by these participants suggest that marriage and cohabitation are a means to cope with the economic and emotional hardships as result of job loss. Bethy shared contrasting viewpoint to Leyla and Ayantu by emphasizing the independence one can maintain despite challenging job search circumstances. While the other participants linked marriage to their economic struggles and decisions made out of necessity, Bethy asserts that reliance on personal relationships, such as marriage, should not be seen as a solution to financial instability. She argued that marriage decisions aimed merely at surviving economic hardships could lead to long-term psychological and emotional problems. According to Bethy, while marriage may offer immediate financial relief, it can also lead to negative outcomes on an individual's mental health, marital relationship and its sustainability. In her own words:

> I didn't believe in marriage just to escape the burden of unemployment; I believe in love and partnership. I observed that females married for survival had faced multiple emotional and health problems (Bethy, S., personal communication, February 7, 2023).

According to Bethy's opinion, while marriage may offer immediate financial relief, it can also lead to negative outcomes on an individual's mental health, marital relationship and its sustainability.

The opinion from Yeab further expressed a preference against marriage as a coping strategy. He shared:

> In my observation, marriage introduces a significant financial burden for economically dependent male graduates. It obligates them to make personal sacrifices to meet basic necessities of their family members. It also increases pressure of fulfilling adult and social responsibilities (Yeab, N., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

These participants suggest that while marriage can serve as a coping mechanism, it can also lead to potential risks for both sexes. Reflections from participants suggest that marital decisions require careful decisions, particularly at times of financial hardship.

Engagement in informal and precarious jobs

Opinions from in-depth interview participants further reveal that engagement in informal and casual labor jobs was one of the strategies employed by study participants. Economic pressures during periods of prolonged unemployment compel young graduates to adopt various coping strategies aimed at financial survival. Data shows graduates engaged in informal and precarious paid employment that does not even require a degree and a job mismatching with their education and qualifications.

Yeab, for instance, shared: "I am still struggling to find the job I aspire to while sometimes working in informal and temporary jobs." (Yeab, N., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

 Similarly, Fraol shared his experience:

> I used to work loading and unloading goods from trucks with my friends. But sometimes, because there are no formal systems for allocating work among different groups, conflicts arise. [Laughing, pointing to a faded scar] I got injured in a fight with young men from another zone who came to our village for work (Fraol, G., personal communication, February 3, 2023).

Participants in addition indicated that they established micro and small businesses in their localities as a way to cope with job loss related to their field of study although many experienced setbacks due to a lack of financing and inadequate infrastructure. Semira shared, "When I lost a job relevant to my qualification, I tried to start a small business, but without proper startup capital, it didn't last long" (Semira, H., personal communication, February 20, 2023).

Moreover, graduates often commuted to nearby towns and the capital city, Addis Ababa, in search of work while facing limited employment opportunities in their area. Participants shared their stories of migrating to nearby towns such as Gelan, Dukem, and Burayu for seasonal construction work, jobs at floriculture farms, and serving in hotels and restaurants.

Ayantu said "I worked as a waitress in hotels and restaurants in Addis Ababa, moving between two locations every working day, Addis Ababa and Sebeta, my place of residence."(Ayantu, K., personal communication, October 19, 2022). The participant's response to probing questions indicates that the reasons for commuting to nearby towns and the capital, Addis Ababa, are not solely linked to the unavailability of similar jobs in their localities. The motive is to distance the stigma attached to working in low-status and informal jobs in their localities. Ayantu shared her experience and feeling as follows:

> While I am working as a waitress in hotels and restaurants in Addis Ababa, I return home by bus in the evening to Sebeta. I do this to distance myself from people who know me; to hide that I am working in a hotel and bars after graduating from university. My neighbors know only where I am working but not what type of job I have (Ayantu, K., personal communication, October 19, 2022).

The reflections of participants reveal that graduates often resort to informal jobs in the absence of formal employment opportunities. Evidence regarding engagement and reliance of graduates on informal and precarious jobs for survival reflects a lack of decent employment for a successful school to work transition. In addition to informal jobs, a few graduates engaged in digital marketing, though the skills gap and limited access to technology hindered their broad engagement in this business. Yeab noted:

> I started an online business. However, I ceased it due to a lack of know-how and connections. I don't have the resources and access to these technologies. I need more training on digital skills and

resources to operate this business (Yeab, N., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

The reflection of the participant suggests that significant efforts and a support system through awareness creation for graduates from rural-based households, resource mobilization and training can create opportunities for the mass of graduates entering the labor market every year.

Pursuit of further education and skill development
Opinions from participants show that graduates pursue further education and training during the period of prolonged unemployment. Data from experiences of participants show their pursuit of special skill training in areas such as Peachtree accounting, ICT, and supplementary occupational skills that prepared them for employability at the same time provided emotional relief. Letarik shared her experience:

> I am attending supplementary vocational skills in my field of study that prepare me to pass the COC since I did not yet pass in my first and second trials. I need certification since it's mandatory to continue my further education; continuing my education gives me hope and mental relief for a lower status. I am currently engaged in a public organization (Letarik, M., personal communication, February 28, 2023).
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> Similarly, Mebrat shared her feelings:

> I realized that having a degree wasn't enough. With the job market being so competitive, I needed specialized skills to stand out. Enrolling in a Peach Tree accounting course allowed me to gain practical knowledge that employers are looking for (Mebrat, G., personal communication, February 15, 2023).

The opinion and experience of Mebrat shows that attending specialized skill training enhances the hands-on abilities, which in turn boosts the individual's self-esteem.

Religious engagement and community support systems

Graduates have shared the importance of religious and community involvement in mitigating the feelings of isolation and despair that arise from delayed transition. Yeab noted:

> While I am in religious services such as teaching and supporting fellowships. I get blessings, emotional relief and future hope in my entire life, it makes me believe all things are for good; I am not compliant about joblessness (Yeab, N., personal communication, October 15, 2022).

The experiences of the participants reflect that active engagement in religious activities helps alleviate the psychological pressure associated with job loss.

Discussion

The results reveal graduates adopt a multifaceted coping strategies rather than relying on a single approach. These strategies include seeking support from family, friends, and relatives; entering into marriage and cohabiting; engaging in casual labor or commission-based work; commuting to nearby towns and city centers for alternative employment; leveraging political connections, volunteerism and freelance services; and religious engagement.

The results illustrate that family and close networks are one of the sources of financial and emotional support for graduates experienced delayed transition. Multiple studies noted the significance of family and close networks in the economic and emotional coping of job loss. For instance, Ahsan et al. (2021) found that individuals rely on family support during periods of unemployment in South Asia. The reliance of unemployed youth on family to cope with the stress of job loss conforms to the work of Eshetu and Ketema (2016) and the report from the International Labor Organization ILO (2020). This study observed a similar trend documented in the literature of various contexts that family plays a vital role in providing financial and emotional support to unemployed and underemployed youth.

Another significant theme emerged is the political connection and participation as a means to access various opportunities that help to survive during employment uncertainties. The engagement in political activities and volunteerism to enhance employability and connections is addressed similarly in various literatures. For instance, a study by the African Development Bank (2021)

reveals young people in sub-Saharan Africa participate in community service to develop social networks and skills that facilitate future employment. The study by Sommers (2010), in addition, reveals that civic and political participation is vital to cope with economic hardships during job loss.

The results in addition indicate that marriage and cohabitation are a means to cope with the economic and emotional hardships as result of job loss. These findings conform to a study by Abebe and Zeleke (2020) that indicate marriage can create economic advantages for unemployed women.

The results from reflections of participants further revealed that graduates often resort to informal jobs in the absence of formal employment opportunities that match their qualifications and level of education. This finding aligns with studies from various contexts. For instance, the studies by the Ethiopian Economic Association (2022) and Gebeyehu and Abebe (2019) reported that casual labor, street vending, and unpaid internships are means to generate income while searching for stable employment. The practice of commuting to nearby job-providing areas also aligns with the United Nations Development Program (2018) report in Ethiopia that documented a significant youth migration from rural areas and small towns to urban centers in search of economic opportunities.

Furthermore, participants in study area experienced further education and skills enhancement training as a means to cope with the emotional impacts of delayed transitions. The pursuit of further education and additional training as a means of coping aligns with existing literature, but this study identified that graduates are more inclined to pursue further education and additional training for emotional coping in response to the stress of delayed transitions, rather than primarily enhancing their competitiveness in a dynamic labor market. The results moreover reveal the importance of religious and community involvement in mitigating the feelings of isolation and despair that arise from delayed transition.

To comprehend the results, the strategies graduates used are not mutually exclusive but often overlapping and interwoven, with graduates dynamically employing multiple strategies from different sources. Moreover, data reveal that the support received from various avenues is often seasonal or situational, compelling graduates to adapt and switch between different coping mechanisms. For instance, volunteerism sees a surge during the summertime, known as "Kiremet"- a period marked by school closures, the end of the old fiscal year, and the start of a new one. It represents a peak opportunity for earning supplemental income through volunteer service. Ayantu, for instance, described her experiences during the "kiremet" season, wherein graduates voluntarily participated in various municipal activities and a range of social services organized by the city

administration. She herself was actively involved in mobilizing social contributions through door-to-door community visits and took part in the "Green Legacy" initiative.

Similarly, Misrak noted her involvement in urban landscaping, sanitation, and beautification projects. Yasin reported his involvement in tutorial classes for children and students prepared for matriculation, offering support to the elderly and people with disabilities in repairing their homes with his friends while the program was mobilized by the government authorities.

Data from participants reveal that volunteering and freelance services during this peak period, as non-payroll contributors to the development efforts of the city administration, serve as valuable opportunities. This engagement acts as a springboard for future stable employment prospects for graduates while addressing their immediate financial needs. Additionally, it enhances their skills, experience, and connections.

Another evidence for the seasonal nature of the coping strategies was support from family peaks during harvest seasons, known as "Meher" in Ethiopia. "Meher" provides a crucial window for unemployed and underemployed graduates to receive support from families and relatives that may cover the costs of their basic needs, such as food, housing, and sometimes clothing. In addition to material benefits, the situation fosters a sense of self-esteem for support recipients, and it promotes social cohesion among family members and close relatives due to a reciprocal exchange between support providers and recipients; graduates contribute to harvest and post-harvest activities in return for receiving rewards for the assistance.

This dynamic fosters a mutually beneficial relationship where support seekers do not feel entirely dependent, and families do not feel exploited. Such mutual support not only aids graduates economically but also alleviates the psychological stress associated with relying on parents during unemployment.

There are also seasons when support from external sources shrinks. During these periods, graduates are often compelled to engage in casual labor in local markets or commute to nearby towns on weekends in search of alternative jobs.

The insights from participants illustrate the complex interplay between seasonal support and the coping mechanisms employed by graduates. The 'Kiremet' and "Meher" seasons provide critical support that fosters their financial status, self-esteem and social networking, while off-seasons challenge graduates to seek alternative employment, creating a dynamic of resilience and adaptability.

The results of the study in addition reveal cohabitation, religious services, commission-based works, and marriage appear as more gender-specific coping

strategies, with cohabitation, commission-based works and religious services being more common among male graduates, while marriage is predominantly practiced by female participants. This finding conforms to studies suggesting that women in Africa may view marriage as a means of economic security and stability (Darkwah, 2010; Darkwah, 2013).

Volunteerism and political participation were strategies employed by both sexes; however, female graduates were less represented than their male counterparts. This disparity suggests that coping strategies vary by gender, echoing existing literature (Suleiman et al., 2016).

According to in-depth interview of participants, the lesser involvement of female graduates in political party activities, volunteerism and freelance service relates to fear of sexual harassment. Drawing definite conclusions, however, calls for more investigations. The difference in coping strategies by gender reflects societal expectations and gender norms in Ethiopia (African Development Bank, 2019; Woldemariam & Reta, 2018).

Conclusions

The results from this study reveal that graduates in Sebeta employ a myriad of coping strategies to navigate the challenges posed by delayed transitions from education to stable employment. Key mechanisms identified include reliance on family support, active engagement in volunteerism and freelance work, and exploration of informal job opportunities. Family networks provide crucial financial and emotional backing, particularly during periods of unemployment, reinforcing existing literature on the significance of familial support in managing economic hardships. Volunteerism not only offers graduates a means to earn supplemental income but also enhances their social connections and skills, creating a pathway to future job opportunities. Additionally, political engagement emerges as a dual strategy, fostering both community involvement and networking possibilities that can lead to employment.

Gender dynamics significantly influence the coping strategies. While both male and female graduates navigate similar challenges, their approaches often reflect societal norms and expectations, with men more frequently participating in commission-based jobs, cohabitation and political activities, whereas women tend to view marriage as a vital economic safety net. Ultimately, the adaptive responses of graduates illustrate a complex interplay of resilience, social networking, and cultural factors. The study suggests the importance of supportive structures in promoting graduates' successful transition into the workforce. Furthermore, disparities of coping strategies in terms of gender suggests the need for further

exploration of the barriers facing female graduates, particularly concerning their participation in community and political engagement.

Recommendations

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest certain institutionalized and sustainable solutions that extend beyond graduates immediate needs and efforts. In particular, for individuals engaged in informal and casual labor as a means of coping, redirecting their efforts towards micro and small enterprises (MSEs) by connecting them with locally available resources and opportunities that are unutilized or underutilized is recommended. The study suggests the location advantage of Sebeta, that is, its closest position to Addis Ababa and along rivers with rich potential for urban agriculture can create job opportunities for a mass influx of graduates entering the labor markets from HEIs every year. Therefore, a collaborative action among local leadership, sector offices responsible for school-to-work transition (SWT) service and other stakeholders is vital to take these advantages.

Additionally, regional and local leadership must mainstream interventions and programs targeting graduates experiencing insufficient employment-specifically, the underemployed graduates-by promoting volunteerism outside statutory working hours, providing training and tools in the digital economy, and enhancing political empowerment to complement their formal employment.

Limitations and directions for future research

The study acknowledges that the coping strategies employed by graduates change and evolve as labor market conditions change. However, this study is limited in addressing similar changes over time. Therefore, studies that examine graduates' experiences over time would be important for understanding the changing and evolving nature of coping strategies. Additionally, themes like the gender dimension of coping strategies needs more investigation with bigger samples and triangulated research techniques.

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Informed consent statement

In all process this study, consent was obtained from participants.

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