



SKILL GAP AND EMPLOYABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION GRADUATES IN UGANDA

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**New Welfare Services–Sustainable Service Design as a driver for regional
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ABSTRACT

Uganda's higher education system has come under pressure in the past few years. Liberalisation of the education sector attracted numerous private players into higher education provision, and making it commercialised. This has promoted that focus is shifted to the profit motive away from the primary purpose of students attaining gainful employment upon graduation.

The research seeks to emphasise the need for higher education institutions realignment of study programs/ curriculum with the current labour market demands. The gap between theory taught, labour market demands, and employability eventually needs to be urgently closed.

The key terms used in the research are employability, higher education and skill gap. A study population of 15 purposely selected respondents (five fresh graduates, five human resource professionals and five higher education institution staff) was used to collect data for the research. Three main research questions are looked at; Why do graduates fail to get employment? How does the Ugandan education system prepare graduates for the job market? And finally; What needs to change for graduates to match the job market?

Hinged on an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research design was used mainly focusing on available research documents analysis, face to face interviews and structured interviews. Unlike previous research on graduate skill gap and employability that mainly lay emphasis on skills and attributes this research takes the pedagogical perspective route. The research explores how innovative pedagogy/curriculum positively impacts students educational achievement and aid in the school to work transition.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A Level	Advanced Level
BTVET	Business, Technical and Vocational Education Training
CME	Career Management Employability
GED	Graduate Employability Development
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HES	Higher Education System
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NCDC	National Curriculum Development Centre
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SNE	Special Needs Education
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UMI	Uganda Management Institute
USEM	Understanding Skills Efficacy and Metacognition

1) INTRODUCTION

Globalisation and technological advancements have seen a drastic evolution in the traditional career pathways over the years.

Pre- higher education level which is usually the end of level 2 (UCE/O'Level) or beginning of level 3 (UACE/A Level) attracts career guidance on a student's career pathway. This is mainly informed by subject selection which is usually categorised as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) based or non- STEM based. Career guidance at this stage is meant to support students make informed career choices, foster early personal planning all ideally in tandem with an appropriate curriculum that would eventually ease the school to work transition.

Liberalisation of Uganda's higher education sector occurred prematurely mainly because the regulatory bodies have since struggled to balance management with system output. This regulatory policy vacuum meant new entrants into higher education provision couldn't provide appropriate programs/ curriculum or even carry out quality assurance.

This mass higher education arena with replicated programs and substandard curriculum has translated into an economy flooded with unemployed graduates. Technological advancements have necessitated industries shift to automation which is predicted to render some jobs useless soon (e.g., data entry clerks, particular factory workers, mechanics, postal service clerks, bank tellers, news and street vendors, and construction laborers).

The aim of this essay is to *To discuss the skill gap between study and employment in Ugandan higher education graduates*. The essay will seek to answer the following research questions; Why do graduates fail to get employment? How does the Ugandan education system prepare graduates for the job market? What needs to change for graduates to match the job market? The purpose of the research paper is; *To stimulate higher education reforms that tackle barriers leading to graduate unemployment*

1.1.2: State of Higher Education in Uganda

In this essay higher education is defined in conformity with formal standards in Uganda and means a post secondary (Post Advanced-level) course of study or programme leading to the award of qualifications on the Uganda Higher Education Qualifications Framework. In the qualifications framework higher education covers education and training from Level 4 to Level 9.(Uganda Higher Education Qualifications Framework, 2016)

Table 1 : Levels of the Uganda National Qualifications Framework

Levels	Education Levels	Typical Qualifications at this level
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Level 1	Primary Education	Primary Leaving Certificate
Level 2	Secondary Education	Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE/O-Level)
Level 3		Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE/A-Level)
Level 4	Higher Education	Higher Education Certificate(HEC), University Foundation Programme
Level 5		Ordinary Diploma
Level 6		Advanced/Higher Diploma
Level 7		Bachelors
Level 8		Masters Degrees/Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma
Level 9		Doctorate

Source:(Uganda Higher Education Qualifications Framework, 2016)

The higher education scene in Uganda has seen a tremendous evolution right from the establishment of Makerere University in 1922 by the British Colonial office. The main aim of its establishment was to train talented natives for subordinate jobs in the colonial civil service. Makerere University prides itself as Uganda's oldest higher education institution. It began as a technical school offering courses in carpentry, building and mechanics. In 1949 it became known as University College

affiliated to well-known University College London. In 1970 it was being granted independent university status in providing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.(World University Rankings: Times Higher Education).

Education policy reforms in Uganda can be looked at in two distinct periods: the Pre-Independence period and the Post- Independence period.

Uganda's Education Policy formulation can be grouped into 3 significant phases;

Phase I : Independence and setting a path for the future (1963-1971)

Phase II : Turmoil and downward spiral (1972-1979)

Phase III: Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Reforms (1980- 1992)

(Dr David R.Evans & W Senteza Kajubi 1994)

Post 1970, Uganda had a lot of turbulent times because the country was experiencing political instability.

Under the leadership of President Idi Amin (1971-79) and President Milton Obote (1980-85). In this period the education sector was neglected.

In 1986 a new government (The National Resistance Movement; NRM) led by President Yoweri Museveni took power, it embarked on an extensive recovery program to stabilise all sectors of the economy among them the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the education sector.

Up until 2001 there was no clear legal framework covering higher education till the Ugandan Government passed **The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act**. “The Act defined “tertiary” and “higher” to include “both public and private universities and other tertiary institutions that provide post-secondary (post A level) education, offering courses of study leading to the awarding of certificates, diplomas and degrees, and conducting research and publishing”.

The Act also established a **National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)** for quality assurance at all tertiary institutions. The functions of the council include (a) advising the Minister of Education and Sports, (b) establishing an accreditation system, (c) investigating complaints, (d) evaluating national manpower needs, (e) ensuring minimum standards of education, (f) setting national admissions standards, (g) ensuring that HE institutions have adequate physical structures, (h) publishing information about HE institutions, and (i) determining equivalence of academic and professional degrees and credits between institutions. (Uganda Tertiary Sector Report; March 2004, The World Bank Africa Region Human Development Working Paper Series)

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in October 2023 celebrated 20 years since its establishment. The theme of the celebrations was “**20 Years of NCHE Transforming Higher Education in Uganda**”

“The National Council for Higher Education is mandated to regulate and guide the establishment and management of higher education institutions as well as regulating the quality of higher education, equating qualifications and advising the Government on higher education matters.”

(National Council for Higher Education; Uganda)

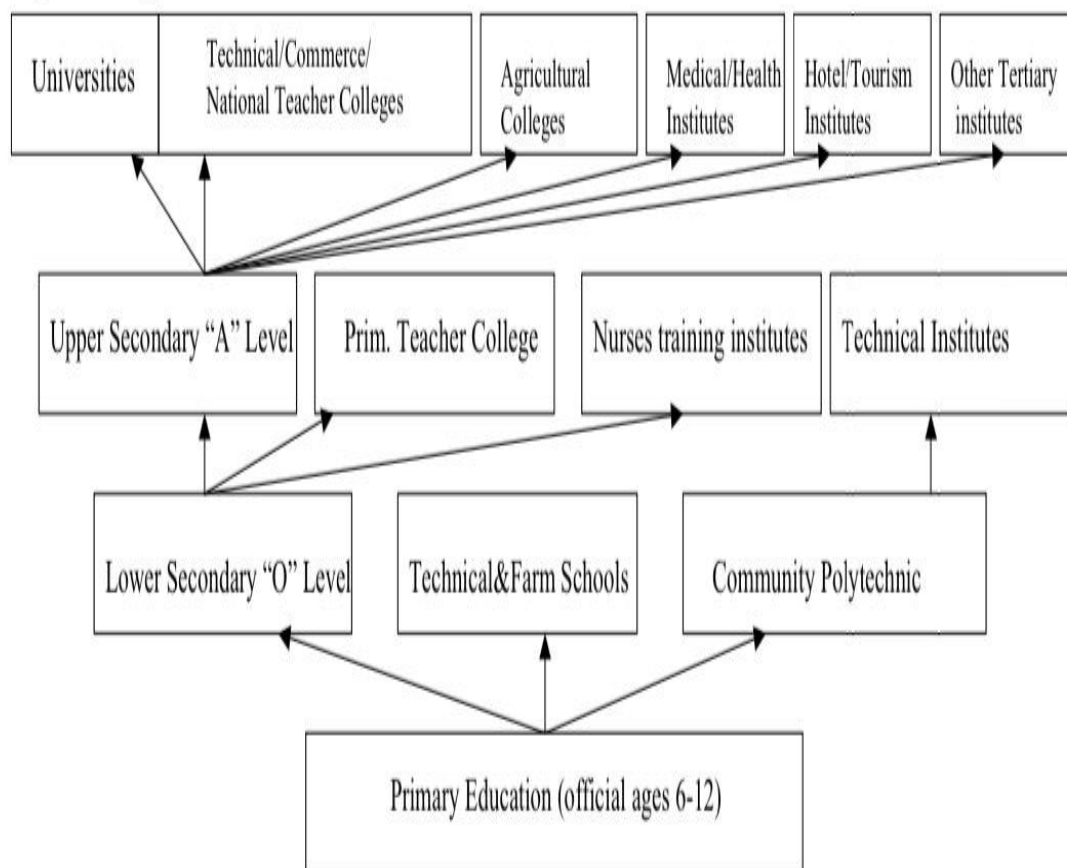
The NCHE website shows there are 282 registered higher education institutions and 4,924 accredited programs running in the country.

The Ministry of Education and Sports website lists nine Public Universities among them; Makerere University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Gulu University, Kyambogo University, Busitema University, Muni University, Kabale University, Lira University and Soroti University.

1 One Public Other Degree Awarding Institution: Uganda Management Institute (UMI) One Private University with own act of Parliament: Islamic University of Uganda

Seven Private Chartered Universities, 29 Private Unchartered Universities, eight Private Other Degree Awarding Institutions, 71 Accredited Private Other Tertiary Institutions (Commercial, Hotels and Social Development) 16 Bible / Theological Colleges, two Agricultural Colleges, six Colleges of Health Sciences, four Performing Arts, Music and Design Colleges and **three** Military Colleges.

Figure 1: Uganda educational structure



(Source: Uganda Tertiary Education Sector Report; World Bank, 2004)

1.2 Research Problem statement

The research is based on the need to achieve SDG 4 and SDG 8 in line with achieving Uganda's Vision 2040.

SDG 4; Quality Education. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 8; Good Jobs and Economic Growth. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Uganda's Vision 2040 outlines development paths and strategies meant to operationalise Uganda's Vision statement which is "A Transformed Ugandan Society from a Peasant to a Modern and Prosperous Country within 30 years"

It aims at transforming Uganda from a predominantly peasant and low income country to a competitive upper middle income nation.

Liberalisation of higher education in Uganda has led to an increase in enrolment levels. This growth in student numbers hasn't been matched with improvements in facility capacities or realignment in curriculum/pedagogy policies.

The Global South in which Uganda falls is home to 90% of young people worldwide, and by 2030 young people will make up almost half of Africa's population (El Habti, 2022; GCA, 2021). This youth bulge is a double-edged sword which if well harnessed could be an advantage in the form of human capital or if neglected could turn into a huge security risk of disgruntled unemployed youth.

“Youth unemployment is a socio-economic and political problem which is also a development problem. Unemployment negatively affects the economic growth and development of nations” (Mohseni and Jouzaryan, 2016).

The high unemployment rate in Africa especially among the youth aged between 18 and 35 years has led them to desperation, loss of trust in their governments and consequent vulnerability and eventually involvement in anti-social behaviour including crime.

The Arab Spring in North Africa 2010-2011 in (Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Libya) were mainly political uprisings orchestrated by mostly unemployed and disgruntled youth, xenophobic insurgencies in South Africa, South Sudan, Nigeria, and in other countries across the continent, have all been attributed to youth unemployment and disillusionment.

The above incidents relate to the Relative Deprivation Theory and the youth bulge in most African countries. Gurr (1970) explained the “Relative Deprivation Theory as the difference between what an individual or group thinks they deserve, and what they actually have or receive in reality.” Long spells without employment are very frustrating since all students work hard in school with the bright prospect of a job and financial stability at the end of it all.

Murshed and Tadjoeeddin (2007) state that “the significant difference between an individual's ambition and personal achievements can determine whether the individual is satisfied with their social status.” In the context of young unemployed graduates, the attainment of educational certificates raises their hopes and aspirations, however the prevalence of unemployment causes disappointment and this creates a recruitment pool for civil unrest activities.

Higher education institutions need to formulate “employability parameters” that should act as a guide once formulating courses and course content. Robust internal quality assurance systems tremendously aid any higher institution of learning when carrying out their mandate which in this case includes teaching of students, guidance when undertaking research and offering community service.

The diverse/cross-border nature of higher education due to globalisation has resulted in “a growing demand for accountability and transparency . . . [which has] in turn led to a need to develop a quality culture, while addressing the challenges of globalised higher education” (Smidt, 2015)

Educational research work focusing on new problem areas is one of the avenues that can stimulate change that would positively impact both the graduates and the nation's economy eventually.

1.3 Significance of the study

The advent of world globalisation has necessitated a revision in the purpose of higher education from merely attaining academic qualifications to embracing a highly dynamic 21st century skill set culminating into relevant gainful employment. Previously research has

focused on graduate skills and attributes to explain the persistent employability dilemma among graduates.

This research shifts focus to pedagogy and curriculum as aiding in the urgent need to address higher education graduate inadequacies and employability. Emphasis is made to the need for higher education institutions reviewing or adopting new curriculum and teaching/learning approaches that will lead to correlation of study programs with actual prevailing labour market demands. The research will look at how modes of instruction (teaching and learning) interplay with student identity development and eventual graduate's employability in Uganda.

It will benefit prospective higher education students in future to assimilate easier into the workplace. It will also benefit the academic stakeholders, specifically those in the quality assurance docket implement necessary reforms. Higher education institutions need to formulate "employability parameters" that should act as a guide once formulating courses and course content.

1.4 Definition of key terms

- 1) **Employability:** In the context of higher education, employability is considered more than merely 'getting a job' (Harvey Lee, 2003), as it implies 'a set of achievement skills, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Mantz Yorke,2006)
- 2) **Higher education** means a post secondary (Post Advanced-level) course of study or programme leading to the award of qualifications on the Uganda Higher Education Qualifications Framework. In the qualifications framework higher education covers education and training from Level 4 to Level 9" (Uganda Higher Qualifications Framework, 2016)
- 3) **Skill gap** is defined as a significant gap between an organisation's current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals and meet customer demand. It is the point at which an organisation may not be able to grow or remain competitive because it cannot fill critical jobs with employees who have the right knowledge, skills, and abilities (Bano & Shanmugam, 2020).

2) LITERATURE REVIEW

The four functions of higher education institutions are: producing values and social legitimation, selecting the dominant elites, training the labour force, and generating scientific knowledge and supporting its application in society (Castells, 2008).

Employability world over has become a key issue of concern in the global economy specifically for higher education graduates that invest enormously in education. It is a widely researched higher education concept with scholars tackling this from varied approaches that focus on different perspectives.

Leonard Holmes, 2013 in his article “Competing perspectives on graduate employability: Possession, position or process?” explores the interplay between various aspects like governance structures both in higher education institutions and government, industry, market forces and actual graduate personal attributes.

The macro level looks at systems within which employability operates such as governments, higher education and industry bodies. The labour market which is essentially the demand side is of great influence at this level. On the other hand the micro level looks at the individual and skills, attitudes, and behaviour that make them employable. Emphasis here is on the various kinds of employable capitals that enable people to achieve employment and career goals.

The research focuses on the meso level that is considered to fall in between the macro and micro levels of employability.

At the meso level consideration is put on how students learn and develop employability within their varied educational systems.

Pedagogy is of essence in determining employability.

“Pedagogy is the term that describes the relationships and interactions between teachers, students and the learning environment and the learning tasks.” (Murphy, 2008. p 35).

It determines graduate outcomes since educators design/structure of education programs and delivery methods of learning have significant impact on their eventual employability upon graduation.

The three competing perspectives on employability: position (based on social background), possession (of human capital) and process (of career self-management) have a major interplay with curricula and learning in higher education. (Okay.S & Dora S, 2013)

The research will dwell on the processual perspective particularly focusing on graduate career self management’s interplay with the meso level of employability.

Employability can be understood as an aggregate of constructs such as career identity, personal adaptability, social and human capital (Fugate et al., 2004). How these constructs are perceived to manifest on employability largely depends on a choice of perspective. How students learn, their curriculum in general and these aspects’ eventual interplay with graduates’ identity ultimately determine their employability. What and how are higher education institutions teaching and learning? What is the makeup of the higher education institutions arena in Uganda?

Duplication of study programs has meant not much effort is put in curriculum development or actual study program content formulation. These efforts are what would in essence create a particular niche for each institution if well thought out and critically planned. Graduates from institutions with a particular niche offering programs constituent of well balance curriculum would be sought after thus raising their employability levels upon graduation.

With the current dilemma it’s prudent that graduates adopt a relatively independent identity that propels them above and beyond their peers in the labour market. They should be able to self-manage their competencies, reputation and networks in order to navigate future careers. “Technological developments are changing the labour market: old jobs and occupations are being eliminated, new jobs and occupations are being created, and the core tasks and required

skills in most jobs and occupations will fundamentally change over the coming decades.” (Arntz et al. , 2016)

As much as it’s important for students/graduates to cultivate a unique identity that will enhance employability prospects, it’s equally important that the higher education institutions have a sense of uniqueness that distinctly differentiates them from each other.

Differentiation has the potential to generate values and social legitimacy, to select dominant elites, to train labour forces, and to generate scientific knowledge and support its application in society (Castells, 1993).

Differentiation in higher education is wide, it could be in the general makeup of higher education institutions to avoid “institutional isomorphism” or refer to the instruction/ teaching and learning methods/modes within institutions.

“A differentiated academic system is required for research universities to thrive, the fulfilment of different functions necessitates the collaboration of different institutions in order to distribute the functions throughout the HES and research system, in which different institutional types undertake different combinations of functions”. (Altbach, 2013).

Higher education institutions need to expand the scope of their education beyond the traditional generic and subject-specific learning content and also assume an active role in developing their students’ ability to position themselves in the labour market.

“The expansion of higher education coupled with the creation of new forms of Higher Education Institutions and degree provision, has resulted in a more heterogeneous mix of graduates leaving universities” (Scott, 2005)

This massification of HE through liberalisation draws increased attention to pedagogy. Students that would otherwise have failed to join HEIs are given a chance. “Students with lower levels of ‘cultural capital’ are likely to need increased levels of pedagogic attention if they are to achieve their full potential, and they may require more than a semester to come to terms with the academic demands made upon them.” (Mantz Yorke & Peter T Knight, 2006)

Ordinarily transitioning from higher education institutions to the workplace took almost a linear approach with a specific age bracket for fresh graduates and particular expectations. However, with globalisation economic hardships and massification of higher education this transition has since become a process affected by several factors.

Students dropout of school due to financial constraints and a few that are ambitious later enrol to complete their studies. These continuing students have a deeper understanding of the value of education and make better informed career choices as such. With technological advancements especially in the workplace there’s another group that attend higher institutions of learning mainly for career augmentation. This diversified array of learners’ demands carefully curated pedagogical approaches and eventually transitions into the workplace at varied paces.

2.1.1 Uganda’s existing curriculum and school to work transition.

The Uganda secondary school curriculum has a great bearing on how students transition into higher education and eventually the workplace upon graduation. The International Labour Organisation defines school-to-work transition as “the passage of a young person from the

end of schooling to the first stable or satisfactory employment.”(International Labour Organisation).

Job stability would mainly relate to having a formal contract that lasts a year and beyond in a reputable institution while satisfactory employment mainly relates to being content on a job with no desire to look for alternative employment. (Nakato, 2023)

Employability discourse has progressed to entail much more than students developing attributes and experiences to include areas that have previously been ignored like the role of pedagogy/curricula.

It is becoming more about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. Emphasis has since moved to developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view of empowering and enhancing the learner. Employment is a by-product of this enabling process (Harvey, 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2002).

Uganda’s curriculum has mainly been teacher centred with limited student participation, this has created a scenario where there’s a lot of rote learning, dictation of notes in class with limited attention to explanation of concepts or even correlation to real life experiences. This hasn’t allowed for deeper learning of concepts and crippled student’s ability to critically think.

Employers continue to say students are not work ready upon graduation. This disgruntlement from the labour market regarding the quality of graduate’s higher education institutions churn out leads to the issue of an urgent need for a general curriculum overhaul.

Skill mismatches often arise from higher education system curricula deficiencies that limit graduates’ performance in the labour market. The kind of instruction a student goes through in school significantly increases their ability to transfer attained skills if any in the workplace. Uganda’s education system has stagnated in what our colonial masters passed on post independence. Most curricula has been mainly theoretical with the major focus on passing exams highly. This considerable focus on marks obtained by students is not a relevant and reliable measure of learning. This system has been producing students that are crammed knowledge laden but very incompetent in the workplace.

In February 2020 Ministry of Education and Sports through the National Curriculum Development Centre rolled out a new lower Secondary school curriculum that is competence based. This was a move from the post colonial knowledge based curriculum that the education system had grappled with since independence.

The competence based curriculum is learner centred with emphasis on student participation through groups and discussions. The shift from the teacher centred teaching and learning mode of instruction boosts students confidence, self esteem and critical thinking skills.

In addition to the above development the National Curriculum Development Centre has a fully fledged Directorate of Curriculum and Materials. This covers Early Childhood Care and Education, Primary Department, Secondary Department, Special Needs Education (SNE), BTVET (Business, Technical, Vocational Education Training) /Lifelong Skills and Co-curricular activities, Pedagogy and innovations and finally Quality Assurance and Publishing. (National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), Uganda)

This research paper will pay attention to the last three as they are of crucial importance in aiding the school to work transition for higher education graduates eventually impacting their employability prospects.

The BTVET (Business, Technical and Vocational Education Training)/ Lifelong Skills Department is mandated to develop curricula for tertiary institutions in Certificate and Diploma programmes run by both public and private HEIs. This has introduced inclusivity and alternative progression routes as early as after completion of primary level 7 education. This will in essence deal with the long-standing bias toward university education at the expense of lower levels of the other tertiary sub sectors which aligns with the nation's labour market needs.

NCDC under the BTVET /Lifelong Skills Department has developed Higher National Diplomas and Certificates in Engineering (Electrical, Civil, Mechanical and Water), Refrigeration and Air conditioning, Leather Technology, Welding and Fitting, Building Construction, Plumbing, Cosmetology, Performing Arts and many others. These programs offered by the BTVETs in comparison to most university degrees have a shorter completion period, have more pocket friendly fees thus cater for the less privileged students and most importantly have a higher absorption rate into the labour market. Most BTVET/ Lifelong Skills graduates are absorbed into workplaces during internship or usually create self-employment upon completion of studies. This is therefore a testament that the new curriculum produces learners that are analytical, critical and innovative which is in line with a highly competence-based approach that fits in with the 21st century labour market needs.

Various employability models have been developed and analysed over time all laying emphasis on varied graduate attributes that influence employability. The research follows a gradual evolution in the employability models and how higher institutions of education have embraced and at times used them as guides in tracking labour market trends.

The USEM model (Knight and Yorke, 2002), the Graduate Employability Development (GED) model (Harvey et al., 2002), the CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), and the Career Management Employability (CME) model (Bridgstock, 2009), the Career Resource model (Hirshi, 2012), the Graduate Capitals model (Tomlinson, 2017) and the Map my model (Tomy & Pardede, 2018)

All the above employability models seek to address the graduate employability dilemma however, each pays varied attention to constituent influencing factors. As such there isn't a particular model that can appropriately solve any nation's graduate employability issues. Each nation needs to work in partnership with the vital stakeholders in this case industries/Labour market actors who are the employers, government regulatory agencies who provide funding and regulatory duties for HEIs and finally the very HEIs with the students, academic staff, and HEI internal governance structures.

2.1.2 Pedagogy and innovations

Most higher education institutions are now ranked based on how well their graduates assimilate into the workplace. The focus has since shifted from the attainment of academic

documents yielding pride and enormous gratification to how fast or easily these qualifications aid in gaining employment.

The above pressures have meant HEI need to thoroughly assess their pedagogical policies.

Pedagogical innovation has as a result become a critical component of HEI educational assessment policies.

Walder (2017) defines pedagogical innovation as “any new teaching practice that differs from the traditional lecture, with the purpose of improving learning”

Various educational research studies view pedagogical innovations through different lenses. Some look at the role of leadership in the context of innovation development, while others examine the characteristics of these innovation strategies. The leadership aspect of HEIs is vital since these pedagogical innovations can only thrive in conducive institutional work environments.

Falchikov (1993) studied academic staff in a Scottish polytechnic with focus on faculty members’ attitudes and values towards innovations in their institutional context. It was found that all staff enjoyed teaching although particular groupings(specifically pro- student autonomy staff and senior staff) valued other aspects of their academic roles so were consequently more likely to engage in research / pedagogical innovations.

Ganesan, Edmonds and Spector (2002) specifically delved into “networked learning” which they referred to as a broad range of learning tools and technologies.

Their contribution chapter featured as part of the Computer Supported Cooperative Work book series. Here Information and Communication Technologies methods and tools it was noted could range from ordinary emails to more complex computer supported collaborative work environments that make use of networks to share web-based resources. Emphasis was laid on the fact that all the above pedagogical innovations should meet students' learning needs at the same time be reasonably efficient and effective.

The COVID 19 pandemic was a big wake-up call to most sectors in the country.

Higher education was affected as well and this meant there was need for purely online instruction or hybrid(limited face to face and online) interaction.

The pandemic and digital technological advancements have drastically altered the way higher education is delivered. This has necessitated them embracing e-learning initiatives.

The Uganda e-learning Initiative for Educational Institutions is such an initiative meant to facilitate the integration of e-learning into teaching and learning practices of 7 HEIs in Uganda. The initiative’s core objectives are policy development, sustainable business models, instructor capacity building and content digitization. Mastercard Foundation in collaboration with Cyber School Technology Solutions launched the above pioneer program in 2021 designed to foster innovation and support HEIs aiming for significant changes in the Ugandan HE landscape.

Participants in the initiative were grouped into two; those in charge of policy development (Vice chancellors & their deputies, Directors of planning, University secretaries, Directors of ICT) and those in charge of pedagogy & Instructional design (550 instructors and lecturers from the 7 HEIs).

The policy development group was tasked in developing e-learning policies and strategies while the pedagogy and instruction design group was tasked to acquire essential skills in digital pedagogy and instructional design.

Both groups upon completion are to undertake six month continuous virtual support programs. (Eight Tech Consults Limited)

Training of academic staff in digital pedagogy, instructional design, content development creates an informed online presence for HE instruction. This enhances the quality of knowledge delivery to students and consequently this diversified lense of knowledge acquisition prompts a more critical perspective to life.

2.1.3 Quality Assurance

HEIs world over fall under the education sector, like any other sector they ought to be bound by specific sets of policies, procedures and guidelines. These are usually put in place to maintain quality and regulate performance requirements in ways that benefit students, teachers/teaching staff, administration and parents.

Before independence quality assurance systems in Uganda were based on institutional affiliations following the University of London Model. Since its inception Makerere Technical College in 1922 followed University of London's quality assurance system. By 1949, the technical college became a constituent college of University of London and fully adopted the university quality assurance systems. (Baiko, Namubiru, et al; 2023)

Formal quality assurance systems in Ugandan HEIs started with the establishment of the NCHE by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) in 2001. With the promulgation of the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, an institutionalised quality assurance system gradually formed, marking a shift from affiliation to accreditation. Affiliation is the relationship that arises from linking one thing with another, whereas accreditation is the official review board's approval of an institution of higher learning following the completion of specific requirements.

Quality assurance can be external or internal. "External quality assurance relates to Supra-institutional policies and practices that ensure the quality of higher educational institutes and programs while internal quality assurance relates to the procedures adopted by the educational institutions for continuous improvement throughout the years" (Gurudev Somani; 2022)

NCHE first published the Quality Assurance Framework for Ugandan universities in October 2006. Years later a need arose to amend this document and include licensing. In May 2011, it published the Quality Assurance Framework for Universities and the Licensing Process for Higher Education Institutions. The second publication was issued with three electronic volumes of Minimum Standards for Courses of study.

3) METHODOLOGY

The goal of the research is to highlight literature that illustrates key components of several document analyses that paint an overview of the Ugandan Skill gap and employability dilemma facing higher education graduates.

To answer the research questions Holmes' employability perspectives (possession, position and process) are analysed against existing pedagogy (curriculum, methodology and technique) in higher education institutions.

Hinged on the interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research design was adopted. Using purposeful sampling techniques, a sample of 15 respondents (5 Fresh graduates, 5 Human Resource professionals and 5 Higher Education Institution staff) participated in both online and face to face semi structured interviews.

“The interpretivists paradigm uses documentation as a data collecting technique, collecting external and internal documents, such as memos, emails, annual reports, financial statements, newspaper articles, websites, and so on — to cast further insight into a phenomenon of interest or to corroborate other forms of evidence” (Smith, 1993).

Documentary analysis was used because it is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

EBSCOHost and ScienceDirect databases as well as Education Policy Analysis Archives were the main sources of literature. These were used basing on their previous successful application in other higher education research projects.(Tight, 2019)

4) RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section of the research paper will cover the primary research findings of the study on Skill gaps and employability of higher education graduates in Uganda.

An important finding was that there’s a distinct difference between the unemployment and unemployability dilemma among HEI graduates in Uganda. Unemployment as widely viewed is a huge economic problem for any nation, however graduate unemployment moves this a tier higher. In recent years Uganda’s HE enrolment numbers have increased and as such graduate volumes have risen exponentially, however these haven’t successfully been absorbed into the labour market.

The primary research findings observed commonalities across respondents that were along the following categories; economic/ labour market prevailing situation, rural/urban demographics, STEM vs non- STEM qualifications and finally psychological capital/ substance abuse.

The economy is rapidly growing and interestingly this contributes negatively to youth employment levels. Economic growth generally means there’s a steady increase in a nation’s productive capacity leading to high levels of National output/income which is reflected in an increase in GDP(Gross Domestic Product) According to the Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development, Budget speech for the financial year 2023/2024:

The economy in 2023 grew at an average of 5.5% compared to 4.6% in 2022, inflation was 6.2% which is a reduction from the 10.7% in October 2022 ,Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) increased to a record high of US \$1.5 billion, GDP per capita increased by 8.9% from 957 USD in 2020/2021 to 1,042 USD in the financial year 2021/2022 and foreign remittances hit a record US\$ 1.3 billion by April, 2023.(Budget speech: FY 2022/2023)

The above figures look promising but technically have more implications than meets the eye. The increase in FDI inflows is mainly from multi national companies with hyper specialised and high knowledge/skill intensive production and service processes. These operate at international level standards therefore require specific qualifications when recruiting (Dr Kibuuka Enoch, 2024).

Most of the Ugandan graduates we cover in this study are those we would generally term as having foundation higher education qualifications. To attain gainful employment they would need to advance and specialise further in their respective fields. This leads to a bigger issue; the country and the world over is facing credential inflation. “It should however be noted that returns to education differ depending on fields of study and prestige of education institutions, as well as socio-economic statuses of individuals” (Kariya, 2011).

Rural/ urban demographics during the study featured a lot as determining factors for graduates obtaining employment. The urban born and raised graduate has an upper hand with more exposure, is savvy and boasts greater social capital in comparison to the rural born and raised graduate. Graduates interviewed for this study intimated that their counterparts already in employment got the job placements through personal contacts implying employment opportunities are unfortunately most times distributed sociologically rather than meritoriously. The rural youth however were found to be more open minded and engaged in employment not necessarily related to what they studied in school. Their urban counterparts were more prone to under looking some kinds of employment as below their social class.

The number of graduates that have qualified in non STEM professions outweigh those in STEM related professions. Even those that are deemed more marketable in the STEM professions are running away to greener pastures abroad in search for better remuneration.

Graduates are faced with low psychological capital that leads to substance abuse dimming what would have potentially been a bright future. In HEIs peer pressure, social inequalities and immersion into excessive recreational opportunities exposes the graduates to very reckless lifestyles. What begins as fun spirals out of control leading to mental health complications. Many

The younger graduates have issues with expectation management and are most times hit with reality shocks. Most were never mentally prepared for these situations which disorganises them and affects output in the workplace. “Psychological capital is a multi - dimensional construct with four dimensions : self sufficiently, optimism, hope and resilience” (Luthansa, Youssef, & Avolio, 2015) In a nutshell a graduate's positive psychological development would significantly increase their likelihood of success mainly on the basis of perseverance and effort toward any situation life throws at them.

5) RECOMMENDATIONS

Uganda is not a party to The Ratifications C131-Minimum Wage Fixing Convention,1971(No.131). There is an urgent need to revise the country’s minimum wage policy. A more conducive work environment in the country especially as regards remuneration and salaries will improve the country’s ability to retain talent. Majority of STEM graduates leave the country for greener pastures. This brain drain is a huge loss as it translates to a flight of skilled middle class workers that would have helped uplift the country out of poverty and towards the nation’s Vision 2040.

Government and development partners need to prioritise learning and skilling, not just schooling in secondary school if STEM is to be more embraced. Borrowing from the revised lower secondary curriculum, a gradual overhaul of higher institution curricula will enable training of learners who are independent thinkers and more innovative. In HEIs summative assessment (tests and exams after a unit of learning) should not be the standard assessment method but rather adopt and emphasise formative assessment (not grading) instead.

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