

Full Length Research Paper

Graduates' Employability: Has the Expansion of the University Sector in Uganda improved Employment Prospects for Graduates? 'Employers' and Lecturers' Perspective'

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Given the increasing private and public cost of university education, households and nations are getting more interested in that type of education which has high potential for employment. This study explores how the expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to graduates' employability. The study was guided by three objectives, namely: To find out whether expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to available options of employment for graduates; To establish whether the expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to adequacy of skills which graduates need in the world of work; To examine whether the expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to the duration which graduates take before getting employed after graduation. Mainly relying on the constructivist research paradigm, the study used a cross sectional and correlational research design. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in data collection and data analysis. Using a questionnaire and interviews, data were collected from 244 university lecturers, 9 Deans of Faculty, 18 Heads of Department, and 9 Human Resource Managers who represented employers. The study found out that expansion of the university sector in Uganda has a relationship with options for employment of graduates in the world of work. The expansion of the university sector in Uganda is associated with adequacy of skills for employment which are acquired by university graduates. These findings also show that expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to the duration which graduates take to get employment after graduation.

Key words: Expansion, university sector, graduates' employability, labour markets.

INTRODUCTION

A university is a place where teaching and learning take place, theories are developed, debates are carried out and new knowledge is generated (Altbach and Levy, 2005; Duderstadt, 2009). Universities generate knowledge

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through research; they serve as conduits for the transfer, adaptation and dissemination of knowledge generated elsewhere in the world and they support government programmes. University education is viewed as having the potential to contribute to economic and social development as well as poverty eradication in the developing countries (World Bank, 2015; Bräutigam and Xiaoyang, 2014). The link between extra qualification and development is guided by the human capital theory advanced by Schultz (1972) and further developed by scholars such as Becker (1993), Nafukho et al. (2004) and Tan (2014). The human capital theory suggests that education leads to the acquisition of productive skills, knowledge and other attributes which are of economics value not only to individuals who get high life time earnings, but also to nations which benefit in terms of growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Therefore, university education should equip graduates with productive skills which should increase graduates' prospects for employment and earning and they should be able to make a measurable economic contribution to national wealth.

Expansion of the University Sector in Uganda is characterized by the increase in the demand and supply of university education. This increase in the demand and supply of university education is indicated by the rise in the number of students looking for university places. For instance, statistics from the Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda indicate that total enrolment in Universities increased from 57,114 in 2002 to 345,000 in 2016 (MoES, 2018). On the other hand there is an increase in the number of public universities from 3 in 2002 to 9 in 2019 and private universities are currently 43 (NCHE, 2018). However, there is concern that growth in university provision in Uganda has not been efficient at producing graduates who are relevant to the Ugandan labour market. This has contributed to the relatively high levels of unemployment currently at 9.2% with females being the most unemployed at 14% while males are at 6% (UBOS, 2020). This means that as the university sector in Uganda expands, all stakeholders need to consider those university inputs such as facilities, teaching and non-teaching human resources as well as academic programs which increase employment prospects of graduates.

LITERATURE ON GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY

Employability is defined as the ability to find, keep and progress in graduate employment and this ability is determined by individual factors, environmental factors and labour market considerations (Behle, 2020). On the other hand, Knight and Yorke (2003) define employability

as a set of achievements, skills, understanding and professional attributes which make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. The link between university education and graduate employability in Uganda dates back to the founding of Makerere University in 1922 (Hayward, 2006). Makerere University was established as a technical college to serve students from the British East African territories of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania (Cloete et al., 2011; NCHE, 2016; Kasozi, 2016). At the initial stage of university education in Uganda, the concern was to train graduates in practical skills of carpentry, building and mechanics and when the university expanded, other courses in medical care, agriculture, veterinary sciences, and teacher training were introduced (Ssekamwa, 1997; Kasozi, 2016; Muwagga, 2011). Graduates who went through this training had higher prospects for employment because they had acquired practical skills which were related to the immediate work environment.

With the growing demand for university education in Uganda, in the 2nd half of the 20th century, more students have enrolled in Ugandan universities, and more public and private universities have been established. Besides the public universities, currently there are 39 private universities offering both undergraduate and graduate programmes (NCHE, 2010; MoES, 2018). With this expansion in the university education sector, studies on the quality of university education in Uganda have mainly been done by the NCHE which was established in 2001. These studies have all aimed at creating quality assurance models for universities so that all public and private universities in Uganda provide relevant education which meets the labour market demands of the nation by ensuring graduate employability and productivity (NCHE, 2010).

Available literature suggests that issues of graduates' employability and graduates' earnings are taking a central stage in university education. This is because the private and social costs of university education are rising faster than the available private and public resources (Johnstone, 2008; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018). This suggests that households and government should make choice of those types and levels of education which have high economic value. Studies have suggested that many Ugandan graduates lack *employable skills* such as communication skills, problem solving, creativity, honesty and integrity, being punctual, taking responsibility, team working, being self-motivated and having a good attitude to work which make most of them failed job interviews or lost their jobs in the first few months of employment (IUCEA, 2014). Therefore, universities need to focus on those factors which enhance employability of the graduates in the labour

market; earnings attracted by the graduates of the different qualifications; and productivity of the graduates at the work place (Gibbs, 2010; Elinor and Mariana, 2010).

In this study, graduate employability was indicated by the availability of options for graduates' employment, adequacy of skills which graduates take to the world of work, and the duration which it takes graduates to get employed after graduation. The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To find out whether expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to available options of employment for graduates.
2. To establish whether the expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to adequacy of skills which graduates need in the world of work?
3. To examine whether the expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to the duration it takes graduates to be employed after graduation.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Relying on both the positivist and post-positivist research paradigms, the mixed methods approach was used to collect data for the study. A cross-sectional and correlational survey design was followed to collect data using a self-administered questionnaire distributed to university lecturers. Interviews and focus group discussions were also done with university Deans of Faculty, Heads of Department and Human Resources Managers from selected employers. The cross-sectional and correlational survey design was preferred for this study because it is an appropriate measure for relationships between the variables of investigation (Warner, 2013; Krysk and Finn 2007). Besides allowing for measuring of relationships, the cross-sectional and correlational designs also allowed addition of alternative sources of data from Deans of Faculty, Heads of Department and Human Resource Manager from employer companies.

Population and sampling

The target population for this study included 723 University Lecturers, 20 Deans of Faculty, 100 heads of department. This population was from 3 selected public universities in Uganda. The study also relied on a population of 25 companies which constitute the most common employment destinations in Uganda (UBOS, 2015).

The sample of 280 respondents was selected and considered appropriate for this study because following the Yamane's (1967) formula of sample size determination suggested by (Israel, 2009) thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size and e is the margin of error for this study; 0.005 was used. Therefore, from the population size of 826 computations following the formula gives the sample size of 296, and thus the size of 280 respondents is justifiable when one factor in the margin of error is +/- 0.05.

From Table 1, following Yamane's formula of sample size determination, this study relied on a sample of 280 respondents out of 723 university lecturers. For the Deans, Heads of Departments and Employers, convenience sampling was used because information required from them was meant to corroborate and triangulate information from the lecturers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A five – level likert scale survey was used to collect data from 244 university lecturers on their evaluation of the relationship between expansion of the university sector and graduates' employability in the Ugandan Labour Market. It was measured by three indicators, namely; available options for graduates' employment; adequacy of skills for graduates' employment; and duration graduates take to get employment.

Data collected from lecturers were coded in SPSS and analyzed. The Spearman Correlation (r_s) was used to establish the direction and magnitude of the relationship between expansion of the university sector and graduates' productivity in the Ugandan Labour Market. This method was preferred because data collected were on an ordinal scale fulfilling the assumptions of the Spearman Correlation analysis (Rashidghalam and Heshmati, 2019; Kossowski and Hauke, 2011). The findings of the study are presented and analyzed according to three research hypotheses drawn from the three objectives of the study in Table 2.

Hypothesis One (H01): There is no association between expansion of the university sector and available options for graduates' employment in the Ugandan Labour Market.

Findings in Table 2 indicate that expansion of the university sector in Uganda is significantly associated with available options for employment with $r_s = 0.996$ with a p-value of 0.001. This means that from the lecturers' point of view expansion of the university sector in the country should happen with increased options for employment. Therefore, from the findings there is evidence to reject the null hypothesis (H0) that there is no association between expansion of the university sector and options for graduates' employment in the country. These findings are also confirmed by an interview with one Human Resource Manager who had the following to say:

Table 1. Population size and sample size.

Target category	Population size	Sample size	Sampling method
University Lecturers	723	244	Simple Random Sampling
Deans of Faculty	20	9	Purposive Sampling
Heads of Department	100	18	Purposive Sampling
Employment Destinations	25	9	Purposive Sampling

Table 2. Correlations between expansion of the university sector and graduates employability in Uganda.

IV: Expansion of the university sector	r_s	p-value
DV1: Available options for employment	0.996	0.001
DV2: Adequacy of skills for employment	0.868	0.000
DV3: Duration graduates take to get employment	0.604	0.001

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

'The major functions of a university are teaching, research, and community engagement. Universities in Uganda need to provide a conducive environment with good facilities in order to enable lecturers achieve those functions and provide university education which is necessary for socio-economic development. However, issues of congested lecture rooms, lack of up to date text books, and lack of equipment in the science laboratories are a hindering factor for students to learn and acquire those skills required by employers. Well trained and appropriately skilled graduates should have wider options for employment' (HRD, 12th June 2019).

The statement by the Human Resource Manager is supported by one Dean of Faculty who said that:

'Budget constraints and deficiencies in universities greatly affect timely delivery of study programmes as it limits resources such as human resources, laboratories and libraries. However, efforts are being made to bridge the gap by bringing together interested parties who help to bridge staffing level gaps by recruiting lecturers on part time basis. Programmes are well prepared with the aim of equipping learners with the expected skills needed in the world of work. However, the absorption of graduates mainly focuses on production rather than manufacture. No machines and equipment are made locally most are generally imported. There is no research industry which would help graduates to improve on the acquired skills and enable improve their skills while on the job. It was also noted that rapid transformation of the HE sector brought in many programmes and many students yet the

staffing levels have not improved which limits attention to students and professional support. This in the long run limits the knowledge and skills which graduates take to the world of work (Dean of Faculty, 28th June 2019).

From the above findings it is evident that the expansion of the university sector has a relationship with options for employment in the world of work. Universities should prepare academic programs and equip graduates with skills which open them up for employment prospects.

Hypothesis Two (H02): There is no relationship between the expansion of the university sector in Uganda and adequacy of skills for employment acquired by the University graduates.

The findings in Table 2 show that according to the university lecturers opinion, expansion of the university sector in Uganda is significantly related to adequacy of skills required for employment with $r_s = 0.868$ and with a p-value of 0.000. These findings mean that expansion in the university sector should provide for increased skills for employment by university graduates. There is therefore evidence to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis that expansion of the university sector in Uganda is associated with adequacy of skills for employment which are acquired by university graduates.

The above findings are also supported by information got from one of the interviewed Head of Academic Department who noted that:

'The way lecturers approach students should emphasize

ethical and moral values required in the world of work. Universities have been transformed due to liberalization of the higher education sector. This has affected the ways that lecturers use to approach students. There is limited emphasis on the moral values and ethical issues that graduates need to take to the places of employment. There is great need to consider how organizational structures such as regulations, policies, norms, cultures and structural routines have been established to guide the conduct of both students and lecturers in the universities to equip graduates with those values desired in the world of work' (HOD, June 2019).

On the other hand, another interview with a Human Resource Manager shows that:

Universities need to create a conducive learning environment with sufficient facilities which will enable learners to acquire practical skills which are needed by employers. Learners should be helped to develop the capability to compete and win on the labour market, perform well on the job and work in various locations. They should be helped to know that the world of work is highly competitive and students look at higher education as preparation to obtain a better position in the highly competitive labour market. Therefore, universities should endeavor to provide facilities which match the status of employing companies if students are to be confident and impress when they are in employment (HRD, November 16th, 2019).

The above findings also indicate that as the university sector expands, it should put into consideration the fact that there is need to improve teaching and acquisition of skills needed from graduates by employers. Universities need to continuously interact with the employers in order to know what kind of skills which needed in the world of work.

Hypothesis Three (H03): There is no relationship between expansion of the university sector in Uganda and the duration which graduates take to get employed after they graduate.

The findings in Table 2 show that there is a significant relationship between expansion of the university sector in Uganda and the duration which graduates take to get employment with $r_s = 0.604$ and with a p-value of 0.001. These findings indicate that expansion of the university sector in Uganda affects the duration which graduates take to get employment. There is therefore evidence to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis that expansion of the university sector affects the duration which graduates take to get employed.

Concerning the reasons why many graduates take long to get employment after graduation, one of the interviewed Human Resource Managers suggested that:

Recent graduates expect quick and easy pay, they expect to work only in executive offices, they do not expect to do any hard work, they are not innovative and they always wait for the supervisor to tell them what to do. This is the reason most of them stay long before they get employment; in some cases when they get chance they don't stay long in the company. In this company we need multi-tasked individual who can adjust to any calls and are willing to learn. Probably their study environments emphasized specialization which is not achievable today where companies have limited resources yet they must achieve results if they have to survive in the competitive industry (HRD, November 19th, 2019).

However, one of the Deans of Faculty who was interviewed gave a ray of hope on graduate employment that:

I think government in this country has realized that university education should benefit parents, students and the country. This is why university administrators are on intense pressure from NCHE and from Government to restructure their programmes and weed out those courses that do not have direct career paths. I think you have seen that newly created universities are under instruction to specialize in specific fields such as agriculture, vocational, business and science and technology and some courses which used to be stand alone are proposed to be course units to be taught to all students. This will help recent graduates to get employment because they will have skills which are immediately required in the world of work (Dean of Faculty, November 16th, 2019).

These findings also show that expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to the duration which graduates take to get employment after graduation. From the employers' perspective graduates personal attributes contribute to how easily they can get employment. On the other hand, from the perspective of university administrators, reviewing of academic programmes in universities is meant to ensure that what happens in the university relates to the world of work and increases employment options for graduates.

Conclusion

1. The expansion of the university sector in Uganda has a

relationship with options for employment of graduates in the world of work. Universities should prepare academic programs and equip graduates with skills which open them up for many employment prospects.

2. The expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related with adequacy of skills for employment which are acquired by university graduates.

3. These findings also show that expansion of the university sector in Uganda is related to the duration which graduates take to get employment after graduation.

Recommendations

1. In order to benefit from the growth of the university sector, universities need to prepare academic programmes which equip graduates with skills and competencies which open them up for different employment options.

2. In order for employers to benefit from the expansion of the university sector, universities need to continuously interact with employers in order to know what kind of skills are needed in the world of work. Universities will then emphasize those skills in order to enable their graduates be competitive in the world of work.

3. As the university sector grows in Uganda, lecturers need to emphasize to graduates the need to work on their personal attributes such as confidence, communication and social skills which are highly needed in the world of work.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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