

Influence of Career Management Skills on Graduate Employability in East Africa, Africa.

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Abstract

Unemployment among the graduates in East Africa has become a major topic of discussion and it's associated with inappropriate education system, imperfections in the labour market, high population growth rate among other factors. However, there exist various conjectures regarding exactly what constitutes employability and which graduate attributes are required to foster employability among graduates. This paper presents a model of desirable employability attributes that acknowledges the importance of career building skills required for enhancement of graduate employability. The paper raises concerns and argues that institutions of higher learning should focus on skills-based training/competence based training as opposed to emphasis on substantive knowledge. To conclude, the paper proposes some suggestions to be considered by institutions of higher learning in order to change the current status quo and yield the desired results in terms of graduate employability in East Africa.

Key Words: Graduate employability, Career management skills, Generic skills, Graduate attributes.

Introduction

According to British council 2014 employability can be defined as the possession of relevant knowledge, skills and other attributes that facilitate the gaining and maintaining of worthwhile employment. Employability is about the development of a range of attributes and skills at university that can be transferred into situations beyond university study. Graduate employability is multifaceted and entails career management skills, academic performance and labour market awareness. This view is supported by Pool & Sewell (2007) that employability goes beyond just gaining employment. It is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work (an individual's capacity and willingness to become and remain attractive in the labour market). Teamwork, effective communication, adaptability to change, positive and flexible attitudes, continuous learning, self-confidence, willingness to take risks and commitment to personal excellence are all characteristics linked to employability skills (Pool & Sewell, 2007).

One of the main factors that enhance one's employability is *career resilience*. According to Waterman and Collard (1994) career resilience is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances even when the circumstances are discouraging. It encompasses being able to adapt to the changing working environment due to globalization, technological advancement, political climate and changing economic conditions of a country. Besides career resilience, continuous learning & development and generic skills also enhance one's employability prospects (Collard 1994).

Career Management Skills & Graduate Employability

According to Bridgestock (2009) career management skills refers to the abilities required to proactively navigate the working world and successfully manage the career building process based on attributes such as lifelong or continuous learning and adaptability. Career management skills/employability skills are very important in enhancing employability. They are skills that are directly pertinent to obtaining and maintaining work. According to Bridgestock (2009) career management skills /employability skills are grouped into four categories and described as follows:

Discipline-specific skills: These are the skills traditionally included in university curricula to address specific occupational requirements. These skills originate in specific domains, disciplines or subject matter areas. For instance graduates in statistics are expected to possess the ability to apply appropriate statistical techniques for the analysis and interpretation of data.

Generic skills: These are the transferable skills. They are the most widely acknowledged employability skills in universities and most of employers view such skills as the most desirable and attractive. They include such skills as information literacy, technological skills, written and verbal communication skills, working in teams and numeracy skills. Most of the literatures agree that generic skills are very important skills and enhance graduate employability. However, despite the evidence on what is required by employers, the existence of graduate attributes statements and a large body of scholarly literature many graduates are not optimally work ready (Fullani & Scott, 2014)

Self-management skills: These skills relate to the individual's perception and appraisal of themselves in terms of values, abilities, interests and goals. These competencies are closely related to the concept of career identity (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999). Eby, Butts & Lockwood (2003) demonstrated that students who have a well developed concept of their career goals and a positive, realistic appraisal of their own abilities and aptitudes report themselves as possessing higher levels of employability than other students.

Career building skills: These are the skills relating to finding and using information about careers, labour markets and the world of work and then locating, securing and maintaining work as well as exploiting career opportunities to gain advancement or other desired outcomes. According Bridgestock (2009) a student who is aware of a high unemployment rate in an occupation or geographical location can draw on their self-management and career building skills to construct alternative career scenarios involving different locations, training options, occupational choices or work modes through the process of proactive career management.

It is evident that the world of work is changing fast and is becoming more surprising with many new opportunities. In today's job market people always devise plan B and a thing like "one job for life is rare". So being able to make informed decisions about what you are going to do and how is very important. You also need to be equipped to deal with any eventuality /un expected changes. That is where management skills checks in career. Career management skills help one to: understand his or her personality, interests and values which are very vital in making career decisions, help one to know how to use one's talents and skills, explore the world of work, training and learning. Career management skills also help one to identify who can help him or her in his/her career journey (Bridgestock 2009).

Paadi (2014) a lecturer in North West University, South Africa carried out a study on "Perception on employability skills necessary to enhance human resource management-Graduate prospect of securing a relevant place in the job market". The researcher wanted to find out what graduate employability entails and what graduate attributes are most valuable for employability. The study established that graduate employability entails application of the combination of technical and soft skills, being able to secure a job and facilitate its growth and sustainability in the face of the changing world of work and also being able to embrace lifelong learning. According to the study the most valuable & desirable graduate attributes required to enhance employability are: Communication skills, teamwork, problem solving skills, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, individual growth, interpersonal abilities and independence. According to the study graduates must be able to communicate in the work place & have problem solving skills. In the study, emotional intelligence came up as important because it basically guide people on how to respond and deal with situations at work place. Teamwork was found crucial because most organizations are run on projects and one has to learn to work with different types of people to complete projects on target hence embracing diversity in the work place. Independence was also cited as vital attribute as one has to learn to work independently without close supervision.

According to High Level Panel Report (2015) what matters is not having technology but understanding how to use it well and locally. This requires institutions of higher learning to impart necessary desirable skills to enable graduates navigate the world of work. Despite the rapid expansion of higher education enrollment in Africa's universities there are still serious concerns about the ability of these universities to produce the kinds of graduates who can drive the region forward (World Bank Report, 2014). The World Bank Report of 2014 posits that too few Africa's graduates gain the skills they need to find work. The report states that lack of desirable skills among graduates poses a great challenge to their transition to the labour market.

Concerns about graduate employment and the kinds of skills graduates bring to the workplace are wide spread across African countries. The Inter University Council of East Africa which regulates higher education in the East Africa community conducted a study dubbed “From Education to Employment” in 2014. The study confirmed long held concerns among employers that most graduates in the region are not fully prepared for the job market (IUCEA, 2014). The study shows that at least 63% of Ugandan graduates lack Job market skills, it is followed closely by Tanzania where at least 61% were ill prepared for the job market. 55% and 52% in Burundi and Rwanda respectively .Finally 51% of graduates in Kenya were found not prepared for job market.

According to Inter University Council of East Africa (2014) thousands of the youth who graduate each year in East Africa are unable to secure jobs because of lower qualifications and that employers are increasingly shunning new graduate in favour of highly skilled one. In order to establish the relationship between the employers’ needs in graduates to entry level jobs and the skills obtained through universities, Inter University Council of East Africa study examined three factors. These are the knowledge-based education and training (K-ET), delivery method and the division of knowledge. It divided the knowledge gained through higher education into two categories: Substantive and enabling knowledge.

According to Inter University Council of East Africa (2014), substantive knowledge embraces concepts, theories, analytical tools and what can be defined as the subject matter of the field or area of discipline and conveyed through texts and course lectures. Within this context the study established that most of the higher education institutions in the region were focusing on delivery of substantive knowledge. On the other hand enabling knowledge represents the skills individuals possess that allow them to apply their substantive knowledge and at the same time gain expertise in applying that knowledge. The importance of enabling knowledge is seen in the skills and proficiencies that should be developed by academic programmes for successful labour market performance. Skills-based education and training(S-BET) focuses on mastering specific skills or standards rather than completing course work over specific period of time. It is intended to be an institutional process that moves education from focusing on what academics believe graduates need to know to what students need to know and be able to do in varying and complex situations.

Skills -based training in universities fosters graduates employability and should be embraced by Kenyan institutions of higher learning (IUCEA, 2014). Overall, the higher education landscape in East Africa has not sufficiently transformed for it to be able to effectively address the socio-economic dynamics that continue to take place in the EAC region (IUCEA, 2014). As such, there are still enormous gaps between qualifications offered by the higher education system in the region and the human resource needs in the job market and the general society. In a study conducted by the Inter University Council of East Africa in 2014, employers and education providers were asked for their assessments of the importance of the young people they hire in regard to the skills as shown in the table 1.0 below. Their responses highlighted three important points:

Compared with education providers, employers are much clearer in their ranking of the relative importance of various skills. In almost every partner state employers cited work ethics, communication and teamwork as the most important skills. Education providers gave similar weights across the board.

Employers noted a mismatch between what they needed and what they were seeing. They ranked the competence of new employees in each of the various skills lower than the importance they gave it.

In some skills, there was a wide gap between the perspectives of employers and education providers on the competence of new employees .The difference is particularly stark in theoretical and hands on training, problem solving and computer literacy. The table below presents a summary of the finding:

Skills Area	% of respondents responding 8 or higher out of 10			
	Employer Rating		Higher Education Provider Rating	
	Competence	Importance	Competence	Importance
Work ethic	63	81	68	83
Oral communication	63	80	67	81
Team work	62	73	67	77
Hands on training and discipline.	55	73	67	81
Problem Solving	52	70	64	80
Written Communication	46	70	63	80
Creativity	49	65	60	81
Theoretical training in discipline	50	63	65	80
Basic Mathematics	53	60	59	71
Leadership	50	58	57	67
English proficiency	49	53	55	73
Computer literacy	43	63	62	72
Local languages	61	73	73	77

Source: Field Survey and Analysis, December 2013-January 2014 (IUCEA)

Ojiambo (2009) maintained that the Kenya's educational system should produce graduates who are self sufficient and productive in agriculture, industry and commerce. He opined that education should equip university students with scientific and technical skills that are crucial for self and salaried employment for the country's sustainable development. The Kenyan Government task force dubbed "Towards a Globally Competitive Quality Education for sustainable development (Task force on re-alignment of Kenya's education system to the constitution of Kenya 2010) emphasized that for the country to realize sustainable development in economy Kenya's universities should churn out globally competitive graduates. The task force reported tremendous increase in university students' enrollment from the year 2003 to the year 2010 and opined that as the university enrollment rate increases the question of graduate employability should be given a primary focus (R o K, 2012a).

Ponge (2013) highlighted five reasons/factors that contribute to high rate of unemployment among the Kenyan university graduates which include: Mismatch in labour market demand and supply, inadequate labour market information, discrepancies between graduate expectations versus market reality, lack of work experience and lack of life skills training. He argues that the greatest challenge facing universities in Kenya is producing fully baked graduates who fully possess employability skills and also who can be relied upon to create jobs.

The East African Universities continue to be criticized as being competitive and commercially driven with most of them overemphasizing on subject content at the expense of the development of generic skills among students (Timuti et al 2013). Generic skills are the skills, values and personal attributes which potential employers might find desirable (James et al 2004). They include such interactive skills as teamwork, communication, problem solving skills and personal skills. According to Harvey (2001) personal skills entail: Willingness and ability to learn and continue learning, ability to explore in relevant job environments, being risk taker, being flexible enough to adapt different working environments etc. More so, personal skills/self skills entail being self confident, self motivated and also having ability to manage oneself.

What should universities do to enhance graduate employability?

In the year 2014, the British Council Commissioned Institute of Education, University of London led a research project dubbed “Can higher education solve Africa’s job crisis?” which was carried out in partnership with Kenyatta University, Kenya; Winneba, Ghana; University of the Free State, South Africa and University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The research project explained the following three major ways that the universities can do to enhance employability among graduates:

1. Enable a broader learning experience for students.

The research shows that experiences outside the classroom can be pivotal in enhancing employability (British Council, 2014). Student’s engagement in extra-mural activities is very influential in securing successful employment outcomes. According to the British Council (2014), experiential learning in the community-serving learning, volunteering etc as well as on campus through students’ societies and other extracurricular activities should be facilitated. Employers increasingly value global perspectives and understanding of diversity and these qualities can be developed through these forms of engagement on campus and beyond.

2. Improve the quality of taught courses

According to British Council (2014) there is extensive evidence of the poor learning environment for students in Sub-Saharan Africa countries. Some of the changes required to address this challenge involves significant structural reforms: For example, decreasing students -lecturer ratio and improving infrastructure. But there are also more affordable interventions such as pedagogical development for existing staff and enhancing student voice in relation to teaching and learning.

3. Provide targeted employability input.

Beyond the general learning experiences ,more specific provision is also required to inform students about career opportunities, to enable the reflect on their personal aptitudes and develop them further where necessary. Career advisory are obvious focal point in this regard as well as job fairs as well as other interactions with employers. Therefore closer links are needed with employers in terms of updating curricula and involving industry representatives in course delivery as well as providing quality placements. Finally, transferable skills and critical that will allow graduates to adapt to make a positive impact on a rapidly changing economy and society are essential (British Council 2014).

Conclusions

Graduate employability is not only about a graduate securing a place in the labour market but it is also about the student being able to apply that which they have learnt and acquired from higher education. Most of the employers desire graduates who have developed generic skills through work integrated learning programme (Paadi, 2014). According to Paadi (2014) generic skills are the most sought after in the work place but not ignoring technical skills as they are also very necessary.

As employers’ wish lists evolve and grow, stakeholders in undergraduate education must cultivate employability attributes in undergraduates. In this regard therefore, besides preparing students intellectually and conceptually the universities should also inculcate employability skills/attributes in learners to enhance their employability after graduation. However solving the graduate unemployment problem is not something that universities can do alone; the task involves coordinated efforts between diverse segments of government and society.

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