

Skills Oriented Higher Education and Graduate Employability in Cameroon: The Case of the National Employment Fund

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Abstract— The 21st century graduate labour market has become very competitive and unpredictable. Graduates therefore need skills that would help the transit smoothly and successfully from the university to the world of work. This paper investigated the case of higher education graduates from a cross-section of Cameroonian universities registered with the National Employment Fund (NEF), as graduate job seekers centre regional branch Yaounde. To carry out the study, a questionnaire was constructed following the Likert scale from 1-5, of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), uncertain (UN), strongly disagree (SDA), and disagree (D). Data was analyzed with SPSS, using the Spearman Rank Correlation. Findings reveal that lack of marketable skills and skills that do not match the demands of the labour market are some of the obstacles of getting employment. The paper proposes a more skill orientated curriculum in higher education as a remedy.

Index Terms— Curriculum Employability, Higher Education, Labour Market, Skills.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the main reasons most people enter higher education institutions is to graduate and get employment, get promotion or get a new employment (Gokuladas, 2011). It is therefore important that higher education institutions equip their graduates with employability skills (Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). While higher education institutions around the world are graduating increasing numbers of graduates; most of them are increasingly finding it hard to get jobs. This is because the skills they acquired do not match the skills required by the employers (Baker & Henson, 2010). Youth Unemployment is a worldwide phenomenon. According to the ILO report of 2012 about 12.4 percent of people aged 15 to 24 worldwide were unemployed as of 2012, up from 12.3 percent in 2011. The youth unemployment rate was expected to climb to 12.8 in 2018 with an estimated 73.4 million young people out of work.

In six of ten developing countries surveyed, more than 60 percent of the young people were either unemployed or trapped in low-paying jobs, the report stated. According to the International Labour Organization's 2013 report, the unemployment rate in Cameroon is 30% and that of underemployment is 75%. The report states that, even by the most conservative standards, there are about 4-6 million, mostly educated, able and ready to work young people who

are currently jobless in Cameroon. Cameroon remains very strategic in terms of institutional arrangement which also covers issues of the younger generation, yet the lack of adequate technical and professional education for youth remains a major concern and is one of the main causes for massive youth unemployment in Cameroon.

In this 21st knowledge economy, there is a growing expectation for universities to produce human capital with the right kind of capabilities and skills to meet the rapidly changing needs of the labour markets. (Foray & Lundvall, 1996). Universities are also expected to facilitate the shift to the new knowledge-based economies and high technologies through effective connections between research and the labour markets. (UNESCO, 2009). In response to this higher education was highlighted in the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper, (GESP), (2009), in terms of policy as a driver of economic growth and development. According to the ministry of higher education quarterly review, SUP INFOS, (2010c), one of the roles higher education (HE), is to increase the socio-economic, socio-professional and market friendliness of the curriculum. This role was reconceptualised in their New University Governance Policy (NUGP), with the objective of acquiring: a modern, professionalized higher education which is resolutely open to the rest of the society and meeting the requirements of knowledge production, of knowhow, of the use of knowledge and the production of human capital, quantitatively and qualitatively which is necessary to drive Cameroon to become an emergent nation (Operational Strategy of the NUGP up to 2010:2).

Also, the global HE arena and labour markets are preoccupied with concepts of graduate employability in recent years. Harvey (2004:3), defines employability in its core sense "as the acquisition of attributes (knowledge, skills, and abilities) that make graduates more likely to be successful in their chosen occupations (whether paid employment or not)." It is the aspect of the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities that was considered in this paper. These knowledge and skills are supposed to be acquired in the universities or institutes of higher learning. It therefore stands to reason that in order for graduates to be gainfully employed after university, they must possess the necessary skills and attributes required in the workplace. Higher education institutions in Cameroon, both public and private are thus confronted with the need to develop study programmes that meet employability challenges. The research question developed to carry out this research was:

How does content of curricula in HE influence graduate employability.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing interest through research on how higher education can become influential economic growth and development as well as employability of graduates. Studies on Cameroon include: Fonkeng and Ntembe (2009), investigated the potential of HE in the development of Cameroon, using household survey data from the first Cameroon household survey, analyzing the effect of education attainment on earnings and private returns to education, revealing among other things, a positive and significant relationship between HE and economic growth. Doh (2012), investigating the responses of HE in the alleviation of poverty in the country and in triggering economic growth, analyzed the transformation processes used by the Cameroonian government to use HE as a driver of its poverty reduction strategies in becoming an emergent nation by 2035. He used the National Innovative System (NIS) in depicting the systemic environment of HE to suggest that university's contribution to socio-economic development in Cameroon could be more direct given a strong macro support system with linkages. Samfoga (2015), evaluated the Strategic objectives of HE through the Balanced Scorecard (BSC), evaluating the increasing need of accountability and relevance to varying stakeholders with differing expectations. She concluded that Cameroon could learn from business organizations to manage strategic objectives, using the BSC. This paper is a contribution of how skill oriented HE curricula could become the safest route of escaping the unemployment trap and growing individual employability once in the world of work.

Internationally, there is a wide variety of studies on the phenomena of skills and graduate employability: McNair (2003) thinks that even though successful higher education teaching supports the production of employable graduates, the significance of this is most often missed by the learners if not made clear in the curriculum. He therefore suggests that in addressing employability in higher education curriculum, whether directly or indirectly, the link with employability must always be made crystal clear to maximize student benefit. (York and Knight, 2004). York and Knight (2004) point out that a needs analysis is necessary from the beginning, where HE providers find out the skills that make students employable and how these can be embedded in the curricula, to achieve desired employability. Phillips (2007) argued for the inclusion of work experience in the higher education curriculum on the basis that work experience improves students' employability and equips them with such skills as team building and business awareness. From their extensive research within the higher education community Knight and York (2004) came out with additional 39 attributes important for employability. The attributes have been grouped under the following headings: personal qualities, core skills and process skills. Knight and York equally outlined four main strategies currently in use within higher education for embedding employability in the curriculum. These are:

- Embedding employability through the whole curriculum;
- Embedding employability in the core curriculum;
- Incorporating employability-related modules within the curriculum and
- Work-based or work-related learning within or in parallel with the curriculum.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study was a survey and used quantitative analysis.

Population Sample: The population constituted of unemployed graduates of up to 5 years of both public and private universities registered with the National Employment Fund (NEF). The sample size was 520 purposefully sampled in the NEF, Yaoundé, where graduate jobseekers from a cross-section of universities in the country come to register in the Graduate Employment Programme (PED) run by the NEF.

Research Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions constructed along the pattern of the Likert scale: Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Uncertain (UN), strongly disagree (SDA), Disagree (DA), for the graduate jobseekers.

Data Analysis

Data collected was analyzed using the Spearman Rank Correlation.

Spearman Correlation is expressed as:

$$r_s = 1 - \frac{6\sum D^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}$$

Where:

D is the difference between the ranks of X and the corresponding ranks of Y

n= the number of paired ranks

The table below shows the analysis of data according to the research question:

Question 2: How does content of higher education curricula influence graduate employability?

IV. PRESENTATION AND ANALYZES OF RESULTS

Inferential Statistics :

Hypothesis

Ha: The Contents of Curricula determine employability of graduates of higher education

Ho: The Contents of Curricula do not determine the employability of graduates of higher education

Table 1: Information on the contents of the curriculum

Item	Statement	SA	A	Ua	DA	SDA	Mean	
1	Availability of syllabus and study programmes to students at admission	f _i	154	208	88	39	35	2.21
		%	29,6	40,0	18,2	7,5	6,3	
2	You know what you would do after graduation	f _i	37	83	174	174	28	4.79
		%	11,0	12,3	32,9	32,9	10,3	
3	Understanding of curricula implication of the BMD and GESP and work environment	f _i	189	171	98	27	33	2.87
		%	38,3	32,9	9,2	5,2	18,3	
4	Work related skills are embedded in the curricula	f _i	30	98	113	137	124	3.38
		%	9,6	18,3	21,7	26,3	23,8	
5	Availability enough extra curricula activities and forums to inform students of the 21st knowledge economy	f _i	73	71	107	133	118	3.32
		%	14,0	13,7	20,8	29,7	22,3	
6	Course contents reflects the needs and demands of 21st century knowledge economy	f _i	88	93	---	197	140	2.92
		%	18,9	18,3	---	37,3	28,9	
7	Course contents enables students acquire skills that enables the employable and self-reliant	f _i	18	71	---	170	281	2.87
		%	3,5	13,7	---	32,7	50,1	
8	Course contents are effective in professionalisation and professionisation	f _i	83	83	118	108	150	3.38
		%	12,1	16,0	22,7	20,4	28,3	
9	Course contents ease my transition from university to the world of work	f _i	72	70	131	118	131	3.14
		%	13,8	13,3	25,2	22,3	25,2	
10	Course contents in school enable me develop employability skills which now enhance my job performance	f _i	81	77	---	233	127	3.03
		%	11,7	14,4	---	49,0	14,3	
11	Internships were compulsory and effective managed by university and industry for students placement	f _i	82	73	---	234	109	3.08
		%	13,8	14,4	---	48,9	21,0	
12	Our university library has not receive enough additional findings to enable lecturers and student meet with the research component of the reform	f _i	43	123	139	33	122	2.88
		%	8,3	24,8	28,7	18,9	23,3	
13	Student need professional development activities such as seminars, workshops and conferences to enhance professionalisation and employability	f _i	189	233	78	---	---	2.58
		%	38,3	49,0	14,8	---	---	
14	Greater partnership between university, NEF and professional association and employees in designing curriculum will enhance quality and employability of graduates	f _i	197	122	30	37	94	3.43
		%	37,9	23,3	5,4	7,1	18,2	
15	More practical needed in order to breach the gap between theory and practice	f _i	198	221	105	---	---	3.82
		%	37,7	42,3	19,3	---	---	
16	There is need for dialogue between universities and the business world	f _i	201	283	28	---	---	4.84
		%	38,7	50,8	10,7	---	---	
17	Professional and extra curricula activities needed to enable students gain practical work experience and develop new experiences	f _i	230	173	87	30	---	2.49
		%	48,0	33,2	12,9	5,8	---	

Table 2

Correlations				
			The Contents of Curricula	Employability of Graduates of higher Education
Spearman's rho	The Contents of Curricula	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,807**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	520	520
	Employability of Graduates of higher Education	Correlation Coefficient	,807**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	520	520

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

V. FINDINGS

There is significant relationship between contents of curriculum and graduates employability of higher education in Cameroon (P-value < 0.05)

Most of the graduate jobseekers said they were never

exposed to internships and other work related activities. This implies that universities teach mostly theoretically with hardly any practice, which can be very detrimental to 21st century graduates in the knowledge economy. Universities should increase their efforts in embedding work-related activities into their curricula, either through internships, or other co-curricula or extra curricula activities. In consonance with this, Phillips (2007) observed that for youths to acquire skills required for future employment there must be an on-going partnership between universities and the world of work. According to Phillips, inclusion of work experiences in higher education curricula will improve students' employability and equip them with skills such as team building and business awareness. Higher education must therefore adapt and continue to adapt contents of curricula to reflect labour market needs, if they want to produce work ready and competitively employable graduates because contents of higher education curricula have a high and positive influence on graduate employability.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research initially set out to find out how skill oriented HE could influence graduate employability in Cameroon. Employability was mostly viewed in terms of skill development where universities and institutes of higher learning prepare new entrants to the workforce. Graduate employability was also identified as an increasingly important element in the curriculum development process. A general conclusion arrived at in this research is that embedding employability skills in the HE curricula, as an empowering tool to foster entrepreneurial self-reliance among graduates, leading to gainful employment and employability, is one of the safest ways of solving the employment and employability challenges, by preparing graduates to transition smoothly to the world of work. Higher education in Cameroon shall therefore continue to be a cornerstone agency in the production and supply of a quality and skilled labour force. This will solve the worries of employers who have increasingly voiced their dissatisfaction about the employability of graduates, with the claim that new graduates are lacking in certain attributes and skills. As an immediate response we believe that in collaboration with industries, a consensus can be reached to come out with a coherent graduate employability framework of skills and attributes to address this concern in a more sustainable and responsive way.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

All stakeholders (higher education administration, industry, curriculum designers, and students) should be consulted before designing curricula, in order to embed the needs of all stakeholders, while monitoring the evolving employability attributes and skills as dictated by the changing patterns in labour market needs and trends to align them with higher education curricula.

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