



## Employability Trends in Africa: The Role of Higher Education

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**Abstract:** This study investigated about employability trends in Africa, highlighting on the role of higher education. The study treated published papers as units for data collection and analysis. Following the identification of the literature, the study deployed a systematic review of the literature. The presentation of findings took place using the narrative approach. Based on the findings, the study concludes that graduates' employability in Africa is higher and is mainly associated with lack of employability skills, including social skills, lifelong learning skills and entrepreneurial skills. The problem may only be resolved when universities integrate such skills in the teaching and learning processes. Therefore, the study recommends that universities in Africa need to integrate employability skills in the teaching and learning process to produce employable graduates and prevent the potential cost in providing the graduates with the missing employability skills.

**Keyword:** Africa; employability; skills; graduates; employer.

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### Introduction

The development of higher education in Africa has a long history, tracing back to the first millennium when few universities existed (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996; Lulat, 2005; Assie-Lumumba and Dri, 2006). For instance, Assié-Lumumba and Dri (2006) and Lulat (2005) traced this development from the times of the pyramids of Egypt, the obelisks of Ethiopia and the Timbuktu. Ajayi *et al.*, (1996) accounted for the establishment of academic institutions, including the Alexandria Academy, between 331 and 642 AD. Other institutions reported by Lulat (2005) include Al-Azhar University in Egypt, established in 1970 AD. Religious institutions, for example, mostly established these early universities such as Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco in 859 AD, which started as a mosque and later extended its functions to become a university.

During colonial times, especially after the Berlin Conference in 1885, the development of higher education in Africa took a different direction where universities were established by the colonial powers to suit their needs. In this regard, several

universities were established under the French, Germany, and UK colonial rules. In Woldegiorgis and Doevevspeck (2013), Ridder-Symoens (1992) reported the establishment of the Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone in 1826, the University of Cape Town in 1829, the Stellenbosch University in 1866, the University of Khartoum in 1902, Cairo University in 1908 and the University of Algeria in 1909. The momentum for establishing higher education institutions took a strong pace after the First World War (1914-1918). After the First World War, Africa became home to Makerere University in Uganda (1922), Egerton University in Kenya (1939), University of Ibadan (1948), and Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia (1950), to name but a few.

Learning during pre-colonial Africa as Woldegiorgis and Doevevspec (2013) report, was embedded in the cultural setting of the time without having formally established institutions that dealt with the production and dissemination of knowledge. The authors further argue that indigenous forms of learning in pre-colonial Africa centered on African civilizations, nurturing cultural identity and

maintaining a coherent way of life in the continent. The authors along with Ajayi *et al.*, (1996) conclude that the roles of these institutions of higher learning were formed by African societies and they primarily provided religious, philosophical, moral, medical and other studies to meet the demands of local people.

Colonial powers disconnected the precolonial foundation of higher education by ignoring cultural identities and indigenous knowledge systems. According to Ashby (1961), the main purpose of colonial education was to produce elites to support the colonial vision and mission in Africa. According to Woldegiorgis and Doevenspec (2013), higher education was used as an instrument to facilitate the colonial administration instead of enlightening African societies. As a result, access to higher education was extremely limited to a few individuals. In this case, the number of professionals of African origin was very low in such a way that only three percent of Africans had received secondary education under the colonial administration. According to the World Bank (2009), only one university served Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda at independence and the combined population of 23 million had less than 100 graduates at the time of independence.

Looking back at the role of higher education during colonial times, Lulat (2003) reveals that the established universities during the times were not fully autonomous. Most of the universities were extensions of established universities in the mother countries. The colonial administration and mother countries determined the content of the curriculum, the appointment of lecturers, the programs offered and the degree awards. Those who went to study in those universities were detached from the historical and traditional institutions including indigenous knowledge systems and practices that brought them up from childhood. Foreign languages became the languages of instruction at the expense of ethnic languages.

While the number of higher education institutions left behind by colonial powers was very low, their post-independence roles were extremely important. The institutions left behind by colonial rulers were not only responsible for shaping the requisite human capital but also nurturing philosophical orientations and influencing the critical mass of graduates to support the economic transformation under the indigenous rules. This task was not easy

because, as Clark (1983) observed, colonial features heavily influenced university education. Most of the existing universities, as earlier indicated, were imposed institutions through the exploitative and oppressive ideologies of colonialism. The role of higher education institutions at the independence was, in the words of Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2013) to address the challenges of colonial artifacts imposed on African societies.

For higher education to thrive, post-independent government policies changed through national strategies for development. Such policies mainly focused on decolonization and healing of wounds from the colonial injustice (World Bank, 2009). Therefore, higher education's role was to build capacity for socio-economic and political transformation through training professionals, promoting access to higher education and safeguarding the nation.

Largely, African higher education operated through the influence of the Human Capital theory of Adam Smith. The theory, as observed by Leoni (2023), considers education as an investment that yields future returns, and that its rates of return compares with other investments. Blundell *et al.*, (1999) identified two complementary components of human capital, namely, the ability, whether acquired or innate and skills acquired through formal education or training.

The adoption of the human capital theory was so popular during post-independent Africa to the extent that the UN declared the 1960s as the development decade, recognizing the importance of the educational system for Africa (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). This declaration along with subsequent conferences in the 1960s and the early 1970s, affirmed the importance of higher education institutions as major partners for economic growth and transformation.

Together with the economic growth that higher education institutions planned to acquire, they promoted the African identity. This role, as described by Makgoba (1997) cited in Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck, (2013), encompassed a shift of mindset among the African elites from the Eurocentric to the Afrocentric mindset. The entire process was generally termed Africanization as it demanded to promote and transmit thoughts, philosophy, identity and African culture into higher education.

The 1970s saw the expansion of higher education in Africa. University enrolment, according to the World Bank (2009), increased from an estimated 181,000 students in 1975 to over 600,000 by 1980 and this number increased to 1,750,000 in 1995. Yesufu (1973), Ravenhill (1986) and Seepe (2004) point out that the backlash resulted from the negative economic growth (defined here as a sustained negative growth in GDP) in Africa. During this time, the total output in agriculture grew only by 1.3 percent per year and, according to the World Bank (1998), the agricultural output in 39 countries declined from 2.3 to 1.3 percent on average. This challenge was reinforced by the high rate of population growth, which, according to Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2013) was 3.1 percent. This rate was higher compared to 2.34 percent in South Asia and 2.09 percent in Latin America.

In 1990s, remarkable improvements in the economy shaped higher education due to the global economic integration. The growing demands for raw materials in the African economy came with the increasing flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The World Bank (2009) estimates that the growth of the economy increased from USD 9 billion in the 1990s to USD 62 billion in the 2000s. These and related developments changed the role of higher education from focusing on the development of key professionals in the public and private sectors to focusing on a knowledge-based economy in an increasingly knowledge-intensive economic system which Africa started to embrace.

Following changes in the 1990s, it became clear that unlike in the 1970s when the emphasis was placed on basic education, returns are greater in higher education than in basic education. Not only did higher education show positive economic returns on investment, but it also had positive social returns, including spillovers from increasing labor productivity. This argument concurs with Bloom *et al.* (2005) who reported that an increase in one year in average higher education levels, increased the GDP growth in Sub-Saharan African countries by 0.39 percent and increased African GDP per capita by 12 percent. Based on the said contribution, higher education institutions in Africa became engines of economic growth and development. The World Bank reaffirmed this position, which subsequently increased its attention to higher education in the 1990s. Consequently, countries in Africa started to increase public

expenditure on higher education. The World Bank (2009) shows that Sub-Saharan African countries spent 18.2 percent of the government budget on education, where 20 percent of this budget went to higher education. This, as indicated by Seepe (2004), resulted in reforms in higher education finances, management and governance, research and development. Based on these reforms, higher education became a link pin to economic growth and development.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, higher education institutions started to be subjected to the global competition, which subsequently made universities relevant not only to national demands but also to international markets with renewed demand for skills to be sold to the highly competitive global markets. However, while there has been significant growth in the competitiveness of higher education in Africa, the number of students enrolled in higher education is still low, compared to the global average. Currently, only 9.4 percent of school leavers in Africa join higher education institutions. This percentage in Africa is very low, compared to the global average of 38 percent. Moreover, while African countries enroll a limited number of potential students, the majority of those who join higher education and manage to graduate remain unemployed. Nearly 45 percent of graduates in Africa are unemployed, underemployed or their wages are too low to afford a decent life.

Considering the high state of graduate unemployment in Africa, this study sought to determine and address issues on graduate employability in Africa. The study proposes the reorientation of higher education to produce graduates who are ready for the world of work

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

This study uses the combined perspectives of Yorke and Knight (2006). Yorke and Knight (2006) defined employability as a construct that encompasses skillful practices, domain-specific specialization, effectual views about personal identity, self-worth as well as meta-cognition. In this study, employability is taken to be an embodiment of education, skills as well as personal attributes possessed by an individual. Based on the authors' arguments, the study considers employability as a set of achievements that includes skills, understanding and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

Building from Human Capital Theory, Yorke and Knight (2006) and Su and Zhang (2015) point out that in analyzing graduate employability, one should not only look at subject-related knowledge but also the overall process of creating a graduate (Selvadurai *et al.*, 2012). Under these perspectives, people perceive employability differently, depending on the vantage point of the analysis. However, researchers commonly refer to employability as a set of skills, personal attributes and employment outcomes. These elements, according to Su and Zhang (2015), make graduates more likely to secure employment and succeed in their occupations.

To explain broadly the problem of unemployment in Africa, it is important to investigate labor as one of the factors of production and the supply of labor from educational institutions. In this case, the researchers adopted human capital theory and the Job-Matching theories. The Human Capital Theory as suggested by Verecio (2016) and Bridgstock (2009) puts education as a primary enabler and an essential element for individuals to participate in the labor market. The Job-Matching theory, according to Verecio (2016) identifies education and training as important inputs in preparing graduates for job-related tasks. In this case, and as evidenced in the anecdote information from labor surveys, a mismatch between employer expectations and actual skills possessed by graduates significantly influences the productivity of the workforce as well as the employment outcomes including wages and the ability to gain meaningful employment. Barnard *et al.*, (2001) support this conclusion. Their work concluded that the degree to which graduates can utilize knowledge and skills within the work context is what makes graduates' skills match the expectations of the world of work. The application and the relevance of Human Capital and Job-Matching theories resulted in the adoption of the so-called graduate attributes and the critical cross-field outcomes described by Jonck and Minnaar

(2017); De Jager (2004). Graduate attributes, according to Du Preez and Fossey (2012), are terms encompassing key skills, competencies as well as transferable skills adopted to embrace a broad range of generic personal and professional qualities, skills, and dispositions, coupled with the ability to understand discipline-related knowledge. This, as argued by De Jager (2004), represents the basic generic outcomes related to teaching and learning.

## Methodology

This study treated published papers as units for data collection and analysis. Following the identification of the literature, the study deployed a systematic review of the literature. This approach was adopted at the beginning of the review, based on the work by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), Levac *et al.*, (2010) and Daudt *et al.*, (2013). The approach helped the author to examine the extent, range, and nature of the research activities on graduate employability.

The presentation of findings took place using the narrative approach. According to Sylvester *et al.*, (2013), the narrative approach applies in the qualitative interpretation of knowledge presented in the literature. In most cases, the approach helps to summarize or synthesize written materials on a particular topic. To complement the narrative approach, the author combined the narrative approach with the descriptive approach.

## Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study. The findings appears under specific themes such as the rate of unemployment in Africa, determinants of youths' unemployment and the role of higher Education.

### The Rate of Unemployment in Africa

The African continent remains home to higher rates of unemployment compared to the global average. As Table 1 shows, in Africa, youth unemployment remains below the world average.

**Table 1. The Unemployment Rate in Africa compared to the World's Average**

	2019	2020	2021	2022
World	13.5	15.2	15.6	14.9
Africa	11.5	12.5	12.9	12.7

Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, November 2021

As it appears in Figure 1, the stated figures reported by ILO in 2015 mask the substantial differences across the African continent. Some countries have

higher rates compared to others. The Eastern and Southern Africa, for example, reported higher rates

of youth unemployment in 2021 compared to Western and Central Africa as presented in Figure 1.

Along with the variation across the continent, the problem seems to affect young people graduating from Higher Education Institutions more than from other levels of education. In South Africa, for example, among graduates aged between 15 and 24 years, the unemployment rate was 31 percent during the first quarter of 2019 compared to 19.5

percent in the 4th quarter of 2018 (Mseleku, 2022). According to the estimates presented by the British Council in 2020, the graduate unemployment rate stood at 23.1 percent in Nigeria, 41.6 percent in Ghana, and 15.7 percent in Kenya. These figures point to the plausible conclusion that young people with higher education are more likely to be unemployed compared to their uneducated counterparts.

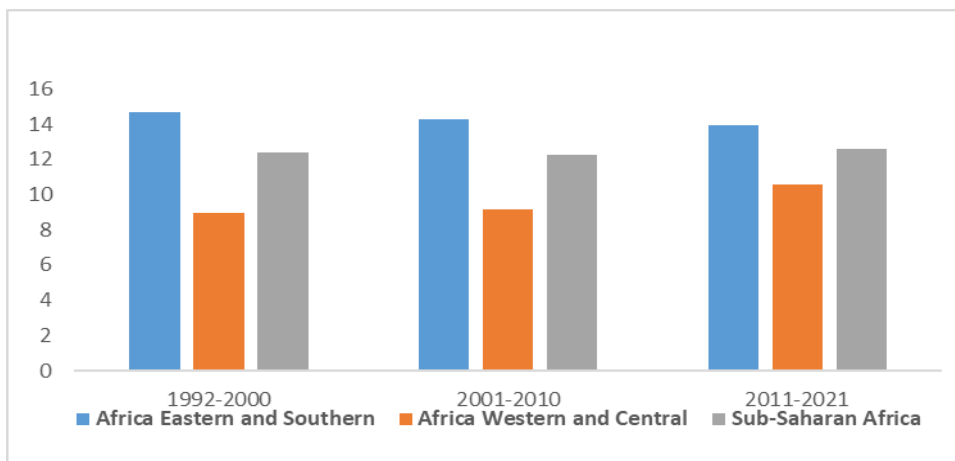


Figure 1: The State of Graduate Employment in Africa (Penar, 2021)

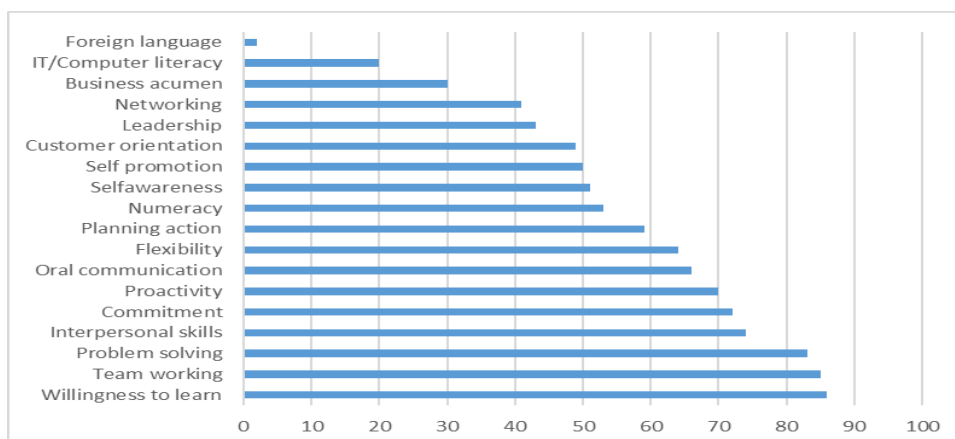


Figure 2: Skills requirements by employers (SAGRA, 2021)

It is also important to note that while Africa recorded low rates compared to the global average, the quality of employment and the earned income from employment are highly contestable. Many of the so-called employed are found in insecure and often low productivity jobs for survival. A typical example is what is occurring in Tanzania, where it is common to find a university graduate employed as a motorcycle rider. So in general terms, the labor force available in Africa is grossly underutilized because many graduates are not employed in the field of their training or competence.

### Determinants of Youths Unemployment

The main reason for youth unemployment rests on the low ability of the African continent to create jobs. According to Penar (2021), while 10 to 12 million young people enter the labour market each year, only 3.1 million formal jobs are created in African countries, leaving most of the youth unemployed or forcing them to settle for low-paid and low-productive jobs in the informal sector. While Africa is not creating sufficient jobs, it is also important to acknowledge that many young people seeking employment lack the requisite skills.

Therefore, the analysis of factors influencing employment and employability should consider both the demand and the supply side of the spectrum. While employers are generally satisfied with the knowledge acquired by the graduates in their field of training, they are dissatisfied with the attributes related to communication, personal qualities and transferable skills. According to Pitan and Adedeji (2012), the missing attributes when assessing or interviewing graduates for employment include teamwork, problem-solving as well as Information Technology skills. Quantifying the non-discipline skills, SAGRA (2013) shows that problem-solving, teamwork, interpersonal skills and willingness to learn are highly important attributes demanded by employers in South Africa. Figure 2 shows how employers in South Africa are satisfied by attributes that are not related to education.

Figure two shows and confirms Green et al.'s, (2013) argument that graduate employability as perceived by employers is far beyond the knowledge and skills from universities. In other words, employability depends in part, on what the university provides but the input provided by the university is not sufficient though important. This, as seen in Human Capital and Job-Matching theories presented earlier, is an accumulation of factors that militates against graduate employability in Africa. Green et al., (2013), building on the work published by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), named five interrelated factors that can influence the employability of an individual: Individual factors, individual circumstances, household factors, organizational practices and macro-level factors are responsible for determining the possibility of a graduate to be employable.

Thus, the employability of a graduate cannot be a result of being a university graduate alone but a combination of other related factors nurtured within and outside the university circles. Factors like the conceptualization of employment (individual factor), work culture (household factors), remuneration and incentive structures (organizational factor), employment policies and job creation at the national level (macro-level factors) greatly influence employability. Thus, dealing with the problem requires the adoption of an integrated approach by considering the supply side (university education) as well as other factors as described by Green et al., (2013). The adoption of an integrated approach allows universities and governments to analyse the problem beyond what is happening at the universities. Thus, the role of universities should

expand beyond the provision of lecture knowledge and skills.

### **The Role of Higher Education**

Looking at the role of higher education in shaping graduate employability, Sato *et al.*, (2021) pointed out that the primary role of Higher Education Institutions is to develop individuals (graduates) in terms of imparting the qualities demanded by the labour market. To achieve this purpose, Higher Education Institutions must continuously work hard to understand and track the needs and trends of the labour market, providing venues that can help students acquire required skills that appear in Figure 2.

Cognisant of the realities outside the university, the role of higher education should change from the traditional provision of knowledge and skills to ensuring that university graduates are work-ready with requisite social skills, lifelong learning skills, Information and Communication skills as well as entrepreneurial skills. In this case, universities need to link graduates with practical demands in the workplace. According to Tran (2021), the more the workplace skills are aligned with university education the higher the employability rates. The shifting focus of higher education to making graduates work-ready reduces the burden that employers take to train or retrain recently hired employees from universities. Similarly, preparing graduates to be work-ready minimizes the learning curve for students in the transition from the university to employment. Supporting this, Harvey (2000) emphasized that employers are spared the time and resources required for in-house training when students are trained to be work-ready and highly adaptable.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study concludes that graduates' employability in Africa is higher and is mainly associated with lack of employability skills, including social skills, lifelong learning skills and entrepreneurial skills. The problem may only be resolved when universities integrate such skills into the teaching and learning processes. Therefore, the study recommends that universities in Africa need to integrate employability skills in the teaching and learning process to produce employable graduates and prevent the potential cost of providing graduates with the missing employability skills. Furthermore, universities need to provide a career management

module to prepare prospective graduates to meet the world of work demands.

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