The importance of infopreneurship training for records and archives management students in Zimbabwe

Njabulo Bruce Khumalo and Gugulethu Shamaine Nkala
National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe
njabulo.khumalo@nust.ac.zw /
gsnkala@gmail.com;

Abstract

Unemployment has been on the rise over the years in Zimbabwe, and a lot of graduates have found themselves unemployed. Concurrently, the establishment, growth of state universities, and admissions into these universities has been on the rise. Most of the university graduates in the country have found themselves stuck at home with no employment and source of livelihood. These challenges have forced different stakeholders in the country to be innovative and come up with strategies to counter the high unemployment rate. Graduates from the department of Records and Archives Management (RAM) at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Zimbabwe, have not been spared from the unemployment problem as the inception of the programme came at a time when the economic meltdown was looming in the country. In 2011, the RAM department introduced a course in Infopreneurship which sought to empower students in the department with skills to start their businesses and even create employment for other information practitioners. This conceptual paper discusses the importance of equipping students with infopreneurial skills in a third world country like Zimbabwe.

Key words: infopreneurship, unemployment, records management, archives, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Establishing a new degree programme has always been a challenge as students and graduates in such programmes have to make inroads into the job market and make a mark. Furthermore, universities usually do not have proper marketing structures that "sell" students and programmes to the industry. Therefore, the growth and development of a new degree programme is dependent on its meeting industry and market demands and creativity, innovativeness and groundbreaking initiatives. The department of Records and Archives Management at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) was established in the year 2004 and the first cohort graduated in the year 2008. This cohort graduated at a time when the Zimbabwean economy tumbled and according to the United Nations, at the close of 2008, only six percent of the population was formally employed and the country's inflation rate rose from 11, 2 million to 231 million percent between June and July 2008 (The Financial Gazette, 2009). Therefore, graduating at such a time meant that these graduates were not going to easily make it into industry as the majority of the workforce was not getting paid and industry was closing. Students who graduated at such a time were also not guaranteed of being employed and for those who might have been employed, salaries were not sustainable. The 2008 Government of National Unity (GNU) however brought a sigh of relief to the economy as the use of multiple currencies injected new life into the economy and companies could pay their employees. However, unemployment and the demise of industry are challenges that have not been adequately addressed in the country. There needs to be a way to avert unemployment for

RAM graduates and infopreneurship promises to be one vehicle that can be used in that regard. This study seeks to show the need for infopreneurship training in the RAM degree programme at NUST, Zimbabwe.

Definition of terms

The word infopreneurship is derived from two words, information and entrepreneur. To Du Toit (2000) an entrepreneur is an individual in society who takes the lead as well as the risk in mobilizing the production factors (natural resources, human resources and capital) in specific combinations to produce products and services for his or her community. Kuratko (2005) noted that entrepreneurship is more than the mere creation of business, as it is a dynamic process of vision, change, and creation which requires an application of energy and passion towards the creation and implementation of new ideas and creative solutions.

Problem statement

A plethora of challenges have besieged the RAM graduate in Zimbabwe; an economic meltdown, unemployment, retrenchment and the rise of the informal sector. RAM graduates are therefore graduating into an environment where they are not guaranteed of employment.

Purpose of the study

This study sought to assess how infopreneurship could be viewed as a mechanism for alleviating the high unemployment of RAM graduates in Zimbabwe. The specific Objectives of the Study included to;
  ➢ Establish challenges facing RAM graduates in Zimbabwe; and
  ➢ Establish how infopreneurship can contribute towards equipping RAM graduates to overcome unemployment

Methodology

This was a conceptual paper which reviewed literature and also highlighted the views and opinions of the researchers in line with infopreneurship.

Challenges faced in Zimbabwe

A number of challenges exist in Zimbabwe which have been barriers to the development and growth of new degree programmes like RAM. These challenges are explored in subsequent sections.

Freezing of posts by government

The largest employer of RAM personnel has usually been the public service, where RAM has been a tool and mechanism for ensuring transparency and accountability. However, due to the unsustainability of the Zimbabwean economy and the public service wage bill, the government froze the hiring of personnel in the public sector. This meant that RAM graduates could not be assimilated into the public sector. The Zimbabwean (2011) highlighted that the government of Zimbabwe was not going to lift the freeze on recruitment in the civil service due to financial challenges it was facing. The effect of the recruitment freeze was also acknowledged in the National Archives of Zimbabwe's Director's Annual Report (2012:4) in which the Director stated that "our operating environment continued to deteriorate in 2012 mainly due to failure to fully circumvent the recruitment freeze and poor funding and we continued to lose critical archiving and library skills". The recruitment freeze has only seen 2 RAM graduates out of the 7 cohorts which have graduated, being employed by NAZ. Such have been the effects of the public sector recruitment freeze. Another major challenge has been that archival degree programmes have been designed to mainly

address the management of public sector records, and such an approach renders students unemployed in the private sector especially at a time when government does not hire. The African Economic Outlook (2012) stated that at the tertiary level, young Africans are confronted with a university system which has traditionally been focused on educating for public sector employment, with little regard for the needs of the private sector. Often a degree from a tertiary institution is an entry requirement for government employment, with little attention paid to a specific skill set (African Economic Outlook, 2012). Furthermore, graduates in technical fields such as engineering and information technology (IT) have less problems finding employment than those from the social sciences or humanities. At the same time these latter fields have much higher enrolment and graduation numbers and consequently much higher unemployment numbers (African Economic Outlook, 2012).

Companies Closing
Universities usually feed into industry, where graduates must be produced and at the same time there be growth in industry and the market. The growth of the production of graduates coupled with the demise in industry becomes a challenge. Just like all graduates in Zimbabwe, RAM students have been massively affected by the massive closure of a number of companies. This has meant that RAM graduates have been trying to penetrate the job market at a time when companies are closing. The Daily News (2015) highlighted that about 4 000 Zimbabweans workers were retrenched in 2014, a 40 percent increase in retrenchment figures compared to 2013, as the economy continued to nosedive leading to more companies closing shop, the central bank said. Even if the economy were to resuscitate in the following years, this would mean that these graduates would not be practicing in the meantime and thus were

going to lack the relevant experience that would be required then.

Retrenchments
Due to the trying times in Zimbabwe, a lot of companies resorted to retrenching employees in order to survive. This means that there has been no job security for RAM graduates who might have been lucky enough to be employed. Many organisations feel that they can do without qualified records management personnel who need high salaries, and thus can easily retrench such personnel. The Herald (2015) stated that the Minister of Finance, Mr. Patrick Chinamasa highlighted that the government of Zimbabwe was considering reducing the wage bill and was also exploring ways of amending labor laws to make it flexible when companies want to retrench personnel. Schlesinger (2013) posited that global enterprises are focused on making themselves more competitive at all costs, and that often means fewer jobs as a result of increased productivity.

Universities mass productions
Another major anomaly in Zimbabwe has been that; as the job market has been shrinking, tertiary institutions have been increasing student recruitment. Thus, tertiary institutions have been producing students equipped with the skills of contributing to industry which has been incapacitated to assimilate these graduates. Eke, Igwesi and Orji (2011) highlighted that graduates are mass-produced every year without job opportunities nor adequate entrepreneurial skills which vis-à-vis has affected the national economy. Furthermore, at a time when the job market has been shrinking, there has been an increase in the number of state universities and this has meant that a lot of graduates are being produced to compete for fewer jobs on the market. NUST RAM graduates have had to compete with graduates from Polytechnics and other related programmes like Library and

Information Science, History, Archaeology, Cultural Heritage inter alia.

Rise of the informal market

One major challenge in Zimbabwe has been the rise or dominance of the informal sector. According to a Zimstat (2011) survey conducted in 2011 only 11% of Zimbabweans were employed formally whilst 84% were informally employed and the largest group being in the wholesale and retail sector. The informal sector in the country has been necessitated by high unemployment and over the years, graduates have had to resort to being vendors, cross border traders inter alia to survive.

Small to medium enterprises (SMEs)

Closely related to the informal sector are SMEs which have been a major phenomenon in Africa over the years. SMEs also do not have bureaucracies that can accommodate records and archives management. SMEs especially in a struggling economy like Zimbabwe have been all about survival and hand to mouth, and thus cannot employ records and archives management graduates. Kuredza et al (2014) stated that a number of people starting businesses are doing so because they have failed to secure employment or are just looking for a simplest method to upkeep their families. To such entrepreneurs, records and archives management is the last thing they can think of as the majority are taking up the accounting, administration, production and marketing roles individually.

Vacancies soliciting for lower qualifications

Another challenge faced by RAM graduates is that employers prefer employing diploma holders who require less in terms of salaries. Furthermore, if diploma holders can do the job well there will be no need to hire degree holders who require high salary packs. The

trend has been that a number of institutions especially in the public sector usually hire underqualified records management personnel who are O-level and Certificate holders. These members of staff are trained without qualifications and get on the job training and can then develop within the system. Such an approach has meant that RAM degree holders cannot be hired.

Too much theory and no practice

University graduates have been popular for being loaded with theory, yet failing to practice. RAM graduates have been also been found wanting especially in electronic records management issues. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005), the aims of various governments to combat poverty through the establishment and creation of poverty reduction programmes failed because graduates of the education system lack practical skills. Shoul (2014) added on that one major factor contributing to graduate unemployment is the defective education system, which focuses too much on theoretical teaching and there is next-to none of the practical training needed to either be employed in the job market, or become self-employed. RAM requires that students experience the practical side of things especially in audio visual archives, e-records management inter alia. However, these students graduate without even having an experience with any e-records management software package which are prerequisites especially in International Records management vacancies.

The dependency syndrome

Universities have for long cultivated dependency in students as graduates have been equipped with skills that enabled them to depend on the government and other people to create jobs for them. The norm has been that these students graduate and the best

they can think of is applying for jobs and getting paid. Thus, with economies struggling and unemployment on the rise, these graduates have been stranded waiting for the time when things can normalize and employment created, Omogbolahan (2012:11) postulated that the lack of entrepreneurial education creates a self-reliant ideology in people which will lead to gross unemployment, which results in poverty and lack. This has also been one major of RAM training, where students have been taught to manage public sector records and archives and they have been equipped to serve as employees and not employers. Such dependency has rendered the majority jobless and clueless on venturing into sound information management businesses. Omogbolahan (2012) also illuminated that many courses have nothing to do with business management, development or business startup as many courses taken in Sciences and Arts predominate on the technicalities of the courses and not the direct application for profitability outside the walls of the institution. There has been a tendency to create front end users in RAM, as graduates are trained to use systems that have been created by other people, and not create their own systems and come up with innovations.

The RAM programme at NUST has been offering a course in Infopreneurship in trying to prepare students to venture into entrepreneurial activities in the rise of the challenges being faced in the country. However, Omogbolahan (2012) highlighted that entrepreneurship is not only about creating business plans and starting new ventures, it is also about creativity, innovation and growth, a way of thinking and acting relevant to all parts of the economy and society as well as the whole surrounding ecosystem. Therefore, it is not enough to have a single course as the most important aspects of infopreneurship in such courses are not addressed and thus has led to failure produce

students who become outstanding infopreneurs. Zhao (2014) highlighted that to cultivate the entrepreneurial mindset cannot be achieved by simply adding another course to teach entrepreneurship to the existing paradigm. There is therefore a need for a new education paradigm entrepreneur-oriented education, instead of the employee-oriented education.

Why infopreneurship?

Having highlighted all the challenges facing the RAM student in Zimbabwe, it was necessary to highlight the importance of equipping students with infopreneurial skills. In economies characterized by low labor demand and high rates of youth unemployment, entrepreneurship training has the potential to enable youth to gain skills and create their own jobs (Premand et al, 2012). Blecher (2013) posited that the real solution for Africa is human creativity and hard work, the spirit of entrepreneurship and the creation of small businesses in their millions – leading to job creation. If ever the RAM programme is to contribute positively and immensely to the development of the country, there will be a need for a paradigm shift, in that the programme has to create students who are equipped to identify information and records management challenges in the country and come up with solutions instead of aiming to be front end users of systems created by other professionals in other countries. The "primary purpose of entrepreneurship education [at higher education level] is to develop entrepreneurial capacities and mindsets" (European Commission, 2008: 11). Thus, by virtue of strengthening and bolstering infopreneurial training, the university will create graduates whose aim will be to avert the unemployment problem rather than add to it. The power of entrepreneurship means that graduates do not have to wait to see who will employ them, but must seize opportunities and in the process create jobs

(Elumelu, 2014). Entrepreneurship training has the potential to enable graduates to gain skills and create their own jobs, as well as possibly also better align their skills with private employers' needs (Premand, 2012:2). Therefore, the researchers argue that proper grounding in infopreneurship, has the capability of growing the RAM programme by virtue of creating graduates who become employers and important stakeholders in contributing to the growth of the economy. If engineering, computer science, agriculture, law, accounting students can establish businesses in line with the training they had in university, why not RAM graduates?

Vengadasalam (2007) posited that infopreneurship as a business is important due to the information era which has turned information into a commodity that could be packaged and sold to consumers and information had become the underlying vitality in today's success to both an individual and a company. Ocholla (1999) also noted that individuals, organizations and countries are increasingly accepting the importance of information and knowledge for their survival, and therefore invest a great deal in information as a commodity. Ngulube (2001:157) postulated that the information society requires records managers and archivists who can efficiently contribute to the development of society by having portable and comparable qualifications that can be used across the board to harness the advantages offered by the information age.

Infopreneurship training will go a long way in eradicating the dependency syndrome as it will create graduates who create jobs rather than become dependent on government and the private sector for employment. The importance of infopreneurship training was highlighted by Du Toit (2000:90) who postulated that an education system that places a premium on knowledge acquisition

and retention while it restricts creativity, capability and the ability to relate to others and conditions young people to be dependent on others for employment opportunities – is out of phase with the needs of society in the new millennium. At a time when unemployment is very high, the university system cannot afford to specialise in knowledge acquisition and retention, but has to trigger creativity and innovation in students so that they think outside the box and come up with solutions that will contribute to the development of their communities.

Furthermore, infopreneurship will create dynamic graduates who are flexible enough and can adapt to changes and demands in the marketplace. Today, information specialists are compelled to use new skills and strategies in order to change, survive, and continue to compete in the world of virtual information (Du Toit, 2000). Technologies are being developed on a daily basis, and infopreneurs who survive will be the ones who will be able to flow with change and proactively harness these changes and turn them to profitable business ideas and ventures. Thommassen (2001) stated that archival students must be trained not only for adaptability but also for the mastery of the processes of change in their work situation, they must be prepared to give shape to a future of which only the outlines can be seen now. Archival education must adapt professionals to changes, but also be an agent of change by itself (Thommassen, 2001).

Furthermore, infopreneurship will at most move towards equipping students with practical skills which will be used to provide the community with the much information services. The need for practicality in RAM was highlighted by Li and Song (2012) who were of the view that many archivists feel that archival education programs do not prepare them for the demands of practice and a great

deal of the knowledge and skills need to be learned in the workplace. Fully fledged infopreneurial training will emphasise on practicality in the form of workshops, seminars, development of information products, marketing and other areas that will introduce students to the practical needs of industry. Wang and Shen (2009:60) also pointed out that regarding learning, archivists should be management-based and innovation-oriented, and they should be equipped with comprehensive qualities, such as learning ability, management knowledge, information skills, and innovative spirits.

Kabikwa (2006) illumined that embracing entrepreneurship in the heart of its education system from beginning to end is quite likely the most important step to help reverse the trends of rising youth unemployment and social dislocation. The RAM department (NUST) can therefore tackle the high level of unemployment of graduates by bolstering infopreneurship training. The importance of training in infopreneurship was also highlighted by Ogbar (2009) who highlighted that infopreneurship will start a chain reaction when the infopreneur continuously tries to improve the quality of existing goods and services and even add new ones. Therefore, once the programme triggers infopreneurship, it would have started an infopreneurship cycle which will lead to developments and innovation in the records and archives management field. One major problem in records management has been that solutions and e-records management systems have been developed from outside Africa and not homegrown. Thus, infopreneurship will trigger and motivate infopreneurs to develop homegrown records, archives and information management solutions. Schlesinger (2013) also highlighted that African universities need to produce more entrepreneurs than bureaucrats. Development and economic growth is hinged on innovativeness and creativity, thus

infopreneurs and not bureaucrats can contribute very much to the development of Africa.

RAM graduates must take it upon themselves to raise the status of the programme by setting up startups that will largely have a great impact on the socio-economic and political front. Infopreneurship is how we as information practitioners control our own destiny and tackle the serious risks that mass unemployment poses to the stability of our societies and economies (Elumelu, 2014). Rather than being victims of fate and unemployment, infopreneurship training will lead to the production of graduates whose fate will be determined not by their employers and or government, but whose fate will be in their hands. The Invested Development (2015) highlighted that small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 95% of all firms in Sub-Saharan Africa and in many countries contribute more than 50% of GDP and employment.

What infopreneurs need to be taught?

Rather than bombarding students with the theory on infopreneurship, there has to be a practical approach to preparing them. Banjo (2009) highlighted that students may conduct market research surveys; evaluate new products, of developed marketing or information technology strategies. Such an approach will accustom them to the market and make them aware of the services that industry demands. Merely theorizing will lead to students who see infopreneurship as a course that they memorise and pass the exam and after that do nothing about pursuing information businesses. However, having a practical approach will most likely trigger innovation and open up students' view of information management as a paying service. Schlesinger (2013) opined that all levels of

education must be aware that the most essential facet of entrepreneurship: it is a practice, like that of law and medicine that can be codified, developed and taught.

Infopreneurship has to go beyond planning to engage in business and equip students and or graduates with a plethora of skills and competencies. Ajiferuke (2003) highlighted that the core competencies for information professionals include the ability to analyze business procedures, to understand knowledge on business procedure, ability in the use of information technology, ability administering changes, ability managing projects and ability managing information and documents. To Oosterbeek (2010) successful entrepreneurs appeal to the specific needs of clearly defined target group of customers and have the ability to anticipate changes in the market on their awareness of the needs and wants of customers and have the ability to anticipate changes in the market based on their awareness of the needs and wants of customers and the (planned) activities of competitors.

Curriculum review

The rate at which technology changes requires that infopreneurs be prepared to re-invent themselves regularly, as failure to do so will at some point render their services irrelevant. Dodo and Dodo (nd: 33) highlighted that some of the causes of unemployment in Zimbabwe might be due to the fact that the education curriculum and the needs of the industry may not be in tandem while others attribute the problem to a shrinking economy which has failed to accommodate all needy youth and graduates. Aina (2011) stated that most of the information management curricula are relevant to the traditional setting, the curricula fail to address positively the emerging information market in Africa and the untapped information job openings. Such

has been the case with RAM curricula which has been relevant to traditional archiving settings and not adequately addressing the emergent trends in e-records management, web archiving inter alia. Shoul (2014) averred that curricula needs to be practice-oriented and demand-driven and has to instill entrepreneurial competencies among graduates from all programmes and subjects. This implies that there is need for education to be geared towards inculcating practical skills, and competencies necessary for self-reliance, capacity-building and national development (Eke, Igwesi, and Orji, 2011). Thomassen (2005) posited that archival education must frequently cross the boundaries between subjects, specialisations, traditional disciplines and related professions and between the world of learning and the world of work. Without integration, expansion is costly and wasteful, and innovation is difficult to achieve. Hayman (2014) stated that to boost the economy, the challenge is not just about encouraging start-ups but enabling scale-ups, offering entrepreneurs the network of advice, support and resources that can help them overcome the barriers to growth.

Conclusion

The world has been very dynamic owing to the advent of ICTs. This dynamism has required that all facets of life re-invent themselves in order to fit well in this ICTs driven ecosystem. The records and archives management has not been spared. ICTs have brought about opportunities for information practitioners, who in economies like Zimbabwe have struggled to get employed or even attract high salaries. This study therefore recommended that given the economic challenges faced by RAM graduates, students be prepared for the rough economic climate by equipping them with infopreneurial skills. Such skills will go a long way in preparing them to start their own information business

and in the process create employment and the growth and profile of the degree programme. Preparing students for employment is becoming less viable and thus students and or graduates need to be trained to create jobs and significantly contribute to the growth of economies. Furthermore, training has to go beyond theory and equip students with practical skills.

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