The Missing Piece: What SME-Owning Graduates Think About Tanzanian Universities' Contribution to Graduate Employability

Darlene K Mutalemwa,
Mzumbe University Dar-es-Salaam Campus College Dar-es-Salaam Tanzania
Corresponding email: dmutalemwa@mzumbe.ac.tz

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9720-4971

Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of Tanzanian graduates who set up and led their SMEs in Dar es Salaam. Specifically, it seeks to identify the extent of the mismatch between academic education and practical skills, the degree to which the university curriculum prepares graduates for the SME sector, and how confident graduates are of the prospect of entrepreneurial success. The paper adopts a narrative approach to tell a story about what graduate employability means for those working in the SME sector in Tanzania. The stories of Rashid, Amina and Harry capture the intricacies of the realities that newly graduated young people in Dar es Salaam are grappling with when trying to run their small business. On a macro level, these stories being dissected independently are unique, but they shed light on many themes together. There needs to be a match between the skills acquired through the traditional educational avenue and the practical skills necessary to run an SME. Thus, more entrepreneurship and practical skill training modules must be introduced into university curricula.

NG-Journal of Social Development

Vol. 13 Issue 2 (2024)
ISSN(p) 0189-5958
ISSN (e) 2814-1105
Home page
https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ngjsd
ARTICLE INFO:
Keyword:
Article History
SME owners, Graduate Employability Skills, University Education, Tanzania

Received: 5th May,2024
Accepted: 12th July, 2024
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ngjsd.v13i2.13

1. INTRODUCTION

Tanzania's economic landscape is dominated by a vibrant small business sector, with over 97% of enterprises classified as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employing less than 99 people (United Republic of Tanzania, 2002). However, a crucial element still needs to be developed: the human capital powering these businesses. With this in mind, the prospect of putting a skilled workforce to work is an essential driver of economic development, offering a hopeful vision for the future. This skilled workforce, comprised of graduates with the appropriate skill sets (Ndyali, 2016; Mutalemwa, 2021; Mutalemwa et al., 2020), could significantly contribute to the growth and sustainability of the SME sector. Graduate employability research in Tanzania notes an alarming mismatch between graduates and the labour market (Kakengi, 2019). For instance, with an oversupply of graduates (800,000 to 1,000,000 annually) compared with a limited number of jobs created (250,000 annually) and the fact that graduates take long periods to attain steady income (up to 5.5 years), it is clear Tanzania can do much better. However, a critical segment of graduates has been largely overlooked: those who become SME owners. Previous studies on Tanzanian graduate employability (Tibandebage, 2013; Ndyali, 2016; Anderson, 2017; Mutalemwa, 2023; Kibona, 2024) have centred on career paths marked by conventional employment, neglecting those whose first foray into the working world takes them into entrepreneurship. This focus has undoubtedly influenced national higher education policy (United Republic of Tanzania, 2018), prompting a need for a broader perspective.

The main objective of this study is to shed light on the graduate journey, particularly for Tanzanian graduates, in their efforts to establish their SMEs. Taking reference from Al-Harthi's (2011) and Mutalemwa's (2021) analysis of graduate employability in Egypt, we demonstrate an understanding from Tanzanian SMEs' graduates on some critical areas of graduate employability, which include: (i) The relationship between their education and work experiences: (An attempt to learn how well graduates' academic background translates to work experiences in SMEs- or Did their university studies translate into practical skills applicable to running an SME?); (ii) The relevance of their curriculum to their work: (An attempt to understand whether graduates perceive their academic program equipped them with relevant knowledge and skills for their current career path in the SME sector or Did their academic program equip them with the necessary knowledge and tools to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the SME sector); (iii) Their confidence in securing employment: (An attempt to understand how confident graduates were about their ability to secure employment following their movement from the university to the SME work setting or How confident do these female graduates feel in their ability to manage their businesses and achieve entrepreneurial success?). Because of the nature of the university education they received, aspects of learning and work education are essential parts of this research since graduates would have developed knowledge and skills, which we must take seriously. Importantly, we observe the differences in these graduates' employability across different fields of study and graduates in different SME sectors. Using these critical aspects of graduate employability as a framework and informed by the graduate employability literature more broadly, we aim to help better understand whether and how Tanzanian universities are preparing graduates for the unique challenges of entrepreneurship in setting up and leading their SMEs. This will help identify what educational policy and practice changes are needed to support graduate-led SMEs in becoming drivers of economic growth in Tanzania.

This research follows a clear structure. We begin by highlighting the significance of the study. Next, we provide context by exploring the situation at Tanzanian universities. Then, we delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the research before explaining the methodology employed and presenting the findings. Following this, we analyse and discuss the results. Finally, we conclude the study and propose potential avenues for further research.

1.2 Addressing the Gap in Literature on Graduate Experiences in the Tanzanian SME Landscape

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature on graduate employability in Tanzania. While studies on graduate employability in Tanzania have concentrated on graduates as "job-seekers", there are very few studies that have provided feedback from the graduates who have transitioned from university culture to employment in an SME setting (Tibandebage, 2013; Mwasalwiba et al., 2012). Also, the study details the various specific attributes of graduate employability, which focus on the three aspects outlined by Al-Harthi (2011) but are adapted to the Tanzanian context of SME graduates. The consideration of these aspects and acknowledging the possible variations across graduates' fields of study presented here are aligned with the ongoing debate about improving graduate employability in Tanzania (see Fulgence, 2015; Istoroyekti, 2016; Kessy, 2020; Kimenyi, 2011; Mbise, 2014; Mgaiwa, 2021; Munishi & Emmanuel, 2016; Mutalemwa et al., 2021; Mutalemwa, 2022; Mutalemwa, 2023; Kibona, 2024), having implications particularly for graduates seeking to become the owners and leaders of SMEs.

Tanzania has clear ambitions for creating a highly educated, flexible, and knowledgeable workforce for the future, including aspiring SME owner-graduates (United Republic of Tanzania, 2000; United Republic of Tanzania, 2002; United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). As Tanzania's economy changes from an agricultural one to an industrial and services-based one, there is a need for workers who are capable of and can drive this transformation (United Republic of Tanzania, 2000). The national development strategy focuses on inclusive growth and poverty reduction. It stresses the importance of a robust private sector and raising living standards across the population (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). A significant barrier to these outcomes is a lack of workers with the appropriate skills to meet the demands of the growing service-oriented and industry-based business structures (ILO, 2022). SME owner-graduates can play a significant role (Mbise, 2018). Agricultural employment in Tanzania has declined over recent years, while service-based jobs have increased, though there continues to be a gap. For many Tanzanian businesses, a primary constraint remains a lack of skilled workers, with more firms reporting skilled labour shortages than the average across much of sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2021). Improved post-secondary education is needed to provide the necessary skills and knowledge. SME owner-graduates can be an essential part of this economic transformation, creating jobs as entrepreneurs and driving the growth of inclusivity in the Tanzanian economy. Addressing current skills deficits can move the country towards a more inclusive economy with the help of Tanzania's future entrepreneurs (World Bank 2014).

Despite falling poverty rates, Tanzania has trouble generating equitable economic opportunities for all. The World Bank (2019) reports that in 2018, the national poverty headcount fell from 34.4% in 2007 to 26.4%. Still, almost half of Tanzanians live in poverty; forty-five per cent of them are below the international poverty threshold. SME owner-graduates have the potential to be

an essential part of the solution to overcoming this challenge. As successful and motivated business leaders, they have the chance to employ others, drive economic activity, and reduce poverty. However, in 2020, Tanzania ranked 152 (out of 174 countries) based on its Human Capital Index score (World Bank 2022), highlighting a need to improve its working population's skills and knowledge base. Suppose graduates' entrepreneurial skills and knowledge are equipped. In that case, they can gain the potential to be effective agents of inclusive growth (McCowan et al., 2016), as entrepreneurship creates higher-quality jobs—often that enable greater income security—and distributes economic gains more widely.

Although Tanzania's economic performance has generally been very positive, with decent growth in GDP and being classified as lower-middle income these past few years (World Bank 2022), there are persistent problems relating specifically to its would-be SME owners and operators. SMEs certainly have the potential to become the power behind Tanzania's economic growth; however, many seem unable even to take off, let alone soar. Even graduates who opt to be self-employed must navigate many obstacles that delay or prevent them from doing so. These difficulties are elaborated as follows (United Republic of Tanzania, 2002; World Bank 2020; Issa, 2022):

Small, informal firms and a few larger firms dominate the business ecosystem in the country. This breeds a narrowing gap—insufficiently robust linkages that help SMEs learn, grow, and reap benefits from working with bigger businesses. Discrimination against non-indigenous firms, with their embedded networks, more accessible access to credit, and historical policy advantages, is another problem. The public sector can also be an issue: low productivity arising from the hassles of dealing with bureaucracy, the uncertainty of the rules that apply, and the risk of corruption constrain the growth of SMEs. National development planning with clear priorities and better implementation of programs could help overcome these impediments and offer SMEs the support needed to achieve their growth goals. What is more, the general business climate in Tanzania throws up obstacles. The country ranks behind its regional peers in many aspects of doing business. High costs of compliance, onerous processes, and restricted access to credit and skilled labour all represent entry barriers for SMEs. To these, add inadequacies in infrastructure: constrained energy, transport, and ICT infrastructure impede Tanzania from growing to its full potential. They segregate businesses from their markets and audiences, preventing and constraining growth. Another significant barrier is funding availability: interest rates are high, collateral requirements are substantial, and loan and credit approval processes are arduous. A lack of credit from banks further constrains graduates' aspirations to turn their fresh business ideas into actual firms. Nor do things look rosy from the human capital angle. Skill shortages are a significant concern for the industry. While Tanzania has improved educational outcomes, the country still fails to provide a trained workforce for a vibrant SME sector. Large firms are struggling to fill vacancies as a consequence. Therefore, graduates cannot launch their businesses or join existing ones. Together, these provide graduates hoping to work in Tanzania's SME sector, a complex and demanding environment. Politicians who want to address these problems by improving existing laws, creating more appropriate infrastructure, and fostering a workforce more focused on the private sector will have a tough job. However, the benefits of bettering the functioning of the private sector and boosting the managerial skills of entrepreneurs would spur Tanzania's business growth as more and better graduates enter the SME sector.

3 TANZANIAN UNIVERSITIES: A DISCOURSE

Tanzania's university system offers the highest level of education in the country, encompassing bachelor's degrees, postgraduate certificates, diplomas, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees across public and private institutions. Admission to undergraduate programs requires an Advanced Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (ACSEE) or a relevant diploma. Programs typically last at least three years for undergraduate studies, two years for master's degrees, and three years for doctoral programs(Tanzania Commission for Universities, 2019).

According to the World Bank (2021), universities' enrolment ratios have been creeping up but remain weak (6.1 per cent, compared with the Sub-Saharan African average, which is slightly higher at 8 per cent) and will continue to affect the number of graduates who might go on to create and lead SMEs. Although university education in Tanzania is a good investment, graduates earn an average annual income 3.5 times that of those with upper secondary education only. However, given the low overall enrolment rate, the number of possible graduates is smaller than the number of people who might become SME owners. The doubling of enrolments between 2016 and 2018 due to improved infrastructure and student loan schemes was followed by a reduction in 2019 due to the closure of low-quality private institutions. According to the same publication, Tanzania's educational system currently struggles to churn out graduates. The enrolment rate in upper secondary education—the level at which students can begin to develop entrepreneurial skills—is just 7 per cent, well below the regional average and that of neighbours such as Rwanda (30 per cent) and Burundi (44 per cent). This means Tanzania has a small pipeline of people who could own and operate SMEs when they graduate.

Most university programs teach and test learners solely on material and technical tasks - which may be relevant yet inadequate for today's employment environment. There are diverse reasons for this (Istoroyekti, 2016; Rupia, 2017; United Republic of Tanzania, 2018; Mutalemwa et al., 2021; Mutalemwa, 2022; Mutalemwa, 2023; Kibona, 2024): limitations in resources for infrastructure, equipment and internet connectivity which result in an ecosystem for weak teaching and learning, especially knowledge essential at practical levels for beginning and running an SME.

The curriculum also lacks pedagogical engagement with the practicalities of the job, restricting graduates' ability to face the challenges of SME ownership. Mastering the art of entrepreneurship necessitates a range of capabilities beyond mere theoretical knowledge, and learning how to overcome real-world problems calls for first-hand experience. Additionally, underfunding research would slow the creation of new knowledge and innovative solutions. The pool of technologies and practices visible to the graduate is smaller. They will be less well-equipped to solve the problems of SME owners. Finally, graduates often lack basic skills such as technical knowledge, English language proficiency, computer literacy, and soft skills such as communication and problem-solving. These are vital skills crucial for running a business.

Besides equipping graduates with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that enable their entry into the labour market, universities in Tanzania have a unique societal role in contributing to attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). It is a shock, therefore, that Tanzania had the lowest position (130th out of 137 countries with a score of 2.6) on the pillar 'Higher Education and Training' of the World Economic Forum's

Global Competitiveness Report 2017-2018, despite its healthy counts of universities (World Economic Forum, 2017). As of February 2024, the number of university institutions approved by the Minister to operate in Tanzania is 49, of which 19 are public-owned and 30 are private-owned (Tanzania Commission for Universities, 2024). This indicates the extent to which the business needs of SME owners are being served by university education in Tanzania. This is particularly grim given the focus on SMEs in Tanzania's national development strategies (United Republic of Tanzania, 2000; United Republic of Tanzania, 2002; United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). Its SME policy focuses on creating an enabling environment for SMEs, which is crucial for economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction (United Republic of Tanzania, 2002).

The existing education and training system must be improved to produce graduates who operate according to private sector needs and create jobs. The private sector employs its workforce in (informal) SMEs. It is thus the primary employer and job-creation motor, next to agriculture. Only 12 per cent of the 2.7 million registered enterprises (World Bank, 2014) are large enterprises. Fewer than 6 per cent of graduates have a public sector-wage job (Wakkee et al., 2017). As a default employer of educated workers in the decades of independence, the state remained a favourite destination for highly educated workers in the 21st century. The extreme preferences of Tanzanian, Ugandan, and Kenyan graduates to locate future jobs in the public sector are due to job security and pension guarantees (ibid.). What explains the higher share of youth in the private sector in Tanzania? More jobs are available in the industry, especially for less experienced workers: the average years of experience of private-sector workers in Tanzania is much lower than in the public sector.

Although there are frequent calls for the global adoption of market-oriented approaches to universities (Barrett, 1996; Nicolescu, 2009; Rotfeld, 2008; Cheng et al., 2016), there may be better recipes for nurturing the success of small businesses. A heavy focus on skills development that fulfils only short-term, immediate market needs may come at the expense of developing creativity and analytical skills that are important for longer-term thinking and strategic problem-solving, an essential competency for small businesses. Any universities that align their education to predefined market needs risk stifling the culture of creative destruction and risk-taking that is critical for SMEs to differentiate themselves and achieve sustainable growth.

4. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The theoretical context of graduate employability is a multidimensional concept encompassing multiple skills, competencies, and attitudes that graduates need to gain desirable jobs and develop careers (Chen, 2017; Tomlinson, 2012). Several theories have been developed regarding graduate employability, but for this analysis of SME owner graduates, we will limit our discussion to two particularly insightful theories (Becker,1964; Becker, 2002; Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997): human capital theory (HCT) and social cognitive theory (SCT).

When applied to the context of an SME graduate entrepreneur, the HCT and SCT provide insightful but distinctive perspectives. The HTC allows us to see the skills and knowledge (human capital) graduates bring to the entrepreneurial task that their educational experiences have equipped them with. However, it fails to explain the social and environmental factors that help shape their entrepreneurial success. Conversely, SCT brings forward the concepts of social

interaction, self-efficacy, and role models in career choices. However, it needs to be more active on the specific skills and knowledge that educational preparation conveys. Studying graduate employability through HTC or SCT lenses gives only a partial and disjointed picture that might be further enriched by considering both theories together. Through HTC and SCT, we better understand how graduate employment is embedded in the lifeworld from which academic and social capitals shape the entrepreneurial actions of SME owner-graduates.

The weaknesses in HCT (see Marginson, 2019) and SCT (see e.g. Widodo and Astuti, 2024; Govindaraju, 2021) provide a rationale for discussing the difficulty of measuring skills. The boundaries of measurability in hard skills are often well-defined. However, there tends to be much more ambiguity in soft skills, such as communication and collaboration, which the World Economic Forum (2018) has flagged as critical for success in the changing digital age. In cognitivism, learning is approached like an algorithm: input, processing, and output. However, defining these skills and agreeing on how best to teach them presents difficulties (see Chan et al., 2017). This is particularly acute when we consider that SME graduates are entering smaller workplaces where the demands may be quite different. Also, an increasing body of research shows, for example, that particular individual and demographic characteristics, including gender and subject area of education, can have substantial effects on graduate employability (Al-Harthi, 2011; Hanson & Overton, 2010; Dominic & Fulgence, 2019; Dunga, 2016). Moreover, it could add further barriers to SME graduates compared with those from non-SME contexts. Female graduates entering male-dominated areas of employment within SMEs could experience an extra layer of difficulty in gaining employment or progression. Empirical studies by Brown et al. (2010) and Aluko (2014) highlight how female graduates are further disadvantaged when seeking employment in small firms. Not only do the employment prospects of female graduates in larger enterprises remain slim, but the potential to have limited career prospects with smaller firms, as well as the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, might result in further disadvantages to female graduates joining SMEs.

Another primary concern for SME graduates is more interest in aligning students with the current labour market (see Mpehongwaa and Moshi, 2014; Naong, 2011). Graduates may have fewer job openings within specific fields than more giant corporations, which limits opportunities for grads with degrees catering to particular fields. On top of this, it is widely argued that universities are not adequately preparing their graduates for the changing labour market because higher education institutions do not effectively train graduates to acquire the skills needed for the changing job market (Anderson, 2017; Chuma, 2017; Mutalemwa et al., 2020). It has been found that many universities still offer outdated curricula and need to inculcate the required soft skills adequately. Soft skills have become increasingly important in the labour market (World Economic Forum, 2018), and it is argued that graduate students from SMEs require more of them due to the diverse and multitasking role of SME graduates.

5 A NARRATIVE INQUIRY WITH SME GRADUATE OWNERS

5.1 Research Design

This research explores the narratives of three SME graduate owners who applied to the Graduate Sales Bootcamp (Mutalemwa, 2020) in 2019. Following the participant's narrative flow and

utilising reflective prompts, the research aims to capture three key aspects: (i) Bridging the Gap Between Education and Entrepreneurship: Participants will explore the connection between their university education and the realities of owning an SME. This will shed light on any perceived gaps between their academic preparation and the practical demands of entrepreneurship. (ii) Curriculum Relevance in the Entrepreneurial Landscape: The research delves into the participants' perspectives on the relevance of their university curriculum to their current career paths as SME owners. This provides valuable insights into potential curricular adjustments needed to better prepare graduates for the entrepreneurial world, and (iii) Navigating the Entrepreneurial Journey with Confidence: By capturing the participants' narratives, the research aims to understand their confidence levels in navigating the challenges and opportunities inherent in entrepreneurship. This will reveal the emotional context shaping their journeys and identify potential areas for support and development.

This narrative approach allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences. It goes beyond simply collecting data; it delves into the heart of their stories, uncovering unintended connections and the emotional intricacies that shape their confidence and entrepreneurial journeys. By exploring these narratives, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between academic preparation, real-world application, and the individual's internal narrative shaping their entrepreneurial journey

5.2 Data Collection

Drawing inspiration from specific guiding statements outlined by Al Harthi (2011) (see also Table 1 for details), the study employs in-depth, one-on-one interviews (Lahiri, 2023) to delve into the participants' experiences. Unlike traditional interview methods, this approach encourages participants to share their educational journeys and career paths as interwoven narratives. This allows them to naturally connect specific learning experiences from university with real-world applications within their businesses. The interviewer is a facilitator, fostering an open, trusting environment through open-ended prompts and active listening.

Table 1 -Guiding Statements for Data Collection

The relationship between university education and employment prospects,	
Statement Number	Perception
1	My university education matches the requirements of future job prospects.
2	I have decided which jobs I will apply for after graduation.
3	I worry a lot about my future career.
4	I must get a job that is appropriate to my academic major.
5	I see a link between academic excellence and my future work success.
6	I chose my field of study because of its strong link to the labour market.

7	There might be no link between education and the labour market requirements.
8	My love for learning was why I enrolled at the university and did not seek a future job.
Confidence in the curriculum	
	Perception
9	I prefer to work in the public rather than the private sector.
10	My University education qualifies me to pursue any future work.
11	I am frightened that my university education has no value in the labour market.
12	My university education offers me an excellent opportunity to find an appropriate career.
13	I will quickly find a job appropriate for my university education.
14	My university education offers me opportunities to compete for jobs outside of Tanzania.
15	My university education qualifies me to work immediately after graduation.
Relevance of the Curriculum to the world of work	
	Perception
16	The government has to provide me with a job-appropriate curriculum.
17	I have to get intensive training after graduation.
18	No more robust relationship exists between what we study and the labour market requirements.
19	Curriculums should be practically oriented for a better fit for future careers.
20	We lack many skills for our future careers, even after a university education.
21	Curriculums should focus more on generic skills rather than content.

Source: Al Harthi (2011)

6 MAIN FINDINGS

The relationship between university and the world of work: Amina's Story

A fresh graduate from Dar es Salaam University, Amina was unfamiliar with navigating a maze of choices and the unknowns associated with the life of a small business owner. She had finished a public relations degree that matched her enduring interest in nurturing relationships with clients but would soon open up unforeseen opportunities and challenges in the ever-changing small business life of Dar es Salaam. With a glimmer of hope that university education had provided her (Statement 1), there was a rising hope for an imaginative future with increased professional prospects (statement 2). However, alas, hope would forever be scarred by a persistent trait to worry about the unknown and what lay ahead in an ever-changing minor business career (Statement 3). An entrepreneurial adventure altered Amina's past belief that a degree opens the door to an expected future in a particular occupation. Nearly everyone in Amina's interpersonal networks

was encouraged to get a government job or work in civil society (Statement 4). However, the unrestricted environment of an entrepreneur showed her that peers from a diverse range of academic majors and disciplines found ways to succeed beyond their fields (Statement 5). So, the imagined future of a conventional working professional with a neatly defined composition was not conducive to her entrepreneurial journey. For instance, typical career drivers such as achieving a high-grade point average, adapting to authority, and adhering to certain work conventions that her professors urged her to live by held little attraction (Statement 6). Amina's scholastic path, motivated by intrinsic motives (more than just employability), reflected her authentic passion for education (Statement 7), which shaped her analytical and problem-solving abilities. An ephemeral work environment, where a diversified skillset was necessary to run a business, made the intrinsic motive even more significant. The steady, predictive nature of an ordered university life flowed slowly enough to endure and endear the theoretical underpinnings of life at an institution of higher learning. However, when Amina's dreams were over and education was turned into hard work, the gulf between university knowledge and workplace requirements became painfully stark. University professors freely discussed the intrinsic value of an education. The gap between the theoretical life of a student and real life on the job was worthwhile and very tempting! However, owning and operating a small business was expensive and time-consuming. It took patience and perseverance to find the necessities (Statement 8). Much of this is part of Dar es Salaam's SME graduates' accounts about their experiences. Aside from the evident importance of knowledge and skills that a university education delivers, following one's passion, regardless of the expected outcomes or the path to such an ending, is a key to success.

Confidence in university education: Harry's Story

Harry's Bachelor of Arts in marketing had led him straight into 'the real world'. The Dar es Salaam skyline was already glinting through the windows, and its possibilities were shimmering before her. Harry did not want to secure one of the government jobs many of his contemporaries aspired to. He wanted to be his boss, to make something out of nothing, but not in the way that proponents of government employment policies would have it. The real world was not at all what Harry had imagined it to be when he first embarked on his tertiary education, and he was not the first young SME owner to feel this way. The enthusiasm that tertiary education would serve him well in kick-starting his chosen career was short-lived and quickly undermined by his new insecurities. Tertiary education had not helped him to prepare for the real world, and he was now grappling to acquire the pragmatic skills needed to run a business. "My university education qualifies me to pursue any future" work (Statement 10), which seemed like a hollow claim. He was unsure he could understand marketing or interpret financial statements and business law. He was scared of failing (Statement 11) and occasionally found himself saying things like, "My university education has no value in the labour market" (Statement 11). The expectations of high school classmates (Statement 9) did not limit Harry despite his fears. Despite his natural fear of failure, he was adamant that his education enabled him 'to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems', which were 'crucial skills for any entrepreneur' (Statements 12 and 13). He was not expecting the golden ticket. Harry knew he needed quick help, so he enrolled in temporary marketing, business management, and financial literacy courses and asked seasoned businesspeople for advice. He asked about their lives and how they had started (Statement 14). He knew what he wanted: a solid local need he could fill. He also knew his education did not automatically guarantee an international career (Statement 14). The result was Zawadi Yetu, a

small shop selling eco-friendly products: locally made handicrafts and a nicely packaged line of personal care products, tapping into his knowledge of consumer preferences and marketing expertise. The first years were filled with learning experiences, overcoming obstacles, and dealing with fear of failure (Statement 11). Finance, red tape, controlling inventory, and promoting my brand were the main challenges these years, but "I moved forward because I had knowledge and perspective" (Statements 14 and 13). Harry persisted despite frequent bouts of fear of failing. "My lack of instant financial stability often made me think I was a complete outsider to this career path" (Statement 11). He contacted other business owners in the city and participated actively in workshops and networking events (Statements 12 and 14). He sporadically asked for their input to make informed decisions and gain insight into what it would take to succeed in business. Zawadi Yetu began to get some recognition and attracted an emerging clientele of green consumers who were attracted to a specific product offering.

The relevance of curriculum for the world of work: Rashid's Story

Rashid felt Dar es Salaam's heat beating down on him. He stood outside his electronics repair shop and said, 'Ufundi wa Rashid' (Swahili for 'Rashid's Skills'). A recent graduate, Rashid had hoped to work in labs after university. However, the job market realities did not quite align with the ideal he had in mind (Statement 16). Public sector positions that would have restored his family's pride in his degree felt beyond his grasp, requiring specific skills not covered in his academic training (Statement 17). Rashid was frustrated. The gap that emerges between theory and reality, between learning in the classroom and applying that knowledge to the real world (statement 18), is exacerbated by the stark contrast between a science education that focuses on foundational principles (statement 19) or problem-solving (statement 20) and graduates' need to shift skill sets and apply judgement to solve real problems in professional settings. The opportunity emerged among the challenges. What started as a reflection on teaching that disconnected from the realities of professional life became an impetus to run a business. Witnessing the growing number of residents in his community buying cheap electronic goods and relying on costly repairs, another emotion replaced frustration: opportunism. He spotted a niche, saw a chance to create a business, and put theory into practice. With a lack of resources and a mix of online tutorials and electronics repair workshops within his community, Rashid started his little shop. Word spread and locals came to Rashid with broken phones, laptops, radios, and other electronic gadgets. Like a scientist working on a puzzle, each repair is its challenge. Every time, he needs to apply his knowledge about how a circuit works and what goes wrong and use the problem-solving skills he gained studying science. However, running a shop is more than diagnostics. Accounting, marketing, people management, customer service, and inventory management are also part of his work—responsibilities alien to Rashid's university days (Statement 21). Rashid's experience reflects the reality faced by many science graduates. The government's efforts to provide a job-oriented education remain crucial (for example, Statement 16). However, initiative and subsequent post-graduation training (Statement 17) that teaches skills that enable scientific knowledge to solve problems in diverse professional settings (Statements 18, 19, and 20) can go a long way toward bridging the gap. Rashid's experience captures how far initiative can go: learning to adapt to circumstances and the need to reverse-engineer a curriculum that equips graduates with employable skills and broad scientific knowledge are crucial for success (Statement 21).

7 A BREAKDOWN OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Some intriguing similarities and differences emerge as each story follows a recent Dar es Salaam graduate working hard at building an SME. All three stories highlight the mismatch between a typical university education and the practical skills needed to be an entrepreneur, regardless of their academic background. These three entrepreneurs face remarkably similar challenges. Getting capital, learning new skills and overcoming the fear of failure are common hurdles entrepreneurs must overcome to realise their entrepreneurial vision and dreams. The three stories emphasise the character traits needed to succeed in these demanding circumstances. All three graduates are well-suited for business ownership because of their initiative, flexibility and commitment to lifelong learning. All of them learn that being true to their passions and doing things they are good at is essential, regardless of how they face obstacles in their business. Combining these qualities with their spirit of entrepreneurship, SMEs forge their route to achievement. This is evidenced by the variety of enterprises they are launching, which range from electronics repair to eco-friendly goods to arts and crafts .

Additionally, the narratives highlight the broader landscape of flourishing small-business owners in Dar es Salaam, showcasing entrepreneurship in various disciplines. This emphasises transferable skills – skills that a future entrepreneur should develop irrespective of academic background. They are valuable for entrepreneurs from any field: creative thinking and problem-solving. Lastly, while each of Amina, Harry and Rashid's stories presents the journey in a different light, they provide a multifaceted picture of the challenges for graduates beginning their journey into the world of SME ownership in Dar es Salaam. They stress that flexibility, a love of learning and a certain amount of entrepreneurial flair are the essential skills people need to face challenges and succeed.

Applying HCT and SCT to the experiences of these recent Dar es Salaam graduates as they embark on ownership of SMEs indicates the complex relationship between formal education, practical skills, individual characteristics, and social interactions. On the one hand, graduates' narratives paint that their specific academic training might not match up well with the raw practical skills needed in their businesses. In this way, HCT underestimates the range of skills required to be a successful entrepreneur. On the other hand, the narrative illustrates a recognition of the importance of transferrable soft skills, like critical thinking and problem-solving, developed across a range of academic disciplines that become crucial assets for an entrepreneur. HCT emphasises students' transferable cognitive skills that apply effectively across various situations, problems and fields. For this reason, all three graduates agree that the field is challenging and requires constant learning, especially in newer business management skills, to keep their business thriving. This is another example of how the narratives combine the three concepts of lifelong learning introduced in this commentary: Beyond more formal education, continuous learning throughout life plays an important role. This aligns with the HCT's emphasis on investing in one's human capital throughout life to remain competitive in the market.

Going beyond HCT and SCT uncovers additional factors influencing graduates' achievement: Self-efficacy, defined by SCT as the belief in one's ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997), or one's willingness to take initiative and endurance, i.e. to overcome obstacles. These characteristics reflect graduates' self-confidence and readiness to learn, which are crucial to overcoming barriers

in the entrepreneurial world. The narrative also evidences the potential role of observational learning (SCT): Amina talks about how she has observed successful business people in her neighbourhood and how we could learn from them; she insists that they teach you many things that help to build an entrepreneurial mindset. Lastly, while this term is not used directly, the graduate stories also allude to the possible strength of collective efficacy. The graduates can receive assistance, share resources, and gain knowledge from the experiences of other business owners, fostering a sense of collective efficacy and instilling confidence in the success of their endeavours. It would be a mistake to reject either HCT or SCT in light of how much the three recent graduates' very first attempts at owning and running an SME reflect the multifaceted skill sets and characteristics involved in successful entrepreneurship as well as the trials and tribulations associated with the realities of owning an SME. By looking at their experiences through HCT and SCT, we can develop a more nuanced approach to enabling and supporting new graduates embarking on an entrepreneurial journey. Examining the complementarities between formal education, practical skills, individual characteristics, and social interactions makes this possible.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The stories of Rashid, Amina and Harry capture the intricacies of the realities that newly graduated young people in Dar es Salaam are grappling with when trying to run their small business. On a macro level, these stories being dissected independently are unique, but they shed light on many themes together. There needs to be a match between the skills acquired through the traditional educational avenue and the practical skills necessary to run an SME. Thus, more entrepreneurship and practical skill training modules must be introduced into university curricula. Practical and experiential knowledge is a prerequisite for those who own an SME. In addition, the overarching importance of cultivating real-life skills on top of traditional academic skills shines through in the stories. Second, the value of transferrable skills, developed across many academic disciplines, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, means that these skills will come in handy regardless of students' educational area of focus. Developing transferrable skills alongside traditional academic skills in a learning environment is, therefore, pivotal, as it meets the requirements demanded of students to succeed. Moreover, we must consider the atmosphere of lifelong learning consistent with the story analysis. It is evident how important lifelong learning is to success in fast-paced business environments. Therefore, the launch and funding of SME-supporting and SME-promoting programs that enable lifelong learning opportunities are essential. This is indeed a journey of pedagogies for life, where resource centres, online courses, and mentoring programs can facilitate this journey. Lastly, the stories raise questions about whether there are possible benefits associated with social factors such as networking to promote collective efficacy and observational learning. Amina indirectly acknowledges this by stating, "I have studied people who started from nothing and built themselves up as good local entrepreneurs. I have learned from them." Providing networking opportunities for small and medium business owners that lead to them networking with one another and exchanging stories of their successes and failures may help foster a sense of group confidence and affirmation, which could explain why they are succeeding.

In summation, if we consider formal education's shortcomings and the more significant social and personal factors impacting success, these systems should include curriculum revisions in universities, specific skill training, lifelong learning, and provision of networking opportunities. These suggestions can support and inform those wanting to venture into the business world as

entrepreneurs and graduate employees. While this study's findings are valuable, its limitations are also worth noting. The retrospective interviews could be based on a faulty recall. In addition, the small number of respondents from three Tanzanian universities may make it difficult to generalise to the SME-graduate population.

Given the focus on Tanzanian undergraduates, further empirical research could focus on a wider variety of participants from various backgrounds, including international students currently working in SMEs alongside employers who are in the driver's seat of shaping these graduates for the future of work. Furthermore, employability could be portrayed more precisely by further investigating perceptions from other key stakeholders, who currently have essential roles in shaping the new jobs that create many challenges and opportunities for these SME-owned graduates in today's post-pandemic-driven job market. With a few modifications, either quantitative or mixed-method approaches could be selected to obtain a more precise picture of how the challenges and opportunities of the situational factors shape the graduates' development of employability skills required for the future of work.

Acknowledgements: We appreciate the research participants sharing their experiences with us.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

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