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ENHANCING GRADUATE YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

Statistics have shown an overwhelming number of graduate unemployment globally with Africa having more than 5 million graduates from 668 universities unemployed every year. Kenya recorded 39.1 percent unemployment rate in 2017 with estimations that 4 out of 10 young people are jobless with requisite qualification. Among various factors, researchers have attributed the overwhelming graduate unemployment rate to inadequate work experience, employable skills and competencies among graduates. There is therefore need for a holistic, in-depth view of practical learning as one of the factors aimed at enhancing graduate employability by sufficiently equipping graduates with the necessary skills for wage employment and self-employment. This study therefore sought to critically analyze the perceptions of university graduate youth on the significance of practical learning in enhancing graduate youth employability in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design on an estimated target population of 116,000 graduate youth within the last five years and between 21-35 years from Nairobi, Kenyatta and Jomo Kenyatta Universities. A statistically significant sample size of 399 respondents was obtained through purposive and self-selection sampling techniques and questionnaires administered. A focus group discussion was also held with 12 graduate youth. The study established that according to the graduate youth, practical learning plays a key role in enhancing graduate youth employment with the need for universities to offer more opportunities for attachments, educational tours and group projects to increase students' hands-on experience and exposure to the real world.

Key words: *Perceptions, training, employability, graduate youth, practical learning.*

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, the youth continue to face daunting challenges, socially and economically. Some of the challenges include social exclusion, limited access to resources and economic challenges among others. One major challenge that the youth face globally is unemployment. In a report by UNICEF (2012), it was estimated that unemployment had increased by 27 million worldwide with the number of unemployed persons aged 15-24 years reaching 75 million. It is perceived by many researchers that one main factor linked to the increasing high rate of youth unemployment though not directly or simply, is the youth bulge. As a result, The World Youth Report in 2018 indicated that unacceptable high numbers of youth are still experiencing poor education and employment outcomes. According to an article by the ACET over half of the 10 million graduates from over 668 universities in Africa per year don't get jobs (ACET, 2016). In the article, the World Bank noted that Africa has the highest youth bulge in the world and the youth population was expected to grow by 45.2 million between 2010 and 2020. It is also stated that according to the ILO, the youth unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa is around 12 percent with the African region having the highest rate of working poverty.

A study carried out revealed the perceptions of graduate unemployment among graduates from a South African university (Mncayi, 2016). Top factors perceived to influence employment prospects by both the employed and unemployed graduates were lack of formal work experience, lack of professional networks, lack of job market information, corruption, lack of job searching skills and mismatch between qualifications attained and available jobs. In a Ugandan study, results from a focus group discussion involving the youth both employed and unemployed revealed that a majority of them perceived lack of practical skills and well-placed networking opportunities to be a constraint to employment. It

was also perceived by all that limited access to internship opportunities made it harder for graduates to acquire relevant experience required by employers while those in salaried employment alluded to lack of mentorship as a major factor as well (Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling & Kleynhans, 2015).

With the above perceptions noted, a majority of the youth globally especially the unemployed are left at the mercy of their governments expected to formulate policies, establish structures and implement projects that will shift the unemployment situation. More often than not, a number of donor governments including the United Kingdom have recently been focusing attention on stimulating job market and growth across the African continent, a good step to make. However, the voices of the young people are conspicuously missing from these moves. A comprehensive understanding from young people about the challenges they face in securing an income, alongside their aspirations for work in a changing economic environment, is very much needed (Bender and Theodossiou, 2015). While dealing with the unemployment challenge, governments exclude the youth from the conversations while laying emphasis on what can be done for them and not with them.

In Kenya, a majority of unemployed graduates are disillusioned about the economic value of education. Since independence, the education system has been expected to produce skilled individuals who would be absorbed in the job market. In the recent years, university education in Kenya has continued to receive huge percentages among the total development expenditure (Danner, Makau, & Nebe, 2016). We have witnessed the growing number of universities all with the aim of equipping young people with knowledge and skills yet many studies still perceive university graduates to be without employability skills, technical mastery and basic work related capabilities (Wahba, 2013). Despite many attempts to overcome the unemployment challenge in Kenya, young Kenyan university graduates still face

so many obstacles in securing gainful employment after university training. It is estimated that 4 out of 10 young people are jobless with requisite qualification. According to the Human Development Index (HDI) report by the United Nations, Kenya recorded 39.1 percent unemployment rate in 2017 (Farah & Ali, 2018).

The inability to practically apply knowledge gained in the theory could be the biggest misgiving of the modern education system. Employment requirements are essentially divided in to two categories i.e. knowledge and skills. While qualifications can be gained through studies, skills come from a hands-on experience in the field and industry. Practical skills and knowledge is very important in understanding how things work. It therefore leads to a much deeper understanding of a concept through the act of doing and personal experience. Practical knowledge empowers an individual to achieve something being studied about. Good practical work can help engage students in developing important professional skills, develop the understanding of concepts and understand the process of scientific investigations. When well done, practical work can stimulate and better engage students at all levels of learning challenging them physically and mentally.

The general objective of this study was to critically analyze the perceptions of university graduate youth on the significance of practical learning in enhancing graduate youth employability in Nairobi County, Kenya. The specific objectives were:-

- To analyze the perceptions of university graduate youth on the different forms of practical learning employed in universities in Nairobi County, Kenya
- To analyze the perceptions of university graduate youth on the level of experience of the forms of practical learning

Problem Statement

In 2017, a report by the Cabinet Secretary Education revealed that between 2012 and 2015, a total of 143,262 students graduated from both public and private universities in Kenya. The report also revealed that there was an increase in the total number of students graduating from degree programmes i.e. 23,523 in 2012 to 49,020 in 2015 (Ma, Pender & Welch, 2016). The unemployed graduates add on to the number of the unemployed youth in Kenya estimated to be 7 million by Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) through a survey conducted in 2018 (KNBS, 2018).

There has been emphasis on academic qualifications that do not necessarily translate to competent and skilled individuals. Studies still perceive university graduates to be without employability skills and competencies, technical mastery and basic work related capabilities (Wahba, 2013). In a study carried out Godia (1987), analysis from the study did not provide any support for the contention that higher education levels (university training) amongst a population facilitates national economic development, a concept that has been widely supported by a number scholars today (Amimo, 2012), (Danner, Makau, & Nebe, 2016). The general recommendation is that there is need to focus on practical learning that aims at building the capacities of graduates through imparting skills and competencies for both paid employment and self-employment.

The purpose of the study therefore exposes perceptions of university graduates on the significance of practical learning undertaken in enhancing graduate employability. This would particularly be beneficial to the higher education policy makers especially the Commission for University Education as specific policies may be formulated and reforms initiated to better university training for enhancement of graduate youth employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Capital Theory: The concept of human capital has been greatly employed to shape perspectives on organizational success, economic growth and development. A report by Ulter University-Business School in 2017 perceived that an organization's economic success was based on its physical assets. A thought which was refuted by Becker who perceived physical assets to be just a portion of the growth and income in many countries (Rohling, 1986). There has since been a shift in how assets are perceived by firms and economies resulting from the transition from a production economy to a knowledge economy. Therefore, HCT postulates that investing in education leads to higher earnings in the future and predicts that the longer the investment period, the greater the returns such as graduates (Marginson, 2016).

Development planners in the 20th century perceived unemployment and underdevelopment of the less developed countries' to have resulted from inadequate skilled labourers termed as 'engines of growth' as suggested by Godia (1987). It was perceived that poor nations were unable to develop due to insufficient education to support modern educational structures. A key assumption in this theory is that one of the most efficient paths a government can take lies in improvement of production and stresses that for that to be achieved, there is need to train human resources for efficiency. In this regard, the 21st century has witnessed the expansion of education institutions globally for the purpose of social mobility and transformation. A right of education has been recognized by the global governments such as Article 13 of the UN 1966; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights recognizes a universal right to education (Tan, 2014; Padhi, 2014).

The HCT is relevant to this study because of the perceptions therein attempting to explain the extent of correlation skill development and employment, in

this case, graduate employment. It is perceived that Human Capital Development (HCD) is the basis on which governments strive to promote and enhance skill development through training to better equip its people; make them more relevant to employers with the expectation that they will be hired, increase their productivity, earn money to better their lives and the economy at large. Education has since become an investment expected to yield significant return in terms of social and economic growth. Since the inception of the HCT, researches have been and are still being carried out on the value of education on the growth and development of economies (Godia, 1987; Vodopivec and Gabric, 2011).

Empirical Review

In a study evaluating the significance of early practical training as part of the pharmacy curriculum in a German university, a study revealed that practical learning increased students' understanding of the theoretical knowledge (Katajavuori, Ylanne, Hirvonen, 2006). The students acquired knowledge and practical skills that enabled them work with the community of professionals. The study also revealed practical learning overtime builds the expertise of learners. This in turn builds the learners' confidence in solving real time problems in their areas of specialization enhancing innovation and self-employment creation.

A report obtained from the Huddersfield University in the United Kingdom revealed that undertaking a work placement while still studying increases graduate employability (Brooks, 2014). The report noted that qualifications, skills and abilities acquired purely from the universities were perceived by many organizations as insufficient for securing employment and work-place experience was a pre-requisite for employment. According to the report, job placement for the undergraduate for a duration of one year is seen as sufficient and most effective for gaining work experience (Mohamed, 2014).

Additionally, practical learning in surveyed West African universities revealed that there is still a major challenge in shifting from theory to practice. Even though practical learning is being fostered, a disconnect still exists between classroom, laboratory works and the society or economy; indirectly contributing to political, economic and social underdevelopment (Kwarteng & Ofofu, 2018). In Africa, quality university training must include adequate practical learning that allows development of skills.

In Kenya, there are no adequate studies on the effectiveness of attachments or practicums, a form of practical learning designed to provide students with practical work experience. They emphasize on the importance of learning by doing through which students are able to transfer their knowledge to actual work. They also provide opportunities to network and make important contacts with employers and professionals. Additionally, universities in Kenya offer other forms of practical learning that need to be explored and evaluated regarding their performance in adequately preparing graduates for employment.

One such form is study/educational tours which are perceived to play a key role in motivating learners to have an interest in learning through exploration of concepts. For deep explorations, students then require more awareness and knowledge on the subjects they study. Such knowledge and transformation can happen with the help of study tours. Educational tours can therefore impart learning of any field (Fowler & Meckert, 2014). Study tours as a form of practical learning offered in Kenyan universities should therefore be looked in to and their effectiveness analyzed to make them efficient in adequately preparing graduates for employment.

A proposal was made to enhance graduate employability through students' engagement in community service (Tumuti, Mule, Gecaga &

Manguriu, 2013). Through the Students' Community Service Programme at Kenyatta University, students would have an opportunity to harness their skills and contribute to the development of the communities they serve. There are however inadequate evaluations on such practical learning initiatives and whether they are significantly enhancing graduate youth employment.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research design was employed in the study incorporating a quantitative approach through administering questionnaires for collection of numerical data needed for statistical analysis and a qualitative approach which enabled systematic collection of in-depth information about personal and group perceptions on the topic. The study was conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya among graduate youth from Nairobi, Kenyatta and Jomo Kenyatta universities who graduated between 2014-2018 and are within 21-35 years. The researcher chose Nairobi County because with a population of approximately 3.5 million growing at a rate of 4 percent annually, the city has the highest number of youth population, highest number of universities and currently ranks top in youth unemployment (Fengler, 2011).

The target population was an estimated 116,000 graduate youth from Nairobi, Kenyatta and Jomo Kenyatta universities who graduated between 2014 and 2018 and were 21-35 years. The population had successfully gone through university training and were in a position to provide information deemed useful for the study. A statistical sample of 399 formed the respondents utilized in the study. Purposive and self-selection techniques were applied in selecting the respondents because of the researcher's inability to obtain a list of the entire target population. Questionnaires were filled and a focus group discussion held with 12 graduate youth.

The raw data was validated to understand if the collected data sample was in accordance with the

pre-set standards. Editing was then done by conducting basic checks and outlier checks to make sure the raw data was ready for analysis. Data coding was then done through grouping and assigning values to the responses for easy analysis of small data buckets. The prepared numerical data was subjected to Statistical Packages for Social Sciences version 20 for descriptive statistics (frequencies) and the output was presented as tables, charts and bar graphs for ease of interpretation.

RESULTS

The respondents were asked to state whether they thought practical learning enhances graduate youth employment. Majority (84.5%) of the respondents

agreed that practical learning does enhance graduate youth employment while 14.5% thought that practical learning somehow enhances graduate youth employment and 0.9% did not know whether practical learning enhances graduate youth graduate employment.

Perceptions of the Forms of Practical Learning Employed

Respondents were also asked to select the forms of practical learning they engaged in at the university. All forms of practical learning were employed with 67.3% participating in attachments, 66.4% in group projects, 58.2% in research work, 52.7% in individual projects, and 34.5% in study tours as indicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Forms of practical learning

Forms		Frequency	Percent	Forms		Frequency	Percent
Study tours	Not applied	216	65.5	Lab Experiments	Not applied	279	84.5
	Applied	114	34.5		Applied	51	15.5
	Total	330	100.0		Total	330	100.0
Individual Projects	Not applied	156	47.3	Attachments	Not applied	108	32.7
	Applied	174	52.7		Applied	222	67.3
	Total	330	100.0		Total	330	100.0
Community Service	Not applied	252	76.4	Research work	Not applied	138	41.8
	Applied	78	23.6		Applied	192	58.2
	Total	330	100.0		Total	330	100.0
Group Projects	Not applied	111	33.6				
	Applied	219	66.4				
	Total	330	100.0				

Source: Author (2019).

In addition, analysis from the focus group discussion on frequency of engagement in practical learning revealed that although 'industrial attachment' had the highest percentage, the frequency of offered was the least among all other forms with all respondents stating that they undertook an industrial attachment only once within their university life. Respondents expressed the need to have more opportunities for

engagement in all forms of practical learning with one respondent stating;

"There should be more case study assignments" (R7, 2019).

Another stated;

“There is need for market place assignments and more study tours to relevant organizations” (R9, 2019).

Results also indicated that the least forms of practical learning applied were laboratory experiments, study tours and community service. Further probing revealed that study tours were not sufficiently utilized and when applied had little or no significance to the courses studied. This therefore implied that more needs to be done to harness the potential of educational tours in adequately preparing graduates

for employment. Another key form of practical learning that exposed students to the real world was community service. 76.4% had not engaged in community service. Universities should therefore adopt community service as a way of connecting students to the real world with real challenges.

Perceptions of Practical Learning Experience

Respondents were further asked to rate their practical learning experience and the results indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Practical Learning Experience

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Practical learning enhanced my ability to apply better solutions to existing problems in my area of specialization	6.4%	4.5%	3.6%	35.5%	40%	100
Practical learning gave me a good understanding of the course and what is expected of me	3.6%	4.5%	18.3%	31.8%	41.8%	100
Practical learning enhanced my ability to develop new ideas, creative thoughts	3.6%	8.2%	18.2%	33.6%	36.4%	100
I was exposed to practical learning that made me better placed for employment	2.7%	12.8%	18.2%	33.6%	32.7%	100

Source: Author (2019).

Form the study findings, more than 70% of the respondents in total agreed to being exposed to practical learning that promoted course understanding, enhanced skill development and made them better placed for employment. When probed further, a majority (80%) of the respondents in total however perceived the inadequacy of practical learning opportunities offered at the universities. Also, when offered, respondents noted that practical learning needed to offer more skills in respective areas of specialization. One of the respondents recommended;

“Students should be given practical lessons in their area of specialization” (R3, 2019).

Another stated;

“Practical lessons should be more and consistent in line with the area of specialization” (R10, 2019).

In seeking to determine the importance of practical learning in enhancing graduate youth employability, 70% of the respondents in total agreed to being exposed to practical learning that promoted course understanding, enhanced skill development and made them better placed for employment though inadequately offered. This is consistent with findings from a study by Katajavuori, Ylanne and Hirvonen (2006) in a German university which revealed that practical learning increased students’ understanding of the theoretical knowledge. However, it emerged

that in some cases practical learning was not offered in respect to areas of specialization with a total of 16% disagreeing that practical learning made them better placed for employment. This was consistent with practical learning in surveyed West African universities which revealed that there is still a major challenge in shifting from theory to practical learning (Kwarteng and Ofosu, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The study revealed graduates' perceptions of the importance of practical learning and whether it enhanced graduate youth employment. It was perceived by the majority (84.5%) that practical learning enhances graduate youth employment through hands-on experience and skill development. From the findings, it emerged that over 60% participated in attachments and group projects. Further analysis however revealed that the frequency of offer of attachment was perceived to be the least amongst all other forms while participation in group projects was perceived to be mainly once a month.

The study therefore concluded that graduate youth perceived practical learning to be important in enhancing graduate youth employability. Practical learning employed in the universities as perceived by the graduate youth should largely expose students to real-time life and work situations and should be regarded as a major part of training. It was also noted and concluded as perceived by the graduate youth that a majority of students in some courses go for study tours once in their university life. With this, more study tour opportunities can be created to increase the students' practical learning experience.

On the other hand, community service and industrial attachments opportunities were perceived to be inadequate and should also be availed more frequently and made compulsory to all students. Programmes should be exciting to arouse students' interest in taking part while also having activities that create awareness of existing programmes.

Universities are however perceived to be in the right track with the introduction of community service as an on-job training opportunity for students undertaking university training (Tumuti et al., 2013).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended the adoption of these forms of practical learning to supplement the ones mainly used i.e. industrial attachments, individual projects and group projects among others that would strengthen graduates' employment skills. To further enhance practical learning, the study recommends that community service and attachment as forms of practical learning should be incorporated at least once each academic year to increase students' exposure to professional settings for on-job trainings and real life work situations. In addition, study tours should also be taken seriously as they enhance outside learning in a better and interesting way through interaction with different environments and cultures. Moreover, the study further recommends the need for universities to strengthen research through supervision of undergraduate research and encouraging active participation of the undergraduates as contributing co-authors of published work as part of practical learning.

It is therefore crucial to note that significant findings were drawn from university graduate youth and findings revealed unemployment rate of 41% among graduate youth with prerequisite qualification most of who had a bachelor's degree. Consequently, the study recommends further studies in the following areas:

- A further study to be carried out to analyze the effectiveness of existing government internship programmes in enhancing graduate youth employment.
- A study to be carried out to establish the relationship between unemployment and youth inactivity in community development in Nairobi City County.

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