

Graduate Unemployment in Uganda

Socioeconomic Factors Exonerating University Training

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Being the Text of a Paper Presented to the First Education Graduates

ABSTRACT

University training in Uganda is under attack, albeit rhetorically, for graduate unemployment. Thus, it has been a *scapegoat* for policy inaction and divestiture of accountability by employment policy persons. A recent study, 'Factors influencing graduate employability in Uganda', however, finds that socioeconomic factors, rather than university training, are blamable for the anomaly and recommends macro-economic reforms purposed to increase the availability of paid employment opportunities and feasibility and profitability of graduate self-employment.

KEY WORDS: Graduate, unemployment, self-employment, Uganda, university education, relevance

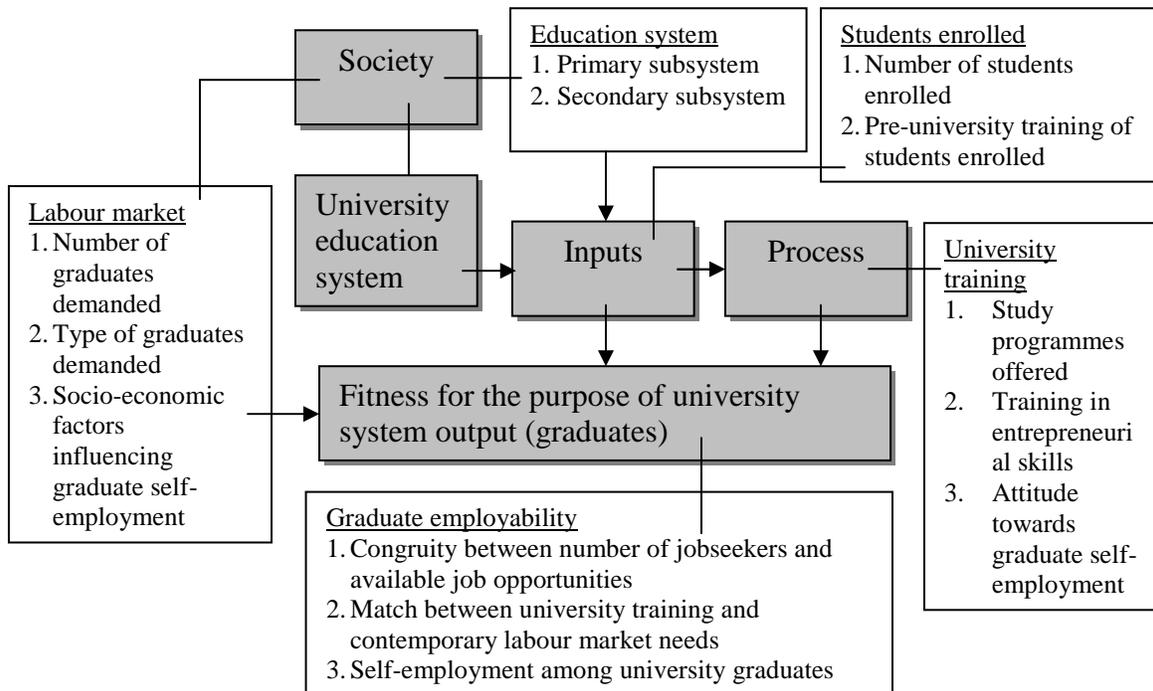
BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Graduate unemployment in Uganda, as in many other countries, is a daunting problem. A 1997 tracer study, for example, reports that employment opportunities for graduates are dwindling and the periods spent searching for jobs getting longer (Mayanja et al 2001). Similarly, a 2003 study of the employment outcomes of education in East and Central Africa, conducted under the auspices of DFID, reports that graduate self-employment is generally non-existent, which is despite the fact that these governments value private sector development as part of the economic liberalisation process (Al-Samarrai et al 2003). Consequently, universities are under attack for the difficult labour market transition of their graduates. However, the fact that the factors underlying graduate unemployment could as well be societal is seemingly ignored. This is what motivated a recent study, 'Factors influencing graduate employability in Uganda', which delved into whether there are enough jobs for graduates in Uganda; whether university training matches contemporary labour market demands; the incidence of graduate self employment; and the factors influencing graduate self-employment in the country.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

University education is an intermediary subsystem in the education system that receives leavers of the secondary education subsystem and produces them, as graduates, for societal consumption--by way of employment or/and further education. In analyzing graduate unemployment in Uganda, therefore, a systemic approach might expose the pertinent variables. Its input-output model, delineated in Figure 1, which expresses the 'fitness for the purpose' of system output as a function of equilibrium between factors internal and external to the system suffices.

Figure 1: Model of the Theoretical Framework for the Study of Factors Influencing Graduate Employability in Uganda



Source: Adapted from Koontz et al (1998)

Explanation of the theoretical framework

From the theoretical point of view of open system theory, we can think of secondary school leavers joining universities as inputs into the university education system; university training as the university system process; and graduates as university system output. This way, university education comprises an open system, meaning that graduates' ability to achieve gainful employment is, theoretically, a function of university-training-related as well as society-related factors.

The university-training-related factors comprise in the number of students enrolled and training offered while the societal factors comprise in the number of secondary school leavers seeking admission to universities; number and type of graduates demanded for employment in the society; and societal factors

influencing graduate self-employment. Equilibrium between these factors enhances congruity between the number of jobseekers and available employment opportunities; university training and labour market demands; and graduate self-employment, resulting into the employment of university graduates. Graduate unemployment pointed to incongruity between these factors and the study undertook to investigate the contribution, to this incongruity, of university training and society.

TECHNIQUES OF INQUIRY

Data collection was by administration of a questionnaire to the selected graduates—for a self-report of their employment experiences and opinions about the factors influencing graduate employability in Uganda—and interview of various key informants.

DATA SOURCES

Data was collected from a random sample of 177 university graduates (2000, 2001 and 2002 cohorts) from a random sample of 14 study programmes; three university vice-chancellors; and officials of the Ministries of Education, Labour, Finance and Economic Planning; Council for Higher Education; National Chamber of Commerce; National Employers' Association; and Uganda Private Sector Foundation. An important caveat, therefore, is that the conclusions reached are based on the respondents' views, meaning that they may not be generic.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study, as discussed in the next subsections, exonerate university training whilst implicating socio-economic factors for the graduate unemployment problem.

Available Employment Opportunities Not Enough

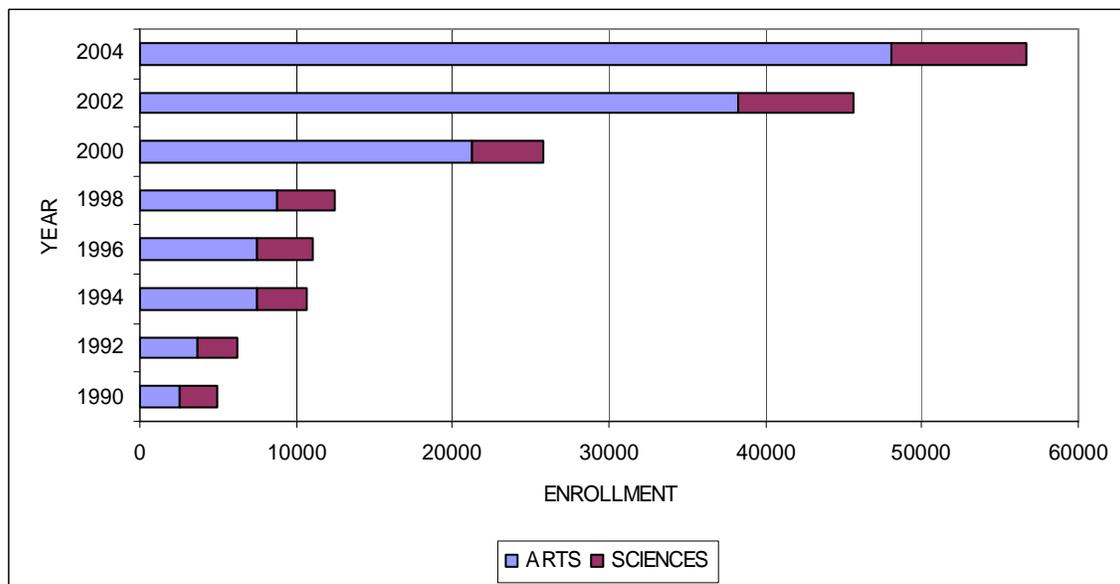
Under the auspices of higher education liberalisation, and as a spontaneous response to contemporary demographic trends (Court 1999), the number of universities and, subsequently, students enrolled and graduates turned out in Uganda have expanded exponentially since the late 1980s as illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Table 2: Increase in the number of universities in Uganda (1987- 2004)

Category \	1987	88	89	90-95	96	97	98	99	2000	01	02	03-04
Public	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	4	5
Private	0	1	1	2	3	4	5	8	9	11	15	24
Total	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	10	11	13	19	29

Source: Nkata 2004 and NCHE (2004)

Figure 2: Undergraduate degree enrollment in Uganda since 1990



Source: Ministry of Education statistical abstracts, National Council for Higher Education (2004) and Tiberondwa et al (2003)

Undergraduate degree enrollment alone expanded by 1045% between 1990 and 2004 and, annually, Ugandan universities produce over 20,000 graduates who face competition for employment opportunities from the leavers of over 325 non-university higher education institutions in the country (Tiberondwa et al 2003 and Rwamutega 2004). It was the opinion of the respondents that employment opportunities have not expanded proportionately, which is credible given the thin staffing approaches adopted in most privatised industries that formerly employed majority of the university graduates. Since the vision of higher education in Uganda rests not only in the provision of quality higher education but also in making it accessible to all qualifying Ugandans by 2015 (Kasozi et al 2003), the desirable condition is that universities enroll all qualifying applicants and the onus is on the economy to absorb the graduates, by way of gainful employment, which it has not done.

Sociology; Not University Training

An interesting finding was that 50% of the graduates who were employed had achieved their first employment placement through a personal contact, suggesting that 50% of the available employment opportunities are distributed 'sociologically' rather than meritoriously. On account of lack of social contacts in the labour market, therefore, some graduates find it particularly difficult to get into employment, irrespective of their university training, a view human resource management and economics of education scholars and practice now recognize as is clear from Maicibi (2003), Ezewu (1986) and Atkinson cited by Todaro (1998).

University Training versus Labour Market Requirements

The Question of Science Education

That science based higher education is of higher employability value in Uganda is a famed, and of late, popular policy position. In fact, universities have come under attack for overemphasis of humanities programmes albeit these are not crucially relevant to contemporary development needs. Nonetheless, the study found no significant discrepancies between the employment situation of humanities graduates and that of science graduates. Evidence was generated, however, that some science graduates are in placements that are supposedly humanities based. Since it is apparent that the needed development-related breakthrough is one in science and technology, however, this finding illustrates that the economy has not evolved an incentive system that encourages students to specialize in the sciences. Alternative arguments, Musingo (2005) for example, are that Ugandan university trained scientists are not sufficiently trained to take up the available industrial jobs. Nonetheless, as Escotet (1998) observes, universities need not provide highly specialized skills—even though some stakeholders are calling for this (Hatakenaka 2005 and Warakaulle 2004)—since students should be prepared for diverse work situations.

Early Academic Predis7()-273.052(b)4.969570-5.070764()-42.6119(e)-5.2942(n)-5..956417L.

Graduate 'Socio-Economic Syndrome'

Many of the humanities graduates said that there are fewer employment openings in their areas of specialization; nonetheless, they said that they specialized in them because it is there that they were admissible. In Uganda, degrees remain important status symbols and their holders enjoy greater social and professional benefits than diploma and certificate holders (Ssekamwa 1999). This is why students would rather attain degrees in programmes for which employment may not even be found than specialize in options that offer faint hope that they will achieve degrees namely, science subjects, since, on account of facilitation inadequacies, failure rates here are particularly high (Kasozi 2003). While it may be argued that the universities have an obligation not to offer such programmes, as one of the vice-chancellors put it, "they have to survive", by offering programmes for which fee payers can be found, which is corroborated by Musingo (2004). Failed medical programmes were identified to illustrate this point, even if it may be argued that there are likely to be employment openings for their graduates.

Rural-Urban Welfare Discrepancies

Graduates' attitude towards working in rural areas has also been central to the graduate unemployment debate with claims being that, owing to their elitist university training, graduates choose to be unemployed in urban areas rather than work in rural areas. The findings of the study refute this claim squarely. Even though most of the unemployed graduates were resident in urban areas, many were resident in rural areas and none said she or he had ever declined an employment opportunity in a rural area. Several of those in the urban centers, however, explained that these centers offer more hopes of employment and many rural stationed jobs are, all the same, offered at organizational headquarters in urban areas. In the sobering words of Bishop (1985), however,

as long as we tax rural enterprises to build infrastructure, not in rural areas but in cities, a person who leaves school and goes to a rural area ought to have his head examined [*sic*], which exonerates university training and implicates development planning.

The Question of Graduate Self-employment

Lack of Capital; Not University Training

Graduate self-employment was generally non-existent since 94% of the graduates were not engaged in any form of self-employment. All of them, however, refuted the claim that they are not self-employed because they lack training in the necessary entrepreneurial skills or because they have a negative attitude towards graduate self-employment. Instead, 90% of them cited lack of capital.

Sociological Factors

Prioritization of formal sector employment was also found to underlie the absence of graduate self-employment albeit superficially. Sociological factors, especially range of social contacts, have tended to restrict jobs to those graduates who would normally have/ access the capital necessitated to be self-employed, leaving those who are least capable of self-employment unemployed, yet they are blamed for failing to take up self-employment. Paid employment, on the other hand, is the choice destination for graduates because available openings for self-employment, and the ones most employment policy persons and commentators point to, are 'survivalist'—requiring limited skills, characterized by minimal economic potential and dominated by school dropouts—and do not keep up with paid employment in terms of returns, work environment and professional and social development. This is why many of the few graduates who were self-employed looked at their self-employment as

stopgap, which is in concurrence with Noorderhaven et al (2005) and Ethgie et al (2005) who find that self-employment might arise out of dissatisfaction with wage employment.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study indicates that, more than anything else, efforts to alleviate graduate unemployment in Uganda should focus on formal employment opportunity creation. Thus, it highlights need for a paradigm shift, from criticizing university training to addressing societal bottlenecks through undertaking pertinent

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