

7. The Correlational Study of the Quality of Students Enrolled in the University and Employability of Graduates from Selected Universities in South-Western Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The employability of university graduates is a concern for higher education stakeholders globally and Uganda is also concerned due to high unemployment rates post-graduation. Not much has been written about the relationship between quality of students enrolled in the university and their employability of graduates from selected Universities in South Western Uganda. This study aims to establish this relationship in selected universities in south western Uganda.

A correlational study collected data from 512 participants, including graduates, employers, university lecturers, administrators, and officers from quality assurance directorate of national council for Higher Education. Data on students discipline, grades, performance and employability were collected. SPSS and Structural equation modelling (SEM) version 21 was used to analyse associations between predictor and outcome variables.

The findings derived from conducting this research clearly demonstrate the presence of a significant statistical association between

the quality of students enrolled in the university and employability of graduates at $R = 0.589$, R squared change 0.347, $P = 0.000$

This suggests that by ensuring the quality of students enrolled in the University through discipline, students' grades and performance increases the likelihood of producing graduates who are employable. It is very important that stakeholders in higher education make it a priority to keep a high standard of students and their moral fibre and this may facilitate their integration into the workforce.

KEYWORDS; Quality of students, higher education, discipline, employability

1. INTRODUCTION

Employability of university graduates is a concern for different stakeholders in many countries all over the world (Cheng et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Employability is defined as “the possession of qualities and competencies relevant to the labour market, meet the fluctuating needs of employers that enable the graduates attain and keep worthy employment (Podsakoff & Mackenzie, 2015; Ronald et al., 2005; Tristan & McCowan, 2014).

Employers are continuously complaining about the graduates that are recruited as they lack essential skills and competencies that are crucial in work environment (Aliu *et al.*, 2019; Ghani *et al.*, 2018). As a result of liberalization of higher education, there has been increased number of universities and students enrolment. There is a huge investment in university students and their sponsors expect them to acquire skills that will make them employable upon completion of their studies (Martinez et al., 2014; Su & Zhang, 2015; Stuart & Hua, 2022; Weligamage, 2009) as education enhances an individual's skill acquisition and productivity. Different scholars have noted a mismatch between graduates' training and the needs of the labor market (Brewer, 2013; Guàrdia *et al.*, 2021; Palmer, 2017) and lack of essential

employability skills is a major concern in many countries (Miguel & Barbosa, 2016; Othman *et al.*, 2017; Tristan & McCowan, 2014).

1.1 Primary Goal of the study

The primary goal of the study is to establish if the quality of students enrolled in the University have any relationship with the employability of graduates from selected Universities in southwestern Uganda.

1.2 Hypothesis

H₀ The Quality of students enrolled in the University has no significant relationship with employability of graduates from selected Universities in South Western Uganda.

H₁ The Quality of students enrolled in the University has a significant relationship with employability of graduates from selected Universities in South Western Uganda.

2.0 Literature review

In this section, theories underpinning the study are looked at and other relevant literature on the variables.

2.1 Theoretical underpinning

The study was guided by the Human Capital theory and Signaling theory. Human capital theory (HCT) was developed by Schultz (1961) and later improved by Becker (1964) and Porath (1967). HCT examine the economic value of education where students are invested in through formal education to increase their value. Human capital is defined as people, their potential and performance in the organisation (Kochan & Litwin, 2003). It is the ‘knowledge, information, ideas, skills, and health of individuals’. It is the stock of knowledge or acquired characteristics by a person that contributes to their economic productivity (Tan, 2014).

It assumes that formal education is highly instrumental and necessary to improve students' discipline, achievement and the production capacity of a population (Okemakinde, 2008). The theory proposes that education improves the productive capacity of individuals (Merwe, 2010). Quality education develops graduates' skills that make them employable (Bridgstock, 2017). Education is viewed as an investment that yields future benefits (Popov, 2014), and HCT explains how people in an organization contribute their knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance organizational capability (Phillips & Gully, 2013). The theory postulates that individuals invest in education and training in the hope of getting employment and higher income (Tan, 2014). Moreover, higher education prepares individuals for work, and through education, individual skills that are needed in the world of employment are acquired (Marginson *et al*, 2023). HCT has been used to explain the value of education (Merwe, 2010), the value of post-secondary education (Jog, 2015), predicting employability (Berntson & Sverke, 2016), the rationality behind investment in education (Okemakinde, 2008), preparation of students for employment (Kalufya & Mwakajinga, 2016), and how education and training raise the productivity of workers (Mutamba, 2016).

However, HCT has been criticized for failing to explain the extent to which education is directly related to improvement in occupation and income. Secondly, it has failed to account for the growing gap between people's increasing learning efforts and the diminishing number of jobs in which to apply the increasing knowledge investment (Okemakinde, 2008). Additionally, the theory has failed to explain how education arguments productivity (Marginson, 2023). Therefore, Human Capital theory is relevant in this study as it assumes that for one to invest in quality education, they are expected to produce highly employable graduates but does not show how they are placed in different job positions. Signaling theory is used as a supplement to address this issue.

Signaling theory as an extension of the Human Capital theory focuses on ways in which schooling serves as a signal to characteristics that lead to high productivity (Weiss, 1995). Signaling theory was developed by Spence (1973) and improved by Stiglitz (1975). It

explains how education acts as a signal for pre-existing abilities of individuals and indirectly communicates personal characteristics to others by basing on educational qualifications (Ghazarian, 2016; Polziehn, 2011). Signaling theory asserts that the education level acquired by an individual indicates some characteristics such as dedication, time management skills, problem-solving, creativity, and ability to follow instructions (Tan, 2014).

It is based on the assumptions that individuals differ in productivity which is fully personal specific and not affected by schooling. Secondly, more schooling entails more costs and increased earnings. Thirdly, it assumes asymmetrical information where individuals know their productivity while employers do not, and fourthly that schooling costs can be observed without incurring a cost. The Signaling theory is useful for describing behaviour when two parties have access to different information, the potential employers lack information about the quality of job candidates but their educational qualification signals their quality to reduce the information asymmetries (Connelly et al., 2011).

The Signaling theory focuses on the message that education communicates in the labour market (Ghazarian, 2016) and this aids the prospective employer in selecting an employable graduate by considering his ability. In this study, the graduate knows the abilities they possess but the employer may not know all the abilities possessed but can only use the academic credentials to select the prospective employee that is later subjected to an interview to evaluate the skills and abilities as per the job specifications. Based on Signaling theory, education serves as a way in which potential workers inform employers of their skills (Ghazarian, 2016), thus the relevancy of the theory together with HCT.

Universities have historically been widely recognized as key players in the cultivation of disciplined and skilled graduates, a fundamental attribute that enables them to effectively meet the increasing demands of the rapidly evolving labor market (Fulgence, 2015; Namutebi and Kasule, 2018). The correlation between students' academic performance and graduate employability has been well-

established, and the inclusion of employability skills and attributes in higher education has been the subject of ongoing debate. It is, however, widely acknowledged that these skills have the potential to significantly impact academic performance (Pan and Lee, 2011). Additionally, Simba *et al.*, (2016) have astutely observed that students are expected to observe the utmost level of discipline by adhering to prescribed rules and regulations since indisciplined students are prone to being inattentive to educational goals, have poor time management skills, lack respect for others, and exhibit a lack of self-determination (Gitome *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, Simba *et al.* (2016) have further noted that academic performance tends to improve among students with a high level of discipline. The literature also provides evidence to suggest that there is a significant correlation between discipline and employability, as demonstrated by a study conducted among Vocational High school students (Tentama *et al.*, 2019). This indicates that learners who exhibit good discipline are more likely to acquire the skills required by employers and that discipline creates a positive image of the institution and prepares learners for their future careers (Stanley, 2014). Nevertheless, the literature has primarily focused on primary and secondary schools, neglecting the experiences of university students and how their level of discipline may impact their employability.

Faith-based universities have increasingly been devoting their attention to the moral values and character development of their students. However, this has met with resistance not only from some students but also from members of public universities. Nonetheless, employers have continued to emphasize disciplined character as an essential trait of employable graduates (Blasu & Kuwornu-adjattor, 2015). Moreover, universities have started to engage in entrepreneurship training, which, if done successfully, can enable graduates to gain skills, become disciplined, and create their jobs while aligning their skills with private employers' needs. Nevertheless, evidence regarding how such programs shape students' skills and facilitate entry into self-employment remains scarce (Premand *et al.*, 2012). It is yet to be fully established that moral values, character

development, and skills development can serve as a channel to enhance employability.

Denisoni (2020) has used the academic grades of students at entry as an indicator of their quality, while (Scott et al., 2017) have used program completion rates as an indicator of performance. Harvey, (2006) argues that students attend university to improve their minds rather than to become skilled in the recruitment market. It is, therefore, crucial to consider the perspectives of students, employers, and policymakers when developing and embedding employability skills to align academic grades with work performance (Tymon & Batistic, 2016). While students frequently cite difficulty in finding employment as their primary concern, proactive students' solution to this problem may lie in achieving high academic grades, as they are often used as a shortlisting tool by employers (Tomlinson, 2012). Additionally, research aimed at determining the relationship between academic achievement and self-concept with students' employability has shown a significant relationship among academic achievement, self-concept, and employability (Tentama *et al.*, 2019).

University students are highly motivated by the belief that obtaining good grades will help them to secure good jobs. However, it is worth noting that employers consider other vital soft skills such as personality. It is essential to understand that good academic performance only translates to success in the public sector (Velasco, 2012). Therefore, striving towards achieving better academic grades is crucial as it could lead to enhanced employability. Furthermore, Manjunath, (2020) in his study, established that high academic performance is closely linked to employability. In this context, employability refers to the set of achievement skills that make graduates more likely to gain employment.

The admission process into universities depends largely on a student's pre-university grades, which are often used to predict their future academic performance. Employers may also use these grades as an additional predictor of employment success (Nelson, 2008). Many universities follow the practice of converting letter grades into numerical values and then applying weights to predetermined essential

and desirable subjects before determining a cut-off point (Nshemereirwe, 2014). In Uganda, admission to a university program is determined based on a student's performance in the national examination at the Advanced Level of secondary school, which is also taken into consideration by employers during job placements.

In order to uphold the standard of higher education, universities have implemented a rigorous screening system to assess applicants for different programs, with clearly defined entry requirements for each program at BSU and MUST. Academic achievement is commonly acknowledged as one of the essential learning outcomes that vividly showcase the quality of students' academic work, which can be precisely, measured using course grades or GPA as suggested by Clemente et al. (2020). The attainment of learning objectives, skill acquisition, and knowledge assimilation can be gauged at various levels, including the course, program, and institutional levels, which are highly sought-after by the public and employers alike, as convincingly argued by Knight & Yorke, (2002).

Another study conducted on higher education students conclusively established that superior academic performance when combined with active involvement in extracurricular activities inevitably culminates in higher perceived employability, as logically posited by Pinto & Ramalheira (2017). It is worth noting that students' academic performance and graduate employability are closely interrelated, with employability skills and attributes increasingly becoming a topic of debate in higher education, although it is apparent that these skills have the potential to significantly impact academic performance, as cogently demonstrated by Pan and Lee (2011). In light of this, employers value performance. Educational performance assessment should be aligned with employment models to enhance employability skills which can benefit both students and universities alike.

Furthermore, Clemente et al., (2020) revealed that academic performance. In the same vein, the study by Tentama *et al* (2019) aimed at investigating the relationship between academic achievement and self-concept with student employability showed a significant

relationship between academic achievement and self-concept with employability. This implies that higher academic achievement and self-concept lead to higher employability among students and vice versa. The study highlights the importance of academic achievement and self-concept in improving employability, which is a significant problem that often leads to unemployment. In another study, it was established that higher academic performance and participation in extracurricular activities result in higher level of employability (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Increased participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities has an effect on students' behavior which has a significant influence on their graduate employability (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

In conclusion, while universities have a critical role to play in developing employability skills amongst undergraduate students, consideration of different factors should be taken into account.

3.0 Research approach

In this study, a correlational research design was used and guided by Post positivism paradigm. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches of data collection and analysis were used. Quantitative approach was used to get information by use of questionnaire survey method, documentary analysis and then analysed using SPSS and AMOS version 21. Qualitative approach was used to get and analyse information got from key Informants through interviews.

The study population of 1950 people that composed of graduates, employers, University staff and quality assurance directorate of National council for higher education (NCHE). The sample of 512 respondents was used as it was got as per use of formula of Taro Yamane (1967)

Students who had finished their program of study and graduated from 2017 to 2019 were considered from the four identified programs that included: Bachelor of Computer Science (BCS), Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Bachelor of Science with Education (BSC ED). Mbarara

University of Science and Technology (MUST) and Bishop Stuart University (BSU) were selected from other Universities in Southwestern Uganda.

4.0 Results and analysis

The analysed results to establish relationship between quality of students and employability of graduates are indicated in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1 : Regression Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					RSquare Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig.F Change
	.589 ^a	.347	.345	.53141	.347	221.033		16	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality of students									

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error				Beta	Lower Bound
(Constant)	.610	.174		3.506	.001	.268	.951
Quality of students	.765	.051	.589	14.867	.000	.664	.866

a. Dependent Variable: Employability

From Regression analysis in table 1 and 2, it was established that quality of students have a positive significant relationship with employability of graduates as indicated in the table 1 ($R = 0.589$, $P = 0.000$).

Furthermore, hypothesis testing was carried out to establish the relationship between the quality of students and employability of graduates. The outcomes are as indicated in Table 1. **H₀: The Quality of students enrolled in the University has no significant relationship with employability of graduates from selected Universities in South Western Uganda.**

The Model reveals 34.7% of variations in employability of graduates at (R^2 Change = .347; $p = 0.000$). The model results also show that there is a positive and significant relationship between quality of students enrolled in the University and employability of graduates ($\beta = .589$; $p = .000$). This further implies that a unit increase in quality of students would result into 0.589 units increase in employability of

graduates. Therefore, we reject the null which states that “*the quality of students enrolled in the University has no significant relationship with employability of graduates from selected Universities in South Western Uganda*”. We accept the alternative hypothesis which concludes that there is a significant relationship between quality of students and employability of graduates. This is further explained by interview results based on the emerged themes as per the objectives of the study. From the Interviews carried out the theme of quality of students enrolled emerged based on objectives of the study and sub themes on students’ discipline and academic grades/ performance.

Employers’ value discipline as it reflects the students’ ability to adhere to rules, regulations and deadlines at the work place. Participants were asked how students’ discipline is ensured and they responded as indicated:

One of the participants echoed that the discipline of students in the University has a big impact on their learning, performance in class and at work, he noted that there are dedicated staff who handle issues concerned with discipline.

This implies that ensuring students’ discipline builds their sense of responsibility and accounts for whatever they do as they take ownership of their actions.

In relation to grades of students, participants echoed that; “*there are guidelines and admission criteria and the Academic Registrar always ask us to verify. We access academic papers of students and look at essentials of students to undertake specific courses and the scores of the student to qualify for admission*”. It was further reported that *Universities run accredited programs, have qualified lecturers and use adequate teaching materials. The admission process is a rigorous one that ensures quality of admitted students and then in some departments, academic staff mentors the students.*

From Quality Assurance office it was reported that to ensure quality of students the university has a clear assessment of the learning process, course works and exams are clearly assessed and Internship process has a clear guideline which is followed. There is also monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning process.

Based on the findings from interviews, the Universities have in place a mechanism to ensure quality of students through discipline, grades and academic performance. Ensuring students' discipline and academic performance is critical to producing competent graduates who are well-equipped to succeed in the workforce.

5.0 Discussion of findings

The results from the study revealed that there was a positive significant relationship between quality of students enrolled in the university and employability of graduates from selected Universities in South Western Uganda. This implies that a positive change in the quality of students, is associated with a positive change in employability of graduates ($\beta = 0.589$; $p < .000$) and the reverse is true. The quality of students was looked at in terms of students' discipline and grades.

The grades of students display a progressive and meaningful connection with their employability status. Thus, an enhancement in academic performance and degree classification could lead to an improved employability status for graduates. The findings are consistent with findings of Zhang et al, (2022), who noted that the grades achieved by students are closely related to their employability. This further corresponds with the study by (Kowang *et al*, 2022) revealed a significant positive relationship between learner quality and employability also agrees with work by (Santosa *et al*, 2021), who discovered a significant positive relationship between students' discipline and their employability skills.

The findings also are in line with signaling theory as it is noted that first-class degree holders have a better advantage in getting jobs (Lanka, 2020) as there are high chances of being shortlisted even when the competition is very high. Similarly, (Win, 2023), noted a moderate positive correlation between academic performance and employability of graduates in the job market. The grade accumulated by graduates significantly affects the employment alignment (Denila *et al*, 2020). Discipline, in the form of regular class attendance, timekeeping, respect for authority, and adherence to rules and

regulations, has a positive relationship with students' academic performance (Andala, 2021; Simba *et al*, 2016). Moreover, academic influence determines the level of graduates' employability (Manjunath, 2020; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017).

5.1 Study implications

The above findings imply that Universities must ensure that quality of students enrolled in the University and during the course of study up to the end.

The students discipline and performance has to be kept high as this enhances University image and to help in ensuring employability of graduates.

6.0 Conclusions

The findings from this study reveal that the quality of students enrolled in the University has a positive significant relationship with employability of graduates. The study also discovers that quality of student contributes 34.7% to employability of graduates and the rest 65.3% is determined by other factors outside this study.

6.1 Recommendations

The study recommends that continued effort should be put in the students to keep good moral standards while at University and at workplace.

Also, Universities need to have planned purposeful formal program to mentor student who enroll at the University in a way of preparing them for labour market.

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