

# Public University Graduates' Perspective of Youth Employability Curriculum

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## **Abstract**

*Zambia is facing high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth. Universities have been accused of offering curricula that promotes the student attitude of graduating for white-collar jobs only. This can be seen through the many youths that fight for the few vacancies each time government advertises jobs leaving many of them disoriented as they discover that the formal job market is flooded. From time to time, Universities undertake curriculum review in a quest to respond to youth unemployment. Unfortunately, these efforts do not always yield the desired results as unemployment among the youth keeps increasing. There is need for Zambia to develop a curriculum that is formulated for employability with or without the formal sector playing a major role. Through purposive sampling, the study engaged 40 graduates from two Zambian public universities through interviews and questionnaires to express their views regarding a meaningful curriculum to enhance youth employability. As its objectives, the study intended to: 1. Explore perspectives of public university graduates regarding a youth employability curriculum. 2. Investigate the public university graduates' perceptions of the curriculum's relevance, effectiveness, and impact on their employability prospects. 3. Identify any challenges or gaps in the*

*curriculum and suggest for improvement The study applied the exploratory and descriptive research designs with qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyse data and perceptions of a youth employability curriculum. Findings revealed that graduates preferred a curriculum that focused on developing practical skills, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork abilities. The data was analyzed thematically according to the objectives.*

**Keywords**— Employability, Curriculum, youth, , skills

## **Introduction**

In today's rapidly evolving job market, youth employability has become a critical concern for governments, educators, and employers alike (ILO, 2019; World Bank, 2018). Public universities play a vital role in preparing students for successful entry into the workforce by equipping them with the necessary skills and competencies (European Commission, 2016). One approach to addressing this challenge is the implementation of a youth employability curriculum within the academic framework of public universities. This curriculum aims to enhance students' career readiness, boost their employability prospects, and bridge the gap between academia and industry requirements (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Understanding the perspective of public university students towards a youth employability curriculum is crucial for the

effective design and implementation of such programs. By gaining insights into the experiences, perceptions, and expectations of graduates, educational institutions can tailor their curricula to better meet the needs and aspirations of the upcoming workforce (Galloway et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2017). This study aims to explore the perspective of public university graduates regarding a youth employability curriculum. It seeks to investigate their perceptions of the curriculum's relevance, effectiveness, and impact on their employability prospects. Additionally, it aims to identify any challenges or gaps in the curriculum and suggest for improvement from the university graduates' point of view. The Zambian economy is heavily reliant on the mining industry, particularly on the mining of copper. Other sectors of the economy include Agriculture, manufacturing, energy, construction, tourism and financial, telecommunications, transport and trade services.

By examining university graduates' perspectives of an ideal youth employability curriculum, this research intended to contribute to the ongoing discourse on youth employability and inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders about the effectiveness of current curricula in preparing graduates for the job market (Meng, 2019; Noreen et al., 2020). The findings of this study have the potential to assist in shaping future strategies for curriculum development and implementation, ensuring that public university graduates are adequately equipped to meet the demands of the ever-changing employment landscape (Oosterbeek et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2018).

Overall understanding how public university graduates' perceive a youth employability curriculum is essential for fostering a strong connection between higher education and the world of work. By aligning the curriculum with graduates' needs and expectations, universities can play a pivotal role in enhancing their employability, empowering them to succeed in their chosen careers, and contributing to the economic growth and development of societies (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Fugate et al., 2004).

## Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Explore the perspective of public university graduates regarding a youth employability curriculum.
2. Investigate the public university graduates' perceptions of the curriculum's relevance, effectiveness, and impact on their employability prospects.
3. Identify any challenges or gaps in the curriculum and suggest for improvement from the university graduates' point of view.

## Theoretical framework

This study was anchored on the *Skills Mismatch Theory* which is directly related to youth employability in a nation. The *Skills Mismatch Theory* suggests that the two factors of *skills mismatch* and the *skills gap* contribute to youth unemployment. The Skills Mismatch factor points to the fact that there exists a discrepancy between the skills required by the employers and the knowledge that a graduate acquired through formal education. On the other hand, the skills gap factor refers to the difference between the skills possessed by the youths seeking jobs and the skills demanded by the employers. A suitable curriculum is meant to bridge this mismatch between academia and industry to bring about the required alignment.

## Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of public university students' perspectives on the youth employability curriculum. Perspectives refer to individualized and subjective point of view arising from past experience, beliefs and values. In the case of this study, the sought-after perspectives of the graduates are anchored on their theoretical knowledge gained from formal university education and the demands of the industrial sector in the country. Qualitative methods allow researchers to explore participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions in a detailed and contextual manner (Creswell, 2013). The study employed purposive sampling to 40 graduates from two public universities. Participants were chosen based on their diverse backgrounds, including different academic disciplines, years of study, and gender, to ensure a comprehensive representation of perspectives (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection was done through a questionnaire with open-ended questions. In-depth Interviews via Semi-structured questions were conducted among the graduates to explore their perceptions, experiences, and suggestions related to the youth employability curriculum. The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to express their opinions freely and provided rich qualitative data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data collected from interviews and open-ended questionnaires. This process involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and categories within the data, and interpreting them concerning the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings measures such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail were employed. Member checking involves sharing the initial findings with participants to validate the interpretation of perspectives. Peer debriefing involves seeking feedback from other researchers to enhance the rigor and credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All these were affected to validate the study.

## Findings and Discussion:

The study revealed the following thematic areas:

1. *Importance of Practical Skills Development.*
2. *Internships and Work-Integrated Learning to develop close relationships with employers.*
3. *Inclusion of digital finance services education: Digitalization of content.*
4. *Career Guidance and Employability Support.*
5. *Curriculum Design and Flexibility.*
6. *Practical information about the job search process.*

The study revealed that all the participants (public university graduates) acknowledged the fact that the theory content of the curriculum that universities offered was by and large good. For instance, under the inclusion of digital finance services education and digitalization of content one participant said,

*Yes, ...they have equipped me with relevant digital literacy and communication skills that I feel are essential for the job market... it has been helpful in improving self-esteem, business ideas and how to accumulate and manage finance in the business.*

- a. Under the theme of *internships and Work-Integrated Learning to develop close relationships with employers,*
- b. one participant explained, *... I have attended Graphic Design Entrepreneurship workshops that teach actual skills for the industry.*
- c. It is clear that the graduates appreciated what they learnt using the university curricula especially on

theory. So, theoretically, the public universities are working hard to bridge the gap between formal education and demands of industry

- d. While the graduates expressed satisfaction and gratitude for the theory curricula that their universities offered them, they indicated that *Internships and work experience offer a good amount of exposure to the industry. Hence, preparing students for what exactly the industry requires of them.*
  - *Practical application courses where one physically apply what was taught should be designed.*
  - *ICT course should be made compulsory to all students since work places now have embraced a digital world.*

### **Importance of Practical Skills Development:**

- Despite the respondents appreciating the content of the curriculum being offered by the universities, they noted some gaps for which they made suggestions to create room for improvement. For instance, the graduates emphasized the need for the students to acquire practical skills that are directly applicable to the workplace if they are to be relevant in the job market. The majority of the respondents expressed the need for curricula that incorporate hands-on training, project-based learning, and real-world experiences. For instance, one respondent said: *Our education is focused on theory and not practical things. Even more that our education in Zambia is a decade thinking and not up-to-date.*

Another respondent added that there were many skills the university systems neglected which were essential to the industry. He was quick to point out;

- *The university education also covers irrelevant topics which are never utilized. The necessary skills for success in the job market include both hard and soft skills. While hard skills may change frequently, soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills are invaluable to employers. Universities should focus on offering well-rounded curriculums that balance disciplinary depth with soft skills to give students an edge in the job market. This can be achieved by offering courses such as*

*communication or public speaking, emphasizing problem-based learning, group projects, or even a dedicated course on time management or career development. Additionally, universities should align their educational offerings with in-demand skills in the global and local industry to increase post-graduate employment in both current and future job markets. Developing close relationships with employers can also help universities provide students with experiential learning and access to information on employer demand for skills.*

- Such opportunities were perceived as valuable for building confidence, enhancing problem-solving abilities, and bridging the gap between academic knowledge and industry requirements. The above finding is in tune with Brown and Lee (2021) who emphasise that hands-on experiences enable students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings and develop industry-specific competencies.

#### ***Internships and Work-Integrated Learning:***

- The inclusion of internships and work-integrated learning experiences within the curriculum was highly regarded by students. The majority believed that such opportunities provided practical exposure, industry insights, and increased job prospects and should be mandatory to all students. For instance, one respondent (MU4) said: *Yes, it should be mandatory because it exposes students to reality of practicality as part of the lessons learnt in class [sic].* Another one (CB 4) added: *Internships and work experience offer a good amount of exposure to the industry. Hence, preparing students for what exactly the industry requires of them.* The above finding is in agreement with Brown and Lee (2021) who suggests that the curriculum should incorporate experiential learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and industry projects. Further, students expressed the desire for structured internships with clear learning objectives, feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for skill development. The respondents' views were in tandem with a study by Johnson et al. (2019) which established that students generally perceived these curricula as beneficial and valuable in preparing them for the job market.

#### ***Curriculum Design and Flexibility***

- Students emphasized the importance of a well-designed curriculum that aligns with industry demands and trends. They suggested the integration of employability-related courses, modules, or certificates that complement their chosen disciplines. One respondent (MU 4) remarked: *practical application courses where you physically apply what you have been taught should be designed.* Another respondent (MU) emphasized that: *ICT course should be made compulsory to all students since work places now have embraced a digital world.* And another one (MU 4) said: *The introduction of practical works using software packages which are used in industries or places of work is cardinal. Further, in all schools, students should be introduced to entrepreneurship skills to help them to innovate and be creative in their field of study.* Additionally, students emphasized the need for flexibility within the curriculum, allowing them to personalize their learning paths based on their career aspirations and interests. This finding tie well with Anderson and Wilson's (2021) study which indicated that students believe that a more tailored approach, considering their specific fields of study, would better serve their career aspirations. The study further showed that students also expressed a desire for more opportunities to gain industry-specific knowledge and skills through internships, apprenticeships, and practical experiences.

#### ***Challenges and Recommendations:***

- Several challenges were identified in the implementation of youth employability curricula. These included limited resources, a lack of coordination between academia and industry, and insufficient training for faculty members. To address these challenges, students recommended increased collaboration between universities and industries, faculty development programs, continuous curriculum evaluation, and regular updates to keep pace with evolving employment trends.

#### **Conclusion**

- Public university students generally perceive youth employability curricula as valuable in enhancing their employability prospects. They emphasize the importance of practical skills development, career guidance, internships, and curriculum flexibility. However, challenges related to curriculum design, implementation, and ongoing support need to be addressed. This literature review provides insights for policymakers and educators to improve the design and implementation of youth employability curricula, ensuring they effectively meet the needs.

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