

Universities and Labor Market Mismatch in Kenya

Ishmael I. Munene

Though studies have demonstrated a strong link between higher education and employment, unemployment is a ticking time bomb in Africa, with university graduates on long-term unemployment approaching 50 percent. This raises questions about the nature of university education and labor market needs on the continent. Although, in this article, the focus is on Kenya, the issues raised and reforms suggested are of great relevance for university education and employment in Africa in general.

Recently, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), the employer of public school teachers, stated that it would not hire bachelor of education graduates. Meanwhile, universities offer a new teacher training program in which trainees complete degrees in their

Abstract

A nagging policy issue, graduate unemployment in Africa, is a concern among stakeholders. In Kenya, in-built institutional inhibitions and failed reforms explain the mismatch between the labor market and university programs. Some modest reforms and alternative pathways for tertiary education, however, offer a ray of hope.

subject expertise areas, followed by a one-year postgraduate teaching diploma. A few weeks later, the Commission for University Education ordered professional associations to obey court orders and cease accrediting university academic programs. These actions are a proxy for perceived labor market deficiencies of university graduates.

University–Labor Market Disarticulation

To a large degree, unemployment is tied to economic performance. A severe economic downturn can have a devastating effect on employment for graduates from a high-skill focused curriculum. However, in a context like Kenya, where economic performance has been relatively good, unemployment is attributed to factors internal to education, as the conundrum of graduate unemployment illustrates.

The 2020 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics reported that youth aged 20 to 29, the age bracket of fresh university graduates, had an unemployment rate of over 32.4 percent, with a long-time unemployment rate of 7.9 percent. The era of guaranteed white-collar employment for university graduates has waned in the last two decades, with many going through years of unemployment and underemployment. Even high-demand professional disciplines such as the medical sciences, engineering, technology, and business have not been spared the scourge of unemployment.

Stakeholders attribute the source of the problem to the mismatch between academic programs and labor market needs. This mismatch is attributed to three major causes: inordinate focus on academics rather than employment needs in program development; emphasis on government as the main source of employment; and nonexistent, or inadequate, career advisory services.

While the government has premised the development of universities—public and private—on manpower needs, their actual establishment focuses on academic program requirements. With the exception of the five top public universities (Nairobi University, Kenyatta University, Moi University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, and Egerton University), established after a considerable assessment of the government’s manpower needs, the remaining 72 public and private universities were founded without any assessment of the labor market needs of the national economy. Other considerations such as politics and religious affiliation have been the drivers of university expansions. Within one year, between 2012 and 2013, 23 of the 38 public universities were established to satisfy political demands for universities by various ethnic groups. Today, nearly all major religious denominations have a university, which is the main driver of private university growth. A common feature of recently founded universities is academic programs that have minimal bearing on direct employment, including humanities, social sciences, basic sciences, and communications.

Though the logic of manpower development is rational, extant academic programs in the universities rarely promote employability. Whether universities should focus on creating employable graduates or transmitting knowledge remains to be settled, but the reality of life after graduation requires some focus on skills deemed desirable by potential employers. Kenyan employers deplore the lack of job skills among graduates. The 2018 Kenya Federation of Employers survey noted that 64 percent of university graduates lacked skills needed by employers, including critical thinking, analytical minds, creativity, teamwork, communication, and writing skills. The ability of graduates to be job creators is a crucial issue for stakeholders, yet entrepreneurship hardly features in academic programs, rendering this goal unattainable.

The antiquated legacy of government as the main employer is embedded in most academic programs.

The antiquated legacy of government as the main employer is embedded in most academic programs. Agriculture, veterinary, forestry, public administration, economics, and education are some of the course programs that were created to respond to the state’s manpower needs in the 1960s. The state ceased to be the main employer of graduates nearly 20 years ago, yet the content of programs does not reflect this reality. The TSC, the government agency that hires teachers for public schools, has openings for 100,000 teachers. However, in 2020, budgetary constraints only allowed it to hire 12,000 teachers. It only hired teachers who graduated in 2015. Nevertheless, 56 (74 percent) of the 77 universities are in the teacher training business.

Career advisory services support employment prospects by equipping students with practical knowledge and a solid foundation to enter the job market. Besides providing

internship opportunities, well-staffed career centers support students in interview and résumé preparation and communication improvement. Yet robust career services with career specialists are a missing link in most of Kenya's universities. The Office of Career Services at the University of Nairobi, the country's premier university, has a professional staff of two for a student enrollment of 77,000.

Reforms That Never Were

There have been educational reforms to address the problem of unemployment, but these reforms have not targeted universities in a transformative way. The first education commission after independence, the 1964 Ominde Education Commission, made recommendations centered on national unity, human capital production, and wealth creation. The 1985 McKay Commission that introduced 8-4-4 reforms focused on giving students practical skills in agriculture, trades, and creative arts that would easily translate into the labor market. The 2017 Competency-Based Curriculum reform overhauled the elementary and secondary education curriculum to develop student competencies in deep mastery of content, critical thinking, and complex problem-solving, etc., to make them nimble.

The government has ensured structural and curricular reforms in the school system to attain the commissions' recommendations. The dictates of autonomy and academic freedom has meant that universities could reform their curricula along with policy recommendations at their own discretion. This, however, has not been the case. Universities have only tinkered with the years of study at the undergraduate level, while leaving their curricula intact.

All Is not Lost

The need to improve the situation has dawned on university authorities and policy makers. Universities have begun to explore corrective measures, albeit in limited ways. It is common to see university websites listing career prospects for graduates of each program and prominent professionals in the field. Some universities now offer entrepreneurship degree programs to strengthen the message of job creation upon graduation. New labor market-focused programs such as tourism, restaurant management, and policy studies are now offered in the newer universities.

Following promotion from the state about the excellent employment prospects of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates, TVET colleges have gained in popularity. Nearly all TVET college graduates enter employment upon graduation, or start their own enterprises. The TVET Authority sets policy, accredits the colleges, and offers regulatory oversight to ensure the quality of training programs. Further, students enrolled in these colleges are eligible for state financial sponsorship through the Higher Education Loans Board. So successful has TVET become, that 10 percent of students admitted to universities have elected to enroll in TVET colleges instead. The reputation of universities as avenues of guaranteed employment is losing its shine. ▲

Ishmael I. Munene is professor in the Educational Leadership Department, Northern Arizona University, US. Email: Ishmael.Munene@nau.edu.