

Employability in African higher education: homogeneity, diversity and stratification

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Employability has become a central motif of higher education across the world in recent years (Archer & Davison 2008; Graduates Northwest 2013; Melink & Pavlin 2012; World Bank 2005; OECD 2012; UNESCO 2012). Fuelled by the perceived need for high-level skills in the knowledge economy, expectations on universities to equip graduates with attributes relevant to the new employment landscape have increased, particularly in the context of constraints on public funding. In increasingly marketised systems, students are obliged to look towards their future earnings, and therefore their employability, in order to justify the rising costs of HE study. Institutions themselves, in an increasingly competitive environment, are marketing themselves to their prospective customers on the basis of the employment prospects of their graduates.

A number of governments in Africa are engaging strongly with the employability agenda. This interest has been driven by a range of concerns, including high graduate unemployment and underemployment rates, dissatisfaction of employers with graduate skills and a desire to enhance knowledge industries (Dabalén et al. 2000; Pitan & Adedeji 2012; Teal 2000; World Bank 2014). Extensive media attention to the problem of 'half baked' graduates has been accompanied by some new institutional interventions and government policies. In Nigeria, for example, a federal law has mandated all public universities to run compulsory entrepreneurship courses.

This paper presents findings from the British Council funded study 'Universities, Employability and Inclusive Development'. The three-year study assesses institutions' incorporation of employability related policies and their outcomes in five countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa (and for comparative purposes the UK). In addition to a macro perspective in each of the countries, case studies are being carried out with a small number of universities in each country, incorporating a diversity of institutions in relation to region, public/private, age, and in some cases mission or religious orientation. In each case study university, interviews are being carried out with senior management, academic staff, careers service staff and students, and a questionnaire is being administered to final year students, in addition to observations and student focus groups.

The four Sub-Saharan African countries all have concerns about graduate unemployment. At 23%, the unemployment rate for university graduates in Nigeria is higher than that for those who have only completed secondary or primary level (National Bureau of Statistics 2009). However, the links between the content of university study and employment outcomes are still unclear. There is little existing research on this topic in the countries in question, and even a lack of basic statistical information. In this respect, South Africa is the clear outlier, with much more extensive data available on student enrolment, completion and transitions to the labour market (e.g. SAGRA 2013). South Africa is also unlike the other three countries in having a predominantly public higher education system, with less than 10% of students in private institutions (Republic of South Africa 2013).

Initial findings from the research sites confirm the existence of a significant homogenisation of discourse and to some extent policy across the countries and institutions. However, they also show a parallel process of diversification or stratification of institutions. On the one hand, there are significant commonalities in the rhetoric of universities (both in official documents and in the discourse of senior management). This rhetoric is consistent with the nationwide (and international) logic of perceiving a form of crisis of graduate employability, placing responsibility at the door of the university, and advocating changes in the curriculum to address the problems. Responses in practice to these perceived challenges have also clustered around the following key interventions: establishment of entrepreneurship courses, updating of curricula, establishment of careers fairs and expansion of work placement and industrial attachment programmes.

Nevertheless, behind this rhetoric and apparently similar interventions, there lies a significant diversity of institutional identity and practice. While South Africa is an exception here, in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, similar trends are being observed of a rapid expansion of the private sector with multiple functions of absorbing excess demand from those unable to pass the entrance exams for public universities, providing a specific mission - usually religious, or a highly exclusive environment (corresponding closely to Geiger's (1986) 'more', 'different' and 'better', respectively). While the public universities in the metropolitan centres maintain their elite status for historical reasons, in some cases -- particularly in Kenya -- quality is being severely challenged by funding pressures leading to a rapid expansion of enrolments in order to generate funding from parallel fees (CUE 2013; Wangenge-Ouma 2007). Expansion of public systems away from metropolitan centres (and the conversion of previous technical colleges into universities in Kenya) is also creating a lower tier public system.

These shifts in the institutional landscape are creating highly uneven experiences of employability enhancement. Initial findings show that the most significant factor in influencing the attributes associated with employability is teaching and learning quality in the main taught component of degree courses, along with opportunities for engagement with student activities more broadly on the campus. The crowded public universities -- even though many are highly restrictive in their intake -- provide challenging environments for learning, leading to poor outcomes in many cases. For those who can afford them, the new compact private universities, whether of a liberal arts model (e.g. Ashesi in Ghana) or a business model (e.g. Strathmore in Kenya), are providing a much richer experience of learning (enhancing both the so-called 'hard' and 'soft' skills).

Employability attributes, of course, are only one of a range of factors influencing the actual obtaining of employment, and networks of contacts (which can also be enhanced by going to university) remain a fundamental element. Nevertheless, the extensive stratification of institutions means that even in the context of a rapidly expanding higher education system, deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities are unlikely to be challenged.

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