

Gauging graduate employment destinations in Sub-Saharan Africa (0189)

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Concerns about graduate employability in Sub-Saharan Africa are widespread. The popular press (e.g. Ernest 2014) commonly portrays a crisis situation of unemployment, of graduates lacking the skill set needed for the contemporary economy and consequent issues of social unrest and sluggish economic growth. A recent World Bank (2014) report on jobs in Africa showed that currently only 16% of all employment is in the formal salaried sector, meaning that for some time to come the increasing numbers of university educated youth will either be entering non-graduate jobs or creating their own forms of employment.

Part of the problem accentuating graduate unemployment in Africa is that at the university level, students are confronted with a system which has traditionally been focused on educating for public sector employment, with little regard for the needs of the private sector or self-employment (African Economic Outlook 2012). Often a degree from a tertiary institution is an entry requirement for government employment, with little attention paid to a specific skill set. At the same time tertiary education in technical fields tends to be significantly more expensive than in the social sciences, which makes expansion of such faculties more challenging for public education institutions (African Economic Outlook 2012).

Nevertheless, despite the apparent consensus on the challenges of employability in the popular imagination, there is a critical lack of evidence. With the exception of South Africa, few countries maintain adequate and reliable data on enrolments, completions and subsequent destinations. Besides, conceptualizing what constitutes graduate unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa is difficult. The definition of 'graduate' is sometimes ambiguous, referring both to those with any post-secondary qualification, and at other times, only to those with a university awarded degree (Maluleke et al 2015). A number of institutions run their own tracer studies, but these are sporadic and cannot provide a comprehensive picture. As a result, academic research has been largely impressionistic, with only a handful of studies (e.g. CHEC 2013, Pitan & Adedeji 2012; Teal 2000) providing adequate evidence of the attributes and employment prospects of graduates.

This paper reports on an exploratory study in Kenya, piloting a graduate destinations survey tool. The research forms part of a larger five country study funded by the British Council (2013-2016), focusing on universities and employability in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. It aims to provide the basis for rolling out a student destinations survey that can be used at scale in Sub-Saharan African countries to track the onward trajectories of all graduates in a national context.

Kenya has witnessed both rapid physical expansion of higher education institutions and growth in student numbers. Enrolments in both public and private universities increased from 42,193 in 2001/2 to 324,560 in the 2013/2014 academic years (Republic of Kenya 2014). One consequence of this expansion has been that enrolment growth has outpaced

funding. While enrolments grew at a rate of 41% between 2012 and 2014, public funding to the institutions increased only 6% in the same period, from US\$588 million to US\$624 million (Republic of Kenya 2014). This funding gap has raised concerns about the quality of graduates coming out of Kenya's higher education system and about whether they have the skills to be usefully employed in the formal labour markets or be gainfully self-employed. However, Kenya, like most African countries, does not have readily available and accurate data on graduate labour market surveys to show graduate destinations or levels of graduate unemployment.

This survey aims to answer the following key questions: first, what activities are graduates undertaking six months after leaving university? What associations are there between those activities and background characteristics of the students, as well as their experiences and achievements in university? How do students perceive the value of their university education for equipping them for their subsequent lives?

The survey utilises a questionnaire drawing on the HESA Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey in the UK, adapted for the local context. The pilot study surveyed all students graduating in December 2014 from two universities, one large public flagship university, and one private university, both in Nairobi. These institutions represent the key institutional types in Kenya in higher education, and have also been selected on account of availability of alumni lists in order to track graduates. A total of 3000 students were contacted via email six months after graduation and completed an online questionnaire of 20 items.

There are a number of methodological challenges in developing the survey. For example, there are issues of context-specific interpretations of survey items. In previous research, graduates have declared themselves to be 'unemployed' even when they do have paid work, if that work does not correspond to their conception of permanent graduate employment (for instance, temporary teaching work). In countries such as Nigeria, there are also challenges presented by a national service year, postponing employment choices, and in South Africa the option for a fourth year of university study. The greatest challenge, however, relates to access to reliable databases of student contact details, and ensuring an adequate response rate.

Emerging findings indicate a number of worrying trends. Low absorption capacity of graduates into formal labour markets has led to a number of coping strategies. Migration and brain drain have meant that the benefits of Kenya's meagre investments in higher education are largely being reaped elsewhere. As more graduates fail to get jobs, they resort to any form of further study available, leading to qualifications inflation and underemployment. Nevertheless, the scenario may not be so bleak, with greater potential returns to investment in higher education if graduates are gainfully employed in small businesses and powering the economy through entrepreneurship.

The final section of the paper draws out further implications for understanding of graduate destinations in Kenya and more broadly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to providing much-needed evidence on the employment destinations and key prior influences on those trajectories, the study also provides methodological pointers that can serve as the base for a

viable national student destinations survey for use across the region. Effective policies for ensuring the best possible opportunities for graduates rely on a sound evidence base that has been severely lacking to date.

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