

WHAT CAN TERTIARY STUDENTS IN AFRICA DO

TO INCREASE THEIR CHANCES OF FINDING WORK?

AUTHORS

Samuel Asare, Pauline
Essah, Jennifer Udeh,
Samuel Sasu, and
Martin Mulwa.



Acknowledgements:

We are grateful to Dr Lucy Heady for her constructive feedback that improved the report significantly. Thanks also goes to Izel Kipruto, Ekow Tachie-Mensah (former Communications Assistant) and Krista Samson for proofreading, editing and formatting the report. Last but not least, we thank the participants of the research for their time and effort.

Suggested citation:

Asare, S., Essah, P., Udeh, J., Sasu, S., Mulwa M., (2023). What Can Tertiary Students in Africa Do to Increase Their Chances of Finding Work? Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA). Mini Report.



Published by:

Education Sub Saharan Africa
Twitter: @essa_africa
Website: www.essa-africa.org

1. Introduction

This short report provides data and evidence to help tertiary students in sub-Saharan Africa increase their chances of finding work. It has useful information for students themselves as well as people in a position to advise students including counsellors, mentors, and student groups. It draws on secondary data from the [African Education Research Database](#) (AERD), and other relevant sources such as working papers and unpublished research. It also includes data from interviews with students, graduates and employers. The insights mainly come from universities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), but they still broadly apply to tertiary education across Africa.

Out of Africa's nearly **420 million** young people aged 15–35, **one-third** are unemployed, another third are vulnerably employed, and only **one in six** is in wage employment. The problem is not just unemployment, but underemployment (AfDB, 2015). The need to address this problem is acknowledged in policy discussions and documents. For example, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights Goal 8; the need for inclusive economic growth to

enhance progress and provide decent jobs for all. In addition, the African Union's Agenda 2063 places emphasis on the commitment of member nations to equip young people with skills to lead the socio-economic transformation of the continent.

Creating employment opportunities for young people in Africa is complex and requires effort from different stakeholders including tertiary education institutions, governments, industry, charitable organisations, funders/investors, etc. **However, students have agency to make choices and to take advantage of opportunities where available.** Student agency 'is the capacity of students to act purposively towards individual goals...' (Luo et al., 2019, p.821). Without students' commitment and ownership of their transition to employment, little will be achieved by stakeholders. Some of the strategies students can adopt to facilitate their transition to employment include networking and collaboration, participation in skills training and voluntary work, advocacy, and flexible mindset. These strategies are outlined in more detail below.

2. STRATEGIES FOR TRANSITIONING TO WORK

2.1 Networking and collaboration

Research has shown that social networks (including family, friends, and acquaintances) are an important pathway into employment (Burns et al., 2010; Gee et al., 2017). It creates avenues to share information about job opportunities and helps job searchers connect with people in influential positions.

According to Galenianos (2014), over 85% of workers use social networks in job search, and over 50% of all workers find their jobs through their social networks. Using data from South Africa, Burns et al. (2010) found that 41% of employers rely on friends and relatives of their current employees to recruit new workers. The importance of social networks for individuals and employers goes beyond getting the right job or reducing recruitment cost. It also leads to lower turnover and higher productivity (Gee et al., 2017).

Students can increase their chances of employment by proactively seeking opportunities to expand their social networks. One of such areas is leveraging alumni networks to facilitate career development and transition to employment (Chi et al., 2012). This would provide access to information on issues such as making appropriate course and career choices, overcoming challenges in learning, internship/apprenticeship opportunities, as well as employment opportunities after graduation.

According to Galenianos

85%

use social networks in job search,

and over

50%

of all workers find their jobs through their social networks.



Social networking sites were identified as importance sources for building networks for potential job opportunities:

Through networking, students can find people with similar interests to collaborate with. This was identified as a possible way to develop business ideas for financial support:



Social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter are good platforms to connect with professionals in areas of interest, as well as participation in conferences and other events."

(Graduate from Rwanda)



I think students need to explore opportunities to collaborate with each other to develop business proposals in a bid to start business ventures."

(Student from Ghana)

2.2 Participation in skills training and voluntary work

Okolie et al. (2020) encourages students to proactively identify and take advantage of opportunities within and outside their institutions, to enhance employability skills. One option is for students to participate actively during discussions, presentations and group work in academic courses. Another is to participate in programmes organised by career services centres of their institutions. However, there is evidence of low students' participation in such activities and programmes. This view was captured in an interview:



In some institutions, entrepreneurship is an optional course for all students. Students can register for such courses to develop skills that can help them start and manage their own business. Career centres also provide free training sessions. These programmes mostly receive low participation because students think that they need to focus on their academic work, which goes against their preparation for employment."

(Graduate from Rwanda)

In addition to programmes provided by institutions, students can learn new skills through the internet, as suggested by an employer from Ghana:



These days it is easy to learn. The internet has almost any information to help students to develop new skills. They should use it to enhance employment chances."

(Employer from Ghana)



Participation in voluntary work is another way students can enhance employability skills. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are opportunities, especially in the charity sector and small organisations, for students to learn new skills. Most of these charities conduct research on various themes so students can often find something interesting to work on. Involvement in these projects will help students develop important skills, including project management, critical thinking, and Information and Communication Technology, all of which are essential for work and life.

2.3 Flexible mindset

The flexibility students have in choosing where to undertake internships and their mandatory service to the state after graduation can create job opportunities. Internships are an important avenue for young Africans to develop employability skills and potentially secure employment after graduation. However, it is generally difficult for students to secure internships, due to limited spaces in receiving organisations (Dodoo & Kuupole, 2020).

Compounding the limited spaces is students' preference for specific organisations where they could potentially receive job offers after graduation.



Students normally want to go to organisations that they would like to work for when considering internships. Even though it is not a bad idea, there are limited spaces in such organisations so they should consider other options. It is possible to learn skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and collaboration in most organisations."

(Employer from Ghana)

In addition, some students turn down job offers due to unsatisfactory conditions. This was highlighted in the interviews:



There are instances where graduates have rejected job offers because of low salary or location. Yes, everyone wants a decent salary and a place where it is easy to get access to good schools, hospitals, water, etc. You can use such offers to gain experience to put you in good stead for future opportunities."

(Employer from Rwanda)

2.4 Advocacy for policy change

Advocacy is a vital tool for students to promote changes to enhance their transition to employment. This can happen at four levels – continental, national, institutional, and departmental. At the continental level, the All-Africa Students Union (AASU) campaigns actively in defence of students' rights, and the passage of policies on the need for the democratisation of education across the continent, with emphasis on access, equity, and equality.

Nationally, there are student pressure groups that campaign for government policies that enable job creation. An example was highlighted in another interview:



During the 2020 elections in Ghana, the National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) – the umbrella body of students' associations in various tertiary institutions – was always present at media engagements with presidential candidates to ask questions, including those relating to employment"

(Student from Ghana)

Similarly, insights from the interviews showed how advocacy can lead to positive results.



In 2011, a group of graduates formed the Unemployed Graduates Association of Ghana (UGAG), to engage government and other stakeholders to create a conducive environment for job creation. Following engagement with the National Youth Authority (NYA), the name of the association was changed to the Association of Graduates in Skills Development (AGSD) in 2017 to provide capacity building and financial support for graduates."

(Graduate from Ghana)

At the **institutional** level, student associations work with authorities to address concerns of students. According to Guan et al. (2016), students' associations in democratic societies have benefitted from participation in university governance. For instance, most university councils in Africa have a student representation, mainly the association's president. Concerns have however been raised regarding the

effectiveness of student representation on such university councils, due to power imbalance (Day & Dickinson, 2018). The relationships often tend to mainly be for information provision, rather than participatory decision making that considers students' concerns.

In some cases, students' associations have used protests to pressurise tertiary education authorities to address their concerns. In March 2021, students at Witwatersrand University in South Africa protested against the University's decision to prevent students owing fees from registering for the academic year. The request for continued registration was however declined by the University.

Even though students speak about the need to reform the curriculum to reflect skills requirement of the job market, it has not been at the forefront of the advocacy. The need for advocacy around skills development was stressed in the interviews:



Advocating for a competency based educational scheme to blend theory and practice, thereby helping students to develop entrepreneurial and vocational skills. All-Africa Students Union has developed the Grab-a-Skill Project to provide students with practical vocational skills for entrepreneurship."

(AAU Executive)

3. Conclusion

This report highlights the problem of youth unemployment and underemployment in Africa and how students themselves can contribute to the efforts of other stakeholders such as governments, education institutions and industry, to address the problem that affects students directly. It argues that without students' leading role in this effort, little will be achieved. Students have agency and can contribute to their transition through various ways, including networking and collaboration, participation in skills training and voluntary work, advocacy, and being flexible in decisions around employment. In addition, this report advocates for amplifying students' voices in youth unemployment discourse.



4. Recommendations for students and people in a position to advise students including counsellors, mentors, and student groups



4.1 Students need to be more proactive in developing employability skills

For instance, students should consider enrolling in entrepreneurship courses that may be offered in their schools, even if these courses are optional. This will not be a waste of the students' time as they will develop skills that are required by employers, and that could potentially help them start and manage their own businesses. Students should also attach more importance to free career sessions and fairs organised by university career services and student unions, as these can have direct impact on their employability.



4.2 Voluntary work is a good option to develop employability skills

There are opportunities especially in the charity sector for students to learn new skills. Most of these charities conduct research on various themes so students can find something interesting to work on. Involvement in these projects will help students develop important skills including project management, critical thinking and Information and Communication Technology which are essential for work and life.



4.3 Flexibility in choosing internships and mandatory service destination

During postings for internships and National Service to their country, there is fierce competition for specific organisations, sometimes leading to bribery and corruption, as students believe that serving in a reputable organisation will increase their chances of securing employment afterwards. Students are encouraged not to refuse alternative organisations when they do not get their preferred choice. Every environment provides opportunity to learn relevant skills including communication, teamwork, and collaboration.



4.4 Students should invest in research through their unions to support advocacy

Evidence is key in any advocacy programme so students, through their unions, should invest in research to ensure that reliable data is collected for advocacy. Using compelling evidence from research on students' learning experiences and graduation destinations is more likely to compel university leaders to address students' concerns, as no institution wants to have a bad image/reputation. In an era where institutional image is a priority, every effort will be made to address findings that can harm the image of the institution if published in the media.

References

- African Development Bank (2015). Jobs for youth in Africa. Jobs for Youth in Africa | African Development Bank – Building today, a better Africa tomorrow (afdb.org).
- Alam, A., & Ali, M. I. (2018). Students' Union in Institutions of Higher Education of India: A Critical Study of Needs, Significance and Roles. *Research Guru: Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Subjects*, 12(1), 104–113.
- Baah-Boateng, W. (2018). Youth unemployment and Joblessness challenge in Ghana: revisiting the Issues. A Background Paper for a National Youth Employment Dialogue.
- Burns, J., Godlonton, S., & Keswell, M. (2010). Social networks, employment and worker discouragement: Evidence from South Africa. *Labour Economics*, 17(2), 336–344.
- Chi, H., Jones, E. L., & Grandham, L. P. (2012). Enhancing mentoring between alumni and students via smart alumni system. *Procedia Computer Science*, 9, 1390–1399.
- Day, M., & Dickinson, J. (2018). David Versus Goliath: The Past, Present and Future of Students' Unions in the UK. Higher Education Policy Institute.
- Dodoo, J. E., & Kuupole, D. D. (2017). Utility of university curricula in contemporary times: Perspectives of employers in the Cape Coast Metropolis. *Journal of Education for Business*, 92(4), 186–193.
- Galenianos, M. (2014). Hiring through referrals. *Journal of Economic Theory*, 152, 304–323.
- Gee, L. K., Jones, J., & Burke, M. (2017). Social networks and labor markets: How strong ties relate to job finding on Facebook's social network. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 35(2), 485–518.
- Gorlach, I. A. (2019). University–industry collaboration: a case study of automotive industry in South Africa. *ISSN 2671-132X Vol. 1 No. 1 pp. 1-876 June 2019, Zagreb*, 341.
- Luo, H., Yang, T., Xue, J., & Zuo, M. (2019). Impact of student agency on learning performance and learning experience in a flipped classroom. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(2), 819–831.

WHAT CAN TERTIARY STUDENTS IN AFRICA DO

TO INCREASE THEIR CHANCES
OF FINDING WORK?



Published by:

Education Sub Saharan Africa
Twitter: @essa_africa
Website: www.essa-africa.org

