STUDENTS IN THE DRIVING SEAT:
YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

International
Higher Education

Introduction

Africa's leaders have committed the continent to an ambitious roadmap of development for the coming decades. In line with the proposals for the new Sustainable Development Goals, a wide-reaching vision has been put forward of eradicating poverty, creating cohesive and secure societies, and ensuring sustainable and equitable growth.[1] While the importance of basic education in development has long been acknowledged, there is increasing recognition that without higher education too, none of these goals will be achieved. Yet the university sector on the continent faces nothing short of a crisis. Systems have been allowed to expand without corresponding resources, leading to a catastrophic drop in quality and the churning out of increasing numbers of poorly equipped graduates onto an already congested job market.

This report looks for answers to this pressing issue in a place that has had far too little attention: the views of students themselves. Crucially, it argues that only by listening to students and empowering them to hold their institutions to account can we drive up quality across the systems. In-depth research in universities in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa has revealed the following key findings:

1. **Students no longer see their future in conventional salaried employment.**

   Entrepreneurship and social enterprise have become key areas of interest for graduates, along with combined careers in various sectors. Universities need to adapt themselves to this new reality.

2. **Giving back to their communities is an important goal for students.**

   While young people are ambitious in their own careers, they also feel committed to the development of their societies, and to supporting others in their communities of origin.

3. **Careers services and skills development programmes are under-utilised.**

   While all universities provide some employability activities, provision is patchy and reaches only a minority of students.

4. **Students from disadvantaged backgrounds face an uphill struggle.**

   Even for the lucky few who make it to university, developing employability skills, participating in internships and voluntary work, and securing employment is particularly difficult for certain groups.

5. **Universities are still characterised by rote learning.**

   While there are notable exceptions, in many institutions a fundamental shift still needs to be made towards critical thinking, enquiry-based learning and real-life application of knowledge.

6. **Despite the problems, students are unwilling to speak out about the problems their universities face.**

   The generally positive views of students on their institutions clash with the evident quality problems faced in the higher education sector. Students lack benchmarks by which to evaluate the provision they are receiving and a platform on which to express their views. Empowering students can have a transformative effect on institutions and systems.

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1. African Union (2014) Common African Position (CAP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. http://ea.au.int/en/sites/default/files/Book%20CAP%20%208_0.pdf; Evans, A and Steven, D (2013) *Delivering the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Options for a New Global Partnership*, New York University Center on International Cooperation. http://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/what_happens_ now_post2015_1.pdf

The challenge of higher education in Africa

For young people in Africa today, the future holds both promise and uncertainty. Economic growth, increased circulation of goods and services, new technologies, and improved connectivity have opened previously unimagined opportunities for interaction, travel, occupations and experiences. However, in the context of the continent's youth bulge, these gains are precarious. Increasing numbers of new entrants into the labour market have made competition for conventional salaried work intense, and unemployment rates are high, reaching 53.6 per cent in South Africa.[2]

Higher education is integral to this at once hopeful and precarious scenario. Access is expanding rapidly across the continent. In Ethiopia, enrolments grew more than tenfold in the first decade of the millennium, from 34,313 in 2000–01 to 447,693 in 2010–11.[3] Even in war-torn Somalia, there is now a thriving sector, with 34 new institutions established between 2004 and 2012.[4] Expanding enrolments to higher education have allowed new segments of the population to experience the richness of wider social and cultural interactions and opened new possibilities of work and enterprise. Nevertheless, for many the great promise of the university has not been fulfilled. Diplomas have not provided automatic white-collar employment as may have been the case in previous decades, and in some contexts such as Nigeria, rates of employment are not significantly higher for graduates than

for those with primary- or secondary-level qualifications.[5] Furthermore, even among those graduates who do find employment there has been widespread criticism by employers about what are perceived to be falling academic standards and lack of broader work skills and dispositions.

What matters, of course, is not just the levels of enrolment, but the quality of education provided. As has been the case in primary education over the past two decades, a shift of conception is needed from access to quality, or more rightly towards access with quality. The gaining of diplomas may increase positional advantage for individuals in the short term, but if those credentials are not accompanied by a rich and invigorating learning experience, then the benefits for individuals and societies in the long-term will be meagre. More worryingly, the unkept promise of higher education may only serve to foster frustrations in youth leading to disengagement and unrest. Without doubt, the conundrum of reducing unemployment and ensuring decent work for all goes beyond university, but higher education does have a crucial role to play in fostering work skills, technological innovation, citizenship, engagement with diversity and social inclusion.

This report aims to contribute to the task of ensuring quality higher education provision in the region through an in-depth assessment of student perceptions of the university experience and of their prospects as

graduates. There has been a significant lack of research in this regard, and student perspectives are needed to complement the views of other stakeholders, such as government, employers, university managers and lecturers. There are three key reasons why it is important to gauge the student view:

- universities should be responsive to the needs, aspirations and goals of students for their future lives
- the student view is essential for understanding how university provision is utilised, how effective it is and what the barriers might be to uptake
- listening to students and involving them in decision-making can be part of the answer, in fostering empowered learners and responsive institutions.

Existing research on student views on higher education in the African region is sparse. With the exception of the work of the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) in South Africa and the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA),[6] there are few studies that provide a rigorous assessment of student experiences, their perceptions and the evaluation of their institutions. For the four countries included in this report, there exist some studies that provide insights on specific themes,[7] for example, of student attitudes towards teaching approaches,[8] perceptions of student-lecturer relations,[9] experiences of 'non-traditional'

2. World Bank (2015) Unemployment, youth total (Percentage of total labour force ages 15–24) (modelled ILO estimate). http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS
3. Akalu, G (2014) Higher Education in Ethiopia: Expansion, Quality Assurance and Institutional Autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly* 68/4: 394–415.
4. The Heritage Institute (2013) The State of Higher Education in Somalia: Privatization, rapid growth, and the need for regulation. www.heritageinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/HIPS_Higher_Education_ENGLISH.pdf
5. National Bureau of Statistics (2011) 2011 Annual Socio-Economic Report. www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/pages/download/38
6. See: Mattes R and Luescher-Mamashela, TM (2012) The roles of higher education in the democratization of politics in Africa: Survey reports from HERANA. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 10/1: 139–170.
7. These are intended as an indicative rather than comprehensive list of relevant studies.
8. Asunka, S (2008) Online Learning in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ghanaian University students' experiences and perceptions. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 9/3: 1–23.
9. Chepchieng, M, Mbugua, S and Kariuki, M (2006) University students' perception of lecturer-student relationships: a comparative study of public and private universities in Kenya. *Educational Research and Reviews* 1/3: 80–84.

students[10] and first-year students,[11] coping strategies for living in student residential facilities,[12] and views on professional education.[13] There are also a handful of studies assessing student views on employability interventions.[14] However, a much broader programme of research gauging the student perspective is needed across the continent. The needs are particularly critical in Ghana and Kenya. The research base in South Africa, and to some extent Nigeria, is more extensive.

Ghana profile:

Population: 25.9 million
GNI per capita: $3,900
Tertiary GER: 12%

Kenya profile:

Population: 44.4 million
GNI per capita: $2,780
Tertiary GER: 4%

Nigeria profile:

Population: 173.6 million
GNI per capita: $5,360
Tertiary GER: 10%

South Africa profile:

Population: 53.2 million
GNI per capita: $12,530
Tertiary GER: 20%

Note: Population figures are for 2013;[15] Gross National Income (GNI) in international dollars;[16] Tertiary Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER).[17]

10. Morley, L, Leach, F and Lugg, R (2009) Democratising higher education in Ghana and Tanzania: opportunity structures and social inequalities. *International Journal of Educational Development* 29: 56–64.

11. Bojuwoye, O (2002) Stressful experiences of first-year students of selected universities in South Africa. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 15/3: 277–290.

12. Amole, D (2005) Coping Strategies for Living in Student Residential Facilities in Nigeria. *Environment and Behaviour* 37/2: 201–219.

13. Walker, M and McLean, M (2013) Professional Education, Capabilities and Contributions to the Public Good. *The Role of Universities in Promoting Human Development*. London and New York: Routledge.

14. Ekpoh UI and Edet, AO (2011) Entrepreneurship Education and Career Intentions of Tertiary Education Students in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, Nigeria, *Journal of International Education Studies*, 4/1.

15. World Bank (2015) Population, total. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc

16. World Bank (2015) GNI per capita, PPP (current international $) http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD

17. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2015) Gross enrolment ratio by level of education. http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=142&lang=en

The report focuses on four countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. The countries are diverse in their geographies, economies and cultures, yet are brought together by the common official language of English, [18] and the legacy of the British influence on their higher education systems. The highest rates of access to higher education are in South Africa at 20 per cent – compared to 12 per cent in Ghana, ten per cent in Nigeria and four per cent in Kenya [19] – though given its huge population, Nigeria has the largest system in absolute terms, with a total of 460 institutions and some 1.4 million students. [20] All of the countries have significant disparities in access between social groups. Gender and region are key dimensions in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, with females and those from the non-metropolitan areas having much lower rates, while in South Africa, race is the key determining factor. In all of the countries, these inequalities of background characteristics intersect, meaning that the chances for going to university for some social groups are almost nil.

There are also significant issues of quality. In Kenya, for example, the rapid expansion of the system through the parallel private stream in public universities has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in numbers of lecturers or expansion of physical infrastructure, leading to extremely difficult conditions for learning for students in crowded lecture halls and without adequate tutorial support. [21] A recent National Universities Commission investigation in Nigeria has reported poor-quality conditions in universities, including dilapidated offices and makeshift classrooms. [22] In South Africa, while institutions are better staffed and equipped, the key challenge is completion, with 55 per cent of students never completing their degree and a third dropping out in the first year. [23]

South Africa has some other distinctive features: in particular, the legacy of apartheid, and the divisions of educational institutions by race – a separation that continues in the gap between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. Another difference is that South Africa has a very low proportion of private enrolments, while the other three countries have seen considerable growth in this sector, now constituting 20 per cent in Ghana and 13 per cent in Kenya. [24]

Yet all four of these countries face a common challenge: that of ensuring access for a wide proportion of the population, in as equitable a manner as possible, and thereby building their graduates' knowledge, skills and social engagement so as to drive forward the development of their countries. As history has shown, this task is more than simply a question of granting more university charters, and represents a veritable conundrum for countries with scarce public and private resources.

This report forms part of the broader research project, *Universities, Employability and Inclusive Development* (2013–16), funded by the British Council. Focusing on Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and the UK, the project explores the role of higher education in fostering employability and developing just and prosperous societies. Through the dimension of inclusive development, the project goes beyond a narrow focus on graduate employment rates to consider the broader contributions that graduates make as citizens and community members, how their work can benefit all in society, and how equitable opportunities are between social groups.

This report presents findings from the second phase of the study, [25] involving research in case study institutions in each of the four countries: primarily, a questionnaire survey with 6,000 final-year students, in-depth individual interviews and focus groups with students from diverse disciplinary areas. [26] An opportunistic sampling approach was taken to the recruitment of participants, such that the surveyed students do not constitute a representative sample of the student body at each institution, or in each country more generally. Nevertheless, a broad diversity of students is represented, in relation to gender, disciplinary area [27] and socio-economic background. [28] Furthermore, the case-study universities were chosen to represent diverse types of institution, including elite metropolitan, regional, technical, private and faith-based institutions, where appropriate. However, the selection for the most part is skewed towards more established universities, meaning that conditions for students reported here are likely to be better than the average across all higher education institutions in the respective countries.

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18. South Africa has 11 official languages, and in addition to English-medium universities has Afrikaans-speaking and parallel-medium (English–Afrikaans) institutions.
19. UIS (2015) *Op. cit.* However, figures for Kenya are for 2009 and Nigeria for 2005; there has been significant growth since these dates.
20. Olayinka, I and Adedeji, S (2013) Higher Education and Governance Reforms in Nigeria: University Autonomy Paper presented at UNESCO/IIEP Policy Forum on Governance Reforms in Higher Education in Africa, in Nairobi, Kenya, 16 May.
21. Oanda, I (2013) Implications of Alternative Higher Education Financing Policies on Equity and Quality: The Kenyan Experience. In D Teferra (ed.) *Funding Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan; Wangenge-Ouma, G (2007). Higher education marketisation and its discontents: the case of quality in Kenya. *Higher Education* 56/4: 457–471.
22. University World News (2014) Investigation of public universities uncovers problems. www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130315113614800

Table 1: Characteristics of the case-study universities

Country	University	Public/ private	Date founded	Location	Number of students (undergraduate/ post-graduate)
Ghana	University of Ghana	Public	1948	Accra	26,154/1,816
	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology	Public	1952	Kumasi	34,820/6,642
	University for Development Studies	Public	1992	Tamale/Nyankpala/ Wa/Navrongo	20,075/346
	Ashesi University	Private	2002	Brekusu	550/–
Kenya	University of Nairobi	Public	1970	Nairobi	68,069/10,931
	Moi University	Public	1984	Western Kenya	41,184/3,656
	Daystar University	Private	1992	Nairobi	4,400/200
Nigeria	Imo State University	Public (state)	1981	Owerri, Imo State	6,000 / 4,500
	University of Ibadan	Public (federal)	1948	Ibadan, Oyo State	13,408/8,228
	Bingham University	Private	2005	Karu, Nasarawa State	1,800/–
South Africa	University of the Witwatersrand	Public [29]	1922	Johannesburg, Gauteng	20,961/10,173
	University of the Free State	Public	1904	Bloemfontein, Free State	23,734/8,143
	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	Public	2005	Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape	22,082/4,279
	University of Venda	Public	1982	Venda, Limpopo	10,459/1,359

In addressing student views, this report gauges perceptions in relation to two areas: first, students' career aspirations, the extent to which they feel prepared to enter the labour market and their prospects for obtaining employment; and second, the role of universities – the kind of learning environments provided by universities and the specific provision they offer to students to assist in preparing them for the labour market. Profiles are also provided for individual students, one from each of the countries, highlighting their trajectory and distinctive perspectives.

23. Council on Higher Education (2013) *A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum structure*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
24. UIS (2015) *Op. cit.*
25. The report summarising the first phase is available at: www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/graduate_employability_in_ssa_final-web.pdf
26. This report draws on the country-specific research reports authored by Eric Ananga (Ghana), Ibrahim Oanda, Daniel Sifuna and Zipporah Ongwenyi (Kenya), Segun Adedeji and Stephen Oyebade (Nigeria), and Melanie Walker and Sam Fongwa (South Africa).
27. Students were not selected from disciplinary areas such as medicine and teacher education, in which there is a straightforward career trajectory and fewer problems of graduate unemployment.
28. For details of sample, see full report: 'Universities, Employability and Inclusive Development: Survey of Final Year Students in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa' (available on request).
29. Private institutions in South Africa have a minimal presence in terms of undergraduate enrolment, hence the choice of all public universities for this study.

Students' aspirations and prospects for the future
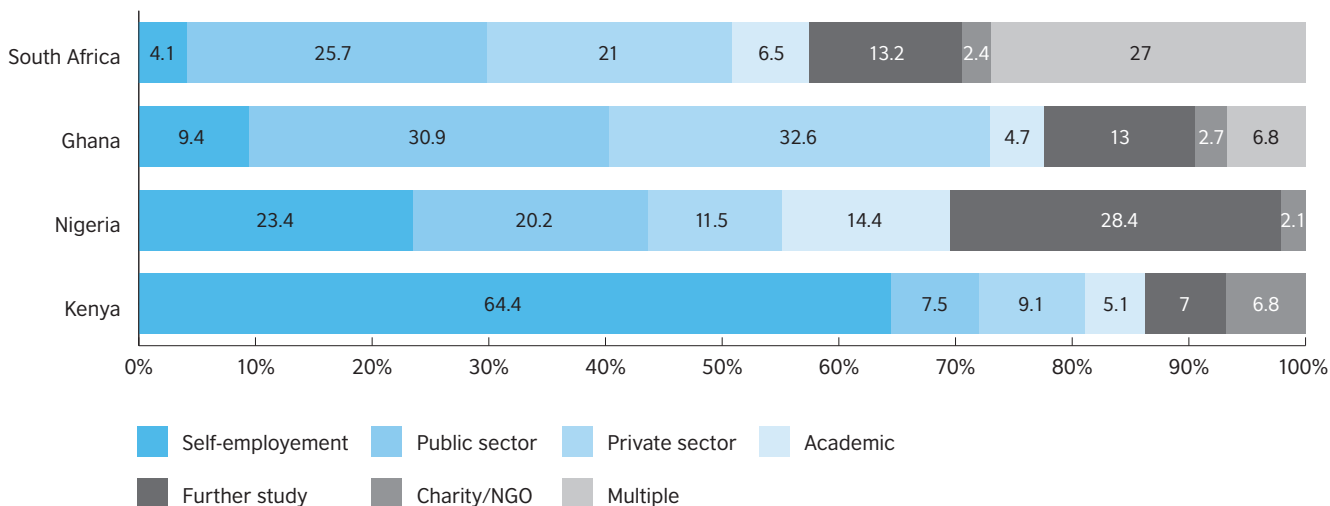
Career aspirations

In the post-colonial period, higher education in Africa was to a large extent a route for a select few to enter high-ranking government jobs. With the expansion of university systems, and some diversification of economies, university graduates have started to fill a range of roles in the private as well as public sector, following the global trend of increasing numbers of professions requiring higher education-level qualifications. However, the landscape is changing once again. Instead of salaried employment, graduates are looking to forge opportunities in self-employment. This trend could be explained either through push or pull factors, through the scarcity of conventional salaried jobs, or alternatively a positive attraction to the greater freedom, creativity and possibly financial returns of entrepreneurship.

Importantly, entrepreneurship is not only understood in a narrow economic sense, but also includes social enterprise, creating innovative forms of organisation and intervention to support communities, provide basic welfare and improve lives.

The chart below shows the career aspirations of the final-year students included in the survey:

Figure 1: Students' career aspirations by sector within study countries

Country	Self-employement	Public sector	Private sector	Academic	Further study	Charity/NGO	Multiple
South Africa	4.1	25.7	21	6.5	13.2	2.4	27
Ghana	9.4	30.9	32.6	4.7	13	2.7	6.8
Nigeria	23.4	20.2	11.5	14.4	28.4		2.1
Kenya	64.4	7.5	9.1	5.1	7	6.8	

Legend:
- Self-employement
- Public sector
- Private sector
- Academic
- Further study
- Charity/NGO
- Multiple

'There is no need mourning that you have no job, create a job for yourself.'
Economics student, Nigeria

The rising focus on self-employment is striking in these results – seen most obviously in Kenya, with a staggering 64 per cent of students considering entering this line of work – but also evident in the other three countries.[30] Only in Ghana does the proportion of students opting for conventional forms of public and private employment exceed 50 per cent. Nigeria, on the other hand, is characterised by a high proportion of students (28 per cent) opting for further study: there might be a pull as well as a push factor here, with students feeling it is their only option given the lack of employment opportunities.

Another notable point is the interest in a combination of careers.[31] Instead of being confined to a single form of work for life, students see themselves entering a range of complementary forms, sometimes termed portfolio careers. This combination might involve some public- and private-sector work, starting one's own business, as well as voluntary work or social enterprise. In one university, Ashesi in Ghana, as many as 81 per cent of students stated they would be going on to a combined career.

To put these figures in perspective, the proportion of students in the UK either self-employed/freelance or starting their own business six months after graduation is only four per cent (with those working on permanent or fixed-term contracts 57.5 per cent; further study 17 per cent; and unemployed 7.8 per cent).[32]

There are some significant differences among subgroups.[33] In South Africa, most black students hope to work in the public sector, while there was a greater emphasis on private-sector work among white students. The table below assesses career aspirations in relation to degree type:

Figure 2: Students' career aspirations by degree type within study countries
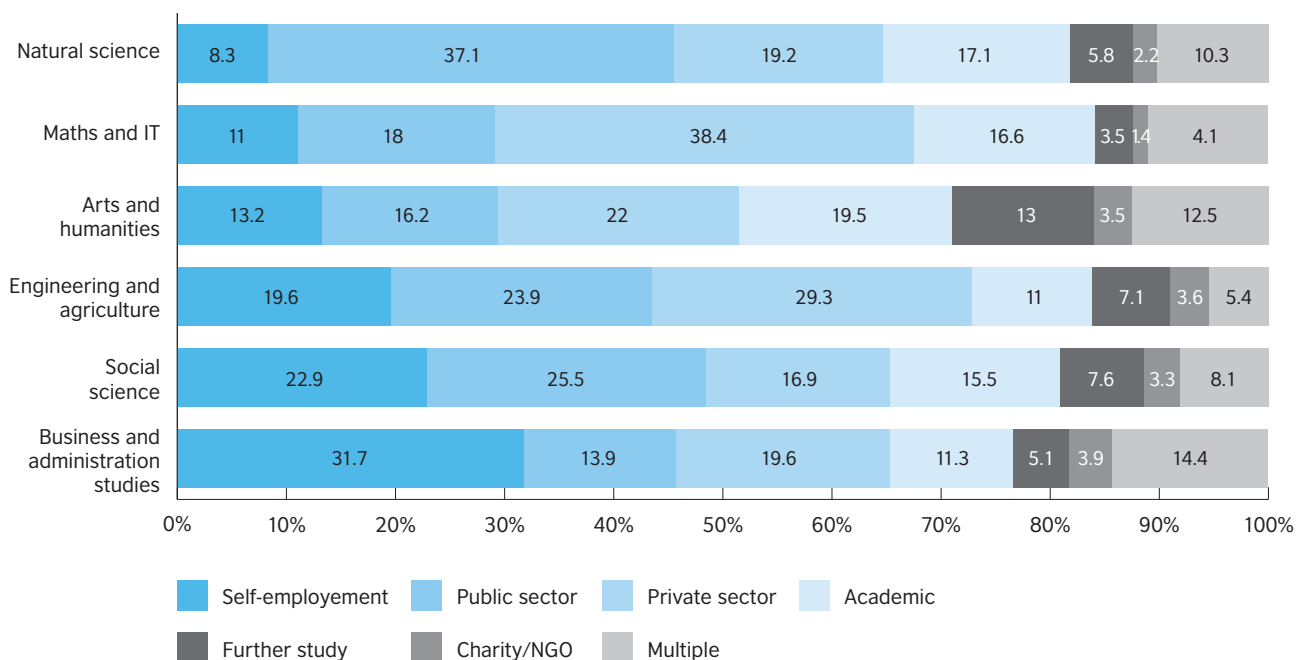
30. The survey does not have information on the subsequent career aspirations of those students who opted for further study.
31. The figures for combined careers are only available for South Africa and Ghana.
32. HESA (2014) What 2012/13 graduates did next. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pr/3203-press-release-207
33. Full details are available in the country-specific research reports.

Here the differences are less startling than those between countries. Nevertheless, there is a greater preference for self-employment among business and administration students, and for private-sector work among maths and IT students, while those in natural science aspire more to the public sector. [34]

Shifting the focus to specific careers, as might be expected these are largely determined by the students' previous choice of degree course. The problematic aspect here is that not all students have a free choice of degree in the first place, with many simply entering the courses available to them on the basis of their secondary leaving exam results, or because there are bursaries or government subsidies in particular areas. This phenomenon leads to an inevitable lack of engagement with the discipline or resulting profession for some students.

However, students' aspirations are not restricted to their own employment or personal gain. They also expressed a range of intentions of contributing to society more broadly and giving back to their communities of origin.

'This is because really education is power. One will come to the university and gain knowledge and skills to improve one's society. This education will enable me get a job and this will make me give back to the society.'

BCom student, Kenya

In part this is due to students wanting to pay back what has been invested in them:

'It is obvious that those who have received education up to university ought to positively contribute to the development of society. This is a person that has consumed a lot of resources and should therefore make a difference to society.'

BCom student, Kenya

Students expressed a range of aspirations for helping others and empowering communities, including developing sign-language provision, improving agricultural techniques and bringing marginalised cultures into the school curriculum.

What do students need to succeed?

The young people participating in the study show themselves to be adapted to the contemporary reality that employment is not guaranteed, and that the responsibility for acquiring relevant knowledge, skills and experience that will enhance their opportunities lies with them. Student views on the kinds of skills, knowledge and dispositions required for employability largely echoed those cited in debates more broadly in society: they saw the need for real-life work experience, practical application of their knowledge and a range of soft skills, such as communication and problem-solving.

Those in Nigeria in particular saw the need to develop soft skills as stemming from scarcity of employment opportunities:

'… being a graduate doesn't automatically guarantee you to secure a job, because you have to consider the environment in which we found ourselves, I mean the outside world that when you graduate, there are already like four to five sets of people who have graduated before you, that is where the problem lies. And because of this, you have to be creative; creativity prepares you for what you intend to get from your society, waiting to get a white-collar job is a mere wasting of time.'

Agriculture student, Nigeria

In addition to creativity, the kinds of skills and dispositions put forward by students included communication, interpersonal relations, teamwork and entrepreneurship. For some students, a lack of these skills was seen to be a major problem in Africa:

'[T]here was a conference I went for in Lagos, talking on Entrepreneurial Talented Nigerian, around November 2013, and the theme of the conference was collaboration, competence and competition. And we were talking about this issue … because you did not see people with the skills and the competencies that they need to excel. Already, the labour market is saturated with a lot of people. What distinguishes you is the extra skills you have to bring to the table.'
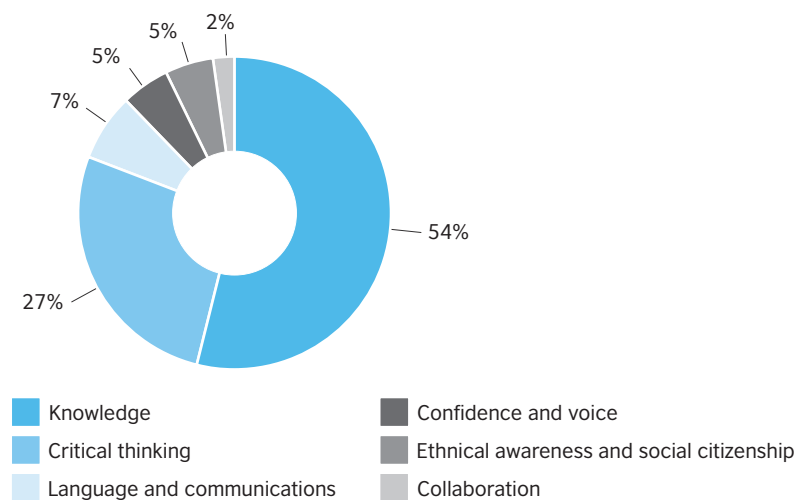
Political Science student, Nigeria

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34. The differences between disciplinary areas can in part be explained by the uneven distribution across countries: for example, the greater number of Kenyan students in business and administration, and the greater number of South African and Ghanaian students in natural sciences.

Nevertheless, it was not only soft skills that students emphasised. For South African students, disciplinary knowledge came out the clear winner:

Figure 3: South African student perceptions of most important graduate attributes

Knowledge

Critical thinking

Language and communications

Confidence and voice

Ethical awareness and social citizenship

Collaboration

This is not to say that other qualities such as collaboration and communication are not considered important, only that when required to rank, the students valued knowledge most highly.

'Of course there are challenges, you can't be all optimistic, we have to be realistic, because there are many graduates in the job market and the biggest challenge is that most employers want someone who is experienced; they will go for an experienced person rather than a fresh graduate from school.'
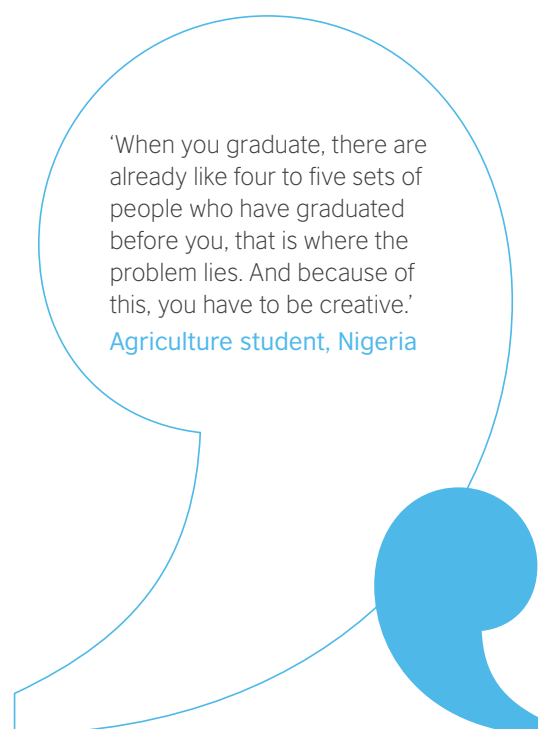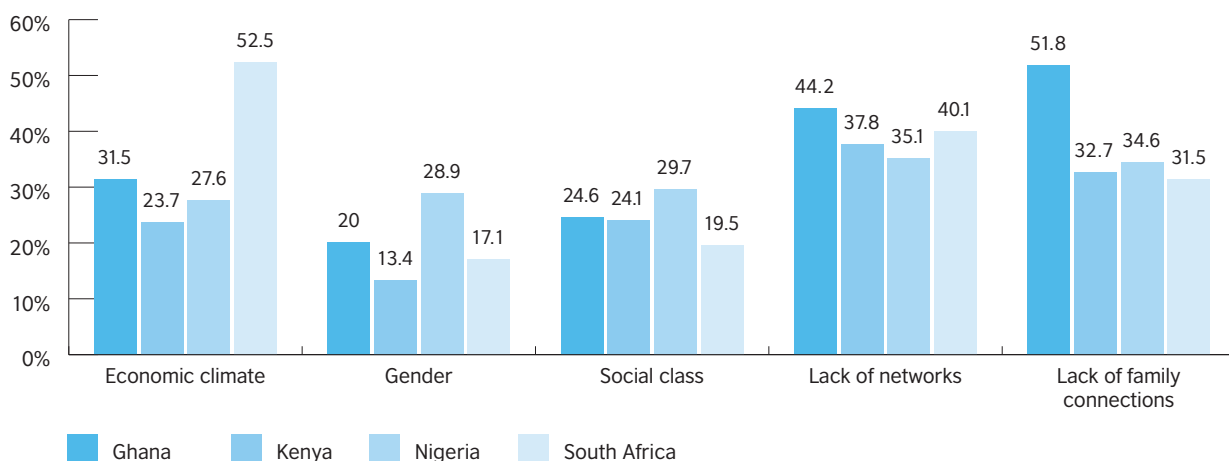Nursing student, Kenya

Challenges in gaining employment

Students do not, however, attribute difficulties in obtaining employment solely to a lack of personal qualities. The most important obstacle is the simple lack of jobs – a state of affairs of which students were acutely aware. In obtaining these jobs, recent graduates are seen to have an automatic disadvantage.

However, there were a range of other factors seen to constrain those looking for work, as shown through the survey:

Figure 4: Percentage of students reporting strong/very strong opinions about factors affecting employment prospects

Ghana | Kenya | Nigeria | South Africa

'When you graduate, there are already like four to five sets of people who have graduated before you, that is where the problem lies. And because of this, you have to be creative.'

Agriculture student, Nigeria

Interestingly, the economic climate was viewed as an impediment by a majority of students only in South Africa; gender and social class were considered a significant influence by few. By far the greatest influences were seen to be lack of networks and family connections, as emphasised by these students:

'I don't think it's about marks, it's about contacts. If you look at it, a lot of the time it's not the brightest people who may get good contacts, who end up doing vacation work or internships, just because their parents know a person in the company.'

Zoology student, South Africa

'Bad leadership is a major cause of unemployment in Nigeria, our leaders accumulate wealth that is supposed to be used in providing employment for the people. Another thing is that the job is there but the problem is that you cannot get a good job unless you know somebody, maybe a politician or somebody at the helm of affairs, or you have a big brother who can influence things.'

Economics student, Nigeria

Another issue raised by students was that geographical location and proximity to employers make a difference, with those in more remote universities greatly disadvantaged in comparison to those located in metropolitan areas.

Problems of skills mismatch were raised by disparities between different disciplinary areas. Those studying arts, humanities and social sciences in all of the countries are less aware of job opportunities, and more pessimistic about their prospects, while those in accounting, business and engineering students are more positive.

Nevertheless, it is an oversimplification to place the blame for problems of graduate employability solely on a skills gap or skills mismatch: in some cases there is a mismatch, but outcomes in the labour market depend on a range of other factors. Graduates may still not obtain employment even when they do have the appropriate skills, either through simple lack of jobs, or through lack of networks, low prestige of their institution or outright discrimination.

Stratification

In Africa, as in all regions, there is a trend of convergence between institutions, and evidence of 'mission drift', with initially diversified institutions – focusing on technical as well as general academic areas – slowly gravitating towards a similar model. This trend can be seen in Kenya, for example, in which 15 mid-level colleges have recently been converted into universities.[35] Nevertheless, differences of quality and prestige between institutions persist. In some cases, stratification of higher education systems is intensifying. This stratified prestige is seen to colour the decisions made by employers and thereby influence the employment prospects of graduates.

The effect of stratification on employment prospects was seen most starkly in South Africa, as shown in these contrasting accounts from the students in elite and periphery institutions:

'Employability, the way I see it around me is it seems like people get employed all the time, that's how I see it. I'd say that for us we are a bubble, we know privileged people, we have seen and met people who will say, "call me after graduation", we are in that sort of circle. It seems like in this bubble we live in at varsity [university], it seems like it's easy to get employed – you go out there and hassle for a month, two, three months and you get employed.

Civil Engineering student, South Africa

'Universities are ranked and unfortunately [this university] is slightly at the bottom; so if a person is looking at my degree and the degree of someone who went to Wits, looking only at the status of the university, then obviously the person from Wits has an advantage over me ... [Yet] as for the content of our degree I honestly believe that with the whole faculty of agriculture we are very well off.'

Animal Science student, South Africa

In part, the disparity relates to resource differentials between institutions: for example, while the student-staff ratio at the University of the Witwatersrand is only 15:1, it rises to 40:1 at the University of Venda.[36] Yet in the comment above we can see that while quality and prestige often go together, in some cases negative associations of a university can be influential even when the courses are of a good quality.

Given the limited numbers of jobs, and constraints and discrimination in the labour market, it is clear that universities on their own cannot solve the problem of graduate unemployment. Yet there is much that they can do. The following section outlines the views of students on what they learn at university, and how well their institutions are equipping them for their careers and future lives.

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35. University World News (2013) Plans for 15 new public universities to boost places. www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130208120627703

36. Republic of South Africa (2010) *Education Statistics in South Africa 2009.* Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

In the classroom ... it exposes you to a person's life. You [realise], this person is not that bad. Maybe I thought white people are like this, but this guy is different. So we've learned to appreciate other people.

Politics student, South Africa

The role of university

Generally speaking, students participating in the research were positive about their own institutions. In Kenya, despite widespread concerns about the poor quality learning environment in universities, 78 per cent of the students surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that their university was well regarded by employers, and approximately nine in ten thought that higher education had enhanced their knowledge, self-confidence, personal qualities, ability to make applications and ability to find work. While not all universities in all four countries were quite so enthusiastic, there was a generally positive evaluation made by students of their institutions and of the qualities they had gained from them. This result is in stark contrast to the frequent media reports of 'half-baked' graduates, and the concerns expressed by academic staff and researchers of the poor quality and precarious conditions of these universities. [37] Lecturers interviewed for this project in many of the universities also presented a very bleak picture of the current state of universities. How then to explain this apparent contradiction? There are three possible hypotheses:

The deference-to-authority hypothesis

Positive views may be the result of students' unwillingness to criticise their institutions, or even a fear of doing so. In the contexts researched there is a history of oppressive political regimes and cultural norms of not speaking out against those older than or senior to oneself. Students may hide any real criticisms they may have, particularly if they are unsure of the anonymity of the survey.

The no-benchmark hypothesis

In many cases, students do not have substantial familiarity with other institutions, including those in other countries, to compare with their own. As a consequence, they may not feel the lack of the kinds of provision, such as tutorial support or laboratory facilities, that may be expected in other contexts.

The generosity hypothesis

There was some indication from the data (though not in all contexts) that students felt that their universities were doing well, given the very challenging conditions in which they were working, and the lack of resources at their disposal. Furthermore, there is a possible element of gratitude emerging here, i.e. in a context in which the vast majority of young people have no access to university at all, even a poor-quality university experience is a lucky break and will help in some way to improve one's employment chances.

Nevertheless, different perspectives start to emerge when we look at some of the other quantitative indicators and the qualitative data. Students are critical of the forms of teaching provided to them – particularly the lack of practical application – and only some of the students have engaged with extracurricular activities to enhance their employability.

'I'd say that for us we are a bubble, we know privileged people, we have seen and met people who will say, "call me after graduation", we are in that sort of circle.'
Civil Engineering student, South Africa

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37. Inter-University Council for East Africa (2014) Regional higher education qualifications gaps. Vol. II; University World News (2014) *Op. cit.*

Uptake of careers provision

Figure 5: Employability activities undertaken by students
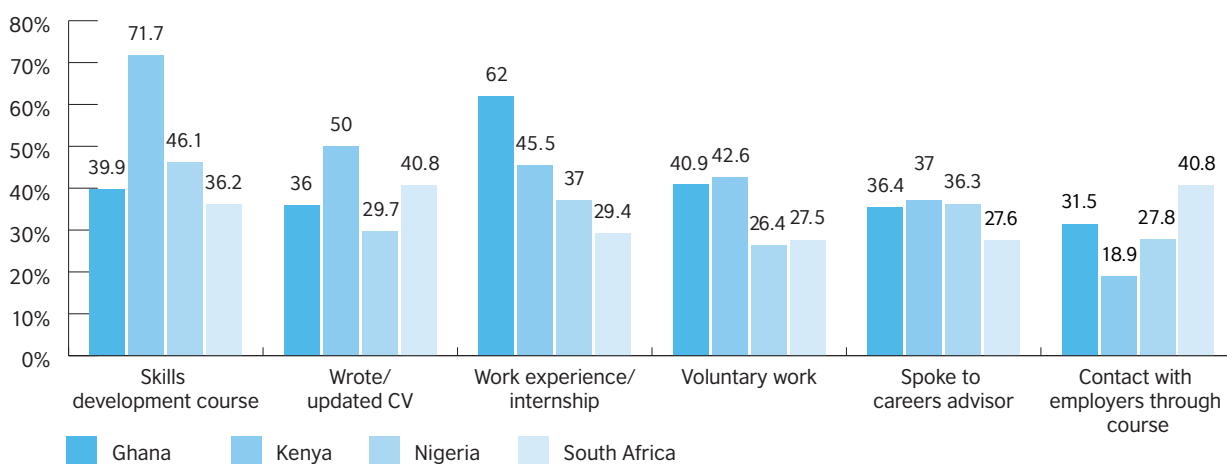
As seen above, surveyed students outlined a range of activities that they had engaged in while at university. While all had undertaken some relevant activities relating to employability, uptake was far from universal. The only activities for which more than half of students had engaged were skills development courses in Kenya – accounted for by the nationwide policy on the provision of entrepreneurship courses in universities, and work placements in Ghana – bolstered by the strong emphasis placed on these in particular universities. Approximately one in three students in the other countries have engaged in work placements, and another third in voluntary work, activities shown by research to be highly valuable in enhancing employability.[38] Uptake of other opportunities such as use of careers advisory services, CV writing and contact with employers, vary significantly by institution.

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38. Mason, G, Williams, G, and Cranmer, S, (2006) *Employability Skills Initiatives in Higher Education: what effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes?,* National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

Some activities are seen as highly valuable by the students:

'[W]hen it comes to leadership and acquisition of certain qualities, they do permit us to join the school union, and so to a certain extent, it really helps us to be mature and develop good character. Some of us don't really know what we have in us. It helps us bring out those qualities in us.'

Economics student, Nigeria

'[T]he internship programme has been of help, it gives insight on the real working day, helps to practicalise theories, and opportunity to meet people.'

Development Studies student, Ghana

However, while students do perceive the value of these activities, there is uneven uptake. In part this is because of timetable clashes or competing demands of their courses:

'They send emails at the wrong time because we are busy with exams, when you get an email at that time you're not going to spend time trying to send the CVs or trying to research more because you need to pass first.'

BCom student, South Africa

'I am aware that the careers department exists but I don't think they are aggressive. I have heard that they organize talks including careers day but this is done when we are also supposed to attend lectures and can only attend during free time. It therefore becomes difficult to participate.'

Industrial Chemistry student, Kenya

In one South African university, up to 90 per cent of third-year students did not know about the office for career development or where the office was situated. One student from Ghana gave this damning account:

'No opportunity made available by the university … I am not aware of any labour market options or career service by the university … Graduates from this programme even though they get employment, it is not as a result of the university's assistance. I am not aware of any labour market options or career service offered by the university.'

Psychology and Physiology student, Ghana

However, even students within the same institution can give quite contrasting views of careers provision, showing unevenness in the extent to which students are made aware of or utilise the opportunities available.

While many students do take advantage of employability-enhancing interventions, there is neither consistent nor universal provision of these activities across higher education systems. There is significant diversity between institutions in this regard. In some universities, the careers service has very minimal activity, and engagement with students beyond periodic careers fairs is weak. On the other hand, in Ashesi University in Ghana, all students work closely with the careers office from the first year, developing CV-writing skills, interview skills, discussing career options and making contact with employers. A similar picture emerges with the facilitation of volunteering and internships. While students are left largely to fend for themselves in some

institutions, in the University for Development Studies in Ghana, every student undergoes a two-month community work placement at the end of the first and second years, and an industrial attachment at the end of the third year.

Across the region, careers support is nevertheless a considerable concern: the universities participating in this study include flagship institutions and well-equipped private institutions, and many lower ranking universities or non-university tertiary institutions in these countries will have even more precarious provision. Of course, engagement with extracurricular activities is not simply a question of supply: in some cases provision is there, but students opt not to take it up, or are prevented by other commitments. The equity aspect emerges strongly here, with students from wealthy families in a much stronger position to engage in these enrichment activities than those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Theory/practice misalignment

Careers inputs of the type outlined above are not the only influence on students' employability. Students' knowledge and skills, and even values, are profoundly influenced by their experiences within their regular degree courses, and it is here that deeper problems emerge.

One finding that was ever-present across the four countries was concern over the lack of practical application of the knowledge gained in university. It is important not to be overly reductive on this issue. It is inevitable that universities will focus substantially on theory: indeed, that is part of what defines an institution as a university.

Furthermore, a familiarity with the theoretical underpinnings of a professional area, and the ability to challenge received ideas and generate new theories are fundamental to innovation and adding value in the workplace. Nevertheless, students also need the opportunity to apply what they have learned in practice and to understand the relationship between the theoretical and the practical. This connection is too weak across the institutions. In some cases, students were expected to learn IT without access to computers and aquaculture without access to fisheries. As this student stated:

'In the last three years I've been acquiring only the theory part of it. I don't even know how to use a camera. That is if I want to be a journalist. If it is about advertising, I've never been exposed to the advertisers. If I want to be a public relations officer, I don't know what I will be doing, I just know the theory part of it.'

Media Studies student, South Africa

'I think we should do more practical work than this book mining we are doing. They have to change the style of teaching and challenge the thinking of students.'

Renewable Natural Resource Management student, Ghana

Ironically, even the entrepreneurship courses now made mandatory in Nigeria were seen in many cases to be delivered in a manner entirely divorced from practice. One student in Ghana used this memorable expression to describe the predicament: 'Yes, the university doesn't teach how to fit into the industry, but only to chew, pour, pass[39] and forget.' However, once again there were differences between institutions in this regard, and Ashesi University is certainly an exception in showing a substantial concern with the practical application of knowledge. In the South African context, equity issues were intertwined with the theory/practice issue, as disadvantaged students were least likely to have the opportunities to engage with these practical experiences.

Concern for the overly theoretical was accompanied by more general criticisms about the quality of teaching and learning. One Nigerian student stated that, 'Lecturers should not use course materials that are over 12 years old in lecturing', a fair comment by any standards. Other views expressed were as follows:

'[T]he experience has not met my expectation, because it does not challenge your thinking, there is a need to change the style of teaching and challenge the thinking of students.'

Earth Science student, Ghana

'I have come across the term in newspaper articles where employers or experts have been raising complaints about lack of competency by those looking for jobs … Our system is to blame … Training focuses on examinations as the ultimate challenge. One can just concentrate and pass yet he/she has no necessary competencies … Education is not challenge oriented … Teachers simply examine what they teach and in several cases, they do not demand extra work from students.'

Chemical Engineering student, Kenya

In the views of the students then, curriculum and pedagogy need to be transformed so as to move away from rote learning and regurgitation in exams and create critical learners capable of problem-solving and innovation.

Learning for enterprise, citizenship and diversity

Nevertheless, despite the challenges identified, students in many ways have rich experiences of learning. Entrepreneurship was valued by a number of students (particularly in Kenya and Nigeria), and some saw university as being successful in enhancing their qualities in this area:

'And like I said, the introduction of entrepreneurship was to widen the scope of employability of Nigerian graduates so that if you can't find a job, there is no need mourning that you have no job, create a job for yourself.'

Economics student, Nigeria

'University is not only important for getting a job but it can also empower you to be self-employed and create job opportunities.'

Business Management student, Kenya

Another Kenyan student reported that, 'The entrepreneur spirit was imparted to me at the university' through a course provided by his department on detergent production.

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39.   'Chew, pour, pass' is an expression used in Ghanaian schools to mean cramming.

As affirmed by previous studies in various African countries [40], students also develop attributes that will allow them to make a positive contribution to society as citizens. Evidence in this regard was strongest in South Africa, but was present in all four of the countries. They developed skills of leadership and of working in teams:

'In my faculty we have a lot of group work, and a lot of team work … you have to work with people, and you have to adapt to certain things … leadership, I've also gained that, because in high school I wasn't really anybody's leader, but through growing, and realising that people slack behind, you have to stand up and say, no, actually this is not what's happening, this is what must happen. '

Politics student, South Africa

'In first year I joined an organization on campus … I had never heard of it, I had never been part until the December holidays and by January I was already president, I was recruiting people on campus … the association required me to go and speak to big business … I think that was where I got the practical experiences of being able to articulate myself in a professional manner.'

Economics student, South Africa

Through their experiences of living in diversity, they also develop greater sensitivity, tolerance and understanding, and combat prejudice:

'In the classroom, especially when we have to do things like group work, there you don't have [the divide between white and black students] … And then it exposes you to a person's life. You [tend to realise], this person is not that bad. Maybe I thought white people are like this, but this guy is different. So we've learned to appreciate other people.'

Politics student, South Africa

'You meet different people that you would never have met before … And also, with that, it comes with adaptability. Like sometimes you're going to realise that, oh well, this person doesn't really think the same way I do, so you must learn to try and figure out how you and that person can be in the same space, but not overpowering each other.'

Construction Economics student, South Africa

Finally, they develop civic engagement and knowledge, and commitment to contribution to society:

'It makes a difference because it has enabled me to be well informed on life issues and how to deal with them. It has also given me the opportunity to be a good citizen who can bring about development.'

Sociology student, Kenya

'Graduates do make better citizens because they think critically and easily adapt to change and find solutions to societal problems … The difference the university makes is not only with regards to the work life … they teach virtues and leadership skills.'

Business Administration student, Ghana

'Yes because when one comes to the university you get skills you become more knowledgeable and also you meet new people who advise and make you see life in a bigger way. I think university education makes all the difference in one's life and this has a good impact in the society …'

Communication student, Kenya

However, we have to be careful about making an assumption that universities will automatically produce good citizens, as highlighted by this student from Ghana:

'Not all graduate make better citizens. The fact that one has graduated from the university does not mean he/she will be able to contribute positively to the development of the nation. There are many graduates who are in high positions in society, yet they are the very brains behind the downfall of society through their immoral acts, crimes and corruption.'

Chemistry student, Ghana

What is important then is not just the fact of going to university, but the nature of the university, and the way in which the learning environment – through its activities, relationships and principles – influences students' values, understandings and commitments. Universities need to think more broadly about how they are shaping the capacities and dispositions of students for all facets of their lives.

40. For example, Luescher-Mamashela, TM, Kiiru, S, Mattes, R, Mwollo-ntallima, A, Ng'ethe, N and Romo, M (2011) *The university in Africa and democratic citizenship: hothouse or training ground?* Wynberg: Centre for Higher Education Transformation.Luescher- Mamashela, T, Ssembatya, V, Brooks, R, Lange, R, Mugume, T and Richmond, S (2015) Student engagement and citizenship competences in African universities. In N Cloete, P Maassen and T Bailey (eds) *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education.* Cape Town: African Minds; Mattes, R and Mozaffar, S (2011). *Education, legislators and legislatures in Africa.* Wynberg: Centre for Higher Education Transformation.

Students driving change and quality in higher education

The student voice has been glaringly absent from recent discussions on graduate employability in Africa. As argued above, it is essential to bring the views of students into the debate, so as to understand their needs and aspirations, the best way to tailor the provision in universities and the use that is made of that provision in students' lives. Furthermore, the act of engaging students in discussions and decision-making about universities is itself a developmental process that will enhance their ability to participate as active and critical citizens in society. In a number of universities students already provide feedback on their courses and have representation on key committees, yet these mechanisms do not always ensure a meaningful voice.[41] Students across the four countries were not always treated as responsible adults, as one Kenyan student noted: 'I think they imagine everyone is rowdy and that is why they go on the defensive most of the time. They end up frustrating students who are just harmless.'

While there is a long history of student activism in African universities, the existence of an independent and critical student voice has been seriously compromised in recent years.[42] Students do voice their complaints in certain arenas, but it is rare (with the possible exception of South Africa) that they make those demands official. For many, the costs are too high in terms of jeopardising their own successful completion of their degree: anecdotally, there have been examples of student leaders who have had their diplomas withdrawn on account of voicing their demands too forcibly. More generally, there are prevalent cultures of deference to authority that make it hard for students – and indeed even for junior lecturers – to speak their minds. These constraints lead ultimately to apathy and disengagement:

'We were not able to raise these issues with the administration because we lacked unity. There are issues to be addressed but many people are just not bothered and prefer to go about their businesses. In the event that they are raised by students, it takes time to be addressed.'

Chemical Engineering student, Kenya

Allowing the voice of students to emerge more fully is not a recipe for the disintegration of order in the institution: in fact there are good reasons to believe that listening authentically to students reduces the risk of destructive unrest. Nor is it the first step in the unravelling of the academic integrity of the institution: indeed, the earliest European university, that of Bologna, was initially formed as a union of students, who governed themselves and contracted lecturers.[43]

In a dysfunctional higher education system, students will put up with poor-quality teaching, outdated curricula and absent lecturers as long as they are obtaining their diploma at the end of their course. Yet diplomas do not drive a thriving economy nor a just society. For inclusive development to occur in these societies, a rich learning environment needs to be provided, and in order for this to happen, students need to be central to decision-making about all aspects of university life.

The following are the key implications of the findings presented in this report and associated recommendations:

Acknowledging new career and life trajectories

Young people in Africa no longer look exclusively to traditional forms of salaried employment. There is a notable move towards entrepreneurship in all countries, though particularly in Kenya and Nigeria. Social enterprise is also an emerging area of interest for students. Despite the increasing marketisation of higher education systems, students do not view their degrees solely in terms of personal economic gain, but show a strong commitment to giving back to society. Universities need to adapt themselves to this new reality, providing a more versatile curriculum for developing students' capabilities, as well as opportunities for community engagement, social enterprise and volunteering.

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41. For broader discussions of the ways in which students can be involved in institutional governance, see for example: Klemencic, M (2014). Student power in a global perspective and contemporary trends in student organising. *Studies in Higher Education* 39/3: 396–411; Luescher-Mamashela, T (2013) Student representation in university decision-making: good reasons, a new lens? *Studies in Higher Education* 38/10: 1,442–1,156.

42. Klopp, J and Orina, J (2002) University crisis, student activism, and the contemporary struggle for democracy in Kenya. *Africa Studies Review*, 45/1: 43–76.

43. Perkin, H (2007) History of universities. In JJF Forest and PG Altbach (eds), *International Handbook of Higher Education*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Enhancing careers services

There are examples of good practice in careers services across the institutions, and many students are taking up opportunities for careers advice, skills development, extracurricular activities and work placements. However, in many institutions only a small proportion of students have access to these services. Universities need to expand considerably their range of careers support provision and enhance the quality of the offering.

Developing critical thinkers

Students are aware of the transmission-based pedagogy and outdated curricula – the so-called yellow-notes phenomenon – present in many of their institutions. They perceive the need to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills for the workplace and for their lives in general. Attention should be paid to the ways in which these qualities can be developed inside and outside the classroom. A fundamental shift is needed in university culture from rote learning and exams towards a pedagogy in which students are actively engaged in deliberation, enquiry and critical reflection.

Engaging the practical

Universities will always be places for developing theoretical knowledge, engaging with the abstract and discussing the ideal or the philosophical. Yet the theoretical also needs to be contextualised within the practical, providing students with the opportunities to apply the knowledge to real situations. Furthermore, in a number of areas – particularly science, technology, agriculture and engineering – infrastructure and equipment such as laboratory facilities are essential in order for students to develop the knowledge and skills required of the discipline. Theoretical knowledge must go hand-in-hand with practical application throughout the full range of university degrees.
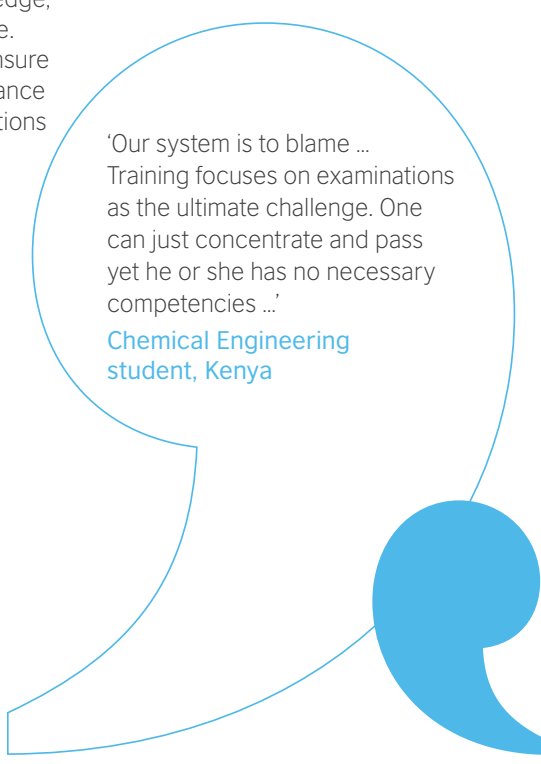
Ensuring equity and inclusion

Opportunities for developing employability are not distributed evenly across the population. In all of the countries in this study, some students have excellent provision and others struggle to develop the knowledge, skills and networks they require. Interventions are needed to ensure that all students have a fair chance of pursuing their career aspirations and life goals.

Empowering students

A clear finding emerging from this study is that the student voice needs to be engaged with much more fully. Ensuring accountability of institutions to their students is an essential step in improving their provision. Institutions should view students not just as consumers, by providing value-for-money products that will be attractive to the market, but should include them as primary stakeholders in the collective task of ensuring a rich and relevant learning environment. Opportunities should be provided for students to participate meaningfully in decision-making at all levels.

The revitalisation of African universities for prosperous, democratic and inclusive societies requires a range of national policies and institutional reforms and increased investment. An essential component of that sea change will be bringing students to the centre of the institution.

'Our system is to blame … Training focuses on examinations as the ultimate challenge. One can just concentrate and pass yet he or she has no necessary competencies …'
Chemical Engineering student, Kenya

Student profiles

Profile 1: Kenya

Boiyo[44] exemplifies the new breed of entrepreneurial youth in Kenya. A 23-year-old Industrial Chemistry student at the University of Nairobi, he intends to develop new products from maize and eucalyptus for animal feed, medicines and cosmetics in his home town of Eldoret. While studying hard for his degree, he also recognises the importance of complementary activities. He is pursuing a professional course in business 'as a way of having an edge in a competitive society' and has already registered his own company focusing on data collection and marketing.

While Boiyo has had a positive experience of his university, he recognises that higher education does not provide all that he needs to equip himself for his career choice, being too focused on cramming for exams. Furthermore, he lamented the unnecessary duplication of courses and lack of the practical application of ideas from chemistry. In terms of careers support within the university, he strongly appreciated the initiatives of lecturers in his department to invite representatives of chemical companies to come to speak to students, which proved very inspiring. However, he wasn't successful in obtaining an internship, something he feels will work against him in looking for opportunities subsequently. He recommends:

'University education needs to re-orient learners so that they become job creators and not just train them for jobs. In the area of chemistry, there should be more time for encouraging students to come up with projects and sponsorship for the same by linking students to established companies...'

However, even for a student as driven and focused as Boiyo, the pressures can sometimes become too much:

'Society expects a lot from us. For example, after university, they expect you to succeed by getting a job. Reflecting on such things made me feel disturbed while on campus. I used to think whether such a dream will materialize especially being the first born. This made me occasionally fail to focus on my studies as I was always in thoughts.'

Profile 2: Nigeria

'I am Tolani, a recent graduate of the Department of English, University of Ibadan. It just came to me naturally to be an entrepreneur. I have discovered this since I was as little as six years old, I used to sneak into my dad's office. I sat on his chair as the CEO and tried to pseudo-act like the managing director. I didn't know all those times that I just had this instinct in me..., so later when I got into University of Ibadan I started a call centre on campus in my hall of residence and room, there I got an introduction to the Centre of Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI) here and from there then I came to meet the professor ... for mentorship and advice.

'So it was from there that I carried out my market research ... I just visited a friend in her hall of residence, on getting there, a floor mate of hers said she wanted to go to the market and was saying that about five other students came running to her that please buy this for me, please help me with this ... some of them said I don't like arguing with these belligerent market women.

'I had to buy a bicycle, then I got orders in the afternoon, in the evening after my lecture ... deliver to them in their hostels, so I was making money. ...but the stress was really wearing me out because it's like trying to do things for 50 people in a day, just one person. Then I felt there could be a better way to tweak this idea and make a whole lot of money out of it. So, we could just get a refrigerator in our hostel, we could just buy these things and you will keep it.

'So I did a questionnaire asking them the questions like "Would you like to get soup ingredients on campus?" The answer was unanimously positive. So I started Soupah Kitchen and I registered the business and started it as an enterprise and I employed three people. On starting that's like 100 per cent increase in sales and profit because the things we sell they are just soup ingredients like parboiled pepper, organic material ... steamed vegetable, well steamed... The food technologists ... told us the things we should do... You pour it in your pot within five minutes, you expect your soup to be ready.

'So that is the problem we are solving for students and in the long run we are very much ready now to launch, to meet working mothers like professionals, people that do not have much time to stay in the kitchen or go to the market. I could say the fact that I have a solution to bring to the table and people appreciate it and buy into the idea, and they respect the fact that it is well researched. It is well made; they can trust our idea.

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44. Pseudonyms have been used for all students.

'The CEI has a lot to do with entrepreneurship and innovation business and from there I think introducing courses, mentorship programmes training to help the students realize their potential. [T]rying to juggle your work, academic work with your business, and innovation with your enterprise is the first step. The university needs to do like a mentorship programme for them. Make mistakes with it, learn from it, get something to do.'

Profile 3: Ghana

Luke attends the University for Development Studies in the less economically developed northern region of Ghana. He is the first of his family to go to university.

'One of the first reasons why I chose it was because I like doing practical things and among the universities I already knew of when I completed my secondary school was UDS and their third trimester offering the practical programme which sends students out to the field to do practical things. I was really interested in that. That was why I came here and with the interest in working in an agricultural centre and also … giving back to society. I really fell in love with the school.

He is studying for a BSc in agriculture technology, and aims with his degree to assist rural communities to develop their agricultural techniques in order to feed themselves better and assist in the development of the region and the country.

However, even with the strong commitment of UDS to practical engagement, there are challenges. While Luke has joined visits to irrigation dams and even a farm in Benin, resource constraints in the department have prevented further visits to field sites. Generally speaking, practical application is a problem for Ghanaian students in his view: 'there are students that do very well theoretically and you ask them questions they will get 90 per cent, 100 per cent, but you put him in the field and he cannot do.'

Aspects valued in terms of developing employability include mentoring from lecturers, extracurricular activities (Luke has undertaken a diploma in project management) and developing networks and contact with employers. The latter is an area in which the university could do more in his view, by strengthening links with industry: 'universities of Ghana should rebuild the broken wall. It is a broken wall.'

While he valued strongly the community placement element on the programme, he also had a recommendation for enhancing it:

'I'm thinking of how to strengthen this practical programme. It's really a good initiative and from what I am seeing we only go to these places, write up our reports and somehow the reports are being done somewhere and not being utilised, but this work that we are doing brings out facts. They bring out problems that can be solved. So if they can strengthen it so that what usually happens is you study for a period of seven weeks and then the eighth week we bring in employers, or people, and tell them what we have found and I think that if we could add the stakeholders of those communities, maybe the DCE,[45] the member of parliament of that area, to be around for these students to make these presentations and they will see these students are good in this and … that these students can do this and do that, these are the students we should look out for. We need to extend our classroom to this place.'

Profile 4: South Africa

Raised by a single parent in an African family in post-apartheid Johannesburg, Lerato shows unwavering confidence in her chosen path: 'I don't have one [a plan B]. I applied to one university and I applied for one degree', in her view the best in the country. Now a final year law student at Wits university, she is set on becoming a human rights or constitutional lawyer.

Things haven't always been easy in her studies, and she failed some of the early courses, forcing her to repeat a year:

'Because you get thrown into school where there are no teachers looking over you, no principal, no bell to tell you to go to class. Honestly, I spent a lot of my first year sitting on the grass basking in the sun and talking to my friends. That's what we did. A biggest challenge is a matter of taking it upon yourself the responsibility of you having to handle your own education.'

Secondary schools in her view need to do much more to prepare students for the rigours of university work.

Taking responsibility is also fundamental to employability for Lerato.

'Find out for yourself and take responsibility and take charge for your own education because if you just sit back you're going to get a glass half empty at the end of the day, you're not going to get the best that you can.'

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45.   District Chief Executive.

In Lerato's view, this involves not just focusing on studies, but interacting with others on campus, engaging in extracurricular activities as well as volunteering and internships: 'Employability I think is a delicate dance, a delicate dance between your academics, your practical skills/experience and who you know.' Even part-time casual work can be fundamental for developing work skills.

However, skills are only part of the story in her view, and in practice opportunities depend to a great extent on one's background and contacts:

'[I]f you are from a poorer background and probably black or previously disadvantaged say, then the likelihood of you having strong contacts is unlikely. If you are from a wealthier white or advantaged background then it's ten times easier. That's just very practical. Just from the people who I graduated from high school with you can just tell that certain people are set from the get go. Irrespective of what they are studying or whatever, they can always land on their feet.

One of the great barriers to reversing this process is the fragmentation of the black community, making *Ubuntu* [46] hard to achieve: 'we are in a position where everyone is trying to survive as opposed to just sustaining themselves. So it is survival of the fittest at this point. So you are for yourself and for your own family, so you can get yourself set up first.'

Yet university can make a difference:

'Graduates make better citizens I think … [I]n a democracy it is paramount that you be educated and informed so that you can decide on who your leadership should be or you can decide how the country should be run and how you should act as a citizen of that country, to better it.'

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46. *Ubuntu* is a Bantu concept signifying humanity, togetherness and human kindness.

Acknowledgements