

## Holistic initiatives for enhancing graduate employability in Zimbabwe

Evelyn Chiyevu Garwe  
Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education

### ABSTRACT

The objective of the study was to document initiatives for enhancing graduate employability and building successful future careers for students. The author used the case of Zimbabwe to explore interventions by higher education institutions, government, industry and commerce as well as professional bodies. The methodology involved a mix of secondary data and where necessary buttressing with primary data collection through interviewing key informants from the relevant sectors. The results showed that the country utilized various ways to stimulate graduate future economic engagement. Crafting curricula relevant to economic and societal needs had the greatest impact. Exposing students to work related learning was also useful in nurturing future entrepreneurs as well as building successful careers in academia and industry. Government efforts to strengthen Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and to promote internationalisation through scholarship programmes contributed immensely to improving graduate employment opportunities. Private sector initiatives included facilitating a six-month graduate internship programme by the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC). The study recommended the critical need for all stakeholders to cooperate in enhancing graduate employability.

Keywords: graduate employability, entrepreneurship, higher education institutions, work related learning

## INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive and challenging global world with diverse demands, many countries are facing serious problems of graduate unemployment (Adesina, 2013). As a result, the higher education sectors are under immense pressure from governments, employers and parents to produce quality graduates that can be economically engaged at the individual, national and global level (Teichler, 2007). Such graduates should possess a combination of attributes that will enable them to take an adaptive and proactive approach to their careers (Bezuidenhout, 2011). While there is consensus worldwide on the importance of addressing employability within higher education, there remains some debate on how best this can be achieved (Harvey, and Morey, 2002). The paper will share the initiatives taken by Zimbabwe to make sure that every stakeholder (including the government, higher education institutions, industry and commerce, employers, professional bodies, parents and the students) plays its part in ensuring that graduates are able to find or create employment sustainably.

Although many countries are faced with problems of unemployment in general (Adesina, 2013), the scope of this paper is limited to graduate employability. A graduate here refers to someone who has a bachelor's or higher degree from a higher education institution (HEI). The rationale for focusing on graduate employability arises from the realisation that governments, employers and communities are increasingly interested in what HEIs have to offer as a source of recruitment and for the development of existing employees (Keech, 2006). In part, this has been driven by a growing awareness of the potential of HEIs in the development of knowledge based economies and driving innovation and national development (Escrigas 2008).

### **What is graduate employability?**

Most literature acknowledges the definition of graduate employability given by Yorke, (2008) who described it as a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Bunt et al., (2005) referred to them as skills that cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to chief executive officer. Employers regard employability as 'work readiness', whereby the graduate should possess the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable him/her to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after assumption of duty (Mason et al., 2006). Lees, (2002) explained the distinction between employability and employment in that the latter means having a job, whilst the former refers to the capacity of the graduate to function in a job and be able to move between jobs, thus remaining employable throughout their life (Knight and Yorke, 2004).

### **What makes a graduate employable?**

The transition from university to employment amongst graduates is influenced by many factors such as the state of the economy, the quantity of graduates versus available jobs, and the preference for paid employment rather than job creation. However, many research studies have revealed that it can also be the result of graduates' lack of desirable technical and employment skills, knowledge and abilities required by the labour market consisting of interactive attributes - communication skills, interpersonal skills and team working, personal attributes, including, intellect and problem solving, analytic, critical and reflective ability, preparedness for lifelong learning, self-motivation, flexibility and adaptability, risk-taking, commitment to ethical action and social responsibility and as well as technical or "hard skills" for example information technology skills (Archer and Davisons, 2008; Harvey, 2006; Pop and Barkhuizen, 2010). Employers require graduates who can quickly adapt to the workplace culture, use their abilities

and skills to evolve the organization and participate in innovative teamwork (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2002; Little 2001). Hence it is imperative that universities inculcate into graduates deep intellectual capabilities and practical skills that either make them more attractive to employers or enable them to start and succeed in their own enterprises. In Zimbabwe, graduates are increasingly encouraged to spearhead the formation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), enter into freelance work and/or create self-employment.

### **Responsibility for employability**

A consistent theme within the literature on graduate employability revolves around who should take responsibility for it. Should it be the individual, the employer, the state, private sector and professional bodies or all of them together? De Bruin and Dupuis, (2008) averred that employability is a shared outcome and responsibility, even though individuals' skills and knowledge rests at its core. However, there has been a clear trend towards a greater onus for responsibility for employability resting on the individual who is expected to update their knowledge and skills through continuous learning to enhance their relative employability vis-à-vis other individuals (Carbery and Garavan, 2007; Southwood, 2011), and being sufficiently flexible and adaptable to meet employer requirements. In Zimbabwe, the responsibility for graduate employability is a shared responsibility as will be explained in this paper.

### **Initiatives for enhancing graduate employability**

Research has documented several responses and strategies of enhancing graduate employability including introduction of new relevant courses and qualifications, enhanced curricula, entrepreneurship modules, imaginative developments in work experience and its accreditation, careers advice and the development of progress files and personal career planning (Nunan et al., 2000; Blackwell et al., 2001; Harvey et al., 2002; Knight and Yorke, 2003; Callanan and Benzing 2004; Moreland, 2005; Mason et al. 2006; Little et al., 2006; Watts, 2006; Hall et al. 2009). Cranmer, (2006) reported that several universities had introduced some employability skills into their curricula either by incorporating the skills aspect or through separate courses that concentrate on skills development and entrepreneurship.

In evaluating the efficacy of the various initiatives, Mason (2006) found that structured work experience had positive effects on the ability of graduates to find employment within six months of graduation and to secure employment in graduate-level jobs. This finding was consistent with many other researches, for example, McKnight (2002) found the effects of work related learning to be long lasting: she found a 4.6% salary premium attached to work related learning some 3.5 years after graduation after controlling for degree discipline and a range of personal and university characteristics.

### **Graduate employability in Zimbabwe**

Since attaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has invested heavily, and continues to do so, in the education of its entire people on the expectation that these skills could contribute to national economic productivity and development. The higher education sector has expanded from having one university with an enrolment of 2240 in 1980 to having fifteen universities with a total enrolment of 60 000 in 2013.

Despite persistent reports of rampant graduate unemployment and concerns that large numbers of university graduates in Zimbabwe were underemployed and thus unable to utilise effectively the knowledge and skills they acquired while at university, the study by Al-Samarrai and Bennell (2003) dispelled these concerns when they found that nearly all the traced graduates in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania were in professional occupations that were directly

related to their university training with only a few non-education graduates teaching. The graduate employability situation in Zimbabwe has since deteriorated as the country is witnessing growing number of graduates who are chasing declining job opportunities in the formal market. However, there is no consensus on the exact statistics as well as disaggregated data on the nature of this graduate unemployment problem (ILO, 2011).

The *Newsday* (May 2013) reported that results from their snap survey based on average graduation statistics of the 15 registered universities in Zimbabwe, indicated that the combined total of graduates for the year 2012 was approximately 10 000. The report revealed that the University of Zimbabwe and Midlands State University topped the list with 2 700 and 2 338 respectively. The Zimbabwe Open University had 1560, National University of Science and Technology had 1 450, Chinhoyi University of Technology 674, Bindura University 673, Women University of Africa 500 and Lupane 131 graduates. Sadly, while graduation statistics in the country's higher education sector are easily available, the same cannot be said about the employment statistics of these graduates since most tertiary institutions do not have fully-fledged career and alumni centres which handle graduate placement and trace the alumni careers. Very few studies in Zimbabwe have focused on graduate unemployment statistics. However, a study by Robertson, (2007) stipulated that the formal unemployment rate stood at 80 percent due to shrinking productivity. He indicated that few of the 2 million young people inclusive of graduates who turned 18 since the year 2000 found jobs with a regular income, training, and advancement or career prospects. The current state of the economy, characterised by further shrinkage of the formal sector and the concomitant retrenchments, suggests that there has not been significant job creation and the growing cadre of graduates must compete for the few jobs available in the private sector as well as the public service. Some graduates migrate to other countries notably South Africa, Namibia and Botswana where they take up employment or embark on further studies.

This study investigated the initiatives taken by Zimbabwe to address the challenge of graduate unemployment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study took the analytical approach. It involved a comprehensive desk study aimed at collecting secondary data from various sources such as online and hard copy books and periodicals, journals, research reports, policy documents, strategic plans, websites and newspapers. Where information was limited or was not clearly understood, the researcher then used primary research to fill in the gaps by exploring issues pertinent to the study objectives. In this case data was collected through personal interviews with key informants from representative organisations for HEIs, employers, graduates, Heads of government Ministries and Departments and other relevant groups (e.g. professional bodies, Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, etc.). Thirty key informants from Harare were interviewed face to face. However, because of logistical challenges, twenty five informants who reside outside Harare were interviewed telephonically. Most of these followed up the interviews by sending additional information to the researcher via email or by hand. The data on which this study is based was gathered from January 2013 to October 2013.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings revealed that enhancing graduate employability in Zimbabwe involved a multi-pronged approach, including initiatives by HEIs, government, private sector and changes in labour market institutions, all aimed at assisting graduates' transition from education into work. The various initiatives will be presented and discussed below:

## Initiatives by Higher Education Institutions

### *Curriculum Changes*

The findings showed that universities in Zimbabwe are keeping abreast of the dynamic environment by continuously introducing new innovative degree programmes which address the gaps that exist in the labour market. Table 1.1 gives examples of such programmes. The development of the new programmes is done through wide consultations with potential employers and other stakeholders. Final approval of these programmes is done by the national regulatory body, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) which is responsible for overseeing quality assurance in higher education. Generally, graduates from these new, unique and relevant programmes were quickly absorbed into the labour market on completion of their programmes. However, a few of these programmes faced resistance from employers, for example, graduates with the Bachelor's Degree in Wildlife Management were shunned by employers who considered them to be too specialised and lacking grounding in basics of Animal Sciences. The concerned university had to amend the programme offering to comply with industry needs. Another example given was the Degree in Family and Consumer Sciences, the graduates did not fit into the health industry, the teaching or any other profession. Quite a number of the graduates had to pursue other programmes to complement their academic qualifications and improve their employability.

Most universities enhanced their curricula by focusing on entrepreneurship and technopreneurship. This was done either through incorporating these aspects in all courses, introducing special modules or introducing separate programmes. These interventions, helped to shape the minds of the graduates from just expecting to be employed to willingness to become self-employed and to create employment. However, the success of these initiatives hinged on government policies and funding support. This finding agrees with other studies that reported that worldwide, entrepreneurship is regarded as a panacea to unemployment, poverty and poor economic growth (Akweshola et al., 2007; Msipah et al., 2013; Ogundele, et al., 2012) and can best be inculcated through entrepreneurial training and education (Botha et al., 2006). To augment this initiative, the Zimbabwean government has placed a lot of emphasis on the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) as evidenced by the burgeoning artisanal engineering sector that is being driven by an expansion of technology-trained graduates from the higher education sector (Msipah et. al., 2013).

Whilst Zimbabwean graduates have embraced entrepreneurship as an attractive alternative to formal employment that provides opportunity for financial independence, job creation, innovation and economic growth, research carried out elsewhere in Africa suggest that many university graduates are reluctant to embark on it as a career, even when the opportunity exists (Omololu, 1990). Ekore and Okekeocha (2012) found that psychological factors notably fear of failure as an entrepreneur, among university graduates, in Nigeria tended to inhibit or even prevent entrepreneurship from being considered as a desirable or even a viable career option. The study revealed that, in 2008 alone, Nigeria produced over 300 000 graduates from its 104 universities yet many of them remain unemployed and would not go into entrepreneurship with some choosing accept jobs that are less than satisfactory. The Zimbabwean success story suggests that perhaps what is important is the demystification of the entrepreneurship concepts by incorporating them in all courses and in all spheres of life through empowerment drives.

## **Initiatives by Higher Education Institutions in partnership with employers**

### ***Work-related training***

All the fifteen registered universities in Zimbabwe include an assessed component of work related learning for periods up to one year in their curricula. Work related learning was designed to reduce the gap between theory and practice, and comprised work-based learning, internships, work placements, learning through work experience (part-time or voluntary), and learning by utilising work-based scenarios and simulations in various forms. The overall purpose of work-related learning is to assist graduates in the transition to the workplace. Whilst it encompasses the development of certain skills (e.g. communication, team working), it also aims to increase the student's awareness of the context and functioning of the workplace, and to make links between the subject content studied and a real-life environment. Thus, the student's learning experience is central to work-related learning.

Most graduates managed to get employed by the companies where they were attached during work related learning. However, due to the increasing number of students requiring placements, some students had to delay completion of their studies because the programme regulations do not allow students to proceed with studies before successfully completing at least eight months of work attachment and passing the assessment. Despite this misgiving, the findings overwhelmingly showed that employers, students, graduates and HEIs value work-based learning as an effective approach to promote the employability of graduates.

These findings are in agreement with other researchers who found work related learning to be invaluable as a way of inculcating non-technical skills such as presenting technical findings to a diverse audience and teamwork as well as improving personality, self-confidence and attitudes towards work (Weligamage, 2006). The strongly positive effects of graduate work experience on labour market outcomes buttresses the point that many relevant employability skills are probably best learned in workplaces rather than in classroom settings (Mason et al., 2006). Weddle (2010) observed that employers in the past were prepared to hire graduates who had modest skills and train them to perform a job. He noted that nowadays, they seek to employ graduates who have all of the skills to do a job and the ability to use those skills effectively in the workplace.

### ***Advisory Boards***

Some university departments have advisory boards and/or partnerships consisting of industrial companies, consulting firms and other relevant stakeholders. These partnerships and boards ensure that the curriculum for every degree program is current and relevant to industry. They also allow departments to tap into the collective experience of industry practitioners and leaders, which, in turn, gives students the knowledge and skills they need to enter directly into the workforce upon graduation.

## **Initiatives by Industry and Commerce**

The Employers' Confederation of Zimbabwe (EMCOZ), Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI) and Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC) represent the three umbrella bodies for the Zimbabwean private sector. Their members participate in providing work related learning and attachments for students during the training periods in the institutions as indicated earlier. The capacity of the private sector to actively participate in graduate related programmes was limited by the economic crisis which saw many companies reduce their activities and some closing. ZNCC also introduced a new initiative to assist graduates as outlined below.

### ***The Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC) employability program***

ZNCC implemented an employability program as an initiative aimed at building job skills and improving the employment and self-employment status of undergraduates and graduates (under the age of 30) who seek to enter the labour market. ZNCC works with its membership and strategic partners to assist graduates by:

1. Providing job related training and support entry into gainful employment in the informal economies.
2. Supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship development
3. Delivering effective life skills training to build employment/self-employment-seeking and performance skills, social capital and personal esteem; and
4. Promoting and facilitating civic engagement through which graduates may acquire valuable leadership, organization and job related skills and experience.

ZNCC receives applications from both employers and graduates willing to participate in the employability programme. ZNCC then selects suitable graduates and attach them to participating companies for a period of six months. ZNCC is responsible for paying a fixed stipend to the graduate on a monthly basis. In addition, ZNCC organises periodic employability training workshops for the benefits of the graduates.

The host companies benefit from contributions of the graduates who normally bring to the organisation/ company fresh perspectives and can help design and implement innovative new programs. The hosts play a major role in developing the overall capacity of the graduates through providing a platform for acquiring new skills to enhance their employability as well as providing the opportunity to network with other young leaders in the business community.

#### ***Other initiatives***

CZI undertakes initiatives that enhance the growth of SMEs, thereby indirectly creating more employment opportunities for graduates. This is done through their Business Linkages and SMEs Committee. There are also small initiatives that are being done by individual companies that promote the growth of SMEs and employment for graduates. ZNCC also assists SMEs with market linkages at the local and international level and in accessing capital through intermediary negotiations with the banks.

#### **Initiatives by Government**

To realize the vision of enhancing graduate employability, the government of Zimbabwe came up with several which include the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise Policy and Strategy Framework, the Graduate Entrepreneurial and Employment Promotion Programme (GEEPP), the Zimbabwe Youth Council through the Zimbabwe Youth Council Act, Zimbabwe National Employment Policy Framework, Zimbabwe Youth Empowerment Network, National Skills Development Framework, Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Act and the Presidential Scholarship Programme. These provisions create opportunities for graduates, and open up avenues economic development.

#### ***Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) Development***

The government of Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Industry and International Trade, and in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth Development, Gender and Employment Creation established a Policy Document for the support of Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises (SMMEs), which was approved by Cabinet in July 2002. Government then introduced a fully-

fledged Ministry of SME Development, which works closely with the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economic Development, and the Ministry of Agriculture. Government has continuously worked out strategies to address various obstacles facing the small business operator notably hostile regulatory environment, limited access to finance, inadequate management and entrepreneurial skills (Nyoni, 2002). The existence of a shared vision is evident among all stakeholders in advancing the cause of small business and providing an enabling environment for them to realise their full potential. In a bid to strengthen the SME sector the government of Zimbabwe also set up an SME bourse to promote their activities so that SMEs will be listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) (Gogo, 2007).

Zindiye et al., (2012) avers that Government support for the SME sector has been repeatedly enunciated in various policy documents such as the Framework for Economic Reform; The Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST); and the Economic Recovery Programme. He further elucidates that the government put up various support programmes financed by institutions such as the Small Enterprise Development Corporation, Zimbabwe Development Bank, Credit Guarantee Company of Zimbabwe, Agricultural Development Bank, and the Venture Capital Company of Zimbabwe.

### ***Graduate Entrepreneurial and Employment Promotion Programme (GEEPP)***

The study found that the Government of Zimbabwe had introduced the Graduate Entrepreneurial and Employment Promotion Programme (GEEPP) which seeks to take advantage of government policies such as land reform, indigenization and economic empowerment by promoting entrepreneurship amongst university graduates. GEEPP enables graduates to start their own business enterprises thus assisting in curbing the levels of graduate unemployment in the country. This initiative complements already existing youth development programmes by focusing on addressing graduate youth unemployment through enhancing skills and in inculcating a culture of self-reliance. GEEPP is a national project that covers all of Zimbabwe's ten provinces. Specific strategies and potentially viable projects have been identified sector by sector.

The programme also allows for provision of the requisite skills to manage the "start-ups." The recognition of entrepreneurship as a viable policy response has also seen many higher education institutions offering formal training in entrepreneurship as discussed earlier. Cognisant of this, many Zimbabwean universities such as Harare Institute of Technology, Chinhoyi University of Technology, and Women's University in Africa are offering training and degrees in entrepreneurship as part of their curricula. Furthermore, the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) Association in Zimbabwe is rebranding into an Institute of Enterprise Development to underpin the paradigm shift that is happening in remoulding entrepreneurs from traditional managers.

This need for emphasis on entrepreneurship training agrees with research findings elsewhere, for example, the United Nations World Youth Report (2011) contains a discussion on Youth Entrepreneurship and notes that while participants in the UN e-discussion strongly felt that youth entrepreneurship is a promising solution to rising or persistent unemployment, there were many calls for greater opportunities to develop skills that are needed for entrepreneurial activities, including in schools. This buttresses the point that apart from access to funding, entrepreneurial skills development should also be prioritised.

### ***Zimbabwe Youth Council (ZYC) initiatives***

Zimbabwe created the Zimbabwe Youth Council (ZYC) through the Zimbabwe Youth Council Act (Chapter 25:19 as amended 1997) which provides for the establishment, functions, and operations of the Council. The role of the Youth Council is to register and coordinate the



activities of national associations and clubs while playing an advisory role to government on youth needs and issues. It is financed by Government through the Ministry of Youth Development, Indigenisation and Empowerment. It has a mandate to undertake projects that have potential to create employment for young people which include fund raising, marketing and trading activities.

The Zimbabwe Youth Council (ZYC) came up with a 10-point plan which mainstreams entrepreneurship as an effective route to dealing with youth unemployment amongst the 60 percent youthful population inclusive of university graduates. The programme provides access to funding entrepreneurship through various schemes such as the Old Mutual Kurera/Ukhondla Youth Fund which is administered through the Central African Building Society to the tune of US\$11 million.

### ***Zimbabwe Youth Employment Network (ZIYEN)***

Cabinet approved the creation of the Zimbabwe Youth Employment Network in 2006 which is part of the world-wide Youth Employment Network which was established within the framework of the Millennium Summit, held at the United Nations in September 2000 where world leaders resolved to “develop and implement strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work.”

The objective of the ZIYEN among things is to: develop a national action plan on youth employment as an integral part of the National Employment Policy Framework; promote youth entrepreneurship training and development; promote access to project finance for the youth; review education and training curriculum in order to enhance youth employability; develop strategic partnerships and mobilise resources for promoting youth employment; improve labour market information in order to guide youth in their career choices and available employment opportunities. The network played an important role in the formulation of the National Employment Policy Framework.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper has presented various responses by Zimbabwe in an effort to enhance graduate employability, embracing academic initiatives, university-industry linkages, government and private sector initiatives. The study concludes that in Zimbabwe, the quest to enhance graduate employability is a shared responsibility among all stakeholders and recommended that continued success hinges on cooperation among all stakeholders in enhancing graduate employability.

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## APPENDICES

Table 1: New programmes that address the needs of Zimbabwe's labour market

| University   | Degree Programme                                     | Level     |
|--|--|-----------|
|  | Irrigation Engineering                               | Bachelors |
|  | Post-Harvest Technology                              | Bachelors |
|  | Biotechnology  | Bachelors |
|  | Fuels and Energy                                     | Bachelors |
|  | Nanotechnology                                       | Bachelors |
|  | Mechatronics   | Bachelors |
|  | Purchasing and Logistics                             | Bachelors |
|  | Strategic Management                                 | Masters   |
|  | Business Intelligence                                | Masters   |
| <b>Reformed Church University</b>                        | Special Needs Education                              | Bachelors |
| <b>Solusi University</b>                                 | Peace and Conflict Studies                           | Bachelors |
| <b>Midlands State University</b>                         | Disability Studies                                   | Masters   |
|  | Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and<br>Museum Studies | Bachelors |
|  | Safety, Health and Environmental<br>Management       | Bachelors |
| <b>Lupane State University</b>                           | Forest Resources Management                          | Bachelors |
| <b>National University of Science<br/>and Technology</b> | Sport Science and Coaching                           | Bachelors |
|  | Lasers and Applied Optics                            | Bachelors |
|  | Fiscal Studies                                       | Bachelors |
|  | African Leadership                                   | PhD       |
| <b>Bindura University of Science<br/>Education</b>       | Intelligence and Security                            | Bachelors |
| <b>Harare Institute of<br/>Technology</b>                | Electronic Commerce                                  | Bachelors |
| <b>University of Zimbabwe</b>                            | Medical Laboratory Sciences                          | Bachelors |
|  | Land Geographic and Information<br>Systems           | Masters   |
|  | Tropical Hydrobiology and Fisheries                  | Masters   |
| <b>Women's University in Africa</b>                      | Sociology and Gender Studies                         | Bachelors |
| <b>Africa University</b>                                 | Peace and Governance                                 | Masters   |
|  | Intellectual Property                                | Masters   |
|  | Ethnomusicology                                      | Bachelors |