



## Transitioning from Academia to Workforce: Addressing the Challenges Faced by University Graduates in Securing Employments in the Labor Market

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### Abstract

*This study investigated the challenges faced by university graduates in Rwanda as they transition from academia to the workforce, with a focus on securing employment in diverse industries and sectors. The objectives were to explore these challenges and identify strategies that higher education institutions can adopt to better prepare their graduates for professional environments. Using purposive sampling, 30 unemployed graduates, 20 human resource managers, and 15 educators were selected for in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data gathered from these interviews, revealing recurring patterns, underlying meanings, and significant themes. The findings highlight various obstacles encountered by graduates, including skill mismatch, limited networking, inadequate guidance, and a competitive job market. A notable issue is the misalignment between academic qualifications and industry needs, exacerbating skill mismatch. To address these challenges, collaboration between academia, industry, and policymakers is crucial, alongside strategies such as integrating practical training, fostering industry collaboration, and emphasizing digital literacy and soft skills development. Recommendations also include curriculum review and adaptation, entrepreneurship education, and the establishment of continuous feedback mechanisms. Internship and apprenticeship opportunities are emphasized as essential for providing hands-on experiences. Implementing these strategies can enhance graduates' practical readiness and contribute to their employability, fostering a seamless transition into professional environments while promoting individual success and economic development in Rwanda.*

**Keywords:** academia, workforce, university graduates, employments, labor market

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education serves as a cornerstone for national development and individual prosperity, acting as a bridge between academic knowledge and practical application in the professional jurisdiction. In the dynamic background of contemporary higher education and the labor market, the imperative to assess the alignment between academic achievements and workforce demands has become increasingly paramount.

Globally, the transition from academia to the workforce has become increasingly complex in recent years. The rapid pace of technological advancement, coupled with shifts in global economic dynamics, has reshaped the labor market, demanding a diverse set of skills and competencies from graduates (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, the globalization of economies has intensified competition for jobs, leading to heightened expectations from employers and heightened pressure on graduates to differentiate themselves in a crowded job market (World Bank, 2018).

In Africa, the challenges faced by university graduates in transitioning to the workforce are particularly pronounced. Despite significant investments in higher education across the continent, many graduates encounter difficulties in



finding suitable employment opportunities. Structural barriers such as limited job creation, mismatched skills between graduates and labor market demands, and inadequate support systems contribute to high rates of unemployment or underemployment among African youth (AFDB, 2020). Moreover, persistent socio-economic inequalities exacerbate the hurdles faced by marginalized groups, further hindering their access to quality employment opportunities (ILO, 2021).

In Rwanda, a nation committed to educational advancement as outlined in Vision 2050 (Republic of Rwanda, 2017), the expansion of higher education has been substantial. However, a persistent and concerning trend has emerged—the higher unemployment rate among university graduates. This study embarks on a critical exploration of this issue, aiming to understand the complex challenges contributing to the elevated unemployment rates among Rwandan university graduates from 2018 to 2023.

The commitment to educational development in Rwanda, as stated in Vision 2050, sets the stage for an investigation into the efficacy of higher education in preparing graduates for the contemporary labor market. The transformative potential of education is not only measured by academic achievements but by its tangible impact on employment opportunities and societal development. Recent studies, such as Umutesi (2021), have illuminated the existence of discrepancies between educational outcomes and the evolving demands of the labor market. Additionally, Rwigema and Niyonsenga (2022) have underscored the importance of evaluating the employability skills of Rwandan university graduates, shedding light on the critical intersection between academic preparation and employability.

Despite the considerable expansion of higher education in Rwanda, a growing concern persists regarding the higher unemployment rate among university graduates. The nation's commitment to educational advancement, as outlined in Vision 2050 (Republic of Rwanda, 2017), raises questions about the effectiveness of higher education in preparing graduates for the contemporary labor market. Recent studies have illuminated challenges within this context, with Umutesi (2021) noting discrepancies between educational outcomes and market demands. Additionally, Rwigema and Niyonsenga (2022) underscored the importance of evaluating the employability skills of Rwandan university graduates to address rising unemployment concerns. Recent studies have illuminated the existence of discrepancies between educational outcomes and the evolving demands of the labor market, with possible contributing factors including gaps in curriculum design, limited practical exposure, and a perceived misalignment between educational programs and industry requirements. The unemployment rate among university graduates in Rwanda was reported at 18.75% in 2022 (Trading Economics).

The youth population, aged 16 to 30 years, faces a substantially higher unemployment rate of 21.5% National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR). The youth unemployment patterns in Rwanda show that 32.4% of unemployed youth are university graduates (Never Again Rwanda). The data on youth unemployment in Rwanda is alarming, and if left unchecked, it is likely to lead to serious social repercussions, including intergenerational juvenile delinquency, forced migration, and more. Recent studies have underscored the importance of evaluating the employability skills of Rwandan university graduates to address rising unemployment concerns (Helyer & Lee, 2014).

This study aims to investigate challenges faced by Rwandan university graduates entering the labor market. The outcomes of this study will provide valuable insights that can inform evidence-based policies, shape educational reforms, and guide stakeholders in cultivating a workforce that is not only well-educated but also well-prepared for the dynamic demands of the contemporary labor market. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- a. What are the challenges faced by the graduates in Rwanda in securing employment across diverse industries and sectors?



- b. What strategies can higher education institutions adopt to enable their graduates to better meet the graduates' practical demands of diverse professional environments in Rwanda?

## METHODOLOGY

This research utilized the case study research design, characterized by a thorough and comprehensive exploration of a particular instance, event, individual, or situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Transitioning from academia to the workforce is a complex process influenced by numerous factors, including individual attributes, institutional dynamics, and socio-economic contexts. Therefore, a case study approach was used to allow for the exploration of this complexity within a real-world context, capturing the interplay of various elements and their impact on the experiences of university graduates. The population for this study consisted of recent unemployed graduates, human resource managers from different institutions and educators from different universities in Rwanda. The population of this study was not definite in nature. For that reason, a purposive sampling approach was used to select 30 unemployed graduates, 20 human resource managers and 15 educators for in-depth interviews. The data collection process involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with university graduates, human resource managers, and educators. Interviews with graduates served to gather information on the obstacles they encounter while seeking employment, while interviews with human resource managers and academic staff were instrumental in obtaining data regarding strategies that universities can employ to empower their graduates. Thematic analysis, as advocated by Bryman (2006), was employed as the method for scrutinizing qualitative data obtained from the interviews. This analytical approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, underlying meanings, and significant themes within the interview responses.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Challenges faced by graduates in Rwanda in securing employment across diverse industries and sectors

In this study graduates were involved in order to obtain data with regard to the challenges they encounter while trying to secure jobs in Rwandan labor market. The findings revealed the following challenges.

#### 1.1 Skill mismatch and industry requirements

In exploring the discord between graduates' skills and the dynamic needs of industries, a profound challenge comes to light, as highlighted by Smith (2019). The struggle to align academic qualifications with the ever-evolving demands of diverse sectors has resulted in a conspicuous gap between educational attainment and industry expectations. This incongruence was poignantly emphasized by one participant who remarked, "It's disheartening to realize that despite our academic achievements, we often fall short in meeting the practical demands of the job market. Our degrees seem to lack the practical edge that employers are seeking." This sentiment underscores the frustration among graduates who find themselves inadequately equipped to navigate the professional setting.

The participants unanimously acknowledged that the scarcity of opportunities stems from a deficiency in the skills required by employers in Rwanda. A respondent lamented, "I completed my degree with high hopes, but the reality is that I am often unable to secure job interviews, let alone employment, due to the gap in skills between what I possess and what employers are seeking." This sentiment is echoed by another participant who expressed, "Our academic pursuits should ideally prepare us for the practical challenges of the workforce, but the disconnection between education and industry needs is stark. It's disheartening to see our degrees not translating into viable job prospects."



### 1.2 Limited networking opportunities

The participant's emphasis on the scarcity of networking opportunities as a formidable barrier to employment aligns with Granovetter's seminal work on the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). The respondents collectively underscored the critical role that professional connections play in the job market. According to their insights, the absence of robust networks significantly impedes their ability to explore diverse employment opportunities, thereby restricting their access to a broader spectrum of career prospects. One respondent poignantly remarked, *"It's disheartening to see that my lack of professional connections has become a major roadblock in my job search. I feel like I'm missing out on potential opportunities just because I don't have the right network."*

The majority of respondents shared a common frustration: their limited network often resulted in missed job opportunities. *"It's not just about what you know; it's also about who you know,"* expressed one participant. This sentiment echoes the prevailing belief that a lack of connections diminishes the chances of being informed about available job openings. Another respondent added, *"I find myself unaware of job vacancies simply because I don't have the connections that could keep me in the loop. It's a real challenge, especially when you're trying to break into a competitive job market."*

The participants articulated a profound sense of helplessness arising from their constrained financial means hindering their ability to establish and nurture professional connections. *"Networking events, conferences, and even casual meet-ups often require financial resources that many of us simply don't have,"* noted a respondent. This perspective sheds light on the socio-economic barriers that further exacerbate the challenges graduates face. These findings are similar to those from a study by Uwambajimana et al. (2020) in Rwanda which identified skills mismatch, limited networking opportunities, and inadequate career guidance as significant barriers to employment for university graduates. The study highlighted the need for enhanced collaboration between academia and industry to bridge the gap between education and employment.

### 1.3 Inadequate career guidance and counseling

The respondents consistently underscored the pivotal role of effective career guidance and counseling services, echoing the sentiments expressed by Gordon (2006). The lack of robust support in navigating the complex setting of career choices and industry dynamics emerged as a recurring theme in their narratives. The absence of comprehensive guidance during their academic journey has left graduates feeling ill-equipped to make informed decisions about their professional paths, thereby compounding the challenges they face in securing employment. One respondent poignantly shared, *"I entered the job market with a degree but without a clear understanding of the opportunities available in my field. It's frustrating to think that a bit more guidance could have made a significant difference in my career trajectory."*

A prevailing sentiment among the majority of respondents was the inadequacy of career guidance and counseling services they received during their university studies. *"The reality is that we were left to figure out our career paths on our own,"* expressed a participant. This sentiment was further accentuated by the revelation that even lecturers tended to focus solely on the formal curriculum, neglecting to provide insights into crucial job-seeking skills. *"It felt like our education was detached from the practicalities of the job market. We learned the subject matter but lacked the guidance on how to translate that knowledge into meaningful employment,"* noted another respondent.

### 1.4 High competitive job market

The participants in the study reiterated that the formidable challenge in the pursuit of employment is the overwhelming level of competition. One respondent poignantly expressed, *"It's disheartening to see the sheer number of applicants*



*for a single job opening. It feels like the odds are stacked against us.*” This sentiment resonated with the majority of respondents, who admitted that the high volume of applicants often led to feelings of discouragement, hindering their motivation to actively pursue job opportunities. A participant shared, *“You spend hours perfecting your resume and cover letter, only to feel like a needle in a haystack during the selection process.”*

In light of this heightened competition, Charmes (2015) advocates for strategic approaches to navigate the crowded job market. A respondent highlighted the importance of networking, stating, *“Building connections within the industry has become crucial. It’s not just about what you know but who you know.”* The participants collectively acknowledged the need for proactive measures, such as continuous skill-building and leveraging personal and professional networks, to effectively navigate the challenges posed by the intense competition in Rwanda’s job market.

### **1.5 Discrimination and bias**

Amidst their support for internships and apprenticeships, respondents passionately illuminated the pervasive challenges rooted in bias and discrimination that cast a daunting shadow over the recruitment setting. One respondent aptly encapsulated the grim reality, stating, *“Securing a job isn’t just about qualifications; it’s a maze where personal connections are often the key. Without those connections, navigating the job market becomes an uphill battle.”* This sentiment underscores the profound impact of networks on the employment prospects of graduates, highlighting the formidable nature of this challenge.

The respondents shed light on the significant role played by influencers within recruitment teams, emphasizing that familiarity with influential individuals substantially amplifies one’s likelihood of securing a job. As one respondent expressed, *“In the silent corridors of recruitment, knowing someone influential is like holding a golden ticket. It opens doors that might remain closed otherwise.”* This acknowledgment unravels an informal network that operates beyond the visible aspects of the recruitment process, further deepening the complexities faced by job seekers.

Furthermore, the respondents lamented the prevalence of a system where merit and qualifications seem to take a back seat to personal connections and affiliations. A respondent poignantly stated, *“It’s disheartening to witness a scenario where competence and hard work are overshadowed by who you know rather than what you bring to the table.”* This highlights the frustration among graduates who perceive their qualifications and capabilities as secondary to the influence of personal networks. In Nigeria, Oluwatayo and Aderinto (2018) found that socio-economic factors, including family background and gender, influenced graduates’ access to employment opportunities. The study underscored the need for inclusive policies and interventions to address disparities in employment outcomes.

## **2. Strategies the can higher education institutions adopt to enable their graduate to better meet the practical demands of diverse professional environments in Rwanda**

This study also sought to explore possible strategies that universities in Rwanda can adopt to enable their graduates to meet the practical demands of diverse professional environments. The study revealed the following strategies.

### **2.1 Integration of practical training and industry Collaboration**

The respondents unanimously underscored the critical importance of integrating practical training components within academic programs, emphasizing its potency in preparing students for the challenges of the professional world. One respondent eloquently articulated this sentiment, stating, *“Theoretical knowledge is undoubtedly essential, but its application in real-world scenarios is what truly defines a competent professional.”* This echoes the sentiment that the bridge between theory and practice is fundamental for a seamless transition into diverse professional environments.



In further agreement, respondents highlighted the efficacy of collaborative initiatives with industries, citing internships, co-op programs, and hands-on projects as invaluable tools for experiential learning. One respondent emphasized, *“Engaging with real-world projects during our academic journey not only solidifies theoretical concepts but also instills problem-solving skills crucial for navigating the complexities of the professional setting.”* This resonates with the findings of Stryker & Strobel (2019), who also advocated for the incorporation of practical experiences in academic settings.

Respondents also highlighted the significance of industry collaboration as a strategic approach to bridge the gap between academia and the professional realm. One respondent emphasized, *“Universities should actively seek partnerships with industries and institutions to ensure that graduates are considered in the recruitment process.”* This underscores the need for proactive measures to establish strong ties between academic institutions and industries, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship that enhances the employability of graduates. The OECD (2018) Employment Outlook highlighted the growing prevalence of non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary contracts and freelance work, which present challenges for young graduates entering the workforce. The report emphasized the importance of adapting education and training systems to prepare graduates for evolving employment patterns.

## 2.2 Curriculum review and adaptation

The significance of regularly reviewing and adapting academic curricula to meet the evolving demands of professional environments resonated strongly among the respondents. One respondent emphasized, *“The academic setting is dynamic, and curricula must evolve to stay relevant. A stagnant curriculum risks producing graduates ill-prepared for the ever-changing demands of the workforce.”* This sentiment underscores the need for educational institutions to embrace a proactive approach in ensuring their curricula remain in sync with the dynamic nature of various industries.

In line with this, the respondents stressed the importance of integrating practical experiences, case studies, and real-world projects into the academic curriculum. As one respondent aptly stated, *“Theory provides the foundation, but practical application is where true competence is demonstrated.”* This echoes the sentiment that theoretical knowledge gains potency when applied in real-world scenarios. Moreover, the inclusion of practical elements in the curriculum was validated by Jones (2020), who asserted, *“Incorporating real-world projects into academic programs not only enhances learning but also equips students with the skills needed to navigate professional challenges.”*

For the respondents, this strategic integration serves as a bridge between academic learning and on-the-job requirements. One respondent elaborated, *“Students shouldn’t just graduate with knowledge; they should graduate with the ability to apply that knowledge effectively in the workplace.”* This aligns with the broader perspective that academic institutions bear the responsibility of not only imparting theoretical knowledge but also cultivating the practical skills essential for success in diverse professional settings.

## 2.3 Entrepreneurship education and innovation

The respondents resoundingly championed the integration of entrepreneurship education as a pivotal strategy within higher education programs, recognizing it as a key ingredient to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving job market. One respondent passionately articulated this perspective, stating, *“Entrepreneurship education is not just about creating business owners; it’s about fostering a mindset of innovation and adaptability crucial for success in today’s dynamic job market.”* This sentiment encapsulates the broader consensus among the respondents that promoting innovation, creativity, and an entrepreneurial mindset is indispensable for making graduates not just eligible but competitive in the contemporary labor market. Research by Khadka et al. (2021) in South Asia identified digital literacy and adaptability



as critical skills for graduates entering the modern labor market. The study underscored the importance of integrating technology-related skills into educational curricula to enhance graduates' employability.

The importance of equipping graduates with the tools to navigate dynamic professional settings was underscored by the respondents, aligning with the findings of Fayolle et al. (2019). As one respondent remarked, *"In a world where the only constant is change, graduates need more than technical skills; they need an entrepreneurial mindset that propels them to embrace challenges as opportunities."* This recognition emphasizes the transformative power of entrepreneurship education in fostering a proactive approach to career development, where graduates are not merely job seekers but dynamic contributors to the workforce.

## 2.4 Internship and apprenticeship opportunities

The respondents passionately advocated for the implementation of internships and apprenticeships as a cornerstone strategy in preparing students for the complexities of the professional world. One respondent succinctly articulated this sentiment, stating, *"Internships are not just about adding a line to your resume; they are about gaining a profound understanding of the industry, its dynamics, and honing skills that cannot be taught in a classroom setting."* This perspective emphasizes the transformative nature of hands-on experiences, providing students with exposure to real-world challenges and facilitating the development of industry-specific skills.

This holistic approach aligns with the broader recognition that traditional academic settings alone may not adequately equip students with the practical skills and insights essential for success in their careers. The insights provided by White et al. (2021) were referenced by the respondents, further reinforcing the positive impact of internship programs on graduates' employability. One respondent noted, *"The study's findings validate what many of us in the field already know – internships significantly enhance a graduate's readiness for the job market. Employers value practical experience and internships serve as a direct pathway to developing the skills that make graduates stand out."* Research by Agyekum et al. (2019) in Ghana revealed that the lack of practical skills and work experience among university graduates hindered their employability. The study emphasized the importance of internship programs and experiential learning opportunities in enhancing graduates' readiness for the job market.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated complex challenges faced by graduates in Rwanda as they navigate the difficulties in the job market, unveiling a spectrum of obstacles, including skill mismatch, limited networking, inadequate guidance, insufficient practical experience, a competitive job market, language proficiency demands, and pervasive discrimination. A significant issue centers on the misalignment between academic qualifications and industry needs, creating a tangible gap between educational attainment and professional expectations.

Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort from academia, industry, and policymakers to bridge the gap between education and employment, enhance networking, provide effective guidance, and tackle language requirements. This collective approach fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment, empowering graduates to navigate the job market successfully.

Simultaneously, the study underscores the essential role of higher education institutions in Rwanda, offering key strategies to enhance graduates' practical readiness. These include integrating practical training, fostering collaboration with industries, and emphasizing experiential learning. Curriculum review and adaptation are crucial, advocating for practical elements to prepare graduates for the dynamic challenges of the job market.



Recognizing the transformative impact of technology, the study highlights the importance of digital literacy and industry-specific technological familiarity. Soft skills and professional development receive attention, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between hard and soft skills. Entrepreneurship education is recommended to transform graduates into job creators, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset across university programs. A continuous feedback mechanism is crucial for keeping educational programs aligned with job market needs, with insights gathered from both students and employers. Internship and apprenticeship opportunities are championed as cornerstones for preparing students, emphasizing the transformative nature of hands-on experiences.

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