

Emphasise Soft Skills in Uganda's Education System to Respond to the Unemployment Challenge



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This policy brief explores how retooling Uganda's education system can respond to the growing unemployment challenge, especially among youth. The dominant discourse on education and employment focuses on skills building through technical and vocational education and training. This paper argues that for graduates of the education system to be able to meet the demands of job creation and be competitive in a globalised economy, more attention needs to be paid towards soft skills such as critical thinking, questioning, problem solving, negotiation, people management, collaboration and communication.

1. Introduction

Uganda is grappling with the challenge of youth underemployment (27%) and unemployment (9.4%) (UBOS, 2018). Many young people who are considered to have jobs are only trapped in survivalist activities characterised by precarious work, poor pay and, consequently, high poverty rates. Considerable blame has been put on and attention paid to the education system for – as the dominant narratives go – producing job seekers not job makers and for churning out unemployable graduates. It follows, therefore, that diverse stakeholders have demanded educational reform to focus on skills development, especially in the areas of vocational and technical skills as well as entrepreneurship skills to foster job creation. .

A key aspect missing in Uganda's employment-education debate is the criticality of soft skills. Soft skills in the form of critical thinking, questioning, problem solving, negotiation, people management, collaboration and communication are important for increasing employment outcomes in many aspects. The development of soft skills not only enhances employability but is crucial for the development and success of entrepreneurship (Holmberg-Wright, 2016). This study was conducted through review of academic

literature, policy documents and media articles and reports on the subject of education and employment. The research process also involved interviews conducted with key informants who are experts in the fields of education, innovation and human capital development.

This paper agrees that for Uganda to answer the unemployment question, its education system must shift from the current model of teaching to test, and the emphasis on memorisation and certificates, and move to an education system that enables learners to participate, analyse and apply knowledge to create.¹ The education system must emphasise essential soft skills like critical thinking, problem solving, negotiation, people management and collaboration, all of which have been identified by the World Economic Forum as crucial for the enhancement of employment.

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2. Contextualising Uganda's Formal Education System

The purpose of education

The purpose of colonial education was to produce low-level clerical staff, who could do some basic reading, writing and arithmetic, trained on the premise of morality and religion, to further the agenda of the British masters through the performance of routine, often predefined tasks.

This system also created the link between education and employment, because those who went to school qualified to join the privileged class of those who had access to assignments and benefits from the colonial government (Burama 2012).

¹ Forehead, M. Bloom's Taxonomy: From Emerging Perspectives on Learning, Teaching and Technology, University of Georgi

Content and curriculum

Most of the colonial content and the language of instruction were foreign and not relatable or applicable to the local context. The products of this education system were expected to be conformist and unquestioning, and without the skills and ability to solve problems. It is this same school system that was inherited by post-colonial governments, and has not been changed since. The objectives, outcomes, values and morals on which our school system is founded are foreign and outdated, which has not only created an ongoing contradiction and identity crisis regarding who we are but has also created educated people who are unable to think creatively and solve persistent problems.

Assessment and examination

To understand a country's education system, it is important to study how it assesses its learners (Rowntree, 1977, p.1).² Uganda's examination system is divorced from the kind that enhances soft skills analysis and application or creation and instead tests and rewards students on the ability to memorise facts and reproduce the content as is received from a teacher, through an approved question approach instead of analysis and application of knowledge. Learners spend up to three hours working alone and in silence when they should be testing skills like collaboration and communication, which are essential for employability.

Education experts categorise Memorisation as the lowest level of thinking and Creating as the highest. This is based on what is technically known as Bloom's taxonomy, which classifies educational goals and objectives. Too many students who are successful in school

Teaching methods

Uganda's teaching/instructional system is the same impractical one-way exchange as it was over 50 years ago. It is premised on the notion that the teacher knows everything and the learner is a passive participant with no input in the creation of knowledge. This learning imbalance in which the teacher is all-knowing and the learner is a passive participant is referred to as the banking system (Nshemerirwe, 2017).

Review of Existing Policy

Research shows that the "existence of adequate relevant skills as well as lifelong learning opportunities constitutes a pre-condition for sustainable economic growth, social transformation and national development."⁴

So whereas the population has increased and the government can no longer guarantee jobs to a huge educated class, the formal education system, curriculum and content have not been changed to reflect the employment realities of today and the future, leading to massive unemployment and underemployment. There is no emphasis on the soft skills or local realities or context that are necessary to create thinkers and problem solvers with applicable knowledge - who consequently turn into employable graduates and job creators.

do not learn enough of the skills and knowledge aligned with the current and future needs of employment and the further development of Uganda's economy; and public discourse about education focuses more on scores than on what is learnt and its alignment with the needs of individual and community success now and in the future (Reg, 2016)³

The practice of teaching-to-test and the emphasis on certificates, which is characterised by media glorification of success through school rankings, perpetuates competition in examinations and continues to perpetuate the focus on aspects that are not relevant to employability.

This teaching method disempowers learners and promotes a lack of imagination. It does not create a culture of achievement because learners only see as far as the teacher shows them and its focus on the teacher rather than the learner. It thus negates the possibility of developing the skills required to solve simple and complex problems, which are essential for creating employment.

In Uganda, the existing policy on skilling in education is Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTJET), which was designed to address the skills shortage and respond to the unemployment challenge.

² Opolot-Okurut, C. *Towards an Improved Assessment and Examination System in Institutions of Higher Learning in Uganda* (2006)

³ Reg, A. et al. *Uganda's Assessment System: A Road-Map for Enhancing Assessment in Education* (2016)

⁴ Ministry of Education and Sports: *Skilling Uganda BTJET Strategic Plan 2012/3 to 2021/2*

The 2012/3 to 2021/22 BTVET Strategic Plan notes that “[e]mployers in Uganda often complain about the shortage of appropriately skilled and qualified workers. Instead of educational certificates, the main purpose will be to create employable skills and competencies relevant in the labour market. Training contents will be aligned with skills requirements in the labour market. The new BTVET system will embrace all Ugandans in need of skills, not only school leavers.”⁵

However, the BTVET policy and strategic plans focus on technical skills, and not the soft skills which are necessary for global workmanship. Reviews of the policy have, in fact, pointed out that it “it still does not produce the appropriately skilled workforce that Uganda needs to increase incomes and employment, and to compete in the East African and international markets”, and that “fewer than 40% of large and medium firms consider courses offered by BTVET institutions to be relevant to their requirements.”⁶

This policy brief, therefore, concludes that the weaknesses surrounding soft skills in Uganda’s

education system are due to an old curriculum with content that does not serve the purpose of today’s needs, an examination model that de-emphasises global labour requirements, and teaching methods that do not reinforce learning outcomes that prepare students for employment. The following policy recommendations are, therefore, advanced to deal with the challenge:

- Reviewing the curriculum with emphasis on core soft skills like critical thinking, questioning, problem solving, negotiation, people management, collaboration and communication - and their application in the local context.
- There is need to change the teacher-training model to enhance the use of practical and participatory and learner-centred methods of teaching that boost the development of soft skills.
- Review of the examination system so that it prioritises the assessment of core learner competencies that are relevant for global workmanship and not memorisation.

References

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⁵ Ministry of Education and Sports: *Skilling Uganda BTVET Strategic Plan 2012/3 to 2021/2*

⁶ Ministry of Education and Sports: *Skilling Uganda BTVET Strategic Plan 2012/3 to 2021/2*