

How tertiary education and industry partnerships can improve students' employability: evidence from West and East Africa

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The importance of tertiary education students' employability has gained increased attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners (Okolie et al., 2020). This is partly due to the importance of economic inclusion in socio-economic development and national security of nations (Chukwuedo et al., 2021; Peeters et al., 2019). For example, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights Goal 8; the need for inclusive economic growth to enhance progress and provide decent jobs for all. In addition, the African Union's Agenda 2063 places emphasis on the commitment of member nations to equip young people with skills to lead the socio-economic transformation of the continent.

In the midst of this increased attention, evidence shows young people especially those from low-and-middle income countries are marginalised economically. According to the African Development Bank (2021), 10 to 12 million youth in Africa enter the labour force each year. Out of this, a small fraction (3.1 million) of the African youth get jobs, leaving most of the youth unemployed.

Even though tertiary education institutions (TEIs), including those in sub-Saharan Africa are implementing measures to increase students' chances of getting employment, there is a concern about the skills of graduates and what employers need (Dodoo & Kuupole, 2017). For instance, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC)'s 22nd Annual Global Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Survey (2019), 65% of African CEOs said skills gap was preventing them from innovating effectively. Fifty-nine percent conceded that their quality standards and customer experience were being undermined. In addition, 54% (global 44%) confirmed that they were missing their growth targets because of inadequate skills. Research shows the need for TEIs and industry to strengthen collaboration to identify the competencies requirement of industry and devise ways to help students develop these competencies (Okolie et al., 2020).

This paper contributes to the CIES 2023 conference *Sub-Theme 1: Social Justice and Inclusion* by drawing on social capital theory to explore how TEIs can form and sustain partnerships with industry, and/or vice versa, to increase students' chances of getting employment. Social capital theory posits that individuals and organisations derive resources from their interactions with others in their environment (Arranz et al., 2022). In the context of this paper, we argue that TEIs and industry have resources which they can draw on through partnerships to achieve mutual goals.

The paper is based on a study undertaken by The Education Coll Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA) in partnership with The Education Collaborative at Ashesi University in Ghana and Kepler College in Rwanda, to understand how TEIs in Africa can enhance their career services outcomes to facilitate students' transition to work. It draws on multiple methods, including systematic review, interviews and focus group discussions, as well as industry roundtable discussion. Participants

included students, employers, academics and career services professionals from Ghana, Burkina Faso, Kenya and Rwanda.

Our findings show that there is an incentive for TEIs and industry partnership because both want graduates who possess subject/technical knowledge as well as soft skills, and partnerships bring mutual benefits. Partnerships create opportunities for TEIs and industry to identify relevant current and future skills needs and co-develop curriculum that enables students to develop these skills. For such partnerships to be effective and sustainable, there should be a commitment from both parties – at both operational and management levels, to enable sharing of resources, flexibility, and open and honest communication.

In terms of theoretical contribution, we demonstrate that social capital is created through partnerships between TEIs and industry, by drawing on the strengths of both parties to better support students' transition to employment.

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