

I EMPLOYABILITY AND RELATED CONCEPTS

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From Unemployment to Employability

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Introduction

In many African countries, youth unemployment is a serious socio-economic and political challenge. In the years to come, this challenge is likely to become bigger, because youthful and fast-growing populations combine with per capita economic growth rates that historically struggle to keep up with population growth. Most African countries are not experiencing the demographic transition that in many Asian and European countries leads to ageing and shrinking labour forces. In the medium term this may turn into a comparative advantage, but in the short term high youth unemployment rates need to be managed and, preferably, reduced (Akanji, 2018). It is in this context that the concept of employability has become prominent in formulating employment policy at national and international levels, in debates about – and new approaches to – education, and in the activities of NGOs and development agencies operating throughout Africa. All of this is backed up by an academic industry of employability research, of which the volume you are currently reading is but one example. The simple summary of what has happened is that a shift in (policy) focus occurred: from providing the jobs, toward equipping individuals with the relevant skills to attain jobs (thus making them “employable”). Of course, the full story of employability is far more complicated than that.

In this chapter, I will discuss the concept of employability in the context of changing views on unemployment and on the roles of states, individuals, educational institutions and businesses in the labour market since the 1990s. The chapter is developed out of five starting points, the first of which is that employability as a concept is focused on achieving a personal state rather than societal structures or institutions, even though institutions may have a role to play in helping individuals achieve employability (Williams et al., 2015). The second is that, although employability is an individual attribute, the economy and broader society will benefit from an increase in employability as this implies that more skills and attributes become available, thereby increasing human capital, which in turn may aid economic development (Jajri & Ismail, 2012; Laskowska & Danska-Borsiak, 2016). However, human capital on its own does not create development, nor does it guarantee employment in developing countries with limited labour markets (Hendricks, 2002; Hanushek, 2013). It is therefore possible for a person to be employable, yet still be unemployed if not sufficient jobs are available (Golub & Hayat, 2015; Rich, 2015). This leads to the third point, that individuals’ employability cannot be understood without taking into account the specific economic and social conditions of the society in which they live. The fourth point takes the significance of time and place one step further in noting that employability is not a general concept that can be applied to societies everywhere: it is specific to the organisation of labour in (post-)industrial capitalism. Finally, in addition to its other uses, the concept of employability also works to suggest a notion of “merit” to explain the outcomes of – as well

as to obfuscate – highly asymmetric processes that enable the accumulation of capital while producing winners and losers (Arora, 2015; Gertel & Audano, 2025).

This chapter thus aims to bring out the different levels on which the concept of employability works, including as a practical approach that helps individuals gain the skills that prepare them for employment, and as a theoretical concept that is part of changing ideological and political perspectives on labour and employment. The title ‘From Unemployment to Employability’ should be read to refer to all those differing meanings at the same time. The chapter brings together insights from literature on employability, work and political economy, with a focus on African countries. It does not offer new empirical material.

The remainder of the chapter is organised in six sections. In the first section I will discuss the specific context in which the concept of employability emerged, and I will present a very general definition of the concept. Having established that this apparently universal concept emerged at a very specific time and place, the two sections that follow will discuss the particular historical and current context of employment in African countries, as well as implications of this for what we know about employment in Africa (for instance through statistical data). In the fourth section I will then turn towards the history of graduate employability in Africa, considering the particular role of universities and the graduates they produced, for nation building and development following flag independence. The fifth section will discuss some of the key approaches to employability research in Africa. The concluding section will take a last, critical look at the concept, its potential and its limitations in African contexts.

The concept of employability

Employability is a relatively recent concept, even if the issues it relates to have been discussed for much longer. The term started to be used in higher education during the 1990s in the United Kingdom (Lees, 2002). From the beginning employability focused on graduates: on people into whose education parents, the students themselves and governments were investing money. In return for this money, universities were told to produce graduates that were not only subject specialists, but also able to get jobs. The timing was no coincidence: after the rapid expansion of higher education since the 1960s, graduates could no longer expect to just walk into a job. They now entered a job market where they had to compete with many other recent graduates. The situation had been made worse by several decades of limited economic growth since the 1970s and relatively high general unemployment rates. At the same time, market-oriented reform policies on the state level went together with a logic of self-optimisation for the individual, following a neoliberal logic (Peters, 2016): “everyone is encouraged to think of themselves as human capital, and their lives as an enterprise in which they need to invest” (Ferguson & Li, 2018).

Thus an “employability agenda” emerged in Anglo-Saxon higher education, which called for the teaching of “key”, “general” or “transferable” skills and attributes, in addition to “traditional” intellectual skills and subject knowledge. The skills and attributes that employers were said to be looking for included: communication; numeracy; information technology; flexibility; analysis; autonomy; team working; and originality. Acquiring such skills would, of course, also improve students’ “traditional” academic performance. However, the fact that this agenda was driven more by government policy

and employers than by the academy, led to scepticism among academics about employability (Lees, 2002). Indeed, one of the most frequently cited early reports on employability, *Skills Development in Higher Education* (1998), had been produced by the accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand rather than by university academics. The employability agenda has since spread from universities to schools and vocational training centres, and from Britain and North America across the globe. But what does employability mean, and does it mean the same everywhere where the concept is used?

Broadly speaking the concept of employability relates two perspectives: personal situations, structured by factors such as education, skills and aspirations, and labour market conditions that demand specific working profiles. However, there is no single agreed upon definition of employability. Definitions range from employability being the ability to get a job (any job), to it being an individual's perception of the chances to attain sustainable employment according to his or her qualification (Rothwell, Herbert & Rothwell, 2008). Governments and international organisations such as the ILO tend to work with simple definitions that focus on the ability to get a job, partly out of a concern with unemployment rates, and partly because this can be measured in an apparently straightforward fashion: people are either employed or they are not (Brewer, 2013). This approach does not consider whether the jobs that university graduates end up in required degree-level skills in the first place. Neither does it clarify how people in informal jobs fit the employability concept (a problem particularly in African countries where informal employment is much more widespread than formal employment). It also poses the following problem: while people with jobs are clearly employable, does the reverse also hold? Do those without jobs lack employability? For many educators, therefore, employability rather refers to people being equipped for a job and capable of being employed, rather than whether they are actually getting a formal job (Harvey, 2001).

Yorke (2006) proposed a working definition of employability that is frequently adopted in the literature: “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006 p. 8). Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne (2017) expand on the usefulness of Yorke's definition, pointing out that it positions employability as a personal state that individuals occupy, while at the same time recognising that greater employability benefits not only the individuals but also the wider economy and society. They also slightly misquote Yorke's original definition by substituting “individuals” for “graduates”. This is a meaningful amendment, which emphasises that the achievements that constitute employability are not exclusively developed in universities (Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne, 2017 p. 10). Yorke's working definition also points towards the limitations of the concept: while it includes the notion that employable individuals are more likely to gain jobs, it also recognises that the availability of jobs is not necessarily a function of individuals' employability.

The question that definitions of employability do not answer, is exactly what are the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make a person employable? Answers to the question can be found in the many studies on employability that aim to establish exactly what these skills and attributes are, for example by using questionnaires and interviews to ask employers for their views. A further set of studies starts out from a list of skills and attributes, and explores how individuals can best acquire them (or how educators can teach them). Another area of interest has been to try and explore how employable people actually find jobs. How does an employer know that a candidate for a job really

has the skills that are apparently required to be employable? I will discuss some of the approaches in employability research later on in this chapter. However, before I do this, I want to consider what the specific origins of the concept of employability mean for its use in other – in particular African – contexts? Employability is applied as a universal concept, but does it mean the same, and how is it useful (and for whom?), in different parts of the world?

The concept of employability emerged to deal with the concerns of university educators in a particular part of the world at a particular time. Since then, it has spread widely in the geographical sense, around the globe and, also, beyond universities to schools and training centres. This would suggest that, in all these circumstances similar conditions prevail as did during the 1990s in the United Kingdom. However, we know that this is not the case, and this raises questions about the spread of employability: does it spread because the concept is the most useful to describe and understand the challenges in local job markets? Or does it spread because it emerged in a dominant centre of knowledge production and its use contributes to academic debates regardless of the local circumstances? Are we using it in African contexts because it is the best fit for our concerns about youth unemployment and (in particular) graduate unemployment? What about other explanations for graduate unemployment? At the very least, research on employability around the globe must take the nature of local labour markets into account. In each country case this includes: the statistical as well as geographical distribution of jobs requiring certain levels of education and skills; the specific ways in which gender and other specific categories of inclusion or exclusion influence access to specific jobs; the extent and nature of the role of the state in shaping the labour market through subsidies and regulation; as well as the ways in which access to job market information is organised (including through networks or government or private agents). More fundamentally, perhaps, it also includes the question of which percentage of work is actually organised along the lines of the capitalist labour market? (And if this percentage is small, how useful is the concept of employability in that case?) In the next section, I will explore these aspects in an historical (and fairly general) fashion for the African continent, because it is necessary context for discussing the study of employability in Africa.

Formal work and unemployment in Africa

Historically speaking, unemployment is a recent phenomenon in African states. Until well into the Twentieth Century, most African economies were characterised by labour scarcity, whereby the allocation of labour resources tended to be based, not on a labour market, but on kinship or coercion (Austin, 2008). During colonial occupation (which in most parts of Africa lasted from the 1870s until the 1960s), the colonial economy initially relied on coerced labour, and gradually moved towards free (not forced) wage labour. In many cases, initially Africans were reluctant to sell their labour power. However, colonial changes in land ownership and legislation, as well as the introduction of taxes (payable in the colonial currency), school fees and various licences, forced African peasants to engage with the capitalist labour economy at least for the limited time it took to acquire the money needed to fulfil their obligations, and sometimes for much longer (Roitman, 2005). With time formal labour markets (commodified labour) emerged, with people depending for their livelihood on the sale of

their labour power, and thus unemployment became a possibility, this occurred first in significant numbers during the Great Depression of the 1930s (Ochonu, 2009).

From the beginning of the Twentieth Century, in many parts of Africa, the commodification of labour allowed for increasing productivity in certain sectors. It also produced radically new relations of wealth, income, status and gender, that enabled a minority of young men to claim social power based on their ability to earn wages. These young men would often be miners, railway workers, or army men, which sectors accounted for a large share of wage labour (Brown, 2003). Even more ambitious were the claims of the (smaller) group of white-collar workers, including clerks, teachers, bookkeepers and managers, whose jobs required literacy, came with a smart dress code, and tended to offer superior job security. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, due to the limited spread of education, any male with several years of secondary school education could easily find such a position. With time, educational opportunities increased. As the number of educated candidates increased faster than the number of white-collar jobs, a process of educational inflation ensued that meant that for the same type of position candidates had to have more and more schooling. In most African countries, there was a surge of opportunities around the coming of independence, as positions previously held by Europeans became available, education systems were expanded (which required teachers), and state apparatuses were built up (which required bureaucrats). However, once these positions were filled, it became harder for educated people to find suitable employment, and in addition to educational inflation, unemployment became a distinct possibility for them (Van den Bersselaar, 2019). This process accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s as a result of Structural Adjustment Programmes that reduced the available white-collar jobs, and failed to stimulate the economy as envisaged (which would have generated new jobs), while reducing African governments' ability to provide employment through labour market policies (Guyer, 2004).

Compared to other parts of the world, wage labour – and thus unemployment – came late to Africa, spread unevenly and had limited reach (Eckert, 2019). Throughout the colonial period, wage labourers only made up a small percentage of the overall working population. For instance, in the 1930s and 1940s only between 1% and 2% of the population of British and French West Africa worked for wages (Osborn, 2013). These percentages have gradually increased since then. In current times, according to ILO estimates paid workers account for 29% of all those in employment in Africa. This percentage is higher in North Africa (a little over 50%) and lower in sub-Saharan Africa (about 22%) (ILO, 2019b).

In most African societies, formal wage labour coexists with complex non-capitalist “informal” labour relations. Formal and informal employment are often entangled, for instance when formal capitalist enterprises use informal labour or informal self-employment to reduce the cost of operating in urban slums and remote rural areas (Meagher, 2020). Looking at the level of the experiences of individuals, we see that one person will often hold one or more informal jobs alongside formal employment (Barchiesi, 2019). Meanwhile, recent or not-so-recent graduates, who may have moved back to live with their parents for financial reasons, take on informal work or gigs, while waiting for the opportunity to work in a “proper” formal graduate job (Honwana, 2012; Ludwig, 2017). Although, according to Honwana (2012), such “waithood” may produce creativity and potential for societal transformation, it also leads to delayed adulthood and a fear of becoming permanently locked out from future formal employment (Ferguson and Li, 2018). Many establish, or strive to set up, their own formal or informal business (Kinyanjui, 2010; Spring & McDade, 1998). Although formal start-up enterprise incubators

and business advice services exist, budding entrepreneurs are more likely to have benefited from business opportunities and resource transfers from their extended family or their social networks (Kibona, 2023; Lentz, 2023).

For those without formal or informal work or a flourishing business – or indeed in addition to income from these sources – there exist many ways to tap into streams of income controlled by others (Ferguson & Li, 2018). These may come as remittances from domestic or international migrants (Lentz, 2023). Often, they take the form of real or rhetorical dependence relations. In contrast to the widespread neoliberal ideology (which also informs much employability research) that expects individuals to be independent, to self-optimize and to take responsibility for their own lives, careers and futures, many Africans invest a lot of hard work in becoming dependent on others or at least claiming dependence. The “distributive labour” that goes into maintaining and massaging these dependency relations aims to put individuals in positions where they can formulate claims (on grounds of care, love, familial duty, social or religious obligation, and so on) that are likely to be attended to (Ferguson, 2013; 2015). Such “declarations of dependence” that people draw on to receive cash transfers, material support, labour market information, business opportunities or – indeed – a job, produce an important social and cultural context for the concept of employability in African countries.

African statistics and employability research

In the previous section I presented statistics when I argued that in Africa, historically as well as today, formal work, not informal work, is the exception. This observation has an impact on the meanings of a range of labour market indicators, including unemployment statistics, that have originally been developed in the context of countries where formal work was the norm. Nowadays, countries in North Africa, where formal employment is relatively prevalent, show much higher unemployment rates than sub-Saharan African countries where three quarters or more of the working population engages in informal work. For instance, Tunisia in North Africa reports an unemployment rate of 15%, while Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa report unemployment rates of 2.9%, 5.4%, and 3.1% respectively (ILOSTAT, 2025). Despite widely reported challenges finding employment, sub-Saharan African countries’ official unemployment figures are often lower than those of other, wealthier countries where the job search is assumed to be less challenging.

This counter-intuitive outcome may be connected with the ILO definitions of employment and unemployment. Not only are these based on a limited reference period of the last four weeks or one month, but to be counted as “employed” a person would only have to have worked in a job (or be self-employed) for at least one hour during the reference period (ILO, 2019a). The methodology, while consistent, thus allows for large differences in the individual circumstances of those considered employed. Statistical agencies are of course aware of this, and to produce more insight into what it may mean to be employed, they also collect data on people who meet the definition of being employed, but who are actually underemployed: they are working less than 40 hours per week but would be willing and available to do more hours of work. For example, for 2023 the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics reported a share of underemployment of 11.1%. For those aged between 15 and 24, that percentage was as high as 16.7%. Added to an unemployment figure for that same age group of 10.1%, that

gives a 27.8% share of young people being either unemployed or underemployed in Nigeria, which is much closer to what we would have expected from casual social observation than the official headline unemployment figure of 3.1% (NBS, 2024). In addition to this time-related underemployment, it is also possible to conceive of education-related underemployment, when individuals do work that requires skills that are below their level of education. However, national statistical bureaus generally do not collect data on this type of underemployment.

Apart from the differences between countries, there are also some aspects of the labour market statistics that seem very consistent across Africa. Thus, we find that within each African country, youth unemployment is significantly higher than the general unemployment figure for that country, usually double or even triple (ILOSTAT, 2025). Equally consistent is that the unemployment rate for young people with a university degree is higher than for non-graduates in the same age range (ILOSTAT, 2025). This adds statistical urgency to the question of the employability of graduates of African universities. The comparison is also skewed, however, because graduates generally have different employment expectations than non-graduates, and are prepared to put up with circuitous ways and non-permanent appointments to get to their desired professional activities. After all, most graduates did not go to university to just get any job, but to gain access to a better life overall (Engeler & Steuer, 2017). In the case of Nigeria, underemployment rates further qualify the relatively high graduate unemployment rate found: in 2023, graduates had the lowest rate of underemployment of all educational categories (NBS, 2024).

Although African governments receive help with their statistics from international organisations such as the World Bank, their statistical agencies still tend to be understaffed and the numbers they produce frequently project a false sense of accuracy (Jerven, 2016). Statistics from other sources, including government commissions overseeing universities and local and international NGOs, provide labour market indicators that differ markedly from the numbers from the national statistical offices. The Ghana-based pan-African non-profit Afrobarometer, for instance, conducts surveys and polls in 43 African countries. In each case, their sample size is either 1200 or 2400 respondents, which is a good number, but of course much smaller than the numbers used by national statistical offices (Afrobarometer, no year). As Afrobarometer aims to “let people have a say”, their surveys rely on self-assessment by the respondents rather than specific, standardised criteria. The results can be very different from that of official sources. For example, its 2024 “economy, poverty, and development” survey for Kenya came up with an unemployment rate of 34% (as compared to the ILO figure of 5.3%), based on answers to the question “Do you have a job that pays a cash income?” The self-reported unemployment rate for those aged between 18 and 35 years was higher still: 43% (Afrobarometer, 2024).

Aside from Afrobarometer there are many other non-official sources for employment-related numbers, which are usually difficult to compare between countries, and often based on small samples and flawed methodologies. Jerven has discussed the problem of statistical inaccuracies in data for African countries, concluding: “[n]umbers are soft, and data availability is sparse, sporadic, and uneven” (Jerven, 2016). However, we nevertheless need to use these statistics because they still give us some idea of crucial economic, demographic and social indicators, even if they do so within a considerable margin of error. We thus need to carefully consider where the numbers come from that we use to understand employment contexts in African countries, and how these numbers have been produced.

This way we get an idea of where inaccuracies in the statistics can be expected, and of what nature they are, and also of what such statistics can not make visible – even if they were accurate.

Graduates, jobs and development in Africa

Already in 1962, W. Arthur Lewis, one of the founders of the modern field of development economics, raised the question of how many graduates a developing African economy might be able to provide employment for. Lewis argued that in the short term there might be limits, as the need for graduates would follow from the level of development of the economy, rather than that the level of development would depend on the supply of education. Lewis thus did not expect that an increase in human capital would lead to increased requirement for graduates in the labour market. Rather, he expected an over-supply of graduates in the short run, that would self-adjust as unemployed graduates would either migrate to a country where their skills are in demand or use their education locally for self-employment or to start a business, thereby increasing productive capacity. Failing this, they would accept less remunerative jobs than anticipated, which would have the effect of raising the educational requirements for some occupations (Dike, 1969). Back in 1962, this question was still purely speculative of course, as the number of university graduates in African countries still tended to be very low. For most governments the priority was to expand higher education and they did not worry about producing a potential over-supply of graduates. Ayandele (1982) quoted UNESCO data which, while not entirely accurate give a good indication of the expansion of African higher education: from 180,000 students across the continent (excluding South Africa) in 1960, to 472,000 in 1969, and 1,095,000 in 1977.

Although later criticised as pork barrel politics, this expansion was not frivolous. During the phase of nation-building that followed flag independence, states across Africa required graduates to form the cadres for expanding state apparatuses that had much broader social agendas than the colonial predecessor states had had, and which thus required more civil servants to deliver on these agendas. Graduates with Law, Humanities and Social Science degrees, that were cheaper to teach than the sciences, were usually appropriate for these positions. This is reflected in the relative prominence that these subjects had in African universities during this period. Additionally, universities were expected to train the skilled labour or human capital that was understood to be required for economic development (Mkandawire, 2015; Aworosegbe, 2023). Humanities graduates were considered less suited for this role, and universities were criticised from very early on for not investing enough in those subjects thought to be more crucial for Africa's economic development, such as the Sciences, Engineering, Agriculture and Forestry (Feuser, 1964). Meanwhile, universities generally did not offer technical and vocational education, leaving this to technical colleges, training in industry and government departments, and apprenticeship schemes (Lewis, 1964).

Already by the late-1970s, it became increasingly difficult for Humanities and Social Science graduates to find employment, as state apparatuses had been filled with the first cohorts of graduates and the further expansion of such institutions stagnated along with African economies, while the number of recent graduates continued to increase in line with the expansion of the university systems. However, Engineering graduates did not necessarily fare any better, as the stagnating economies could not

absorb the increasing numbers of engineers either. The over-supply of graduates that W. Arthur Lewis had predicted, had arrived. Mkandawire (2015) observed that “[t]he solution to this problem is not to reduce the training of engineers but to increase the demand for their services, by accelerated investment and the demand for engineers” (p. 66). But most African governments did not have the political or economic strengths to implement, encourage or demand such investment, nor did they reduce the number of graduates that their universities produced. What did reduce, however, was the amount spent on each graduate, which likely resulted in a declining quality of the education offered (Aworosegbe, 2023).

In line with the general observation that human capital on its own, without other measures, does not create development (Hendricks, 2002; Hanushek, 2013), the increase in human capital in African states during the 1960s and 1970s had not produced the needed amount of economic development (Jerven, 2010). During the 1980s, therefore, the World Bank and the African governments it advised, reduced investment in higher education on the grounds of an alleged “low rate of return on higher education” (Mkandawire, 2015). This went together with Structural Adjustment Programmes aimed at reducing the social agendas of African states, reducing state spending in general, and opening up African economies for foreign competition. The result was economic decline followed by years of stagnation, increased general as well as graduate unemployment, a decline in living standards and, more broadly, a “lost decade for development” in Africa (Mkandawire, 2011). Meanwhile, young people in Africa and their parents still considered education, and, if possible, university education, the route to future success. Thus, from the 1990s, as the number of young people has kept on increasing, student populations across Africa have been expanding at higher rates than elsewhere, although enrolment rates have remained below those of other countries in the Global South (UNESCO, 2026). Also, African governments have started to invest more in higher education again, in line with the World Bank’s renewed focus on the importance of tertiary education. This was because, according to the World Bank, new research had “convincingly established” that human capital development was directly related to growth (Mkandawire, 2015).

Yet, across Africa, government investment in universities did not keep up with the increased demand for higher education. At the same time, although since 2000 most African countries have seen GDP growth during most years (World Bank, 2026), this economic growth has not resulted in a big enough expansion in employment opportunities to absorb the continually increasing numbers of graduates. As a result, the decades since Structural Adjustment saw two notable developments in African higher education: the rise of private universities to meet the demand for university degrees, and an increased focus on graduate employability (Mann, 2014; Okolie, Nwosu & Mlanga, 2019). This focus on employability was not altogether new: there had long been a concern within higher education with the transition of graduates to employment. Indeed, students’ industrial work experience schemes (SIWES), that may include apprenticeships, traineeships and internships, date back to the 1970s (Alao, Osanyinro & Alao, 2022). More recent was the criticism that African universities did not equip their graduates with the skills the labour market required. This led to the oft-repeated diagnosis that graduate unemployment was the result of a “skills gap” that universities needed to address for their graduates to be employable. The skills that were allegedly lacking were not technical skills specific to training in a particular academic subject, but generic so-called “soft” skills. Additionally, digital skills have become regarded as increasingly important since the beginning of the Twenty-First

Century, and even more so since the COVID pandemic (International Finance Corporation, 2021). Their acquisition is often alleged to be essential, given the increasing importance of digital technology in workplaces, the rise of digital employment, and also as a precondition for accessing new forms of employment such as platform work (Bhorat et al., 2023; Meagher, 2019). In response, African governments and the national agencies charged with overseeing higher education encouraged universities to offer an additional employability skills-based curriculum alongside existing subject curricula, including soft skills, life skills and interpersonal skills (Assan & Nalutaaya, 2018). Despite such programmes to improve employability skills training, the notion of a skills gap has remained, as has graduate unemployment (National Universities Commission, 2023). Of course, year after year, quite simply the number of newly created graduate level jobs has tended to be lower than the number of fresh graduates, again illustrating that an increase in human capital did not automatically result in development and an increase in employment opportunities. And where graduate level jobs were not available in sufficient numbers, what options were left for governments, universities and graduates?

Since the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, the way out of this dilemma has often been expected to come from entrepreneurship: if graduate jobs are not available, entrepreneurial graduates should be able to create their own jobs. To encourage graduates to set up businesses, official policies call for training in entrepreneurship skills across the board, not only in business schools or as part of Business Studies degrees. Across Africa, many entrepreneurship promotion and training programmes are offered, often funded by foreign donors and usually aimed at university students and unemployed youths. They teach entrepreneurial skills and encourage young people to think of themselves as potential entrepreneurs with their own businesses (Honeyman, 2020; Fems et al., 2017; Akpan, Effiong & Ele, 2012). Entrepreneurship development has also become a focus for universities. In many universities, for instance in Rwanda, employability skills promotion and entrepreneurship skills development are taught together (Nshimiylimana, 2025). In Nigeria, universities have established Entrepreneurship Development Centres (EDCs) and entrepreneurship has become a compulsory course (Idam, 2014). In recent years, universities across Africa have established university entrepreneurship centres with links to industry that aim to enhance local entrepreneurial ecosystems and empower their students to address local development challenges (Tekwa, 2025).

Interestingly, some recent reflections on the “multidimensional crisis” of African universities warn against higher education agendas that are too rigidly developmentalist and instrumentalist. They are also less concerned with the question of graduates’ employability, and rather emphasise academic excellence, the need to improve the quality of teaching, and new curriculum designs that prioritise critical thinking, creativity and adaptive, applied knowledge. They make no reference to skills or to employers’ expectations (Ochonu, 2025; Falola, 2024). Indeed, in many countries, social networks, connections, patronage, or political party allegiance continue to play significant roles in determining who gets access to which jobs, regardless of the employability skills acquired at university (Mann, 2014). Despite entrepreneurship training, unemployed graduates do not all turn into successful entrepreneurs. This is due to lack of capital and networks, and a range of other constraints (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014; Behuria, 2019). Yet African governments and universities continue to design and implement initiatives intended to make university graduates more employable. Such policies are to a large extent just the copying and implementing of measures designed elsewhere, quite regardless of local circumstances. Only to a lesser degree are such policies based on targeted research on employability in

specific African contexts, even though research results are available. The following section will provide a brief overview of the kind of research that has been done on employability in Africa.

Approaches in research on employability in Africa

Decades before the invention of the concept of employability, governments in Africa were already commissioning research to find out which skills profiles the labour market required. For example, in Nigeria in 1955, a government committee was established to advise on the development and training required to meet industrial and commercial needs. Employers were asked for their training requirements, but the results were disappointing. The committee uncovered a “lack of appreciation by employers of the importance of determining requirements and of planning training in relation to foreseeable needs for skilled workers” (Lewis, 1964). Thus, early research was focused on development, in particular the contribution of trained employees to development and the roles universities might play in offering such training (Odokara, 1972). Ever since the 1958 *African Labour Survey* (ILO, 1958), the International Labour Office of the ILO has been commissioning research on employment. For Africa, most ILO studies have been focused on non-graduate and informal labour, and when they are about education they more often address vocational training than higher education. There are thousands of studies and reports in the ILO Library that mention employability, but only 269 of those are on African countries, and they use the term employability from around 1990 (ILO Library & Knowledge Hub). Since the 1990s, there have been five broad approaches to employability research in Africa: (1) looking at an assumed “skills gap” to identify the lacking employability skills; (2) enquiring how employed graduates found employment; (3) exploring what goes on inside universities and how skills are taught and assessed; (4) exploring interventions beyond the universities, including those aimed at supporting graduate entrepreneurship; and, lastly, (5) broader political economy analyses of employment and labour markets. These approaches have existed alongside each other, and there is no indication that one or other of the approaches is either more up-to-date, or outdated, than others. And of course, there are studies that combine two or more of these approaches as part of the research design.

The skills gap approach assumes that graduates (and other job seekers) have difficulty finding work because they lack the “soft” skills that employers are looking for. Skills gap studies often involve asking employers through interviews or questionnaires what, according to them, are the essential skills that a graduate should have to be considered for employment. It often remains unclear in these studies whether the presence of these skills is actually crucial in real-life hiring decisions: employers say they need certain skills, but this research design can not tell us if they really hire people with those skills. And when employers think they do, how do they assess that applicants indeed possess the skills that they say they do. Furthermore, while employers generally have no problem listing skills they require when hiring today, they are much less willing or able to list the skills they expect to need a few years in the future. However, that would have been the information needed to avoid a future “skills gap”. Many of the skills that employers say they require are not necessarily linked to education. Nevertheless, the skills gap approach frequently assumes that universities do not teach their students the essential skills for employment, or do not teach them well enough. Some skills gap studies take a list of employability

skills, either from the literature or based on their own interviews with employers and ask final year students or graduates whether they are confident that they possess the listed skills. The problem here is of course that self-assessment makes bench-marking difficult, and we are left wondering whether employers would agree that they possess the skills they say they have.

This leads to the second approach, which interviews graduates (or other people) who are in employment. This research design also relies on self-reporting and asks employees what skills they found that they needed to get their job. Of course, the skills that they report that they need to do the job may not be the same skills as those that their employers selected them for. This approach may also include questions on how employees acquired the skills that they consider necessary to do their job well, or also, more generally, what were for them the most useful events, activities, and sources of information that prepared them for the labour market and helped them to become employable, or to set up their own business? These studies may also focus on how those in employment found the job they were doing at the time of the interview. The answers to this question may frequently point to other factors than employability skills, including (extended) family, social networks, being formally employed after internships or forms of national service.

A very interesting approach involves looking into pedagogy, exploring how skills are taught and assessed in schools and universities. This provides fascinating information about what goes on in classrooms, how teaching curricula are developed, and how students are encouraged to engage. However, testing the effectiveness of skills teaching is frequently problematic, because in most cases this can only be done through self-assessment by the students or participants, although some such “soft skills” can indeed be evaluated through standard modes of academic assessment. This research inside higher education institutions may also look at the structure in place to support students’ transition to the job market, including the functioning of careers centres, entrepreneurship development centres, mentoring programmes, service learning and the development of university-business linkages. Although the review of institutional documentation is often part of the research approach, most studies that look at these aspects of employability predominantly deploy the questionnaires and interviews method, which relies on self-reporting, stated motivations, and individual experiences. This area of employability research could also employ the method of ethnography of organisations, involving observations of what people actually do and how they actually interact, rather than what they say they do, over a longer period. Thus far, the ethnography of organisations does not appear to have been employed much for research on employability in Africa.

Looking beyond universities, one approach in employability research explores policies and especially organisations, including local and international NGOs, that offer interventions, for instance skills training, internships or coaching, to help individuals gain access to the labour market or to set up a business. This includes the many incubators and training courses that are aimed at supporting graduate entrepreneurship. As in earlier approaches, interviews are a frequently used research method. For instance, participants in incubators may be polled about the kind of support that was (or would be) most helpful in successfully developing their businesses. This approach to employability intersects with the well-developed research literature on entrepreneurship development. Cases from around the globe offer starting points for looking at teaching entrepreneurial skills and approaches, planning, fund-raising, marketing, upgrading, and so forth.

A final approach is that of broader political economy analyses of employment and labour markets, frequently combining historical research, policy papers, statistical information and interviews to get at broader patterns of employment and employability beyond those of the skills of individuals. Here, political developments, including (military) coups and revolutions, play a role, that lead to new approaches to employment policies or that affect the economy. This also includes global crises such as COVID-19 or those triggered by climate change (resulting in impactful changes in agriculture, for instance), or political conflicts outside the continent. Studies that point to the impact of global inequalities, neoliberal ideology, and international division of labour (including migration), also belong to this approach. What all these political economy-focused studies have in common, is that they make visible the limits of individual students' agency (for better or worse) in the view of larger, structural limitations. They offer important critical perspectives, but generally do not offer practical recommendations for universities, NGOs, or (local) governments, nor do their insights help graduates to find employment.

Conclusion: What work does the concept of employability do?

Employability has been established as an important concept for thinking about how graduates, and people in the labour market more generally, find jobs (or not). The concept draws our attention to important skills and attributes that employers look for in individuals and that are also essential when starting a business. It helps to explore ways in which individuals can acquire and practise such skills and attributes, as well as ways to teach them in universities, schools and training centres. Employability also looks at how individuals demonstrate that they possess such skills, for instance during the job search or in the recruitment phase. These skills will not only have been acquired through formal education. Many people develop their social skills through sports and other clubs, extracurricular activities or Church groups. Individuals may also look to acquire specific skills more explicitly, for instance taking advantage of online digital skills training offers or YouTube channels. Meanwhile, many employers particularly value the skills that are developed through working experience (which poses of course a challenge to fresh graduates). Therefore, when graduates acquire the skills and experience that make them employable, they do not only benefit themselves, but also their employers and – more generally – the workforce, the community and the economy.

However, a focus on individual employability can only be part of a solution to the broader problem of unemployment and underemployment. There are practical reasons for this. For instance, the role of networks in the job search might privilege the importance of contacts and memberships and thereby reduce the importance of skills. Also, individual employability does not increase the total number of jobs on the labour market. Thus, a person may be employable yet still be unemployed. This shows an important downside of the conceptual shift towards employability: it shifts the responsibility for the employment of citizens away from the state, and replaces it with the notion that the individual is responsible for his or her own employment, yet the individual has no control over a whole range of political economy factors that impact on the actual availability of jobs. The focus of the concept of employability on the individual and individual responsibility thus obscures important issues, including the overall availability of jobs, the economic context, and the role of the state in regulating

labour markets and providing employment opportunities. In this respect, the introduction of the concept of employability was entangled with broader neoliberal agendas that aimed to reduce the role of the state, saw the market as the main regulating force, and celebrated the roles of individuals in shaping their own futures by self-optimising and investing in their own futures, rather than to rely on others or on the state. In recent years, however, these neoliberal expectations have been toned down, and even the World Bank has been calling for an increased role of the state (Meagher, 2019).

Not only does the concept of employability still relate to older neoliberal agendas, it is also still essentially a concept from a specific context in the United Kingdom. This means that it is relevant to a particular phase in global capitalism and thus to a particular set of relations between universities, skills and employment opportunities, that frequently differ decisively from realities on the ground in African countries. Surely, the differences in how labour markets operate – in terms of the extent and nature of the role of the state (through subsidies and regulation), the different ways in which gender, age and other specific categories of inclusion or exclusion function, as well as the different ways in which access to labour market information is organised, and even the question of which percentage of work is actually covered by the labour market – must impact on what “employability” means in such different circumstances. In other words, understanding the local context is crucial for employability research.

The application of the concept of employability to African contexts has a lot to do with the dominance of institutions from the Global North in academic knowledge production, as well as with the global policy agenda setting by organisations such as the World Bank and the ILO, that have embraced the concept of employability as fitting with their neoliberal policy orientation. Knowing this, we should engage with employability research critically and insist on taking into account local contexts and local understandings of concepts and processes around work. At the same time, higher education in African countries has been moving towards a situation similar to that in which the concept of employability was first developed in the United Kingdom: a rapid expansion of higher education along with graduate unemployment, limited economic growth, and market-oriented reform policies. However, in African countries the broader society served by higher education institutions functions quite differently and has rather different expectations of what universities should bring to the local community (Shyiramunda & Van den Bersselaar, 2024). It is thus important that employability research in Africa localises the concept of employability and expands its meaning so that it can capture the full spectrum of employment in Africa.

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