

The Employability of Foreign-Trained Nigerian Graduates (1960s to 1980s)

Ngozi Edeagu

Introduction

A dominant but problematic premise in contemporary debates on graduate unemployment in Africa is the assumption that employability is primarily constrained by a lack of skills. This “skills-deficit” narrative has become widespread in policy, development, and higher education discourses, where unemployment is frequently attributed to the alleged mismatch between university training and labour market needs (African Development Bank, 2020; British Council, 2014; World Bank, 2016). Scholars of Africa have long countered this argument (Adeyemo, 2000; Ferguson, 2006; Mkandawire, 2001) and shown that unemployment cannot be understood outside the broader political economy of postcolonial Africa, including the introduction of structural adjustment from the mid-1980s. From this perspective, unemployment is not simply the result of individual deficiencies but reflects structural transformations in African labour markets particularly from the 1990s.

Yet, in Nigeria, the skills-deficit argument is still mobilised to explain why many graduates produced by the country’s public, private, and state universities struggle to secure or sustain employment today. Consequently, Nigeria’s 74 public universities, which continue to train the bulk of the country’s graduates today, are frequently criticised for failing to produce ‘work-ready’ university graduates (NUC, 2023; Lawal, 2024). The contemporary debates on graduate unemployment in Nigeria that frame employability as a problem of individual skill acquisition, or even institutional decay, ignore a longer historical perspective which reveals a far more complex political economy of graduate employment.

Taking this broader context seriously means that the scarcity of skills has not always been the principal cause of graduate unemployment in Nigeria since its independence in October 1960, but other factors – such as a saturated or shrinking labour market – were historically more decisive. If the latter is the case, it becomes imperative to examine the full range of impediments to graduate employment from a historical perspective in order to avoid a narrow reading of graduate employability – a term that has become synonymous with the ways in which the relationship between higher education and the economy is now understood (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 1). By arguing that a degree is insufficient for graduate employment, industrial skill acquisition has now been baked into Nigeria’s university undergraduate degree programmes under the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) established in 1971 and designed to prepare and expose students, regardless of study course, for the industrial work situation they are likely to meet after graduation.

In the first three decades following Nigeria’s independence, a skills gap was not considered a major factor in graduate unemployment. In fact, Nigerian universities and their products were widely

regarded as among the finest in Africa. Up till the late 1980s, Nigerian universities attracted staff, students and researchers worldwide and their academic programmes were highly rated (Ajayi, 1973; Tamuno, 1981; Ukariwe, 1984; Zerby & Zerby, 1971). In addition, their graduates were internationally competitive, with many Nigerians earning academic distinctions abroad and supported by Nigerian and foreign grants to remain for further study or fellowships (Edeagu, 2021). Their subsequent labour market experiences undermine the simplistic assumption that employability is merely a function of skills acquisition and underscore the need for a broader historical interrogation of graduate employability beyond a narrow skills-deficit framework.

Like all conceptual terms, the widely and loosely used term *employability* has continued to be contested. Although there is a strong consensus that employability is about more than obtaining employment, a key contention in the more recent debates is how distinct employability is from employment. Some argue that while employable individuals are more likely to gain employment, this does not suggest that employment is the only indicator of employability. Thus, it is possible to be “employable but still unemployed” (Artess et al., 2017, p. 10). Looking historically enables us to understand how changes in the economic, social and political environment, as well as spatial shifts can impact negatively on an individual’s prospects of finding a job. As labour market – and, in relation to this, degree requirements – change over time, what can data on Africans educated abroad from the 1960s to 1980s tell us about employability in Nigeria? How can we explain unemployment and underemployment among Nigerians trained abroad?

One of the primary motivations for obtaining a university degree was the expectation of improved employment prospects – whether in terms of a better paid, rewarding or higher status job – that would chance their personal circumstances or social standing. Those who pursued overseas education – particularly at the postgraduate level or in disciplines unavailable in Nigeria – anticipated that foreign training would offer improved employment prospects, and consequently superior life chances. This expectation was largely borne out in the 1960s, when graduates generally enjoyed better labour market outcomes than non-graduates. Yet those with a foreign degree were less likely to find immediate employment than those with a Nigerian degree, despite expanding opportunities. Economic, social, political and spatial factors, as well as individual aspirations, were important considerations in shaping what is now conceptualised in terms of graduate employability. By foregrounding these historical dynamics, this chapter challenges the dominance of contemporary skills-deficit narratives and argues for a historically grounded understanding of graduate employability. I focus on the employability of Nigerians trained at foreign universities and colleges outside Nigeria or Africa in the post-colonial era up till the end of the 1980s when the effect of structural adjustment reforms in Nigeria, led to hiring freezes in the public sector, which provided the most graduate jobs. In the next section, I begin by setting the scene in the late colonial period, when Nigerians began to share governance with the departing British colonial administrators.

Employability in the Late Colonial Period: Communists and Capitalists

Access to graduate employment was shaped not only by educational attainment but also by credential hierarchies and ideological suspicion. This section will show that, in Nigeria, discrimination against

non-British qualifications constituted a major, if often overlooked, impediment to graduate employability. This pattern, rooted in the colonial era, persisted into the early post-independence period and profoundly shaped the labour market outcomes of Nigerians trained outside the United Kingdom for at least two decades.

Many Nigerian students who attended foreign institutions went where they could get acceptance offers as well as funding. At the same time, for some young Nigerians with strong nationalist convictions, studying in the communist Soviet Union or the capitalist United States constituted a veiled political statement against colonial authority and its educational orthodoxies. Their choices were not merely academic but deeply personal and political, reflecting both resistance to imperial hierarchies of knowledge and a search for alternative pathways to social mobility. One of the most prominent figures facilitating access to higher education in communist states was Nduka Eze, a former President-General of the Zikist Movement and Secretary of both the United African Company Workers' Union and the Nigerian Federation of Labour. In May 1950, Eze established the National Scholarship Board, which opened opportunities for Nigerians to study in Eastern Europe. Through his connections with the Free German Youth in East Germany, he secured an unspecified number of scholarships for Nigerian students, selected by himself and senior members of the board, to study in East German universities. Despite colonial regulations that strictly restricted the issuance of international passports to Nigerians intending to travel behind the Iron Curtain, Eze succeeded in sending two students to Berlin and Prague in October 1950, followed by sixteen more to Berlin by May 1951 (Tijani, 2006, pp. 41 & 42). These opportunities, however, attracted state opposition.

In late 1953, the Council of Ministers – composed largely of Nigerians – and the colonial administration under Governor Oliver Lyttelton had grown increasingly concerned about the rising number of Nigerians in communist countries. This anxiety led to a stricter passport regime that effectively barred travel for educational purposes to Eastern Europe (Tijani, 2009, p. 63). In October 1954, two British officials of the federal secretariat claimed that at least two hundred active “communists and fellow travellers” were in Nigeria comprising both Africans and expatriates, including a civil servant who was holding a communist party card and an agent of a Communist International in Nigeria (“Active Communists,” 1954, p. 1). While the federal government never formally defined who it qualified as a communist, it announced soon after that henceforth known communists would be excluded from employment in essential services and the public sector (“Official statement,” 1954, p. 1). This purge affected those who had studied or were studying in communist states. The early post-independence federal government continued this policy, motivated by fears of communist infiltration and a desire to ensure that future leaders possessed pro-Western leanings. It was not until 1973 that the Nigerian Military Government began to recognise Soviet degrees (Mayer, 2016, p. 93).

The British colonial government also discriminated against graduates trained in the United States, its wartime ally, revealing that political suspicion extended beyond ideological boundaries. A growing number of Nigerians rejected the prevailing assumption that British universities were inherently superior and believed that, despite potential career risks, the United States offered a more progressive training ground for Africa's future leaders (Roberts, 2016, p. 803). British colonial administrators, in general, associated emerging nationalist movements with graduates of American institutions, whom they accused of radicalism, mass mobilisation, and of eclipsing British-trained elites in the struggle for political legitimacy. Their skepticism towards American-educated Africans was rooted in earlier

precedents – the 1915 uprising led by John Chilembwe in Nyasaland, which they attributed to his education in the United States and his continuing links with African Americans (Gershomi, 1997, p. 124).

In Nigeria, the colonial government employed a variety of measures to restrict educational migration to the United States. These included diplomatic pressure on American universities to discourage the admission of Nigerian students; the use of passport and currency controls to obstruct travel; and, according to contemporary African American newspapers, the deliberate delay or denial of passage to students bound for North America. Upon their return, many US-trained Nigerians were treated with suspicion and faced considerable difficulty securing employment in the colonial administration. With few exceptions, those who returned found themselves excluded from employment within the colonial administration. Thus, for many American-trained Nigerians, the promise of education as a route to social mobility collided with a bureaucratic structure that systematically devalued their credentials, which functioned not simply as markers of competence but as political signifiers. These dynamics illuminate a central paradox of Nigerian graduate employability in the late colonial period: educational expansion did not translate automatically into occupational mobility. Rather, employability among American-trained graduates was mediated by state ideology, geopolitical alignments, and administrative gatekeeping.

However, while the federal government remained wary of US qualifications, the Eastern Region – whose political leadership was itself dominated by American-educated elites – adopted a more accommodating posture. For instance, in April 1954, the regional government organised public forums to familiarise parents and prospective students with the US university system and study conditions there (“‘Outlook’ has pleasure,” 1954, p. 3). Later that year in likely response to lingering anxieties about the recognition of American qualifications (“Report from America,” 1954, p. 3), the government-owned Eastern Regional Production Development Board announced the appointment of Miss Oyibo Ekwulo Akwuba as assistant secretary, in line with its Nigerianisation policy. Akwuba, who earned her bachelor’s degree from Lincoln University in 1952 and her master’s degree from Columbia University in 1953, was reportedly the first woman from the Eastern Region to be appointed to a senior position of this kind outside the government service (“E.R.P.D.B.’s first!” 1954, p. 1). Her appointment served as evidence that American qualifications were both legitimate and valuable.

Given the dominance of American-trained elites within the Eastern Region’s political leadership, it was unsurprising that graduates of US institutions found greater acceptance there. However, tensions persisted at the federal level. In late 1954, J.B.C. Okala – representing a group of graduates of American universities – accused the federal government of systemic discrimination during an interview in Lagos (the colonial capital) with Nnamdi Azikiwe, Premier of the Eastern Region and himself a graduate of American universities. Referencing six Nigerians with master’s degrees from first rate American universities in fields such as education, public administration and micro-biology, Okala alleged that public service boards were reluctant to employ US-trained Nigerians regardless of competence. He also claimed that even those who were appointed were placed “on a scale far below their merits” One person fitting this description was Akwuba who was the only woman in the group of six that graduated between October, 1953 and February, 1954 from a first rate American university (Columbia) with a master’s degree (and in education) (“East Nigerian government,” 1954, p. 2). If this were the case,

gender may have played a more significant role than country of institution in Akwuba's salary scale placement.

Azikiwe assured Okala that it was not his government's policy to discriminate against graduates of American or other universities and pledged to advise the public service commission and the statutory corporations that operated under the Eastern Region government to base recruitment solely on merit and character. He also warned that if discriminatory practices persisted, this would demoralise Nigerian students in North America and undermine the Nigerianisation agenda ("Dr Azikiwe Declares," 1954, p. 5). Although Okala's employment status was unknown then, he later emerged as chairman of the Cinema Corporation of Nigeria, an Eastern Region film unit based in Enugu ("Africans no longer," 1957, p. 1).

Responses to job discrimination often framed employability in practical rather than structural terms. For instance, E. E. Esua, General Secretary of the Nigerian Union of Teachers, dismissed claims of discrimination by American-trained graduates and challenged critics to provide concrete evidence of bias. He regarded these accusations as absurd, arguing that it was inconceivable that Nigerians with recognised qualifications would be excluded from employment, especially given the acute shortages of even suitably qualified expatriates and the fact that the federal government itself awarded scholarships to study at US universities. Esua further noted that graduates of British universities did not automatically secure senior appointments and cautioned prospective students to align their courses of study with Nigeria's projected workforce needs. While acknowledging that some grievances were legitimate, he suggested that others stemmed from ill-informed educational choices rather than institutional discrimination ("Pace of Nigerianisation," 1954, p. 3). Esua's position echoes contemporary skills-deficit narratives, revealing a long-standing tendency to individualise graduate unemployment rather than situate it within labour market constraints and state policy.

Additional forms of bias shaped graduate employability under internal self-government from 1957. Most notably the Northern Region's "Northernisation" policy reshaped access to public employment along regional lines. Although expatriate officials were gradually replaced by Nigerians in regional capitals and local administrations, the pace of Nigerianisation was considerably slower in the North, where access to Western education had historically been limited. As applicants needed to be "from the North" in order to qualify for a government job in the Northern Region, by 1959, its public service remained dominated by expatriates when the region attained internal self-government. Nonetheless, expatriates also continued to occupy most of the highest-ranking "super-scale" posts in the Western and Eastern Regions in the same period (Post, 1963, pp. 22 & 23). Premier Ahmadu Bello's efforts to recruit American engineers and teachers from the United States to support the Northern Region's irrigation, power, and educational projects (ANP, 1960, p. 6) further underscores the complex and often contradictory politics of graduate employability.

The Politics of Graduate Employability

Nigeria's decolonisation in the 1950s significantly expanded employment opportunities for university graduates. By then, only one university was operational in the country – the University College of Ibadan (UCI), which became the University of Ibadan (UI) in 1963. From its opening in 1948 until

independence, it had produced relatively few graduates. In October 1960, the University of Nigeria at Nsukka (UNN), established by the Eastern Region government, was launched, significantly increasing the number of graduates with its more open-door admission policy. Substantial public investment in higher education by the Nigerian federal government also expanded the number of university graduates within a short period. The provisional allocation of funds for the expansion of higher educational facilities and scholarships – £19.7 million between 1962 and 1968 – represented nearly three-fifths of the proposed total national educational budget (Suter, Horlick & Norwood, 1963, p. 21). The unprecedented investment was informed by the recommendations proffered by the Ashby Commission, established in April 1949 to investigate Nigeria's higher education needs over a twenty-year period. Following the release of its report, *Investment in Education*, the federal government embarked on an ambitious programme of university expansion, leading to the creation of three additional ones in the early 1960s (Anyanwu, 2011).

Although these local institutions played a central role in training Nigeria's post-independence high-level ("manpower") workforce, the federal and regional governments also relied on external training to meet her pressing needs in the 1960s. Nigeria's National Manpower Board, established to assess Nigeria's current and projected workforce needs and with training, defined this "high-level manpower" as those occupying positions requiring advanced professional and technical qualifications, usually above the school certificate level. Individuals described under the "senior category" of the workforce included managers, accountants, administrative officers, doctors, engineers, auditors, research officers, and graduate teachers (National Manpower Board, 1964, p. 6). These normally required to hold a good degree from a recognised university, or high professional or technical qualification.

By adopting the Ashby Commission Report, the Nigerian government signaled that a small but highly skilled workforce would play a crucial role in national development during the first decade of independence. The value placed on educated labour grew as this workforce was being trained and later led educational, health, and commercial projects aimed at improving Nigeria's standard of living. Frederick H. Harbison estimated Nigeria's high-level workforce requirement at 85,900 persons for the decade 1960-70 in order to maintain the planned annual economic growth rate of 4 per cent, a conservative figure considering that over 79,000 persons were already classified as high-level in 1960.

At the coming of flag independence in 1960, graduate unemployment was virtually non-existent, in contrast to the growing unemployment among unskilled workers (Suter, Horlick & Norwood, 1963, p. 2). The relatively small number of graduates with the requisite qualifications broadly matched the available positions. Possession of the "right" degree almost guaranteed employment. While social networks, patronage, and ethnic affiliation could be advantageous, they were not always decisive, as the pool of suitably qualified candidates was limited. Nevertheless, political competition shaped graduate employability. Much of the intense political and ethnic contestations between 1962 and 1966 revolved around political job distribution. The controversies surrounding the exposure of a list showing that the 'national cake' was being distributed inequitably among ethnic groups, fuelled the "Fair Share Charter" debate (Falae, 1971, p. 67). These debates generated calls for ethnic quotas, which in turn reshaped patterns of graduate employability.

At the same time, Nigeria faced a paradoxical labour market: a surplus of unskilled labour coexisted with an acute shortage of high-level individuals. In 1963, only 1,000 university graduates – at home

and abroad – were available (Suter, Horlick and Norwood, 1963, pp. 18-20). Thus, Nigeria's National Manpower Board's inaugural session discussed the central concern of creating additional employment opportunities and ensuring that the appropriate number of Nigerians with suitable qualifications would be available to implement the development programmes of federal and regional governments and to meet the needs of private industry (National Manpower Board, 1964, p. 1). The emphasis on these kinds of qualifications encouraged many more Nigerians to pursue higher education abroad as a pathway to social mobility, reinforcing the country's enduring "aspiration economy." In fact, almost one-third of Nigeria's total student population in higher education was studying abroad in the late 1960s (Callaway & Musone, 1968, p. 71).

Within this milieu, international educational partnerships became a central pillar of manpower development. In the context of Cold War rivalry, the United States became one of Nigeria's major partners, using educational aid as a crucial arena of influence. US foreign policy prioritised cultivating political and economic ties with emerging regional powers such as Nigeria through educating its leadership. Among the most influential US educational aid initiatives was the African Scholarship Program of American Universities (ASPAU), launched in November 1959 as the Nigeria-American Scholarship Program. Over its fifteen-year lifespan, the scheme supported nearly four hundred Nigerians (Edeagu, 2021). ASPAU's emphasis reflected a more general concern with addressing Africa's shortage of trained personnel. ASPAU and its related schemes like the African Graduate Scholarship Program (AFGRAD) and the Inter-African University Scholarship Program (INTERAF) aimed to train middle and top-level manpower in fields deemed critical to Africa's economic development. Thus, return and reintegration were central to all three schemes.

The 1960s thus represented a period of exceptional opportunity for the highly educated foreign-trained graduate. Both government departments and private increasingly recruited university graduates – whether trained locally or abroad – with the intention of grooming them for management positions following probationary appointments (van den Bersselaar, 2019, p. 390). Universities were also major employers of foreign-trained Nigerians, especially with advanced degrees. It should be noted that many returnees had already been employed as academic staff before they went abroad, and they had been bonded to return to their institutions. Notably, those targeted for training under AFGRAD were primarily those already working in the junior and middle administrative and academic institutions who were designated to lead in their respective country's development and in strengthening the civil service, research institutions and universities.

Nevertheless, signs of labour market saturation began to emerge by the mid-1960s. In March 1964, Kenneth Dike, vice-chancellor of UI, responded to an earlier warning about the oversupply of educated labour. He noted that as administrative services became more settled and expatriates were progressively replaced, opportunities within the civil service were diminishing. Furthermore, he noted that whereas graduates in the 1950s could expect near-automatic employment, by the early 1960s competition had intensified, causing at least one region to introduce competitive examinations for graduate recruitment. Moreover, the privileges traditionally associated with civil service employment (such as car allowances and overseas leave) were gradually being eroded. Dike predicted that the income and status gap between graduates in the civil service and graduate teachers would eventually disappear. While he found it undesirable that those who had received expensive education should be employed in jobs for which less expensive training would have been adequate, he advised constant

monitoring so that the returns to specified levels of education did not fall substantially below the costs to their community. He further predicted that graduates would be found in less remunerative jobs rather than that graduate unemployment would emerge (Dike, 1969, p. 207).

The less remunerative jobs Dike referenced included school teaching. However, while ample vacancies existed in secondary grammar schools, recruiting graduates was difficult, as witnessed in the Western State (which replaced the Western Region in May 1967 during the Nigeria-Biafra War). According to the state government, the challenges were caused, *inter alia*, by an inappropriate salary structure, a lack of qualified Nigerians/state indigenes, limited funds, as well as factors categorised under “others,” such as an unwillingness to teach in rural areas, lack of social amenities in schools and inducements such as car advances to graduate teachers (Western State of Nigeria, 1968, p. 74). Factors like these help explain why, despite Nigerianisation, it was still commonplace in the early 1960s to find a secondary school headed by a British principal and a teaching staff comprising a few US Peace Corps volunteers and commonwealth expatriates (Ford, 1964, p. 8).

Notwithstanding the Nigerian federal government’s reliance on the United States to help train its high-level workforce, the longstanding bias remained. Besides Nigerian government grant allocations continuing to reflect a strong preference for British institutions, the bureaucratic view that American degrees were unsuitable for government employment also persisted. The experience of Omar Rahaman illustrates this perception. In 1965, Rahaman won an ASPAU scholarship to study chemical engineering in the United States but declined the offer after Samuel Manuwa, then the first commissioner of the Federal Public Service Commission, warned that he would not be employed without a master’s degree. Since ASPAU funded only bachelor’s degrees, Rahaman declined his offer. He later obtained a BSc in Geology from the University of Ibadan and was offered immediate employment in the Geological Survey Division of the Federal Ministry of Mines and Power (on a temporary basis) in June 1968 (Ocan, 2016).

Rahaman’s choice was practical as it was logical. Following the first military coup, Nigerian students studying in North American universities who wished to join the public services in Nigeria (or become school teachers) were warned by the Nigerian military government to take the maximum number of credit hours in their major or related field of study rather than just fulfil the minimum requirements set for graduation. Students were expected to devote two-thirds or three-quarters of the specified credit hours to selected two or three subjects to ensure sufficient depth of knowledge in those subjects. The government declared that degrees would not be recognised just because they had been earned from universities but rather each degree would be evaluated on its own merit and in relation to job opportunities. In other words, the government was “always willing to accept a good degree from any University accredited by one of the accrediting agencies” in Nigeria, provided that “the subjects studied for the degree are suitable for employment purpose” (Federal Nigeria, 1966: 17).

The preference for UK degrees over US degrees, especially at the bachelor’s and master’s level, persisted beyond the 1960s. As Chukunta noted, the federal Ministry of Education ruled in 1974 that the American bachelor’s degree was equivalent to just above the Higher School Certificate, and only the American master’s degree was equal to a bachelors obtained from a Nigerian university (Chukunta, 1976, p. 178). Rahaman’s case thus explains a deeper point, why many Nigerians in the United States

pursued advanced degrees following their bachelor's degree, ultimately postponing their entry into the labour market.

Although expectations of US-trained graduates were sometimes unrealistic – with some ASPAU alumni strangely applying for positions of headship, director or president of a ministry, department or college (Mojekwu, 1964, p. 3) – other factors posed greater obstacles to even appropriate level employment. Many incumbent Nigerians who had risen to senior civil service or private sector positions gradually or through nationalist politics or colonial patronage networks were reluctant to relinquish power to younger, more highly educated returnees. The averseness of the old guard towards the more highly educated led to tensions in the 1960s and 1970s, as employees of the United Africa Company (UAC) recall (van den Bersselaar, 2016, p. 444). This ascriptive criteria that continued to shape access to elite positions into the 1970s has also been noted by Hanna and Hanna, who commented: “The less-qualified incumbents sometimes exacerbate the situation because they are aware of the relative abilities of their potential successors: the students’ frustration is perhaps heightened by the knowledge that fellow Africans are postponing if not blocking their road to success” (Hanna, 1975, p. 5). A subtle way of gatekeeping senior staff positions in the private and public sectors was by advertising vacancies locally, disadvantaging Nigerians abroad. Those positions that happened to be advertised in overseas newspapers demanded years of cognate experience, which many did not have upon graduation (Chukunta, 1976, p. 179). Few entry level positions were advertised abroad. In addition, interviews were frequently scheduled at times that made participation from overseas difficult.

Nevertheless, returnees were not misguided in believing that jobs immediately awaited them. The civil service, expanding school systems and statutory corporations were ready to absorb most graduates, as well as the large foreign-owned companies – namely oil companies and the big trading firms such as UAC – that were actively Nigerianising their management ranks (van den Bersselaar, 2019, p. 400). Taken together, these developments reinforce the central argument of this chapter: graduate employability in Nigeria has never been determined solely by the presence or absence of skills or qualifications.

Graduate Employability in Post-Biafra Nigeria

Available employment opportunities and political climate at home were other significant factors in the employability of foreign-trained graduates in the aftermath of the Nigeria-Biafra War. In the 1970s, unemployment in Nigeria – when disaggregated by educational attainment – was concentrated largely among primary school leavers, a condition widely attributed to their lack of formal job training and prior work experience (Falahe, 1971, pp. 65–66). Graduate unemployment, by contrast, emerged less as a product of educational deficiency than as a consequence of structural shifts in manpower planning, state formation, and labour-market segmentation. A major transformation in public-sector recruitment of highly trained Nigerians shaping this evolving employment landscape was the creation of twelve states in May 1967. State creation significantly complicated recruitment practices, as state governments increasingly prioritised the employment of state “indigenes,” a discriminatory recruitment practice that favoured those who could trace ancestry to the area. Across Nigeria, qualified Nigerians who were considered “non-indigenes” were often denied employment for public-sector pos-

itions, and in some cases, expatriates were preferred over them. This restriction produced unintended consequences. In 1968, the Western State government reported acute manpower shortages in both the public and private sectors. The services sector accounted for 89.9 percent of reported vacancies in the senior category, followed by 87.7 percent in the intermediate category and 63.7 percent in the clerical, skilled and semi-skilled categories. By contrast, the private sector – most affected by the then ongoing Nigeria-Biafra War – accounted for only one out of the 2,530 reported vacancies. The Western State government attributed these shortages to the scarcity of qualified state indigenes, thereby illustrating the tension between manpower needs and exclusionary recruitment policies (Western State of Nigeria, 1972, p. xi).

The Federal Military Government faced a similar dilemma after the Nigeria-Biafra War ended in January 1970, particularly regarding how to restore the Federal Public Service to its pre-war staffing levels of the 1965-66 financial year. Graduates from the Central-East State – carved out of the Eastern Region – expressed widespread anxiety about their employability, while the federal civil servants among them, who had transferred to the former Eastern Nigeria Public Service during the war, feared they would not be reabsorbed. The government dismissed these concerns as “imagined rather than real” and declared that returning federal officers from former Biafran-controlled territories would have jobs waiting – a good number of such officers had already been absorbed, it claimed. Much as re-absorption was made on compassionate and re-integration grounds, the military government needed to replace many expatriates whose short-term contracts were expiring with suitable Nigerians. As “indigenous” staff were scarce in many of the newly created states, the federal military government maintained that ample opportunities existed for qualified professionals outside their state of origin existed and instituted a supernumerary scheme to facilitate mobility of the level that was still scarce throughout the federation (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1970, pp. 7, 9 & 11). Yet as Chuwunta revealed, the Igbo were reluctant to work outside their ethnic areas after the war. The resultant increased intense competition for jobs in the southeast was worsened by nepotism, bribery, and corruption (Chukunta, 1976, p. 103).

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) was founded in 1973 to foster national unity, reconciliation, and reconstruction after the Nigeria-Biafra war by mobilising university graduates to serve in different parts of the country, promoting common ties, and developing national consciousness. The compulsory one-year NYSC programme also aimed to inculcate discipline in Nigerian youth by instilling in them a tradition of industry at work as well as patriotic and local service to the nation. In 1973, 2,600 graduates were tasked to engage in “primary assignments” such as road construction, farming, teaching, surveying and mapping, as well as supporting the development projects of local council services in government departments or statutory corporations (“Year of challenge,” 1973, p. 1). However, university students under the National Union of Nigerian Students immediately protested the introduction of the scheme, arguing that participation would delay the entry of young Nigerian university graduates into the labour market.

Manpower challenges also led the government effort to attract highly trained Nigerians abroad after the war. In 1974, a delegation led by Professor Adebayo Adedeji, then Federal Commissioner for Economic Development and Reconstruction, toured major American cities to encourage Nigerian students and professionals to return home. The initiative was closely linked to the manpower needs of post-war reconstruction and the establishment of the NYSC scheme. The delegation, targeted Nige-

rian professionals in cities like Washington, Chicago, Miami and Atlanta, yet anticipated reluctance from those who were now married to American spouses, those who feared their skills would be inapplicable in Nigeria, or who – in the case of the Igbo — feared reprisals due to their ethnicity (Nigerians on repatriation,” 1974, p. 16). The altered political condition at home, the granting of permanent residency in the United States to those who identified as Biafrans, and the provisions of the 1986 U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act, facilitated long-term settlement in the United States among the Igbo graduates.

Nigerian graduates who returned home after the war were employed in various capacities. Drawing from ASPAU records, of the 186 Nigerian returnees recorded in 1975 (Wise 1976, Appendix VII), only a small fraction entered federal government employment. The majority were absorbed by universities and the private sector (Wise 1976, Appendix IX). A study by Okediji and Okediji similarly has shown that employment in higher education topped the list of fourteen possible employers for 61 Nigerians already working in the United States or those seeking jobs in Nigeria. Some 50% and 30% of the returnees also stated university institutions as their first and long-run employers respectively (Okediji & Okediji, 1972, p. 153). University employment was a rational choice for many PhD holders, who were often considered overqualified for positions outside academia. In 1973, for instance, most government agencies and private firms preferred bachelor’s degree holders, whereas universities increasingly required postgraduate qualifications. This divergence helps explain variations in repatriation patterns: while liberal arts graduates returned at relatively high rates, engineering graduates were less likely to do so, reflecting stronger overseas labour-market demand and higher earning potential.

The proliferation of universities in Nigeria from the 1970s complicated the labour market for foreign-trained graduates. Thus, graduate unemployment became linked to the imbalance between supply and demand. According to a *Times Higher Education Supplement* report, proponents of university expansion overlooked the growing difficulty graduates now faced in securing employment in the southern states and the persistent challenges of filling places in northern institutions (Watts, August 1, 1975). Graduate unemployment, which had been present in Nigeria for several years, had mainly affected arts graduates, the report noted, but even then, the Federal Public Service Commission’s had announced that it could no longer guarantee employment for graduates in the natural sciences, engineering, agriculture, and veterinary medicine. Although the report optimistically concluded that graduate unemployment might stimulate entrepreneurship, this view underestimated the structural barriers confronting graduates with advanced degrees.

While universities remained major employers of university graduates in general – especially for PhD holders – several departments reached saturation point, leading to the rejection of returning doctorates. The newly established universities also generated pressures in the pre-existing ones whose staff resigned to work at the new universities. At the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), the only existing university in northern Nigeria, the situation was acute due to a parochial approach to staffing. The university, which opened in 1962 as the University of Northern Nigeria, had only reached 55 percent Nigerianisation of a senior staff of about 2,000, in 1975 according to S. I. Audu from the ABU in a meeting with representatives of the British Council. Audu envisioned that the university would need to rely on expatriates to replace Nigerians considering a move to the new universities. He argued for the

recruitment of young British lecturers and experienced foreign academics on renewable contracts of up to ten years, while limiting tenure appointments to professors and specialists in scarce disciplines.¹

The rapid massification of higher education also lengthened the transition from graduation to first employment. Okedara's 1984 study of UI graduates (for which fieldwork was completed in 1971) demonstrated that more recent cohorts experienced longer waiting periods before securing work, a finding he self-corroborated by a pilot tracer study conducted by the University of Lagos in the early 1970s (Okedara, 1984, p. 135). Evaluations of international training programmes such as AFGRAD further revealed that most fellows were channelled into civil service or university careers, reflecting the programme's preference for young civil servants or junior faculty members nominated with assurances of reinstatement upon return (Kennedy, 1967, pp. 501 & 505).

Yet access to employment was mediated not only by job availability but also by social capital. Okediji and Okediji's research showed that Nigerian graduates abroad were usually unaware of the diverse formal and informal channels which they could use to find jobs in Nigeria nor assured of the usefulness of the channels which they already knew for locating same. Family and personal connections ranked highest in perceived effectiveness, followed by political patronage, and then public service commissions and organisations with business interests in Nigeria. This response shows that they considered informal methods more efficacious than formal avenues. Graduates without access to such networks tended to doubt the utility of formal procedures and attributed their lack of job offers to structural exclusion (Okediji & Okediji, 1972, pp. 151–152).

In the 1980s, the introduction of structural adjustment policies and the retrenchment of public-sector workers further intensified reliance on informal networks. Recurrent strikes in public universities revived interest in studying abroad, but questions persisted regarding the financing and labour-market value of foreign degrees. Those retrenched or unable to cope with declining living standards increasingly opted for migration, a path more readily available to those with internationally marketable skills. International training schemes such as ASPAU and AFGRAD illustrate the ambivalent outcomes of educational mobility. ASPAU alumni such as Mebenin Awipi exemplify the circular migration patterns of Nigerian professionals trained abroad whose careers spanned Nigeria and the United States. Awipi, a 1962 awardee, returned to work in Nigeria in 1981 but returned to the United States in 1985. Until he retired in 2005, he was a professor at Tennessee State University, Nashville. AFGRAD's final evaluation also revealed high job mobility among its alumni, particularly among those trained in economics and business administration, while health professionals were the least mobile (Management Systems International, 1995, pp. 15–16)

Degree level also shaped employment trajectories: PhD holders remained concentrated in academia, while bachelor's and master's graduates were more prominent in government and private-sector roles. The data also suggested that alumni who studied economics and business administration were more likely to change jobs, compared to alumni in the fields of agriculture/animal science, engineering, and education. Of the seven major fields of study, health alumni were the least mobile and most likely to stay in their jobs (Management Systems International, 1995, p. 17). Yet discrimination persisted. Some alumni reported inadequate compensation, attributing this to salary structures based not on qualifica-

1 Minutes of Meeting with Dr. I. S. Audu, written by D. P. Saville, June 4, 1975, BW 90/1392: Nigerian National Universities Commission, National Archives Kew.

tions but on seniority, ethnicity, and personal connections (Management Systems International, 1995, p. 22).

Taken together, these dynamics challenge the persistent assumption that graduate unemployment in Nigeria resulted primarily from skills deficits. Instead, they reveal a complex political economy of employability shaped by social, economic, political and spatial dynamics. Graduate unemployment, far from being a recent anomaly, was already embedded in Nigeria's post-independence development trajectory, reflecting structural contradictions between educational expansion and the absorptive capacity of the labour market.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that access to employment in the first three decades of the postcolonial era in Nigeria was shaped not only by educational attainment but also by credential hierarchies, ideological suspicion, state priorities, and the structural constraints of a narrow formal labour market. It demonstrates that graduate employability in Nigeria has long been shaped by forces that extend well beyond individual competence or curricular relevance. Credential hierarchies, regional politics, and the growing limited absorptive capacity of the postcolonial state mostly mediated the relationship between education and employment. Far from being a recent crisis driven by inadequate skills, graduate employability must be understood as enduring features of Nigeria's political economy – features that continue to inform contemporary debates on employability, education reform, and youth labour markets.

References

- Active communists in Nigeria reported to be at least 200. (1954, October 20). *West African Pilot*, 1.
- Adeyemo, J. A. (2000). The demand for higher education and employment opportunities in Nigeria. In Y. Lebeau & M. Ogunsanya (Eds.), *The Dilemma of Post-Colonial Universities* (pp. 241-265). IFRA-Nigeria. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifra.992>
- African Development Bank. (2016). Jobs for youth in Africa strategy: Strategy for creating 25 million jobs and equipping 50 million youth (2016-2025). <https://www.afdb.org/fr/documents/document/bank-group-strategy-for-jobs-for-youth-in-africa-2016-2025-89238>
- Africans no longer to be degraded in films – Okala. (1957, June 18). Africans no longer to be degraded in films – Okala. *West African Pilot*, 1.
- Ajayi, J. F. A. (Ed.). (1973). *The university of Ibadan, 1948-1973: A history of the first twenty-five years*. Ibadan University Press.
- ANP. (1960, July 8). Engineer, teachers south for Nigeria. *Minneapolis Spokesman*, 6.
- Anyanwu, O. E. (2011) *The politics of access: University education and nation-building in Nigeria, 1948-2000*. University of Calgary Press.
- Artess, J., Hooley, T., & Mellors-Bourne, R. (2017). *Employability: A review of the literature 2012 to 2016*. Higher Education Academy.
- British Council. (2014). *Can higher education solve Africa's job crisis? Understanding graduate employability in sub-Saharan Africa*. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/graduate_employability_in_ssa_final-web.pdf

- Callaway, A., & Musone, A. (1968). *Financing of education in Nigeria*. UNESCO.
- Choi, Jieun et al. (2020). *The future of work in Africa: The roles of skills, informality, and social protection in unleashing the promise of digital technologies for all*. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1445-7>
- Chukunta, N. K. O. (1976). *The Nigerian brain drain: Factors associated with the expatriation of American-educated Nigerians* [PhD dissertation]. Rutgers University.
- Dike, K. O. (1969). Manpower training for economic development: Professional and managerial staff. In T. M. Yesufu (Ed.), *Manpower Problems and Economic Development in Nigeria* (pp. 200–216). Oxford University Press.
- Dr Azikiwe Declares: No discrimination against American graduates. (1954, August 5). *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star*, 5.
- East Nigerian government opposed to job bias. (1954, October 13). *Atlanta Daily World*, 2.
- Edeagu, N. (2021). Educating a transnational postcolonial elite: United States university scholarships for Nigerian students (1961-1975). *Diasporas*, (37), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.4000/diasporas.6285>
- E.R.P.D.B.'s first! (1954, July 29). *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star*, 1.
- Falae, S. O. (1971). Unemployment in Nigeria. *The Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*, 13, 59–75.
- Federal Nigeria. (1966, January/April 1966). Evaluation of degrees. 9(1-4), 17.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1970). *Re-absorption of former civil servants and the appointment of Central-Eastern state indigenes in the federal public service and other public services of the federation*. Federal Ministry of Information.
- Ferguson, J. (2006). *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*. Duke University Press.
- Ford, E. A. (1964). Letter from Nigeria. *School Life*, 47(2), 5-9.
- Gershomi, Y. (1997). *Africans on African-Americans: The creation and uses of an African-American myth*. New York University Press.
- Hanna, W. J. (1975). Students, universities, and political outcomes. In W. J. Hanna (Ed.), *University students and African politics* (pp. 1–22). Africana Publishing Company.
- Kennedy, M. (1967). AFGRAD: An experiment in purposive education: The first four years of the African graduate fellowship program. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 38(9), 500–506. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1980339>
- Lawal, I. (2024). NUC, COL partner to tackle challenges of Nigerian graduates. *The Guardian*. <https://guardian.ng/education/nuc-col-partner-to-tackle-challenges-of-nigerian-graduates/>
- Management Systems International. (1995). *Capturing the results of 30 years of AFGRAD training: Evidence of change in individuals and institutions across Africa*. <https://www.africafuturefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/AFGRAD-training-program.pdf>
- Mayer, A. (2016). *Naija Marxisms: Revolutionary thought in Nigeria*. Pluto Press.
- Mkandawire, T. (2001). Thinking about developmental states in Africa. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25(3), 289–314. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/25.3.289>
- Mokejwu, C. C. (1964, April). Job Opportunities in Nigeria. *ASPAU forum*, 3.
- Nigerians on repatriation trip. (1974, March 9). *Afro-American*, 16.
- Ocan, O. O. (2016). Citation on Professor Omar Rahaman. *University of Ilorin Geology Student's Blog*. <https://ugsass.blogspot.com/2016/05/citation-on-prof-omar-rahaman.html>
- Official statement on communists in public service. (1954, October 21). *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star*, 1.
- Okedara, J. T. (1984). *Employment status of university of Ibadan graduates, 1950-1971*. Ibadan University Press.
- Okediji, O. O., & Okediji, F. O. (1972). Nigeria “brain drain” to the United States of America: A sociological perspective. *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development*, 2(2), 137–163.
- National Manpower Board. (1964). *Nigeria's high-level manpower, 1963-70*. Manpower Study No. 2.

- National Universities Commission (NUC). (2023). Promote African graduate employability – perm sec. *National Universities Commission*. <https://www.nuc.edu.ng/promote-african-graduate-employability-perm-sec/>
- Post, K. W. J. (1963). *The Nigerian federal election of 1959: Politics and administration in a developing political system*. Oxford University Press (for NISER).
- Report from America: American education and Nigerian posts. (1954, June 24). *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star*, 3.
- Roberts, A. D. (2016). The awkward squad: Arts graduates from British tropical Africa before 1940. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44(5), 798–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2016.1229261>
- Suter, A. C., Horlick, Max & Norwood, Janet L. (1963). *Labor in Nigeria*, BLS report No. 261.
- Tamuno, T. N. (Ed.). (1981). *Ibadan voices: Ibadan university in transition*. Ibadan University Press.
- The 'Outlook' has pleasure to answer: What is the American university? (1954, April 22). *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star*, 3.
- The pace of Nigerianisation. (1954, September 2). *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star*, 3.
- Tijani, H. I. (2006). *Britain, leftist nationalists and the transfer of power in Nigeria, 1945-1965*. Routledge.
- Tijani, H. I. (2009). Britain and the foundation of anti-communist policies in Nigeria, 1945-1960. *African and Asian Studies*, 8(1–2), 47–66. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156921009X413153>
- Tomlinson, M. (2017). Introduction: Graduate employability in context: charting a complex, contested and multi-faceted policy and field research. In M. Tomlinson & L. Holmes (Eds.), *Graduate employability in context* (pp. 1–40). Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57168-7>
- Ukariwe, U. K. (1984). *The establishment and development of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1960-1970* [Ph.D. dissertation]. Southern Illinois University. Proquest Dissertations & Theses.
- van den Bersselaar, D. (2016). Looking back on a career: Unpacking african middle-class life histories. In *Sources and Methods for African History and Culture: Essays in Honour of Adam Jones* (pp. 431-447). Leipziger Universitätsverlag.
- van den Bersselaar, D. (2019). White-collar workers. In S. Bellucci & A. Eckert (Eds.), *General labour history of Africa workers, employers and governments, 20th–21st Centuries* (pp. 379–404). James Currey, Boydell & Brewer Ltd (in association with ILO). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787445550.015>
- Watts, R. (1975, August 1). University expansion despite graduate unemployment. *Times Higher Education Supplement*.
- Western State of Nigeria. (1972). *Report of a survey of manpower shortages and surpluses in the western state and of the capacity utilisation of educational and training institutions*. The Ministry of Economic Planning and Reconstruction.
- Western State of Nigeria. (1968). *Report of manpower shortages and surpluses in the western state and the capacity utilisation of educational and training institutions*. The Ministry of Economic Planning and Reconstruction [Statistics Division].
- The year of challenge for 2,600 graduates. (1973, July 2). *Daily Times*, 1.
- Zerby, L., & Zerby, M. (1971). *If I should die before I wake: The Nsukka dream (A history of the University of Nigeria)*. Michigan State University.

