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Introduction

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In the contemporary world of rapid technological change, economic uncertainty, and shifting labour market demands, the issue of employability has emerged as a defining concern for higher education systems and policymakers worldwide. Today, academic degrees alone cannot guarantee labour market entry; indeed, the employability skills possessed by job seekers have become an important deal maker or breaker. Thus, employability is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct that includes skills, competencies, adaptability, and lifelong learning (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017). Employability research generates evidence-based insights into the skills and aptitudes individuals need to be successful on the labour market, or as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it also produces insights into how education systems can better prepare future graduates for sustainable and meaningful work. The latter may for example relate to curriculum reform, the teaching of “soft” (employability) skills, entrepreneurship training, internship and work experience schemes, service learning and university-business linkages.

Employability research is particularly important in Africa because rising graduate unemployment, underemployment, and inequality challenge the assumed relationship between higher education and economic opportunities (African Development Bank, 2020; ILO, 2022). Yet, despite these labour market challenges, more and more young Africans go to universities, and African higher education systems are expanding rapidly in an attempt to meet the increased demand for university education. Also, structural labour market constraints, demographic pressures, and uneven economic growth have intensified the need for context-sensitive approaches to skills development and workforce integration. Employability research in this context serves both diagnostic and transformative functions: it identifies systemic gaps and informs curriculum reform, institutional innovation, and policy interventions aimed at inclusive development (Oketch, McCowan, & Schendel, 2014).

Employability Research in Africa contributes to the growing field of employability research outside its Northwest European region of origin, by bringing together interdisciplinary perspectives and empirical studies from across the African continent. This is important, because labour markets in developing economies such as found in African countries, do not necessarily work the same as labour markets in the UK and other European countries. Even within Africa, the contexts of North African countries such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, are rather different from sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria or Kenya. This relates to levels of industrialisation and the percentage of young people pursuing university studies, as well as to the extent to which the local labour market has been formalised. Another factor of difference relates to entrepreneurship. For many European graduates who are looking to find employment, entrepreneurship is not an obvious option and thus programmes that explain about entrepreneurship and teach the relevant skills confront students with new possibilities. However, in many African countries such as Nigeria or Kenya, entrepreneurship is

one of the obvious default options, and thus entrepreneurship training there must have different goals than to introduce the idea of setting up the own business.

For these reasons, taken together the chapters in this volume do not only make an important contribution to our understanding of employability in Africa; they also help us to rethink the concept of employability itself from a Global South perspective (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012).

A central feature of this volume is its grounding in the African Centre for Career Enhancement and Skills Support (ACCESS) project. The ACCESS project provides a collaborative platform for advancing employability research and practice across African higher education institutions. By linking universities, industry, and policymakers, it seeks to strengthen career support systems, enhance skills development, and improve graduate transitions into the labour market. The contributions in this handbook reflect this dual commitment to rigorous scholarship and practical impact. The volume is organised into six thematic sections.

Section I: Employability and Related Concepts. This section establishes the conceptual foundation of the field. It traces the shift from unemployment to employability as a dominant analytical lens and considers the question of why a concept that was developed in the context of the specific labour market conditions found in the UK during the 1990s, has become so influential in policy-making in relation to African countries that have very different and diverse labour markets. Two chapters interrogate the relationship between human capital, education, and economic growth (Becker, 1993). They ask what explains the different outcomes of human capital accumulation in different countries and also consider the suggestion that there might be an optimum level of human capital in a given economy. The examination of the impact of wealth inequality on career development behaviour is significant precisely because this research puts into question the predominant importance of employability skills for career success and points towards other factors. This research, as well as the exploration of formal and informal work and life satisfaction, thus helps to situate employability within wider socio-economic realities.

Section II: Labour Markets and Employability in African Contexts. The second section provides empirically grounded analyses of labour market dynamics across selected African countries. Most of the chapters in the section engage with the paradox of highly educated yet unemployed graduates. This includes not only several chapters that explore the functioning of labour markets for university graduates, as well as an exploration of the gender dimension of graduate unemployment. This section also investigates protests and emerging political debates that argue against employability as an individual aspect and rather emphasise the role of politics to ensure fair access to employment. The chapters in this section all deal with North African cases. The fact that we did not encounter authors offering similar work on other parts of Africa may be coincidental, or reflecting the professional networks of the editors, but it is just as likely that it reflects the situation that labour markets in North Africa are formalised to a much larger degree than in sub-Saharan Africa (with the exception of South Africa) (ILO, 2019).

Section III: Individuals and Employability in African Contexts. The third section focuses on graduate experiences and agency. Employable individuals do not always find employment. The experiences of long-term unemployment and the vulnerability of graduates on the labour market can be understood better from a smaller number of detailed interviews than from labour market statistics and

large datasets, as this section shows. It also underscores the role of social capital and networks in job attainment, reinforcing the view that employability is shaped not only by formal qualifications and skills, but also by access to resources and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). These empirical studies suggest that in the experiences of individual graduates, other factors than employability skills and an entrepreneurial mindset better predict success on the labour market. Of course, these insights are valid only for a particular time and spatial context, as historical research on the employability of graduates who have been trained outside their home country shows.

Section IV: Sectors, Enterprises and Entrepreneurship. This section explores the different employability potentials in differing sectors. Although statistics suggest that medical professionals are generally successful in finding employment, there are African countries where, due to an increase in medical training options, graduates in medical fields also experience challenges. Other sectors, however, are rather promising, including green entrepreneurship as well as art and culture enterprises. That, depending on sector and context, a degree can be limiting as well as enabling for employability, becomes clear from the latter case study, as well as from the chapter on recruitment practices in industrial enterprises.

Section V: Improving Employability in African Universities. The fifth section examines institutional strategies and innovations. Contributions highlight interventions such as service-learning and extracurricular engagement within African higher education institutions. In line with employability theory more generally, these chapters show a focus on soft skills for employability, whether they are taught through academic service learning or through inclusion in the standard academic curriculum. Of particular interest are the challenges experienced when trying to enhance work experience for students with special needs, due to the high additional costs involved.

Section VI: Digital Technologies and Employability. This final section addresses the opportunities that digital technologies bring for skills development, either within African higher education curricula, or by individual graduates and entrepreneurs outside the university system through digital coaching platforms. It also addresses implications of technological change for the future of work, emphasising the growing importance of human creativity and adaptive skills in an era shaped by artificial intelligence and digital transformation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

The various case studies and analytical chapters collected in this volume also show that employability research is a field of study that employs very diverse methodologies. Many of the chapters in this volume are based on the analysis of questionnaires that had been administered to cover a representative sample of the study population, asking for self-evaluations by students, graduates or employers. Other chapters report on more ethnographic research involving a smaller number of recipients, whose experiences have been recorded in detail. Another method employed is that of action research, whereby for instance a new curriculum is developed, implemented, and assessed for effectiveness, for instance through self-assessment questionnaires. On the other end of the scale are chapters that apply economics methodology on panel data sets, as well as chapters that take more of a political economy approach, including the interpretation of sets of national statistics. Of course, many chapters combine two or more of these methods. It is a strength of this book, that the various approaches to doing employability research are brought together in one volume.

Overall, this book offers a comprehensive and contextually grounded overview of employability research in Africa. By combining conceptual clarity with empirical depth, it provides valuable insights for scholars, educators, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to bridge the gap between education and employment and to promote inclusive socio-economic development.

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