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Challenges Faced by Heads of Academic Departments in Reforming University Curricula to Promote Graduate Employability

Sophia Geera* and David Onen**

Abstract

This article examines the roles played by heads of academic departments (HoDs) and the challenges they face in reforming their units' curricula to promote graduate employability in a university college in Uganda. The study arose because of persistent complaints by employers and other stakeholders about the lack of employable skills among university graduates in the country, in spite of several curricular reviews having taken place in the institution. Using the qualitative approach, data was collected from four purposively selected HoDs through in-depth interviews. The study's results showed, among others, that the participants had different understandings of what graduate employability meant: while some conceptualised it as the possession of employable skills by graduates, others viewed it as the ability of a university student to complete his/her study programme and obtain gainful employment. Second, the participants revealed that they often enabled the revision of the curricula to promote graduate employability, by involving and motivating stakeholders in curricular reviews, offering effective leadership, and by providing requisite information and support to their staff during curriculum review and development. Finally, the study participants reported facing several challenges in revising the curricula of their units, including limited co-operation by stakeholders, rapidly changing societal needs and a shortage of funds to aid the process of curriculum review and development.

Keywords: heads of department, graduate employability, reforming curricula, university

* East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University, Uganda. Email: geerasophie@gmail.com

** East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University, Uganda. Email: donenotoo@yahoo.com

Résumé

Cet article examine les rôles des chefs de départements universitaires et les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés dans la réforme des programmes de leurs unités afin de promouvoir l'employabilité des diplômés dans un collège universitaire d'Ouganda. L'étude est née à la suite de plaintes persistantes d'employeurs et autres parties prenantes quant au manque de compétences employables chez les diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur du pays, malgré plusieurs révisions de programmes de l'établissement. Par l'approche qualitative, des données ont été recueillies auprès de quatre chefs de départements sélectionnés à dessein par le biais d'entretiens approfondis. Les résultats de l'étude ont montré, entre autres, que les participants avaient des compréhensions différentes de ce que signifiait l'employabilité des diplômés : tandis que certains la conceptualisaient comme la possession par les diplômés,de compétences employables, d'autres y voyaient la capacité d'un étudiant à terminer son programme d'études universitaires et à obtenir un emploi rémunéré. Deuxièmement, les participants ont révélé qu'ils ont souvent permis la révision de programmes d'études pour promouvoir l'employabilité des diplômés, en impliquant et en motivant les parties prenantes dans les révisions des programmes, en offrant un leadership efficace et en fournissant les informations et le soutien nécessaires à leur personnel lors de la révision et de l'élaboration des programmes. Enfin, les participants à l'étude ont déclaré faire face à plusieurs défis à l'occasion de la révision de programmes de leurs unités, notamment une coopération limitée des parties prenantes, des besoins sociétaux en évolution rapide et un manque de fonds de facilitation du processus de révision et de développement de programmes.

Mots-clés : chefs de département, employabilité des diplômés, réforme des cursus, université

Introduction

The employability of university graduates is becoming a matter of concern among educators and policymakers all over the world. It is often attributed to the mismatch between the number of graduates that universities produce vis-à-vis the number that the labour market absorbs (Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi and Eldabi 2019). Nonetheless, several scholars, including Bamwesiga (2013), Beaumont, Gedye and Richardson (2016) as well as Kasozi (2015), have pointed out that the low rate of absorption of university graduates into the labour market is due to the lack of relevant skills and knowledge that employers require them to possess. Yorke (2006), however, contends that the elevated level of graduate unemployment in most parts of the world is attributable to sluggish economies – economies that are growing slowly or not growing at all – to create sufficient job opportunities for graduates.

Unfortunately, none of these scholars have focused on the roles that the heads of academic departments (HoDs) in universities could play to reform the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. Yet, university HoDs play a critical role in curricular review and development. In this study, we explored the roles played by HoDs and the challenges they faced in reshaping their units' curricula to facilitate graduate employability in a university college in Uganda.

Historically, universities have been revered for producing high-level labour and for generating new knowledge. In Uganda, until the 1980s, university graduates used to be booked for employment by private companies as well as government departments well before completing their degree programmes (Kasozi 2015; Ssekamwa 2000). Then, there was little graduate unemployment, and the language of graduate employability was not commonplace. However, with the introduction of the privatisation and liberalisation policies into the different sectors of the Uganda's economy in the early 1990s, there was a massive expansion of the higher education (HE) sector. But this expansion was not met by a parallel increase in the size of the country's economy. The result has been an acute shortage of job opportunities, not only for university graduates, but for other categories of labour, and serious youth unemployment in the country (Uganda Government, 2014).

Having fewer job opportunities aside, employers have been complaining about the quality of university graduates available, who, they allege, lack employable skills. Yet, the knowledge and skills that university graduates are expected to acquire depend on the curriculum and pedagogical techniques that they are exposed to while at university.

At a university, HoDs – together with deans – are responsible for, among other things, maintaining and enhancing the highest standards of scholarly excellence and for setting the intellectual and academic priorities for their departments (Bozeman, Fay and Gaughan 2013; Hess 2013). They are also required to plan course offerings and faculty teaching, periodically review curricula, and ensure excellence in the departments' teaching and mentoring (Lumpkin 2004). This means that HoDs can play a role in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. But are all HoDs doing this? And if they are, how well are they doing this? What challenges could they be facing in revising the curricula of their units? The need for answers to these and many other related questions prompted this investigation.

The study focused on four major concepts, namely: graduate employability, the definition of HoD, the roles of HoDs and the challenges they face. The term graduate employability has been variously defined.

While Kinash and Crane (2015) describe it as the capacity of graduates (or alumni) to obtain or create work, Tomlinson (2012) looks at it in terms of the dynamic changes in the relationship between HE and the labour market. Yorke and Knight (2004), meanwhile, regard it as the 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 community, and the economy. In this study, however, graduate employability was looked at in terms of the possession of relevant knowledge and skills by the graduates and their ability to be absorbed and maintained in employment.

The second main concept in this study was HoD. According to Jones (2011), a HoD is an academic leader who guides the members of a department to work towards a common shared vision, with an ability to articulate and implement the strategic vision of the department in line with its institutional goals, values and culture. Hess (2013), however, defined a HoD as the chair of a department responsible for the leadership and management of the smallest unit of the university where teaching and learning occurs. In this study, HoD was seen in terms of the individual who was occupying the office of HoD in the university college studied at that time.

The third concept was the role(s) of HoDs. According to Day (1984), the role of HoD refers to the responsibilities that a HoD conducts to guarantee the quality of teaching and learning in a particular department. Meanwhile, Edet and Ekpoh (2017) opine that a HoD is someone '… saddled with the responsibility of directing, guiding, coordinating and evaluating lecturers and activities appropriately to ensure good quality education and effective functioning of the department' (Edet and Ekpoh 2017: 130). In this study, the role of the HoD was examined in terms of what the HoD does when reforming the curricula of his/her unit to promote graduate employability.

Finally, the study looked at the challenges that HoDs face in executing their duties. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2019), a challenge is something that needs great mental or physical effort for it to be done successfully. For Onen (2016), the concept of 'challenge' is used to refer to the things (or factors) that different stakeholders involved in an activity find difficulty in doing or accomplishing. In this study, we viewed 'challenges' in terms of the difficulties HoDs experienced during curriculum review and development.

Contextually, this study took place at one of the colleges of a university in Uganda, one of the largest and oldest universities in the country. The literature review revealed that employers were already complaining about the quality of the graduates from the same college that we studied (Bagarukayo,

Ssentamu, Mayisela and Brown 2016; Ssempebwa 2008). They alleged that the graduates of this college lacked employable skills despite several recent curriculum reviews that had been undertaken under the supervision of different HoDs. This was a source of academic concern, since HoDs in universities across the world are required, among other things, to periodically review curricula and ensure excellence in the departments' teaching and mentoring (Lumpkin 2004). Nonetheless, while HoDs have a role to play in curriculum development, how effectively and how often they do it may leave a lot to be desired. We felt that if the scenario persisted, it could injure the reputation of the college as well as that of its graduates. Therefore, this qualitative study was intended to explore the roles played by the HoDs and the challenges they faced in reforming their units' curricula. It was expected that the data obtained from the study would contribute to nurdging university managers to appreciate what the HoDs are doing to promote graduate employability.

Study Objectives

This study was intended to explore the roles HoDs play and the challenges they face in shaping the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. Specifically, the study was meant to:

1. Examine the concept of graduate employability among HoDs;
2. Explore the roles HoDs play in reforming the curricula of their departments to promote graduate employability; and
3. Document the challenges HoDs face and the coping strategies they use to overcome the challenges.

Literature Review

Graduate employability

Scholars have attempted to define the concept of 'graduate employability', albeit with limited clarity (such as Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet and Rossier 2015; Yorke and Knight 2004; Matsouka and Mihail 2016; Römgens, Scoupe and Beausart 2019). In particular, Guilbert et al. (2015) define employability as 'the possibility to access a suitable job or to remain employed, resulting from the dynamic and evolving interactions between governmental and educational policies, organizational strategy, individual characteristics, and the social, economic, cultural and technological context' (Guilbert et al. 2015: 17). Yorke and Knight (2004), on the other hand, conceptualise employability as a 'set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful

in their chosen occupations' (2004: 36). This means that, for the graduates, employability 'consists of a set of qualifications, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics that enable the university graduate to seek and find a job' (Matsouka and Mihail 2016: 321).

Römgens et al. (2019), meanwhile, looks at employability as the competencies that an individual possesses to be sufficiently obtained and maintained in the labour market. This perception of graduate employability is no different from that of earlier scholars, including Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008), who perceived it as the 'ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one's qualification level' (2008: 2). In this case, all these scholars have indicated that employability has to do with the possession of skills that are linked to the needs of employers. However, their views about employability also indicated that there is no universally accepted definition of employability, whether used in respect of any employee or a graduate.

In this study, we sought the views of HoDs at a university college in Uganda and matched them to the literature to gauge the depth and breadth of their understanding of the concept of graduate employability. We believe that their understanding of the concept determined the roles they would play in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability.

The role of a head of department

The roles of faculty deans and HoDs in universities across the world have been widely investigated (for example, Berdrow 2010; Bozeman, Fay and Gaughan 2013; Chinyamurundi 2016; Gaubatz and Ensminger 2017; Hess 2013; Jones 2011; Jowi 2018; Kla 2012; Lumpkin 2004; Otara 2015). Several of these studies have attempted to link deans and HoDs to programme review and development (for example, Otara 2015; Gaubatz and Ensminger 2017). Berdrow (2010) categorises the roles of HoDs in two ways: first as an actor, and second, as an agent of the institution. As an actor, Berdrow states, the HoD performs three major roles: in providing managerial human capital, in providing managerial social capital, and in providing managerial cognition. Concerning managerial human capital, the HoD is expected to exhibit learned skills, training and knowledge while performing specific tasks. Meanwhile, 'in executing the managerial social capital role, the head of department has a duty to network and connect to various organisations and outsource for people who can help to do the work effectively' (Berdrow 2010: 500). In performing managerial cognition, 'the head of department has to display ability of understanding the job by monitoring, coordinating and assessing processes within the department' (Berdrow 2010: 501). But, as an agent, Berdrow points out, the HoD acts

within the context of the institution to incorporate academic functions, administrative functions and external relationships of the department. In this study, we sought to analyse how the HoDs in the college studied played such roles, linking them to graduate employability.

According to Gaubatz and Ensminger (2017), middle-level managers such as deans and HoDs are responsible for extensively reviewing the academic programmes of their units. The authors state that these managers accomplish this role by engaging in systematic investigation to determine how to align the goals of their units with those of industry. However, different individuals perceive the roles HoDs play in reforming the curricula of their units differently; thus, the genesis of this investigation.

According to Lumpkin (2004), HoDs play three core roles: personnel management, budgetary management and instructional leadership. Specifically, it is in instructional leadership that HoDs oversee the development and implementation of the curricula of their units. In this role, the HoD can enable the revision of the curricula of his/her unit to meet the needs of industry. This view is supported by Bozeman et al. (2013) who posited that departmental chairs are key decision-makers who have the powers to influence policy and procedure at departmental and institutional levels. This implies that, during curriculum review and development, HoDs could influence the kind of decisions that can be made regarding curriculum objectives, content and implementation. As a result, they can help to reshape the curricula of their departments to improve graduate employability.

According to Chinyamurundi (2016), university middle-level managers, including HoDs, are generally seekers and implementers of innovation in their units. Innovation is encouraged in the different functions of their units, including in programme reviews and development. One of the key drivers of curriculum reviews is to align the goals of the university to those of society. Nonetheless, none of these studies documented the part played by the HoDs in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability.

Challenges faced by HoDs

Studies have looked at the challenges that HoDs face in executing their roles. Lumpkin (2004), for instance, pointed out that among the difficulties that confront a departmental chair is building a team of staff who, although possessing multiple perspectives and abilities, can work together collaboratively towards the achievement of a common goal. To facilitate this, Lumpkin advises that the HoD must demonstrate strong instructional leadership. Besides, the HoD should provide leadership in the redesign of

the curricula and enhancement of the department's programmes. In this case, the HoD can encourage the realignment of the curricula to enhance graduate employability.

According to Jones (2011), meanwhile, HoDs also have the challenge of energising their staff to work effectively, since academics do not want to be rigidly led. He adds that, in addition, HoDs must find ways to source internal and external funds. These issues, and others not highlighted here, may curtail the effectiveness of any HoD to manage a university department. It can also limit the opportunity for HoDs to reform the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study. It was, therefore, approached from an interpretivist research paradigm because of the study's underlying conceptualisation that the roles played by the HoDs and the challenges they face in reforming the curricula of their units could best be understood by listening to their stories individually, rather than quantifying the kinds of views they held about the issue. Specifically, a case study research design was adopted, since there was no intention to generalise the findings of the study beyond the college that investigated. In addition, the qualitative case study design would, as Gaya and Smith (2016) observed, adequately allow us 'to capture the complexity of the object of study' (2016: 529).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with four out of seven HoDs who were purposively selected from the college. Specifically, we employed the criterion sampling technique which, according to Patton (2001), 'involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance' (2001: 238). In our case, the study participants were selected on the basis that they were HoDs and were available and willing to participate in the study.

The collected data was analysed using the thematic content analysis technique which, according to Saldana (2009), makes it easier to see and compare emerging views and themes from a given dataset. Specifically, we were able to organise the data in accordance with its type and study participants. Thereafter, we identified our unit of analysis, which was the individual study participant, before we proceeded to explore and code the data, accordingly. With the use of the codes, we were able to develop, manually, a more general picture of the data that we had obtained. This enabled us to get meaning from the results that emerged. Finally, we put

in place the necessary ethical considerations, including seeking permission from relevant authorities before we could engage the participants in the study.

Results

In this section, we present the findings of the study. But first, we describe the profiles of the study participants.

Profile of study participants

The HoDs were drawn from the departments of Science, Technical and Vocational Education, Foundations and Curriculum Studies, Adult and Community Education, and Higher Education. All four study participants had been HoDs for between two to four years. They were all males, although one out of the seven departments in the college were headed by a female. We had intended to include the only female HoD in the college, but during the time of data collection she was out of the country and the person acting on her behalf was male. This finding, however, reflects the limited participation of women in higher education leadership in Uganda, an inequality that needs to be separately addressed. Three out of the four HoDs who participated in the study held a PhD degree and were senior lecturers by rank. One of them held a Masters' degree and was still a lecturer, but serving as a caretaker HoD, since the minimum rank at which one can serve as a substantive HoD is senior lecturer. All in all, the four participants willingly participated in the study, and we believe that they provided information that was desirable for answering our research questions.

HOD conceptualisations of graduate employability

The first objective of this study was to analyse the HoDs' conceptualisation of graduate employability to gauge their understanding of the concept and the importance each of them attached to it. When the participants were asked:

> 'What is your understanding of graduate employability and how important is it', different respondents expressed different opinions. One of the participants observed that 'in this era of mass higher education, producing graduates who can hardly get employed is unhealthy to both society and the individual graduate'.

The same participant reiterated that 'the skills that students obtain from the university should be relevant to the work setting'. But another participant argued that:

> While it is important to equip university graduates with employable knowledge and skills, the institutions can only provide generic skills. Specific job skills should be acquired while the graduate has already obtained employment. This means that even the employers must be ready to train their workers so that they can acquire those specific job skills.

These views showed that the participants were aware of the importance of graduate employability in university education. However, they had different opinions on the kind of skills that the students would acquire from university and those that they should obtain from their places of employment. It is that belief that made the one participant distinguish between generic and job-specific skills.

One participant defined graduate employability as 'the ability of a student to finish a given course of study and obtain better employment'. Therefore, according to this participant, graduate employability is not only a matter of being able to obtain employment, but also to complete a given course of study. Of course, university students who perform poorly academically and fail to complete their study programmes or pass with weak grades often remain unemployed for a longer period than their counterparts who complete their studies on time and with good grades. But another participant defined graduate employability as 'the capacity that a graduate has to be absorbed in the labour market and be sustained there'. This participant looked at the 'capacity' of the graduate in terms of the kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA) that a graduate possesses that enable him/her to obtain gainful employment and be maintained on the job. Yet another participant had another meaning: he defined graduate employability as 'the degree to which one is employable given the competencies he/she has acquired as a result of his/her education and training'. Although different in text, the ideas of the second and third participants were essentially the same, that is, that graduate employability has to do with whether graduates have acquired the skills and knowledge their potential employers need.

The second part of the objective was to evaluate the importance HoDs attach to the issue of graduate employability. One of the study participants remarked that:

> In this era of mass higher education and growing graduate unemployment, every graduate needs to prove that he/she possesses some unique skills or knowledge that he/she can contribute at a workplace before he/she can obtain gainful employment. As a result, the way university students are trained is very essential.

Another participant had a different view. He opined that:

> For us as a university, our role is to train the students. We only provide them with generic skills and knowledge to empower them to learn and unlearn while in the field. This allows a graduate to be versatile; and therefore, able to fit in different work situations.

According to this participant, it is not necessarily the work of the university to impart specific work-related skills to students, since the students are being prepared for a wide range of employment options. In fact, the participant reiterated that 'employers have a role to play in enabling their employees to acquire specific work-related skills – not universities'. Nevertheless, this is a debatable matter, bearing in mind that employers are nowadays denying many graduates entry to the workplace allegedly because they lack employable skills. All in all, the study revealed that different HoDs had a different understanding of what graduate employability is and attached slightly different importance to the matter.

It was difficult for us to attribute the variety of conceptualisations to the difference in the participants' fields of study (Science, Technical and Vocational Education [DOSATE], Foundations and Curriculum Studies, Adult and Community Education, and Higher Education) or places where they obtained their highest academic qualifications. But the participants' specialisations may have accounted for the differences in their roles and the efforts they put into reforming the curricula of their units to improve graduate employability.

Roles played by HoDs in curricular reform for employability

The second objective of this study was to explore the roles played by HoDs in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. Again, the study participants expressed different opinions of what they did during curriculum review and development. One reported that, 'As a head of department, I participate in all the committees that review the curricula of our department after every five years'. He proceeded to say that:

> One way by which I help the department to reform the curricula towards promoting graduate employability is by involving potential employers during curriculum reviews. I do this by ensuring that once we have drafted or revised a curriculum, we organise a stakeholder workshop where we engage employers, alumni, and other stakeholders to obtain their opinions about the drafted curriculum – before we can forward it to the relevant accreditation agencies.

This means that HoDs are central to the process of curriculum development, since they contribute to the process of reforming the curricula through stakeholder involvement. This result shows that HoDs do not necessarily work alone to reform the curricula of their departments. Instead, their efforts to reform the curricula may be hampered by the response of other stakeholders, such as employers and alumni.

Another participant observed that one way in which he helped in revising the curricula of his department was by researching and providing relevant market information. He claimed that: 'As a leader, I am expected to guide colleagues during curriculum development. I cannot do that without equipping myself with relevant information about the activity we are engaged in.' He went on to say: 'As a result, I often try to collect as much market information about our programmes and alumni, so that during curriculum review I can provide essential information that can be used to reform our curricula towards promoting graduate employability'. In this case, the HoD plays an informational role. Interestingly, this appears to be more of an 'independent leader role' in curriculum development, unlike the 'collaborative leader role' of the earlier participant. This implies that although HoDs play leadership roles in reforming their units' curricula to promote graduate employability, they do not use the same leadership approaches.

A third participant reported that his greatest role in reforming the curricula was by providing effective leadership. He observed that:

> For any unit of the university to have a relevant curriculum, the process of curriculum development needs to be effectively guided, co-ordinated and led. It is those roles that as a head of department, I try to effectively play and I believe, it greatly contributes to reforming our curricula towards promoting graduate employability.

This participant looked at his leadership role in terms of 'guiding' the process of curriculum reviews and development. This 'guiding leadership role' implied that this leader may not be a risk-taker. Yet, effective leadership requires leaders to take calculated risks for the sake of their followers and the organisation (Otara 2015). In the context of this study, effective leadership was defined by playing the leadership role that produces the desired goals, such as reforming the curriculum to promote graduate employability.

According to another participant, one of the greatest roles in curriculum development is resource mobilisation. This participant observed that:

> In this university, getting funds to undertake departmental activities such as curriculum review is not easy at all since there is always a perennial outcry for lack of funds. I therefore lobby a lot to get money for our curricular

> review activities. To me I think, that is an important role I play because if I do not do it, there is no way we can reform our curricula towards promoting graduate employability.

The above view indicates that HoDs generally consider whatever roles they play in curriculum review and development as an effort towards promoting graduate employability. Yet, in practice, this may not be true since some of these roles may not relate directly to the kind of curriculum a department may produce. In addition, this 'resource mobilisation role' implies that the academic staff engage in curriculum review only when they are paid to do so, yet curriculum review is an in-house activity that may not require any special funding. Nonetheless, the study participants pointed out that they need funds to finance several curriculum review activities, including hosting stakeholder workshops and conducting market research.

Challenges in curricular reform for employability

The third objective of this study was to establish the challenges HoDs faced in their effort to reform the curricula of their units, and how they coped with them. One challenge that almost all the study participants alluded to was 'the rapidly changing demands for skills at the workplace'. Indeed, one participant remarked that:

> There is now growing pressure and demands from the world of work about the kinds of skills university students must possess to make them employable. This often causes those of us who work at the university tension. Yet in the actual sense, as a middle-level manager, I may not influence the integration of all these new skills employers want into our curriculum.

But while this participant could be right, he appears to forget the role of internships and practicals, which his department uses to bridge this gap. In addition, even though no single university curriculum is sufficient to meet the different needs of all employers, as the participant claimed, there are also strategies that universities have put in place to address this challenge. The participant himself revealed that, as a HoD, he had been coping with 'failing to meet the demands of society' by identifying and prioritising what was realistic for the department and to practise it in line with the vision, mission and goal of the college, and that of the university.

Another participant observed that the mobilisation of funds to facilitate curriculum reviews was often a challenge in the university. The participant revealed that he lobbied constantly for funds that would ably finance the process of curriculum review in the department, particularly for hosting

stakeholder workshops and conducting market research. This view was echoed by other study participants, except one, who revealed that he has sometimes used project funds to enable curriculum review in his department.

Another challenge that emerged from the study was 'the students' attitude towards postgraduation employment'. This refers to the belief by students that they will be employed immediately upon graduation, yet 'the world of employment is now narrow to absorb the large number of graduates', said one of the study participants. This implied that the participant did not believe that it is the failure of the university that is responsible for the rising rate of graduate unemployment, but rather a weak economy that is not able to create many job opportunities. The participant reported that he had 'on many occasions advised the graduates to think of beginning their own projects where they can get employed without waiting for chances of employment from non-governmental and governmental organisations'.

During one interview, a participant reported that the lack of co-operation from stakeholders was one of the greatest challenges to curriculum reviews. He said that:

> Sometimes when we invite some stakeholders, including potential employers of our students, they do not come to attend our stakeholder meetings. This makes it difficult for us to receive feedback from them.

The same participant revealed that he normally ensured that stakeholder workshops were appropriately scheduled in terms of time and venue to achieve better stakeholder participation.

Another participant reported on the lack of commitment from some of his staff as a challenge. 'Some staff in my department have a divided attention where sometimes, when I call a meeting to discuss issues to do with our curricula, some of them do not come, and the few who turn up sometimes fail to agree on a number of issues.' This implies that curricular issues are often contentious and cannot be left in the hands of the HoD alone or a few staff. This study participant reported that he usually motivates his staff in diverse ways to ensure that they participate in the different activities of the department, although he added that: 'It is often not that easy'.

Discussion

This study came out with three key findings. First, that the HoDs who participated in the study had different understandings of what graduate employability means and attached slightly different degrees of importance to it. This finding is not surprising because the concept has been evolving, and debates surrounding it and other related concepts continue. However,

most of the definitions that the participants gave rhymed with those of earlier scholars, such as Yorke and Knight (2004), Bamwesiga (2013), Cai (2013) and Beaumont, Gedye and Richardson (2016). For instance, the definitions of graduate employability by a study participant that; 'it is the ability of a student to finish his/her study programme and obtain employment' is in tandem with that of Bamwesiga (2013), who reported on the conceptualisation of graduate employability by employers in Rwanda. These employers viewed graduate employability as the ability of the graduate to have a professional understanding of a specified discipline, to change and adapt to work-life situations and undertake skilful practices. This professional understanding would be obtained upon the successful completion of a study programme by the student.

Another participant defined the term graduate employability as the capacity of a graduate in terms of 'knowledge, skills and attitudes that can enable him/her to obtain gainful employment and be maintained on a job'. This understanding of graduate employability was closer to that of several scholars in this field of knowledge. Forrier and Sels (2003), for instance, defined graduate employability as the individual's ability to fulfil a variety of functions in each labour market. Such functions are fulfilled due to the knowledge, skills and attitudes possessed by the graduate. This also implies that weak university training can jeopardise the graduate's ability to acquire the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes, thereby limiting his/her chances of being employable.

The second key finding in this study was that HoDs often play different roles in reforming the curricula of their units towards promoting graduate employability. This finding was congruent with the works of other scholars, such as Otara (2015), Jowi (2018) and Chinyamurundi (2016), who investigated the roles of middle-level managers in universities in different countries in Africa. Otara, for instance, reported how HoDs as well as deans in different universities in Africa often incorporate stakeholders from the labour market in programme review and curriculum development. This was no different to what virtually all the study participants reportedly said they do. The finding of the current study was in tandem with that of Jowi (2018), who looked at the leadership roles of deans in Kenyan universities. According to Jowi, university middle-level managers often play a crucial role in linking stakeholder experiences to the academic demands of the students and society. Specifically, Jowi (2018) observed that middle-level managers can enhance the integration of entrepreneurial skills in university curricula, thereby enhancing the employability of university graduates. This view was not far from that of Chinyamurundi (2016), who looked at the

views of employers about graduate employability in Rwanda. He alluded to the fact that leaders can play a role in enabling university graduates acquire employable skills through effective curriculum review and development. These leaders included HoDs.

The study also revealed that HoDs commonly get the opportunity during programme reviews to reform the curricula of their units to enhance graduate employability. This was not that different from what Gaubatz and Ensminger (2017) reported when they said that middle-level managers in universities – including HoDs – are responsible for extensively reviewing the academic programmes of their units. However, the two authors stressed that HoDs and deans often engage in prior systematic investigation to determine how their curricula goals can be aligned with industry employment needs. This shows how HoDs often play an informational role in reshaping reform the curricula of their units.

Last, the study found that middle-level managers such as HoDs and deans face several challenges in executing their duties. Seale and Cross (2015), for instance, reported that deans in South Africa are confronted with a lack of management skills and experience. This was not far from what Otara (2015) observed. In fact, Otara revealed that middle-level managers in African universities most often take up these positions without prior leadership training. This means they often fail to recognise and exploit the metamorphic changes that may occur within their units. It is this kind of inadequacy that creates other challenges, such as limited stakeholder involvement and motivation, which the research participants also reported in this study.

According to Penuel, Phillips and Harris (2014), HoDs in Western universities do not necessarily face the same challenges when reviewing their curricula. Although the HoDs in Western universities say that the process of curriculum review is tedious, as do the HoDs in the college studied in Uganda, the former do not point to a lack of finance or low stakeholder participation as serious difficulties.

Finally, the finding that HoDs often receive inadequate institutional support from top management is corroborated by Jowi (2018) who studied the leadership styles of faculty deans in Kenyan universities. He observed that 'it is difficult to work as a middle-level manager in a university setting: the initiatives from the top have great impact on life at the bottom as well as the other way round' (2018: 6). This was like what the HoDs in the university college studied in Uganda reported. Despite these challenges, the study participants revealed some of the strategies they used for mitigating them; thus, the contribution of this study especially to younger HoDs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the subsequent discussion, this study concluded that the conceptual differences that HoDs have about graduate employability could be responsible for their lacklustre response towards it. Yet, the dangers of not addressing the problem of graduate unemployment in Uganda are already enormous. Second, while the HoDs appear to attach significant importance to curriculum revision and try to ensure that the curricula of their units promote graduate employability, there is a repertoire of challenges they face that needs to be addressed for effective improvements in graduate employability. This article, therefore, recommend increased institutional support for HoDs if they are to significantly enhance the process of reforming the curricula of their departments. Specifically, HoDs need to be trained in managing academic departments, and their units should be funded to host stakeholder workshops and pay for other curriculum review and development activities like conducting market research.

Note

1. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/challenge

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