Amplifying Graduates Employability and Marketability: The Case of the National University of Lesotho

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Abstract

There is a school of thought having reservations with the relevance of programmes of National University of Lesotho (NUL) in relation to the demands of the labour market. This reservation has put pressure on NUL to amplify the employability and marketability of graduates by confirming that NUL learning experiences translate into a fulfilling transition to the labour market. This study seeks to identify NUL major areas that need improvement to upsurge employability and marketability of its graduates. A sample of 590 graduates was drawn from 11,233 total graduates who graduated between 2012/2013–2016-2017. A stratified random sampling was used to draw elements to the sample, from each stratum; a simple random sampling was used to select respondents. A total of 467 respondents provided useable responses translating into 79 percent response rate. Results revealed that most of the graduates were from the Faculty of Education while the least were from Faculty of Humanities. The foremost areas for improvement are related to the deficiencies regarding provision of quality of education and relevant curriculum. To enrich NUL programmes, it has to integrate the Employability strategy, Marketing strategy, review of curriculum and provision of an enabling teaching and learning environment as they are germane to the enhancement of graduate employability and marketability of NUL graduates.

Key words: Enhanced Employability, Marketability, Graduates, Universities, Education.

1. Background and Introduction

In today's competitive, technologically and economically challenging environments, most countries worldwide are facing serious problems of graduates' unemployment (Keech, 2006). This problem is even intensified by an increased number of unemployed graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEI) (Rok, 2013).The high rate of unemployment experienced by university graduates worldwide is not only as a result of the unavailability of jobs, but also because of a dearth of candidates with employable skills that employers are looking for (Emeh, Nwanguma, & Abaroh, 2012; Pitan, 2016: Judd, et al, 2015). Evidence in support of this assertion shows that in Lesotho, it is estimated that of the 7 500 graduates who enter the labour market each year, half of them do not get jobs (Central Bank, 2012) and 19% of them come from HEI (Khaola, 2010). This may be probably due to their lack of necessary skills for employment (Emeh et al., 2012).

The high unemployment rate amongst the graduates usually result in the majority of them having to settle for jobs for which they are overqualified on occasion resulting in intermittent employment without job security (Harvey, 2010). While some end up taking up employment in subsistence agriculture and tourism where they do not earn any salaries or if anything they get very meager wages (Thetsane, et al., 2020). However, it is widely believed that those with high education qualifications have an added advantage in the labour market because of better employment prospects (Moleke, 2006).It is therefore, essential for HEI to appreciate and prepare graduates well in anticipation for the pathways into the world of work. This is the reason why enhancing graduate employability and marketability have become one of the main critical areas which universities worldwide and industries should willy-nilly consider. This view is strongly supported by Tranv (2012) who posited that collaboration between and amongst universities and industries is valuable in order to bring the labour market into the classroom.

On the other hand, some studies have argued that perhaps there is a mismatch between qualifications and labour market skills required. However, it is still not certain that graduates who have not been absorbed into the job market duly lack the required skills.

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Many universities are presently faced with thought-provoking (Ernst & Young, 2012) issues, related to the demand for enhanced employability outcomes for students, the recognition of the value of industry and strong competitive market (Ferns & Lilly, 2015). Universities are also under profound pressure to take on-board employability, not only as a pragmatic response (Yorke, 2011) to the competition among universities, but also to the requirements of the society.

The National University of Lesotho (NUL) had previously enjoyed a monopoly in the higher education space up to 2008. Although NUL seems to have lost some monopoly to a certain degree, it still retains the highest market share of 42% of total tertiary student population in Lesotho(Mokhethi et.al, 2020). That notwithstanding, there is a school of thought having reservations with the relevance of programmes of NUL in relation to the demands of the labour market and society. While there is consensus worldwide on the importance of addressing employability within higher education, there remains some arguments on how best this can be achieved (Havery & Morey, 2002).It is therefore against this backdrop that this study seeks to identify NUL major areas that need improvement to upsurge employability of its graduates. In achieving this aim of the study, the following research question will be interrogated: In what ways could NUL graduate's employability and marketability be amplified?

2. Research Methodology

This study is part of the major NUL tracer study (Mokhethi, et al, 2020) that used both quantitative and qualitative approach. However, the current study used qualitative approach toidentify NUL major areas that need improvement to upsurge employability and marketability of its graduates. A sample of 590 graduates was drawn from 11,233 total graduates from the University Academic Office database who graduated between 2012/2013–2016-2017.The study used a stratified random sampling technique to draw elements to the sample from the seven NUL Faculties and Institute of Extra Mural Studies of (IEMS) NUL. This was done in order to obtain an equal sub-sample from each study stratum and to get a representative sample. From each stratum, a simple random sampling was used to select respondents who were finally contacted through their telephone numbers that were captured into the university system during registration when they first joined the university. A total of 467 respondents provided useable responses translating into 79 percent response rate. The questionnaire included mainly closed ended-ended questions and an open-ended question which required suggestions for possible areas of where NUL can improve to increase employability and marketability of its graduates. The qualitative question, requesting area for NUL improvement was qualitatively analyzed through the use of thematic coding technique.

3. Strengthening graduate Employability and Marketability

Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have developed capacity to obtain and/or create work (Kinash & Crane2015). Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013;Knight&Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006).It is important for HEI to enhance employability marketability of their graduates by establishing strong links with industry through the adoption of both formal and informal approaches (Pitan, 2016) while Judd, Knight, Lovell & Kinash, (2015) suggests that for enhanced graduate employability and marketability, there is the need for an enabling environment, which must be provided by the relevant stakeholders including the universities, industry and the government. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) referred to the factors that could contribute to an enabling environment as external factors. According to them these factors are the attitude of employers towards unemployed, the supply and quality of training and education. In addition, Gracia, (2010) observed that work experience, internships and placements are programs designed to provide students with formal, supported practical opportunities in the workplace and such formal experiences develop both students' technical skill-based capacities and their graduate attributes such as an employee identity. However, Allen, Bullough, Cole, Shibli, & Wilson, (2013) argues that with leadership and support (including standards, guidelines and professional development), HEI can embed employability and marketability activities within curriculum to improve graduate outcomes.

4. The results

4.1 Characteristics of Graduates

The respondents for this study consisted of 472 graduates. Table 1 shows the distribution of graduates by sex, faculty and year of award of the degree. It could be seen that majority of the graduates were from the Faculty of Education (37.6%) followed by Faculty of Social Sciences (29.5%) and Faculty of humanities (7.3%). The results further reveal that 63.9% of respondents were females while 36.1% were males. It is also revealed from Table 1 that most respondents graduated in the year 2014 (23.2%) followed by 2017 and 2016 with 18% and 17.6% respectively. Those who reported having graduated in other years were the least with 11.1%.

Table 1: Graduate Distribution by Sex and Faculty

Faculty	Number of Graduates		Percentage of Graduates		Total Graduates	Percentage Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male		
Agriculture	12	9	57.1	42.9	21	4.5
Education	118	57	67.4	32.6	175	37.6
Health	13	6	68.4	31.6	19	4.1
Humanities	26	8	76.5	23.5	34	7.3
Law	4	4	50.0	50.0	8	1.7
FOST	4	13	23.5	76.5	17	3.7
FSS	84	53	61.3	38.7	137	29.5
IEMS	36	18	66.7	33.3	54	11.6
Total	**297**	**168**	**63.9**	**36.1**	**465**	**100**
Year of Award of the degree						
2013	45	25	64.3	35.7	70	15.0
2014	65	43	60.2	39.8	108	23.2
2015	37	34	52.1	47.9	71	15.4
2016	54	28	65.9	34.1	82	17.6
2017	56	28	66.7	33.3	84	18.0
Other	40	12	76.9	23.1	52	11.1
Total	**293**	**169**	**63.4**	**36.6**	**467**	**100**

The graduates' distribution by sex and faculty portrays the overall picture of the targeted population as the sample size tends to follow the population pattern. For instance, the larger sample (Education) had the highest percentage of graduates in the years 2013-2017.

4.2 Areas for improvement

The content analysis identified several areas of where NUL can improve and clustered them into eighteen (18) main themes. The ranking of the identified weaknesses, as described by the themes, was determined by the frequency at which they appeared in the responses in Figure 1.
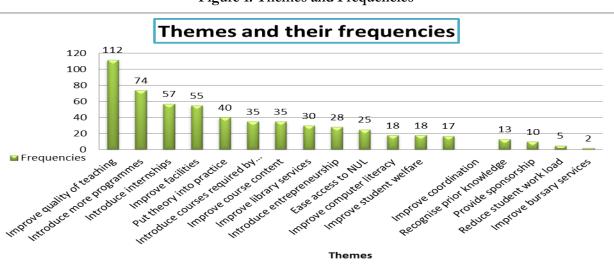
Figure 1: Themes and Frequencies

4.2.1   The description of the first ten key findings.

- **Improve the quality of teaching and learning**
  The theme relating to quality of teaching and learning is paramount as it touches on the core function of the university. The respondents point to an array of limitations on the issue of quality of teaching and learning, from the instructors' skills and commitment, student's workload and ensuring quality in the areas of assessment to mention but a few.

- **Introduce more programmes**
  The second theme that was also mostly cited by the respondents relates to introduction of more programmes at NUL. The respondents observed that the NUL has limited number of postgraduate programmes and as such students' choices of postgraduate programmes are narrow. This may be a disadvantage to students wishing to further their studies in the foreseeable future.

- **Introduce internship / attachments and enhance teaching practice**
  Introduction of an internship / attachments was also alluded to by almost if not all the respondents. They suggested that NUL should improve its courses to incorporate internships/ attachments so that students can gain fist-hand exposure of working in the real world. The enhanced teaching practice /internships may be good for the students as it will enable them to among others harness the skill, knowledge and theoretical practice they learnt at NUL. To this end, the respondents were of the considered opinion that NUL should earnestly consider introducing and improving internships and attachments in its programmes as opined by the respondents.

- **Improve educational facilities**
  A considerable number of graduates indicated that they would like NUL to improve educational and recreational facilities. Teaching and recreational facilities consist of not only physical structure for teaching (lecture theatres, seminar rooms, and small group tutorial spaces) but also building grounds, athletic fields, playgrounds and areas for outdoor learning.

- **Puts theory into practice**
  Respondents suggested that NUL should offer programmes that are more hands on rather than being wholly theoretically. They should, for example, be able to put into practice and apply what they learned to real life situations.

- **Introduce courses required by the market**
  Respondents are of the view that NUL should introduce courses that are currently required by the market. They believe that some NUL programmes are obsolete and as such are no longer addressing the needs of the market.

- **Improve course content**
  A considerable number of respondents suggested that NUL should improve the course content in different programmes in the faculties. The suggestion was mostly referred to by respondents in the Faculties of Education and Social Sciences.

- **Improve library facilities**
  Respondents view library facilities as not adequate and not accessible for some students. Therefore, they suggested that NUL should upgrade its library books, provide reading facilities that cater for all types of students and seriously attend to shortage of reading materials in the library.

- **Introduce Entrepreneurship**
  Respondents are of the opinion that introducing entrepreneurship for the whole university could equip students with necessary skills to enabling them to venture into business after completion of their studies at NUL. They also suggested that entrepreneurship should be offered with emphasis on practical rather than just being theoretical.

- **Ease access to NUL education**
  Some respondents were of the opinion that it may be difficult to further their studies at NUL, as some prospective students may not have sufficient and or not have access to information about the university. Some also indicated that some NUL students not sponsored by National Development. Secretariat(NMDS)is not able to complete their studies due to high tuition fees.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Against the above backdrop, that is the findings of the study, it is abundantly clear that there are some areas meriting major improvements with a view to increasing the employability and marketability of NUL graduates. Such are summarized*inter-alia*: as the provision of quality education, provision of relevant curriculum, access to university education as well as the improvement of NUL support services.

5.1 Provision of quality of education

The study has revealed that conduct and commitment of NUL lecturers is one of the factors identified as having a major impact on the provision of quality education at NUL. According to what is suggested by the respondents, it is quite evident that NUL instructors seem not to focus on educational needs of their students and by not being enthusiastic about teaching as their profession and or occupation. It should be borne in mind that the university is supposed to offer a service whose quality is highly sensitive to the demands of the students. Therefore, urgent attention by the university management to members of the academic staff is highly needed if the best provision of quality education is anything to go by.

Suffice it to mention that, coincidentally the university has already identified some limitations on the provision of quality of education and has already put measures in place to mitigate such challenges. For example, as far back as in 2008 NUL established the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning by organizing induction programmes and trainings in teaching. Further, NUL established a Quality Assurance (QA) office mandated with the responsibility of coordinating academic QA activities, providing advice on QA to all faculties and also monitoring and guiding all faculties on QA activities. The quality assurance office works jointly with faculties through quality assurance representatives that are knowledgeable about their area of specialization with the sole aim of achieving the university's goal of providing quality education.

There is a dire need for NUL to underpin and strengthen specific areas that affect the provision of quality education and services, such as, instructor's absenteeism, students cheating in examinations which are still being experienced to date and complaints of students by instructors are still read in newspapers. The external moderation, particularly, in the exit-level for programme courses still remains a challenge and yet it is one of the pillars which are supposed to deal with the improvement of quality control and fair assessment (quality assurance). Inadequate facilities still limit students to have access to computers. Overcrowding in classes, outdated books in the library and limited resources for academic staff continue to be challenges gravelly affecting the provision of quality education at NUL.

5.2 Provision of relevant curriculum

Provision of relevant curriculum covers the relevance of the programme and courses, introduction of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes required by local and international market, internship/attachment, improvement of facilities, putting theory into practice, improvement of course content, improvement of computer literacy and any enhancement offered by the university that equip students to acquire degrees successfully. Graduates seem to be mostly interested in relevant programmes / courses that connect them with prospective employment opportunities. However, there is a strong belief that some of the programmes and courses offered at NUL do not adequately offer what is required by the current market. For instance, the findings show that B.Ed. graduates majoring in business education were not exposed to the new content of Business education, and yet they were expected to teach it at High School level. On the contrary, they were offered various courses which were related to teaching methodologies. This scenario obliges the university to revisit its programs curricula regularly with a view to identifying and diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of the programmes in a way that can bring about improvement to meet the demands of the labour market thereby reducing the seemingly high unemployment rate in Lesotho. They are of the view that albeit computer course is mandatory for all students in year one, graduates are also of the view that the practical aspect of computers is not adequately

allocated sufficient time. Moreover, the practical aspect of the course does not give students enough practice that will equip them with computer skills applicable to their job after completion of their studies. The panacea for this state of affairs, therefore, calls for the university to introduce more practical use of computers in order to improve the quality and marketability of programmes that are offered at NUL. The introduction of a general course of entrepreneurship contemplated to be offered in the academic year, 2020/2021 for all students will perhaps address the concern raised by a number of respondents in this regard.

5.3   Access to university education

Access to education from the university perspective can be understood not only as entry/admission to NUL, but also as retention of students and the continual successful completion of studies. In the case of access related to entry / admission to NUL, respondents noted that NUL should recognize student's prior knowledge and qualifications for admission purposes. They indicated that admission requirements for prospective students with additional certificates should not be the same as requirements for students fresh from high school. In support of their view they cited IEMS students as an example of students with prior knowledge and qualifications. Be that as it may, this issue is currently being addressed as IEMS; students are currently admitted in year 2 as opposed to what used to obtain in previous years.

This demonstrates that the university has partially addressed the concern by currently recognizing prior knowledge and qualifications. Regarding retention and continual successful completion of studies, respondents are of the view that exorbitant tuition and supplementary fees hinder a number of potential candidates from enrolling with the university. As if that is not enough, those already enrolled with the university may not be able to continually and successfully complete their studies at the university. Most significantly absence of sponsorship for part-time students was also cited as an obstacle for students to pursue their studies with NUL to completion. Moreover, respondents indicated that the workload for candidates is unbearable resulting in unsatisfactory performance, which may in turn in some instances result in some students not completing their degrees. It is noted that the university is moving towards semesterization and modularization which could have a positive impact in addressing a number of students concerns including reducing the student's workload and enhancing their mobility. Hopefully the project will be completed and implemented well on time.

5.4   Improve educational facilities

Good educational facilities refer to the entire scope of human, physical and social infrastructure and other support services provided by the university for the purpose of teaching and learning (Okokoyo, Nwaham&Ikpeba, 2004). A well-equipped university with educational facilities is a good structure for provision of quality education and satisfactory service delivery. It encourages focus in pursuit of the curriculum; eliminates behavioural risks, such as, instructors as well as students' absenteeism thus, promoting good academic environment. The findings of this study show that NUL educational facilities (faculties' seminar rooms, computer laboratories, lecture theatres, athletic fields and teaching equipment, specifically for the visually impaired) need to be extremely enhanced, as some of them are inadequate and outdated. Lastly, support service, in particular bursary service which is critical for student learning as it deals with the management of students' tuition fees and other expenditures, should constantly provide students with statements showing their incomes and expenditures while at the university. This will assist students to have information of how much they owe and how much the university owes them well in advance. They should not know for the first time what they owe when they are supposed to get their results.

5.5   Improve internal and external coordination

It is imperative to have regard to stakeholders (internal and external) concerns and their feedback as such are a valuable source of information that can be used to improve the relationships among NUL, Student Union (SU) and NMDS. The results of the study show that there is insufficient coordination and communication between and amongst NUL Management, SU and NMDS. This lack of coordination and communication usually result in the delay in disbursing students' allowances thereby resulting in unnecessary perennial students' strikes. Against the above backdrop, inter-departmental/faculty coordination and communication among different faculties and departments within the university should also be enhanced in order to avoid situations whereby students end up selecting irrelevant courses and or duplication of courses. Proper external communication and coordination with alumina, local and international institutions partnerships with other universities for is one area which can be of benefit to NUL students. To this end, therefore, there is need to enhance such relationships as they may provide opportunities for international exchange programmes. Such coordination may also provide NUL with an opportunity to improve the quality of teaching and learningby introducingnew programmes including postgraduate studies, introduction of internship/attachment and enhancement of teaching practice.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to identify some areas where NUL is lacking with a view to recommending possible areas of improvements for the employability and marketability of its graduates. The findings are based on best practices and are comparable in many respects to studies carried out in other African countries (Malawi and Tanzania) and they do contribute to the body of knowledge regarding specific areas that the university should improve in order to increase employability of its graduates. The major areas suggested for improvement centre around the core of the university and they are related to the deficiencies regarding provision of quality of education, provision of relevant curriculum, access to university education, improvement of educational facilities and internal and external coordination. This callsfor the integration of the employability strategy, marketing strategy, combining with, review of employment of academic staff, review of curriculum, amplifying internal and external coordination and provision of an enabling teaching and learning environment especially in the areas of well-equipped and modern laboratories, computer labs as they are germane to the enhancement of graduate employability which will translate into NUL graduates being marketable in the labour market.

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