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Employment Expectations of Final-Year Undergraduates at Private Universities: Challenges and Opportunities - A Case Study of Saint Thomas University of Mozambique

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The present research investigates the employability expectations of graduates from Saint Thomas University of Mozambique (USTM). It aims to analyze the extent to which these expectations align with the current conditions of the Mozambican labour market. The study employed qualitative research, and a case study design was adopted. Fifty participants, including students and faculty members, were engaged in this study and gathered input from employers to understand the challenges and opportunities graduates face. The researcher selected 30 students, 15 lecturers, and five employers using random sampling techniques. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The data were then analyzed using Nvivo software to generate codes and themes. The results indicated a significant gap between what graduates expect from USTM and the available employment opportunities. Among the issues identified by employers was skill mismatch, while graduates in Mozambique expressed frustration about limited internship opportunities and competitiveness in the job market. The study also identifies resource constraints and inadequate industry collaboration as systemic issues in private universities. Regarding their students' readiness for employment, this study recommends incorporating practical training into academic programs, strengthening partnerships between private universities and employers, enhancing career counselling, and promoting entrepreneurship as a viable career option. This research contributes to the broader debate on employability in Mozambique while providing insights for policymakers, educators, and industry leaders to create a more inclusive and effective pathway to employment for university graduates.

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INTRODUCTION

Of the southern African countries, Mozambique has undergone the most dramatic educational changes over the past thirty years. Following its independence from Portugal in 1975, Mozambique immediately launched an ambitious program of rapid development with socialist equability (Piepiorka, 2020). The period was marked by hardship exacerbated by Cold War dynamics and attempts by South Africa to retain apartheid, which spilt over into the disastrous civil war that ended in 1992.

Hence, the country's higher education system also witnessed drastic reforms. After the Portuguese instructors vacated the country in 1975, there was a severe scarcity of teaching faculties in Mozambique's only university (Nielsen & Andreasen, 2015). Besides governmental institutions, including the Higher Pedagogical Institute and the Higher Institute for International Relations, there were nongovernmental institutions. These institutions include the Catholic University of Mozambique and the Mussa bin Bik Islamic University. Despite recent economic growth, Mozambique remains one of the world's poorest countries, grappling with a severe shortage of skilled professionals crucial for development and effective governance (Mendola *et al.*, 2018). Mozambican higher education is a mixed economy

combining public and private participation. Although various ministries are implicated, the Ministry of Education is still dominant in providing higher education services, relying extensively on extensional financing sources (Bonde & Matvel, 2022).

Data from the Mozambique Familiar (Family Budget Survey), carried out in 2019/20, shows that 37% of the women and 29% of the men aged 15-19 are NEET, while 47% of the women and 39% of the men aged 20-24 years are NEET. Compared with many other countries in East and Southern Africa, Mozambique has a low enrolment rate of girls and young women in school, both at primary and secondary school levels. The dropout rate among girls is widely reflected as they feel compelled to help family farming or businesses. A significant number of them even marry in their teens. The demographic profile is shifting fast in Mozambique, with a rapidly growing population of working-age people. Youth unemployment is considered a gigantic economic failure of missed human capital and lost revenue through taxes. It means a higher tax burden for the future generations. More educational and training opportunities will improve youth job opportunities and increase the nation's competitiveness and development. A 2019 UN study in Mozambique finds that university graduates struggle to gain entry into the labour

market even as public funding for higher education more than doubled between 2007 and 2017. The jobs they get rarely fit their skills and are low quality, with minimal job security and low wages. Only 40% of graduates who responded to the survey reported finding employment within 15 months. There is a gap between the soft skills required for the private sector to compete in the global economy and those that job seekers possess. Women, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ are facing particular barriers, including gender discrimination, prejudice, stigma, and inaccessibility (USAID, 2024).

In 2023, a record 170,000 students enrolled at public universities across Mozambique. However, this figure excludes the 85,000 qualified students who were not assimilated into the public universities and furthered their education at private higher learning institutions nationwide. Society and perceptions are driving the upward trend of taking up private university places as a vital ingredient for helping to address the challenges of joblessness posed by Ruth (2020). The global issue of youth employability has emerged as a significant challenge (Dhakal *et al.*, 2018), prompting a shift in perception toward viewing challenges as opportunities. This trend is evident in Mozambique through increased investment by entrepreneurs in educational ventures such as universities. Many students enrol, expecting to secure employment upon completing their studies (Agency *et al.*, 2020). However, most private universities' higher enrollment rates did not correspondingly reflect increased employment levels upon graduation. So far, improvements are needed if such uncertainty hampers these youth in considering employability from their academic engagement in Mozambique.

Admission to public universities is very competitive, and a student only qualifies by scoring high grades; otherwise, some must attend private colleges due to performance below the minimum required standards since they would hope for higher job opportunities available after finishing college.

Students enrolled in private universities usually have lower academic entry qualifications and thus are underprepared for labour market requirements (Langa & Zavale, 2015). This mismatch enhances the frustration and disillusionment of graduates who feel unprepared for the realities of entering the workforce. Based on this scenario, this research investigates the hopes and expectations of students enrolled in private universities concerning job opportunities upon graduation.

Research Questions

- What are the employment expectations for graduates from Saint Thomas University of Mozambique?
- What challenges are Saint Thomas University of Mozambique graduates going through to seek employment in the current labour market?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dynamic Evolution of Employment

Work evolution has been a dynamic process. Different changes within society have always influenced it. Work has undergone an evolutionary process regarding its nature and context, continuously reflecting changes in the economic, technological, and social landscapes from pre-industrial to contemporary times. Historically, the industrial era, marked by the Industrial Revolution, saw the emergence of mass manufacturing and labour division, fundamentally altering how societies functioned (Hamid & Intan, 2023). Subsequently, the post-industrial era transitioned from manufacturing to services as the primary work activity, signifying a shift toward a knowledge-based economy (Damayanti, 2021). Modernity, typified by industrialization and the division of labour, provided the backdrop against modern society as we know it was built.

It represented a period of stability and structured organization in the workplace, characterized by clear hierarchies and standardized processes. However, with the advent of postmodernity came a

new era typified by risk, uncertainty, and rapid technological changes (Asmady & Drake, 2016). This stage, also known as the knowledge economy or post-Fordism, is marked by the commodification of knowledge and the shift from solid to liquid times, times of turmoil and change (Chiffi *et al.*, 2022). The network society has transformed the nature of work, creating more interconnectedness among different types of work, such as paid and unpaid, formal and informal, and domestic work (Dhakal *et al.*, 2018). These changes have had impacts that have not only shaped the organization's structure or dynamics but shaped identity and workplace relations. Considering this, any expectations of students to get a job after graduating must be located in the realities related to Mozambican universities because private higher learning institutions form one of the significant sectors that promote higher learning there.

As graduates navigate the complexities of the modern job market, their expectations are shaped by broader socioeconomic structures that influence employment conditions and work's role in shaping social identity (Bruck & Van den Broeck, 2012). Thus, examining the intersection of private university education and graduates' expectations for employment provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing young professionals in Mozambique's evolving economy.

Development of Higher Education in Mozambique

Undoubtedly, this created new opportunities for Mozambican youth to pursue further studies and acquire important skills. It allowed students from all socio-economic backgrounds access to higher education and allowed them to become agents of national development. On the other hand, such rapid growth in higher education has created several challenges. Limited resources and infrastructure have strained institutions' capacity to deliver quality education effectively, raising concerns about maintaining academic standards and program relevance to societal and market needs (Videira &

Teixeira, 2020). Furthermore, the societal perception of higher education as a pathway to employment and socio-economic advancement has fueled a surge in university enrollments.

Most Mozambican youth see having a degree as a means to getting better jobs, as Dhakal *et al.* (2018) stated. The reality, however, is different, as shown by an increasing number of university graduates who struggle to get jobs after graduating, according to Santos and Jones (2019). This shows the increasing mismatch between higher education attainment and labour market needs in Mozambique. Another major cause of this mismatch is the imbalance between the number of graduates and the labour market demand. With the rapid growth in university graduates, there has been an oversupply of qualified individuals competing for limited job opportunities, thus worsening the situation faced by graduates in finding jobs (Balchin *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, bridging the gap between academia and industry and employability skills for graduates is imperative. Historically, higher education has been one avenue for employment among the nation's youth. In contrast, currently, the situation is such that there is actual mismatching between the available jobs and the skills of graduates.

Graduate Employment Expectations and Job Market Reality

Students anticipate leveraging their acquired knowledge and skills to access fulfilling domestic and international career opportunities. However, the harsh reality of unemployment often shatters these expectations, leaving many graduates disillusioned and struggling to transition into the workforce (Anyanwu, 2013). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges, leading to widespread job losses and economic instability, particularly for young graduates entering the workforce (Tholen, 2022). Therefore, this situation raises awareness of the demand for universities and policymakers to take responsibility

for the mismatch between the expectations of graduates and the realities of the labour market.

Employability in Mozambique

The labour market of Mozambique has a remarkable record for excessive informality along with rampant cases of under-employment, which pertains to the potential to influence decent and decent-paying job opportunity issues for young first-year students. This competitive job market affects the limited growth within the formal sector. Much of the Mozambican labour market is characterized by informal employment, which dominates at about 80% of the total jobs. Such informality bears serious consequences regarding job quality, stability, and access to various benefits like health insurance, retirement plans, and legal protection (World Bank, 2019).

Increasing numbers of university graduates entering the labour market yearly have also heightened competition for the few jobs in the formal sector. The result is growing frustration among young people, who resort to entrepreneurship in the informal sector or seek opportunities abroad. In contrast, informal sector jobs may not align with graduates' professional qualifications, and they provide a source of income to meet immediate needs. However, employment in the informal sector often comes with precarious working conditions, low wages, and limited job security, highlighting the vulnerabilities unemployed graduates face in navigating the informal economy (Jeque, 2023).

The Mismatch Between Opportunities and Expectations

Undergraduate students from private universities in Mozambique typically expect a smooth transition from education to employment, with a strong preference for jobs that offer stability, competitive salaries, and opportunities for career advancement (Gbadamosi *et al.*, 2015). Private university students often aspire to positions in multinational companies or government institutions, driven by the perception of higher job security and better benefits

(Barsoum & Rashad, 2018). The alignment between employment opportunities and student expectations in Mozambique is often challenging. According to (Oraison *et al.*, 2019), there is a noticeable gap between the skills students acquire and the skills employers demand.

Curriculum Misalignment

As mentioned by (Oraison *et al.*, 2019), the educational curricula in many private universities tend to remain static, failing to adapt to the rapidly evolving demands of modern industries. This results in students acquiring knowledge and skills that may no longer be relevant or in demand when they graduate. This is mainly employers from the technological, business, and health fields who seek specific technical competencies or soft skills, like critical thinking and problem-solving, that may not be adequately represented in the current university offerings.

While Mozambique's economy has grown, several structural challenges continue to influence labour market conditions. Key sectors such as mining, energy, and construction are also employed, but most jobs require technical skills or vocational training, usually not provided at regular universities. Economic situations, political instability, exogenous shocks, and natural catastrophes could further hamper economies' ability to create well-paying, stable employment opportunities (Barsoum & Rashad, 2018).

Qualified Educational Opportunities and Underemployment

Many graduates often find themselves overqualified for the jobs available, particularly in rural or other areas irrelevant to their professional training. A business graduate would often only be able to secure informal economy employment or underemployment that does not utilize his or her qualifications. This will be dissatisfying and may result in a brain drain over time as graduates migrate in search of better opportunities abroad or at urban centres. There is also a divide between public and

private universities, contributing to this misalignment. Private universities often market themselves as offering better opportunities for upward mobility, and many students believe that a degree from a private institution will guarantee a higher salary (Marginson, 2016). This perception gap between public and private education's benefits can contribute to mismatched expectations. These are aligning student skills with market demand through university and industry partnerships and updating curricula to reflect current trends and employer expectations.

Research Gap

In Mozambique, where private higher education institutions continue to mushroom, with the concomitant increase in enrollment, there is an interesting gap in research on the employment status of undergraduate students who graduate from private universities. Existing research has framed higher education access, quality, and governance as key concerns (Nielsen & Andreasen, 2015). The existing literature talks less about how graduates face a mismatch of their skills with what is available at the workplace, limited job opportunities, and unrealistic expectations of those graduates by potential employers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, and the researcher employed a case study design comprehensively to gain a foundation for the challenges of employment faced by private university graduates in Mozambique. The Qualitative research design allows the researcher to understand the participants' knowledge, experiences, and feelings because it allows them to communicate with the researcher (Creswell, 2021).

Targeted Population

The target population comprised graduate students at Saint Thomas University, lecturers, and employers in both private and graduate students,

lecturers, and employers in the study of expectations concerning undergraduate employment in Mozambique is important based on various aspects:

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample size of 50 respondents was selected. These included 30 undergraduate students, 15 lecturers, and five employers. Sampling is a method through which a suitable representative subgroup of the population will be included in the study Verma *et al.* (2017). In this study, a Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants representing various categories of stakeholders involved in Mozambique's higher education and employment sectors. In this case, the researcher used random sampling to select 30 university undergraduates and purposively sampled 15 lecturers from Saint Thomas University of Mozambique (USTM). This sampling approach ensures that participants possess the relevant knowledge and experience to provide valuable insights into graduate employment expectations and challenges in the country (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2020). Apart from that, five employers were selected through purposive sampling as they are essential in employing undergraduates from both public and private higher learning institutions in Mozambique.

Data Collection Method

The researcher adopted interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary review methods in this study. An interview is a conversation between two persons to gather information for a particular objective. The interviews were conducted face to face, on the telephone, or as a focus group of six to eight participants each group. Semi-structured interviews with university lecturers, final undergraduates, and employers were performed to understand undergraduate employment expectations, their efficacy, and their effects. University lecturers are major stakeholders in studying the dynamics of employment readiness and the challenges of entry into work faced by

graduates. The participation of undergraduate finalists in an interview is important for a complete understanding of their perceptions of employment expectations and realities after university.

Focal Group Discussion FGDs involve gathering a small group of individuals who discuss their attitudes, experiences, and perceptions on a particular subject. Basnet (2018) points out that in this study, FGDs were used to collect qualitative data about what graduates of private universities in Mozambique expected from job opportunities.

The discussion group comprised 10 final-year students from various departments at the Saint Thomas University of Mozambique (USTM). Four had just graduated from the same institution, balancing five females and five males with experience. The FGDs, which lasted 10 to 15 minutes, allowed the researcher to gather rich, qualitative data on the expectations of private university undergraduates regarding employment in Mozambique. The focus on student input was important in understanding their career aspirations, job market perceptions, and the alignment or misalignment of these with the realities of the Mozambican economy. Document Review The various qualitative data collection techniques involve the researcher studying various public and private documents. The public documents include newspapers, meeting minutes, government reports, and the journals for the meetings. Some examples of private documents include emails, letters, journals, and personal diaries.

In this method, official evaluation records were used as the primary data source, which was integrated with data obtained from interviews and group discussions. The data collection method of document review encompassed the assessment and extrapolation of relevant data from primary and secondary sources (Bryman, 2012). This approach enabled the researchers to obtain specific data and information about employment policies, curriculum materials, and job market trends. This was achieved by reviewing relevant documents such as University

curricula, job market reports, and employer surveys on the prevailing expectations among university lecturers, graduates, and employers regarding post-graduation employment prospects.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data analysis involves the preparation and collection of data for analysis, then the subsequent breaking down of data by topics through some method involving coding and compressing of the codes, and presenting the data either in figures or tables or a discussion, as stated by Creswell (2021). Data obtained through qualitative methods were analyzed using a general app qualitative data analysis approach. A digital voice recorder was used to authenticate the voices during the interview. After conducting each interview, the researcher quickly coded it when the memory of the discussion was still sharp to avoid missing important information.

Field notes during the interviews were taken down for supplementation to record data and help the researcher get comprehensive data from the research. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze qualitative data gathered through interviews. In this study, central and minor themes were coded. Moreover, they are categorized according to the objectives to reveal and clarify prevailing patterns. Ethical Issue Consideration In this research project, the researcher sought consent from Zhejiang Normal University and Saint Thomas University of Mozambique participants and guaranteed confidentiality and privacy for the information they provided.

RESULTS

Participants Description

Understanding participant characteristics in a research study is an important precursor to interpreting its findings. The participants were purposefully sampled to investigate various variables related to the research focus of the employment expectations of private university

graduates in Mozambique. Demographic data collected involves gender distribution, job position, and key information such as age range, occupation, and educational background, which gives an overview of the group of participants.

Table 1: Students' Age Distribution

Age Range	Number of students	Percentage
20—24	9	30%
25—29	14	46.67%
30—34	5	16.67%
35+	2	6.67%
Total	30	100%

Table 2: Teachers' Academic Positions and Occupations

Academic Position	Number of Teachers	Occupation
Professor	3	Research, Teaching, Curriculum, Development
Associate Professor	4	Research, Teaching, Mentoring
Assistant Professor	5	Teaching, Research Assistance
Lecturer	3	Primarily Teaching, Course Design
Total	15	

Table 3: Employer's Sectors and Occupations

Sector	Number of Employers	Occupation/industry
Construction	2	Infrastructure Development, Civil Engineering
Media	1	Communication, Broadcasting, Journalism
Environmental Services	2	Environmental Protection, sustainability, Waste Management
Total	5	

Table 4: Gender Distribution for All Respondents

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	30	60%
Female	20	40%
Total	50	100%

Employment Expectations Upon Graduation

High Expectations

The "high expectations" theme regarding their graduation prospects increased across the participants. Graduates from the different faculties at USTM were of the view that their academic

success would automatically open up good job opportunities. This optimism was still more pronounced amongst students in the professionally oriented Faculties, the graduates of which expected to enter well-established career paths connected with their specializations immediately.

Overall, most interviewees had ambitions regarding their potential careers after studying and expected immediate entry into an occupation. It was reflected, for example, by the words of one interviewee from IST:

"I felt that once I graduated, within a few months, I would have secured a job either as a systems analyst or a software developer. The sector is developing rapidly, which is happening within Mozambique and the world. Therefore, I was very sure that with my current degree, I was equipped to make some contributions toward such development. I completed an internship in the final year of study with a local technology firm. There, I worked with coding, integration of systems, and management of projects". S1

From the detailed account of opportunities in the technology sector and practical experience during an internship, this participant makes it clear that he is confident in getting a job. The seamless transition into professional roles constitutes "high expectations" among graduates who believe their degree coincides with industry demand.

Based on their perceived general relevance, they would expect to work in ethics consulting, human resource management, or tourism development.

"During my final year, I was allowed to intern at a local technology company specializing in software development and systems analysis. This was priceless, allowing me to apply the theoretical knowledge I learned in class to real projects. I was allowed to develop a mobile application for one of their clients and even participate in some system integration work for local businesses. By the time I graduated, I was sure I could compete in the job market with practical skills employers would be happy to hire."S14

Realistic Expectations

While there are those highly expectation undergraduates in their various prospective employment possibilities after school, not those that still consider or show understanding and realistic mentality concerning the obstacles that await their career prospects. "Graduating is difficult at our faculty," as noted with disarming realism by an undergraduate at the Faculty of Agriculture:

"I knew from the start that agriculture in Mozambique is an important sector, but it is not one of those sectors that necessarily have very well-paid jobs or immediate jobs, especially for new graduates. Most farms and agro-companies want practical experience, which, through internships, I did get a bit off, but that may not be sufficient to get a full-time job immediately. Some of my classmates who finished before me are still looking for a job there."S21

This participant realizes the gap between academic qualifications and the reality of finding immediate high-level employment, especially in agriculture, where experience and time are of the essence. Graduates from faculties such as the Faculty of Agriculture and the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences were particularly cognizant of the realities of the Mozambican job market. A graduate from the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences shared a similar outlook:

"Business is very competitive in Mozambique, and I know my degree in economics gives me a sound theoretical basis, but it is not enough. Most employers would instead employ people who have at least some work experience or, at the very least, network connections. Those things take time to develop. I have been attending conferences and sending my résumé to various places, hoping to get an internship or temporary job "S4.

Graduates from the Faculty of Media and the Faculty of Information Sciences and Technologies also noted a saturated job market in their respective fields, as technological advancements increase competition against limited opportunities with an increasing number of students being qualified for the same jobs. A graduate from the Faculty of Media shared the oversaturation of the job market in their field:

Challenges in Meeting Expectations with Job Opportunities: Employment Challenges

Graduates from private universities in Mozambique, particularly those from Saint Thomas University (USTM), expressed several significant challenges when aligning their career expectations with the available job opportunities. Though academically qualified and optimistic, many reported that transitioning from university into the workforce was far more complicated than expected.

Lack of Experience

A shared theme in the participants' conversations was their annoyance at the numerous entry-level roles demanding prior experience, a requirement they faced as recent graduates. This established a frustrating cycle where graduates struggled to gain experience since they couldn't land any jobs, not even in junior positions. One graduate from the Faculty of Agriculture remarked:

*"I was shocked when I was job hunting; even entry-level positions require 2-3 years of experience. How will we get the experience if nobody hires us in the first place? I did an internship during my studies, but that was not enough. It is very discouraging because I know I am qualified, but they seem more concerned about practical experience than what we have learned in university."*S28

This response reflects a common challenge faced by recent graduates not only in Mozambique but also globally. Studies have shown that employers often highly value experience, sometimes even over

formal qualifications, especially in developing economies where companies may lack the resources to train inexperienced workers (Teichler, 2009).

Another graduate from the Faculty of Media echoed similar concerns:

*"It is all about experience in the media. I applied for several jobs in local radio and TV stations, and they keep telling me I have no practical experience. Of course, I did a few projects within the study program, but this seems insufficient. Now, I am considering volunteering or freelancing to fill my portfolio."*S27

This comment chimes with research indicating that employers in professions such as media often place more value on a portfolio, work experience, or an internship rather than formal education (Tomlinson, 2019). Those graduates who did not have this work experience were left in a precarious position whereby their academic credentials did not provide a clear route into employment.

Employers acknowledged that work experience plays a significant role in hiring decisions, with one respondent from the tech industry noting:

*"We prefer candidates who have gone through internships or work experience. It is not just about theoretically knowing but about applying the knowledge."*T10

This feeling finds its echo in the growing sense among employers that practical experience has more excellent value compared to mere qualifications. This factor is attributed to several reasons, unveiling the gaps between conceptual knowledge acquired at academic levels and the actual field-level competencies required for decent performance at professional levels.

Limited Availability of Jobs

Undergraduates from Agriculture and Media reported particularly low availability of the roles. While some fields in Mozambique are small and

others are growing, this has contributed to a mismatch between the number of graduates seeking work and the number of available roles.

One participant from the Faculty of Agriculture described the frustration:

"It is such an important sector for Mozambique, but it does not have few are in rural areas, and even there, they are scarce. I thought I would find something quickly, but now I understand that I must wait even longer or move to a different country or region to find work. I might have to consider applying to a completely different sector of activity". S16

This observation reflects a more significant problem in the labour market in Mozambique, which is typical of uneven development between sectors of the economy. While agriculture is significant in the economy, job opportunities in this sector are limited and narrow, particularly for university graduates seeking skilled employment positions. Graduates from the Faculty of Media also expressed their apprehensions over the lack of job opportunities:

"The media industry is growing, though still small in Mozambique. Only a handful of TV and radio stations cannot employ all the students who graduate yearly. I knew it would be competitive, but I did not realize how few opportunities there would be. Now, I am considering looking for a marketing or communications job". S25

This is part of a single cause of job over-saturation, where the number of graduates is relatively higher than the available job opportunities. As a result, job holders have reported experiencing significant frustrations because their newly acquired education does not adequately prepare them for the challenges of the job market as promised.

Competitive Market

Graduates from faculties such as Information Sciences and Technologies and Law reported how

the rise in graduates within their disciplines, technological changes, and industrial requirements have made the field very competitive.

According to one graduate from the Faculty of Information Sciences and Technologies:

"Technology is one of the fastest-growing sectors, and I thought that would mean plenty of job opportunities. However, there are so many graduates now, and we all compete for the same positions. Employers want the best and seek people with specialized skills and experience."S9

This corroborates global findings where technological-related fields face increased competition, and employers are increasingly interested in candidates with particular skills and certifications over and above formal degree qualifications (Stanton & Stanton, 2020).

A graduate from the Faculty of Law contributed to the oversaturation within their field:

"Law is getting increasingly competitive. Hundreds of law graduates enter the job market each year, while not as many law firms or state organizations could hire all of us. It is tough, and one has to be at the top of one's class or have strong connections to get a foot in the door. I am considering taking on a paralegal role to gain experience and build my network."S24

Limited Industry Networks

Another related issue was a lack of professional networks and industry connections, often helpful in securing work. Students indicated that living in a rural area and/or studying in specialist courses like Agriculture and Tourism if they did not have any contacts in the industry, they felt at a disadvantage in job-seeking and opportunity identification. The following comment came from one of the students:

"Most job opportunities I come across are through personal connections rather than

*formal job postings or merit-based processes. Professional connections are often more important than my qualifications or degree in my field. Unfortunately, I feel this is so. It is frustrating because I feel my academic achievements should mean much more, but I am stuck since I do not know the right people. Networking seems to open up doors that academic credentials cannot."*S23

The employers further attested that networking was significant in their recruitment process. As attested by one tourism employer,

*Usually, we rely on trusted referrals or recommendations from people within our network who can vouch for the candidate's work ethic, reliability, and ability to handle real-world challenges. In many cases, it is not just about what is on paper but about who the candidate knows and how they have built relationships within the industry. A strong personal recommendation can carry as much, if not more, weight than qualifications because it gives us confidence that the candidate is a good fit for our company culture and the role's demands."*E5

This implies that graduates with no professional networks would be at a disadvantage compared with others with high networks, assuming equal academic qualifications. Employers in industries where personal recommendations and trusted referrals hold great importance, such as tourism, may favour candidates with established professional relations.

Economic Constraints

The economic barriers were more evident for graduates from rural areas or those in specialized fields such as Agriculture and Environmental Studies. The economic conditions in Mozambique, marked by sluggish growth and limited investment in crucial sectors, have exacerbated unemployment and underemployment among graduates.

"It is difficult to find a job in agriculture outside of a few large cities; there are limited opportunities in rural areas, and even those tend to pay poorly. Many of us consider relocating or exploring other industries."

This reflects general trends within the Mozambican economy, which is characterized by limited industrial development and significant regional disparities. These disparities make it hard for graduates to find job opportunities relevant to their education outside major urban hubs.

Employers in sectors with economic pressure, such as agriculture, also confirmed the difficulties. One employer explained,

*"There is just not enough funding or infrastructure to support large-scale hiring in agriculture, especially outside the major cities. Graduates may need to be flexible and look for opportunities outside their field."*E4

This economic reality highlights the need for graduates to be adaptable, considering roles outside their immediate field or even entrepreneurial ventures as an alternative. A teacher from the Agriculture Faculty stated:

*Agriculture graduates face a tough job market due to the little investment the country has made in the sector. We advise our students to consider entrepreneurship or other related fields, but the lack of job openings is a real issue."*E2

The participants pointed out the job employment barriers underlining how complex the job market situation in Mozambique is; lack of job experience, limited connections with industry players, and economic constraints are significant challenges facing graduates. This challenge is recognized by both employers and educators alike; there is agreement about practical experience, possibilities for networking, and structural reforms that will enhance graduate outcomes.

DISCUSSION

High Employment Expectations

Most respondents, especially those graduating from professional faculties such as Law and Information Sciences and Technologies, showed strong confidence in securing a job matching their qualifications within a short period after graduation. Such confidence is sustained by literature that suggests that graduates often equate academic success with good employment prospects (Mason *et al.*, 2009). For instance, the graduates from the Faculty of Information Sciences and Technologies shared that the internship was a critical experience for skill improvement and development of the belief in adapting to full-time jobs in no time.

One fact supporting such optimism is obtained from research by SHI HONGJUN *et al.* (2024), which establishes that an internship considerably enhances the employability prospects for graduates through work experience and industrial contacts. While this aspiration is laudable, it is a high expectation that, not matched by a responsive job market for graduates, can quickly turn into disappointment.

Balanced Career Goals

While some graduates maintained very high expectations, others viewed their job opportunities in a realistic light. Among these, practical thinking was highly prominent among students' specific streams, like agriculture and tourism, where the number of jobs is limited. Their views on this subject share similarities with the authors (Callanan & Bezing, 2004), who opine that candidates must consider the market demand and job realities. One of the graduates from the Faculty of Agriculture pointed out that broad experience in the sector alone is required for a high-position job in many positions.

Difficulties in Obtaining Employment Compatible with Expectations in the Labor Market Today

No Working Experience

This is particularly dire in fields such as Agriculture and Media, where employers emphasize practical experience more than academic qualifications. For instance, graduates reported that job postings frequently requested 2-3 years of experience, leaving them unprepared and discouraged. This situation is not unique to Mozambique; studies indicate that employers worldwide increasingly value practical experience (Teichler, 2017). The emphasis on experience reflects a broader trend where companies seek to minimize training costs and quickly onboard employees who can contribute immediately (Tomlinson, 2017).

Another major challenge facing USTM graduates is the limited availability of job openings in some fields. Agriculture and Media graduates noted that few jobs were available while these sectors are crucial to the economy. The unequal development of the economy in different sectors in Mozambique creates a mismatch between the number of graduates and the number of jobs available. As already emphasized in the literature, graduates generally perceive their studies as too far from what is requested in a competitive labour market (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013). This shortage of available positions brings tremendous frustration to the graduates, who may be forced to seek employment in fields other than their own to find a job.

Highly Competitive Landscape

Even for those fields with existing job vacancies, competition is very stiff. Information Sciences and Technologies and Law graduates mentioned that high numbers of graduates make the labour market highly competitive. This is in line with international findings that the competition in the technology-related field has increased, and employers are looking for more than a graduate; they want people with an applicable skill (Rosenbaum, 2017), and the competitive nature of the job market leaves many graduates feeling inadequately prepared and

uncertain about their career prospects. All this is exacerbated by the oversaturation of particular fields, like Law, wherein not only the qualifications but the networks and connections must be strong enough for the graduates to get placed.

Weak Industry Relationships

One noted that many job opportunities are found through personal networks rather than traditional job postings. Strong academic credentials cannot prevent graduates with limited established networks from being placed at a definite disadvantage. This perception is confirmed by employers who confirm that hiring often occurs by word-of-mouth recommendations:

A manager in tourism comments, “I am happy if somebody recommended trusted people for employment since that mostly provided the basis to trust one’s approach and willingness to fit in company culture.”. This finding is consistent with more recent studies emphasizing the role of social capital in job acquisition. According to Mercer& Brown (2010), personal recommendations often serve as a “trust signal” to employers, particularly in industries like tourism, where interpersonal skills and cultural fit are critical. These findings highlight that universities should be more proactive in organizing networking events, internships, and industry partnerships that put students in contact with their future employers. Building and maintaining professional networks has become an increasingly important aspect of career success, particularly in fields where few formal job postings are available and personal recommendations weigh heavily.

Financial Limitations

This imbalance in the availability of jobs exacerbates unemployment and underemployment among graduates who may not be able to relocate. Employers were also on the same frequency, saying a lack of infrastructure and finances prohibits them from effecting large-scale hiring in the agriculture

sector. One of the employers explained that it is difficult to absorb all the graduates in rural areas without substantial investment in those industries. This is in agreement with the study by SUPIOT (2020), which stated that the economic constraints in specific areas, like agriculture, limit the creation of jobs and result in a difficult time for graduates to find employment in the field of their study.

CONCLUSION

While many graduates have high hopes for direct employment in their preferred field, most understand the competitiveness of the job market and the flexibility they must adopt in career choices. This flexibility reflects graduates' resilience when trying to break down barriers in situations involving a few vacancies, lack of experience, and discrepancies between education and industry requirements. Graduates felt a clear need for more practical training integrated into their academic programs, which would equip them with the skills and networks required to succeed in the workforce. This corroborates literature suggesting experiential learning enhances job readiness and employability (Popov & Manuel, 2016).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the Universities

The universities must focus on strengthening industry relationships and developing closer ties with relevant sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and business. For greater clarity, they should incorporate and implement pragmatic training and workplace placement programs during the course tenure. They should also collaborate with government agencies and international associations to provide scholarships and monetary grants needed for continuous professional skills development.

Recommendations to the Employers

Employers should also engage with universities to develop formal internship programs that provide students with on-the-job experiences in their chosen fields and offer graduate opportunities via

traineeships and apprenticeships. In return, employers will have developed a talent pipeline of more work-ready graduates.

Recommendations for the Government

Government investment in rural infrastructure and employment generation programs can balance the unequal distribution of job opportunities and stimulate economic activities in depressed regions. This calls for focused attention on infrastructural development, such as transportation and communication lines, which are usually too minimal in rural settings.

Recommendations for Further Studies

While the qualitative findings of this research study are paramount in providing the much-needed invaluable in-depth insight, future studies could use mixed methods approaches- both qualitative and quantitative approaches. It would thus combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies within a single study, thus allowing the compilation of statistical data supporting or nullifying qualitative information. Large-sample surveys would carry a quantifiable understanding of the expectations from graduates and, perhaps, focus groups or in-depth interviews to shed further light.

Competing interest

There is no competing interest in this paper

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Ethics

The academic committee at the College of Education at Zhejiang Normal University in China approved this research.

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