

Education-Job Mismatch among University Graduates in Cameroon: Labour Market Experiences, Perceived Causes and Impacts

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ABSTRACT

Education-job mismatch among university graduates in Cameroon presents a significant challenge to both the graduates and country's economy. Access to decent work is increasingly difficult for most university graduates in Cameroon and these graduates are finding refuge in 'non-standard' employment which often is below their level of education and outside their field of study. This study examines the perceptions and experiences of social sciences and humanities graduates on the issue of education-job mismatch and how being in mismatched jobs has affected them. The study employed the qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews to examine the issue of education-job mismatch among these graduates. The experiences shared by the participants indicated that they chose to pursue higher education and particular fields of study with the expectation of securing a job equivalent to their level of education and one that makes use of the knowledge they have acquired through school. However, their labour market experiences and the jobs they secured upon graduation indicate a gap between their expectations and the realities they were facing. The study suggests that for the issue of education-job mismatch to be addressed in the Cameroonian labour market, the educational system should be realigned with the market needs, so as to better utilize its skilled workforce, reduce underemployment and promote sustainable economic growth.

INTRODUCTION

University graduates across the world are increasingly facing difficulties in gaining access to graduate jobs. However, most studies on the graduate labour market outcomes have been focused on open unemployment. Open unemployment does not tell a complete story of what actually transpires in the graduate labour market especially in terms of the quality of jobs most graduates secure upon graduation. In most developing countries Cameroon included where unemployment benefits do not exist, graduates cannot afford to remain unemployed. These graduates who are unable to access decent jobs often find refuge in non-graduate jobs and the non-standard jobs are seemingly becoming standard among university graduates in Cameroon. This phenomenon is referred to as education-job mismatch defined by Salas-Velasco (2021) as the discrepancy between the qualifications that individuals possess and those that are wanted by the labour market.

Despite the difficulties faced by graduates to access decent jobs in the labour market, increase access to higher education for all still dominates most policy agendas. For example, emphasis on equal access to higher education for all formed part of the commitments of the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. However, massification has not translated to positive labour market outcomes for graduates in Cameroon especially those of social sciences and humanities who have relatively higher labour market disadvantages due to saturated job market and limited number of jobs in these fields. In many cases, the realities faced by the graduates upon graduation contradict their expectations as many find jobs in non-graduate positions.

Studies have shown that universities in Cameroon release a huge number of graduates into the job market each year without a corresponding increase in job creation to meet up with the increase job demands (Neneh 2014). It can be assumed that an individual chooses a particular field of education with the expectation of working in an occupation related to that field and given the perceived importance of higher education, one will expect that individuals who possess university should be able to secure decent jobs in the labour market. This in turn, is

assumed to transform and enhance their quality of life and lift them out of poverty. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2005) young people after finishing formal education should be able to subsequently make successful transition from school to work with the skills and knowledge they acquired. However, this linear relationship between education and graduate labour market success in Cameroon is a far cry from the reality. Instead of picking up decent and career oriented jobs, university graduates in Cameroon roam the street and various offices several years after graduation in search of unavailable jobs. Given the non-existence of unemployment benefits for graduates in Cameroon, unemployment remains a status that only the rich can afford. Most Cameroonian graduates cannot afford to remain unemployed and when they cannot find jobs in their field of study or level of education, they are forced to accept any available job in order to meet up with survival expectations and are driven by frustration and desperation to accept jobs that do not match their level of education and knowledge in order to meet up with their survival needs (Hyéfouais 2016).

The specificities of the labour market in SSA countries in general and Cameroon in particular therefore call for the use of indicators that address both the quantity and the quality of jobs (Golub and Hayat, 2014, Herra and Merceron, 2013). The form of labour market imbalances should no longer be assessed solely on the basis of unemployment and number of hours worked (underemployment) but on assessing the type and quality of job secured.

RESEARCH METHOD

The present study adopted the qualitative research approach. According to Gillham (2000) the focus in a qualitative research is on the kind of evidence that is based on what the people tell you, what they do that will assist the researcher to understand the meaning of what is going on. In this study such meaningful insight was derived from social sciences and humanities graduates who are into jobs that do not match their level of education and field of study. This method enabled the researcher to arrive at a reliable conclusion with regards to how graduates perceive and experience their being mismatched and the repercussions of the mismatch on their daily lives.

This study made use of the purposive sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique is one that groups participants according to preselected criteria (Mack et al., 2005). In the case of this study the preselected criteria used to recruit participants were- 1) university graduates with a degree in the field of social sciences and humanities, 2) living in Yaounde at the time of the research, 3) holder of a job assumed not related to his/her level of education and field of study, 4) have graduated at least 3 years or more prior to the research. The study ended up with a sample of 15 participants. With purposive sampling, the sample size is determined on the basis of theoretical saturation, that is, the point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights to the research questions (Tuckett 2004). The snowballing technique was used to recruit participants. With the snowballing technique, participants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study. This method is often used to find and recruit 'hidden populations,' that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies. This technique was deemed best for this study because graduates can be categorized as 'hidden population' especially in Cameroon where contacts of graduates and their whereabouts is often unknown after graduation.

The main qualitative technique used to gather primary data were semi-structure interviews. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were tape-recorded. Notes were also taken during and after the interviews. The audio data was then transcribed, field notes expanded, the entire data organized, and coded. Excerpts were extracted from the transcribed data to illustrate the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

RESULTS

Labour market experiences of graduates

Few available jobs and the absence of unemployment insurance forces individuals that do not have resources to withstand prolonged unemployment either to create their own jobs or to accept jobs whose skills match, social security, remuneration, job security and other features are inferior to jobs they expected to have. This menace of unemployment in Cameroon has pushed many graduates especially those of social sciences and humanities to

engage in jobs which require little or no knowledge acquired during their degree programs. The graduates after spending their limited resources and several years in the university to obtain a degree often end up with jobs which a degree is not required or knowledge acquired is not applicable.

During the interview process participants were asked to describe their job search journey after graduation up to where they were during the period of the research. Each participant had their own story to tell about their experiences and the road they had travelled up to where they were at the time of the interview. Their experiences ranged from the difficulties in finding a job, the type of job they secured and the relationship between their job and their education. Many of the graduates reported extended periods of unemployment after graduation. Despite holding degrees, they found it challenging to secure jobs that matched their qualifications. The experiences have been illustrated by excerpts from interviews carried out with the graduates.

Carol, an Anthropology graduate narrated her story:

« Upon completion of my degree, I spent over two years applying to countless jobs without success. Employers kept telling me that I lacked practical experience, but how am I supposed to get experience if no one is willing to give me chance? So I decided to drop my degree and pick up any available job and that is how I ended up as receptionist in this hotel which has nothing to do with my degree »

Many of the graduates in Cameroon have resorted to picking up jobs outside their fields of study due to lack of related and relevant opportunities. They resort to mismatched job which often leave them feeling unfulfilled and undervalued.

Cyril, a Geography graduate with a master's degree noted,

« I have a master's in Geography, but I now work as a cashier in a supermarket. This is not what I envisioned for myself. I feel like my education is going to a waste and it's frustrating to see my potentials being undervalued. »

With few available jobs in the formal sector and the huge unemployment rate, many of the graduates often turn to informal employment as a means of survival. The informal sector in Cameroon absorbs a significant number of these graduates.

Godwill, a History graduate also recounted his story:

« When I finished school I couldn't find a job in the formal sector, so I started something own my own, I raised some capital from other menial jobs to buy my taxi which is my source of livelihood today. While this is not what I wanted to do after my degree, it's giving me a way to earn a living »

From the responses of these graduates it is evident that they viewed the acquisition of a university degree as a means to enhance their human capital which would have provided them with advantages in the labour market and open doors to employment opportunities. However, their job search journey and the inability to secure a graduate job is an indication that a degree is not an automatic door opener as they perceived when undertaking their degree programs. The research participants who shared the above job search and labour market experiences represent just a fraction of the thousands of university graduates in Cameroon who roam the street searching for unavailable jobs. These graduates resort to non-graduate jobs as a way to escape joblessness and to make ends meet. The research participants felt their qualifications were not useful in helping them to secure a graduate job. They felt their academic achievements made no difference because despite the fact that they were degree holders they ended up in jobs that a degree was not a prerequisite and they shared common jobs with non-graduates. Career alienation was evident from their stories and there was a feeling that the work they held at the time of the interview did not contribute to the realization of their career goals and aspirations. What they did for a living looks nothing like the dreams they had.

Graduates' labour market expectations versus realities

Most of the participants had set themselves goals and expectations that their degrees will open sustainable and suitable employment for them. They had the expectation of landing a dream job in their field of study with a good pay package, one which is secured and fulfilling in terms of skill utilization and career advancement. Figure 1 illustrates the expected organization of the labour market and the prospects of the participants upon graduation.

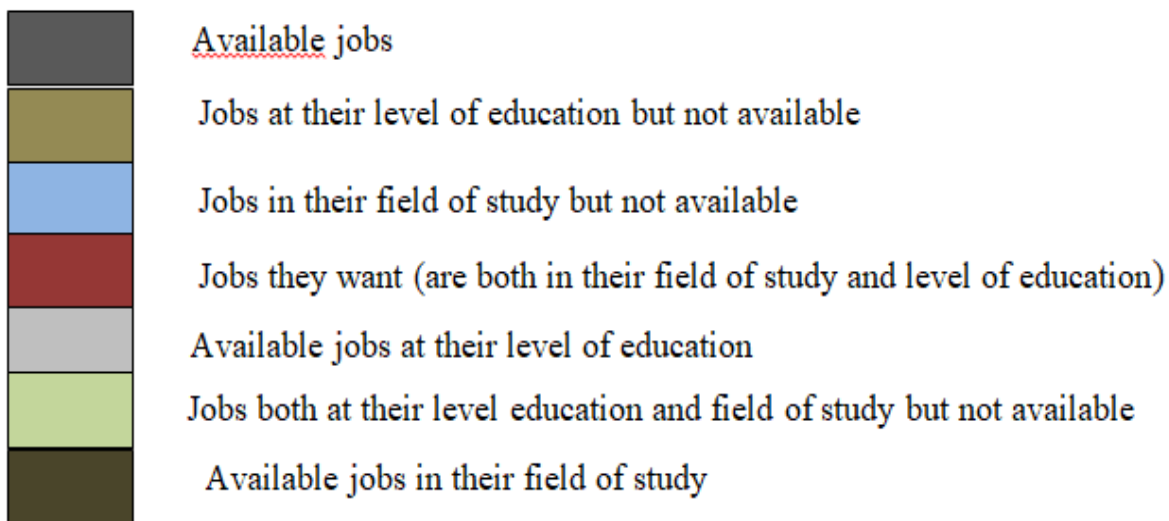
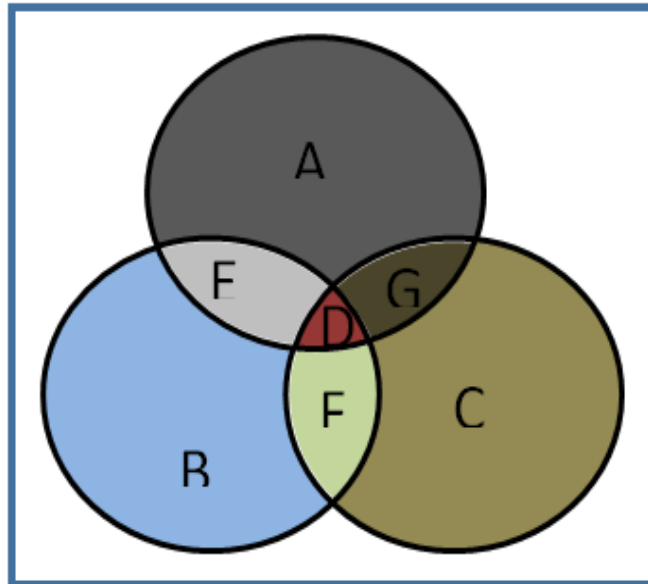


Figure 1: an idea situation of the labour market

Source: Author's conception

As illustrated in the figure 1, everything being equal there are jobs of all sorts available in the job market (A) and at the same time, there are jobs in the graduates' field of study but the jobs are not available (B) and others at their level of education but also not available (C). There are also some jobs available in their field of study but not at their level of education (E) and others available at their level of education but not in their field of study (G). Still we have jobs both at the graduates' level of education and their field of studies yet such jobs are not available (F). Ideally, graduates expect to secure available jobs at their level of education and in their field of study (D), that is, at the point of intersection of A, B and C. However, the realities of the labour market contradicted their expectations and they had to settle for jobs both outside their field of study and level of education as illustrated in figure 2.

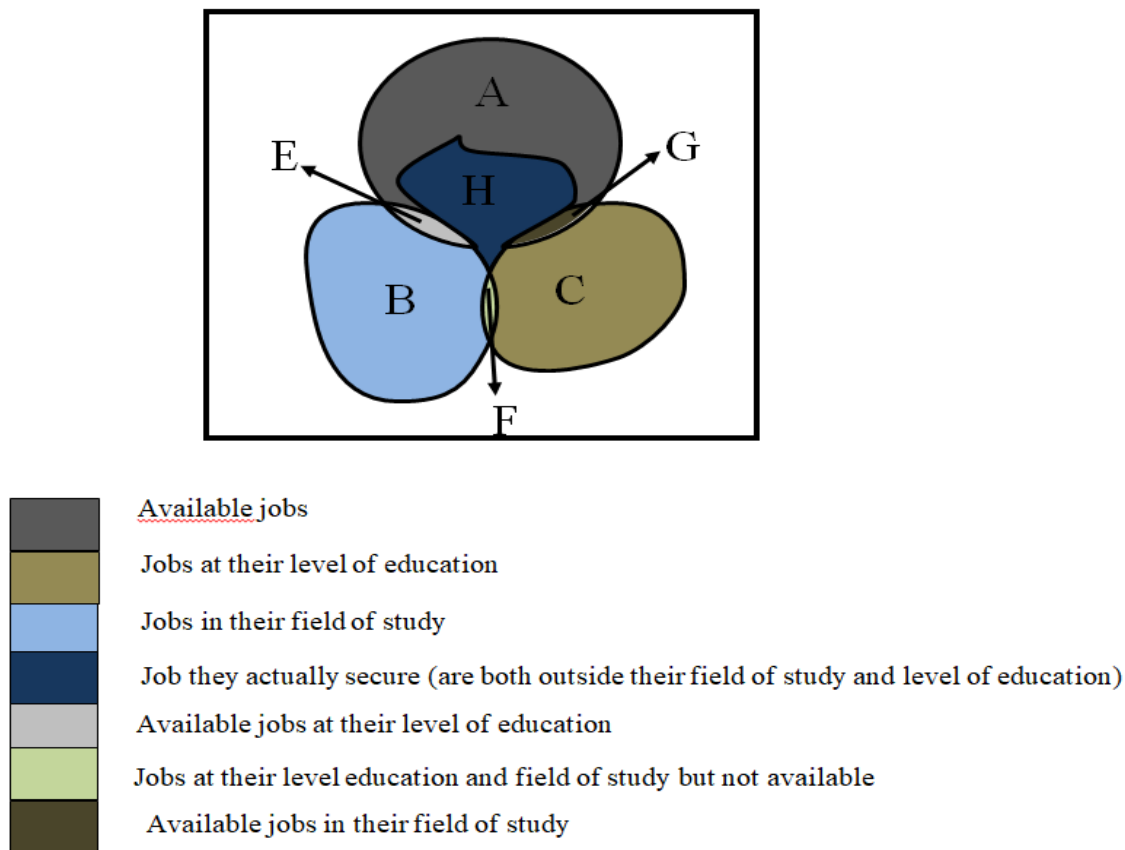


Figure 2: Labour market realities for the graduates

Source: Author's conception

Similar to figure 1, figure 2 shows that, everything being equal there are jobs of all sorts available in the job market (A). Ideally, graduates expect to secure available jobs at their level of education and in their field of study but the reality revealed that there were no available jobs in the field of study and level of study. As such they had to go for any available jobs in the market (H).

The expectations of the graduates in the labour market seem far from the truth. The research findings show almost a reverse pattern in that, the research participants with their higher education degrees found themselves in jobs below their level of education, jobs which do not make use of the knowledge they acquired through education, jobs characterised with low income and income insecurity, and jobs which do not provide room for career development and advancement. They expected that with their qualifications job offers would be rolling. However, in reality the research findings showed that most the participants barely struggled to even get a rejection from a job interview. The participants expressed experiencing discrepancy between their job expectations and their jobs in reality both in the content and in the context of the jobs. This had to do with the environment in which work was performed, that is, interpersonal relationship at the workplace, work supervision and how the general work tasks was being organized. The research findings indicated that the participants envisioned working in a conducive and comfortable working environment, being in jobs that are interesting and gives room for mutual interaction among their co-workers and work that gives them some sense of autonomy and personal creativity. Contrary to these expectations most of the participants found themselves in a demeaning working environment and in peripheral positions which did not give them room to socialise with the core workers and were also limit with regards to work autonomy and taking challenging job tasks.

Perceived causes of education-job mismatch

The research participants articulated various causes of the education-job mismatch in the Cameroonian labour market through their person experiences and observations. The participants framed the perceived causes of education-job mismatch around both individual and structural level factors. The individual level causes had to

do with lack of practical skills and work experience, and constraints brought about by the field study while the structural causes included: the declining public sector and the stagnating formal private sector, the overall weak economy which has made job creation difficult and the culture of clientelism and patronage that prevails in the Cameroonian labour market, outdated curriculum and the absence of course relevance, and excess supply of graduates.

Theory and practical misalignment

The participants were concerned with the type of knowledge they receive from the universities and acknowledged the fact that they had insufficient practical training while they were in school. They perceived the university system in Cameroon as inadequately designed to the actual changing needs of the labour market and reported the curricula are overly theoretical, leaving graduates feeling ill-prepared and lacking necessary practical skills for the job market. To them this was one of the reasons why they could not find jobs in their field of study. They supported their arguments with the type of skills demanded by employers when they advertise a job opening and the type of questions they were being asked during job interviews (for those that had the opportunity to attend a job interview).

Jean a Sociology graduate said:

« Our causes were very theoretical. There was little or no emphasis on practical skills or real-world creative and problem solving skills. This has made it difficult to compete in the job market »

Grace Economic graduate narrated,

« we spend a lot of time learning theories anchored on an outdated curriculum, we then move to the realities of the job market which are more practical based. We are faced with skills that we never came in contact with in class. At this juncture we have very little or no choice and since we cannot get into the formal job market because of this weakness we are forced to get what is available for us and most at times in the informal sector »

Many graduates know more than they can do. The respondents are concerned about the way students are being instructed in the universities and emphasized the weak connection between theoretical and practical knowledge. From the responses gathered during the interviews it is clear that this important practical aspect of education is still lacking in the educational programs of universities in Cameroon.

Outdated curriculum and absence of course relevance

Many graduates believed that the curricula used in most universities in Cameroon are outdated and these curricula are a significant cause of the job mismatched experienced in the country's labour market. They were of the opinion that universities in Cameroon are largely out of synchronization with the society. Some aspects of the syllabuses are outdated and are focused on imparting knowledge that does not meet the national needs and totally out of step with the modern labour market trends.

Micheal Psychology graduate noted:

“The labour market is changing but the curriculum used in our universities still remains the same. We learn a lot of things today that were popular only many decades ago. Employers are looking for new skills, experiences, real-world problem solving skills. But we lack all these, we enter the job market, i realized how unprepared we are”

Sub-Saharan Africa higher education in general and Cameroon in particular suffers from a total disharmony and mismatch between the curricula, production of graduates and current labour market demands. Some aspects of the curriculum used in the universities are several years out-dated and hence, not sufficiently tooled for the contemporary world. New universities are created and the same courses and syllabuses adopted. The Cameroon educational systems inherited from the colonial masters was inclined towards academics and the aim was to train civil servants. The same systems still apply today more than 50 years after independence. Much of the curriculum

has become outdated and almost irrelevant today but unfortunately still used in the universities despite contemporary local and global exigencies in the labour market. The research participants claimed that the university has made them barely literate, defining literacy here to be the ability to read and write. Knowledge is not a static quantity; it changes with search, research and experience of a society (Janjua 2011). For knowledge to be useful the curriculum of an educational system has to be reviewed and updated periodically to meet the changing demands of the society. However, this has not been the case in Cameroon as the curricula of most universities has remained unchanged over the years and is becoming obsolete.

The field of study

The choice of a degree programme has a crucial role to play in a graduate's employment prospects. Some of the participants acknowledged that their field of study was actually a barrier to their career success. They choose what interest them or what they are good at without considering what it can actually do for them and they did not feel the impact of the current labour market until after graduation. With little or no career guidance the graduates could not make informed decisions concerning the choice of their field of study and ended up in over-subscribed fields with low labour market demand.

Hilda, a History graduate remarked:

« Is like everyone wants to study modern letters, law, History; but we seem to be too many of us in these fields scrambling for too few jobs. Meanwhile, fields like technology and engineering are less subscribed for and are struggling to fill the skilled workers gap. To me part of the problem I see is that humanities fields seem to be over-subscribed »

Kenneth, a literature graduate also noted:

« I think there is need for some orientation from the beginning because we were encouraged by the love of particular subjects or peer pressure lured us into particular fields without looking at the labour market outcomes. But now many of us are competing for the same limited positions making it difficult to pick up matched job. »

As it is evident in the above quotes, peer pressure, the influence of siblings and personal interest motivated the participants to pursue certain fields of study without thinking of what the future holds for them. They studied just to realize upon graduation that the future is bleak because the market for these fields is saturated and the demand is low.

Inadequate career guidance

In line with the choice of field of study, the participants highlighted the lack of effective career guidance as a significant cause of job mismatch in the Cameroonian labour market. To them there is often little or no proper career advice and information about job market trends. That has resulted to students making uninformed decisions about their field of study.

Judith a graduate in Sociology said:

« I think career guidance is supposed to be an important aspect of our high school curriculum. But in high school most of us did not get proper orientation on career choices, we made choices based on what seemed interesting, not knowing what the labour market holds and what the job prospects would be like »

Gerald an Anthropology graduate also shared a similar view:

« I think career orientation would have helped us to understand the job market better and we could have chosen fields with more opportunities. A good number of us had no idea what the labour market looked like when we made our choices. »

Excess supply of graduate

Excess supply of graduates in the labour market was consistently cited by the participants as one of the reasons behind education-job mismatch among university graduates in Cameroon. Participants were of the opinion that there is excess supply of graduates over demand and this makes it difficult for many graduates to find career oriented jobs especially in the saturated labour market.

Peter, a Geography graduate recounted:

« In my graduating class we were over 250 Sociology students. The labour market simply can't absorb that many new graduates each year. They are just too many of us for and not enough jobs. »

Holding other factors constant, a greater number of people in the labour market means a greater number of jobs required to accommodate them (Kahraman 2011). However, the expansion of the education system in Cameroon has produced and is producing growing numbers of graduates without simultaneous economic growth to provide employment for them. Universities in Cameroon are turning out graduates at a far greater rate than the rate at which jobs are being created for these graduates. The participants were of the opinion that there is a problem of so many qualified people and a saturated labour market and this has caused the growing number of university graduates to take up jobs which in the past have been filled by those with little or lower levels of education. The explosion in graduates' number in the labour market has left supply outstripping demand, creating increase unemployment rates amongst graduate population and forcing graduates to move into non-graduate roles.

The weak economy and inadequate job opportunities

Economic factors were also perceived as significant contributors to job mismatch in the Cameroonian labour market. The university can impart graduates with the right skills yet the problem of graduate unemployment and subsequent job-mismatch will still persist if career oriented jobs are not available for the graduates. The absorption of the growing numbers of graduates depends not only on the subjects studied or the possession of skills and academic qualifications, but also on the ability of the public and private sectors to create jobs (Migdad 2011). In the postcolonial period, higher education in African countries was largely to select a few to enter high-ranking government jobs. With the expansion of university systems, diversification of economy and a drop in public sector job opportunities, the labour market today cannot be counted on to absorb university graduates as was the case in the 1960s up to early 1980s. The unprecedented economic crises that Cameroon suffered in the 1990s is one of the root causes of graduate unemployment as the government had to retrench many workers within the public service to sustain the overall debt burden of the country. Since then, the situation of youth unemployment in general and graduate unemployment in particular is constantly on the upsurge. The government has not been able to create adequate job opportunities, leaving thousands of graduates waiting for years to fill vacant positions in the public sector. It is really difficult to get a decent job in a situation where the economy is weak and economic growth is slow.

Gerald Political Science graduate explained;

« Our economy is weak and the job market is incredibly tough. It is not growing fast enough to create jobs for all the graduates. Many formal sectors are not expanding, rather the informal sector seems to be expanding instead and the jobs created by this sector don't match our qualifications. »

Jude History graduate also recounted

'The economy is not growing; instead it seems to be declining. Everything is just stagnant and this Covid-19 thing has made things worse. I don't even know what the world is turning into and this certificate that we are even struggling to have I'm not even seeing the use. The whole system now is a mess, in short.....'

The economy of Cameroon has not grown enough to match the rate of turning out of graduates. The number of jobs created has slowed down since the mid-1980s and became severe in the 1990s as a result of the unprecedented economic crisis that hit the country hard. In addition to this sluggish growth, the country does not

have sufficient structural and transformation capacity to encourage the formal private sector to generate adequate jobs to absorb the number of graduates who are turnout by universities every year. It is therefore difficult for these university graduates to find fulfilling employment and they are forced to seek refuge in all sorts of survival jobs.

The culture of clientelism and patronage

Clientelism and patronage has permeated African societies from top to bottom (Thomson 2010) and Cameroon is not an exception. Hiring based on social capital within the network of family, friends, and sponsors among other patrons is a practice that prevails in the labour market in Cameroon and this has undermined the hiring of workers based on merit. This has acted as a barrier to legitimate employment for graduates who may be qualified for certain positions advertised but do not have such networks. The participants were concerned about the system of hiring in Cameroon which has left most of them doubting the actual reason why they cannot find a job in their field of study. The research participants felt that their failure to secure a good job was not only linked to shortcomings of their qualifications but also because they lacked the social network.

Ruth Philosophy graduate noted:

“I have come to realise that networking is very important not only our qualifications. I have even seen less qualified candidates getting jobs simply because they know someone in that domain. It is somehow disheartening to know that who you know matters more than your qualification”

As the above quotes suggest, the issue of connection and personal influence which involves friends and family members helping to secure jobs or locate potential employers is widespread in Cameroon. Therefore, personal acquaintance and connection to people in the labour market is important and securing a legitimate employment as the participants highlighted does not only depend on what you know but also on who you know.

The impacts of education-job mismatch on the graduates

The misalignment between qualification and employment has profound impacts on graduates in Cameroon. Through narratives gathered from in-depth interviews, the research participants revealed economic, socio-psychological and societal impacts of education-job mismatch.

Economic impact

Financial instability

Education is often viewed as an investment and as the main tool to fight poverty as it is assumed to help individuals find better jobs, thereby increasing their earnings in the labour market. However, the research findings revealed that graduates in the Cameroonian labour market face significant financial instability due to job mismatch or underemployment. The participants reported low and irregular remunerations. While some participants reported they earn low wages, others were more concern about the irregularities of their income and at the same time some recounted worries about both the amount and irregularities of their income. To them, payments were made based on the job characteristics and the assigned tasks and since these were mainly non-graduate jobs their qualification made no difference. They could not use their certificates to bargain on the salary or to demand for salary increment.

Judith a Sociology graduate recounted:

“I have a job but somehow i still rely on my parents for financial support because the job does not pay enough to cover my living expenses. It’s frustrating because i have the skills, but no openings in my field.”

Clement a Geography graduate held a similar view:

“Many of us have had to take low paying jobs just to survive. The payment is nothing to write on especially with the current rate of inflation in our economy but we have no choice, we need to make ends meet. “

Socio-psychological impact

The graduates also recounted significant social and psychological impacts as a result of being in mismatched jobs. Being in a mismatched job affected their health, social lives and relationships, as financial struggles can lead to strain and stress for the individual and their families. They reported health related issues such as stress, depression, unhappiness, worry and frustration. Being in a mismatch job also brought a feeling of dissatisfaction, inadequacy and diminished self-worth. The health impact was reported to be a consequence of other negative outcomes of job-mismatch such as poor and irregular income, low job satisfaction, human capital loss and lack of career identity and social status.

Kennedy a Psychology graduate recounted:

“Being in a mismatch job is affecting me health wise because, first the income is small, I’m always thinking, stressed and depressed as I am unable to do the things I have always wanted to do upon graduation”

The participated reported to have been experiencing mental health issues due to the frustration and anxiety of not being able to find suitable employment. They expressed feelings of unfulfilled hopes and diminished expectations. These graduates studied and went into the labour market with ideas of what their future was going to look like but what they found was quite different and lower than what they expected. They felt the pains of not being able to achieve their career goals after all the effort and time they put to study and this had negative impacts on their health and well-being.

Perceived lack of career identity and social status and, social alienation

The participants were also concerned about their social status and career identity. They perceived education-job mismatch to be detrimental not only because it had a negative impact on their income, job satisfaction, and skills but also because it was perceived to have affected their dignity and social cohesion. Individuals derive a sense of identity and self-categorize from the type of work they do. Therefore, work is perceived not only as a source of income but also as a source of social legitimacy. In most cases an individual’s job shapes his/her personal identity and this determines whether or not he/she is a valued person in the society.

The participants perceived certain type of jobs (career oriented jobs) as enhancing dignity and social status and they felt exempted from such dignity that people derive from work. They felt their identity and status has been compromised because of their employment circumstances. Their worries suggest that the type of job one secures is particularly important in one’s personal identity and social status which mediates the sense of being a valued person in the society. The feeling of lack of career fulfilment and job satisfaction made participants to feel that they have be socially alienated and not recognized in the society. They perceived the non-graduate jobs they secured as jobs with low social prestige.

Gerald, a political Science graduate narrated:

“I have always dreamed of working as an environmental consultant but i couldn’t find any opportunity in this field. Now i am working in retail that has nothing to do with my degree. My degree seems meaningless and it feels like i have lost my sense of professional identity”

Due to the misalignment between education and employment, graduates often struggle to establish a clear career identity and this often leave them with feelings of unfulfilled hopes and a sense of social alienation. They feel disconnected from their peers who have managed to secure matched jobs.

Peter, a Geography graduate pointed out:

“ I feel like an outsider among my peers who have succeeded to secure jobs that align with their qualifications, we do not have much in common again and most at times I avoid social gatherings with them because it’s a kind of embarrassing to me”

The inability to find suitable employment and the subsequent lack of career identity contribute to social alienation. The graduates feel disconnected from others and this lack of career identity and social alienation experienced by graduates highlight the profound social and psychological impact of education-job mismatch in Cameroon.

Broad societal impact

Education-job mismatch among university graduates in Cameroon has far-reaching implications which extend beyond experiences, affecting the broader society in multiple ways, among which are economic inefficiency and reduced productivity and human capital depreciation.

Economic inefficiency and reduced productivity

One of the most significant and feasible consequence of education-job mismatch in the labour market is economic inefficiency and reduced productivity. When graduates work in mismatched jobs, they do not use their skills and knowledge acquired in school. This leads to skills underutilization and wastage. The underutilization of the country's human capital hinders innovation, lowers productivity and slows down economic growth.

"I have a degree in Economics but I work as a waitress in a restaurant. All the knowledge I acquired in school is wasting away, I cannot contribute my own share of knowledge in order to foster growth in our country.

Human capital depreciation

Human capital depreciation has to do with the diminishing value of graduates' knowledge and skills over time as a result of underutilization or lack of relevant employment. The participants of this study expressed worries about the knowledge and skills they acquired in school. They shared the views that their inability to work in their fields of study is resulting to loss of knowledge and skills they gained through school.

Our skills and knowledge could contribute so much in building our economy. But without relevant jobs the expertise is wasting, our ideas are fading away and this feels like wasted knowledge and skills both for us the graduates and the country »

The research participants felt their knowledge was wasting and fading over time. This depreciation of human capital has broader implications for the individuals and the society. When skilled graduates are unable to apply their expertise, this implies a significant loss of potential productivity. Loss of productivity and inefficiency impedes economic growth and development in the society.

DISCUSSION

The labour market experiences of graduates in Cameroon offers a vivid illustration of the education-job mismatch that plagues the country. Through in-depth interviews the graduates shared their labour market struggles, their perceptions on the causes and effects of being in a mismatched job. Their views highlight the disconnection between their academic preparation and the realities of employment opportunities available. The research participants articulated various causes of education-job mismatch. Their personal experiences revealed that the causes of education-job mismatch are multifaceted.

The participants pointed out the outdated nature of the curricula used in universities, which fails to equip them with relevant knowledge and practical skills demanded by the modern labour market, a problem highlighted by Arias et al. (2020) in their study on 'The skill Balancing Act in Sub- Saharan Africa'. These young Cameroonians are imparted with theoretical knowledge and they expect to be recruited into the already saturated civil service sector. Their qualifications are mainly tailor-made for the public service employment but such employment opportunities are too few. Lack of opportunities to secure employment in the formal economy has forced most of these graduates to resort to all sorts of informal activities. Going to the university seems to be just a means of obtaining a certificate instead of acquiring necessary and applicable knowledge and skills. Upon graduation,

graduates find it difficult to reconcile the knowledge acquired within the confined walls of the classroom and the tasks they are expected to carry out in the world of work.

The results also revealed that the graduates' preference of traditional fields of study has led to an oversaturation in such fields. This has resulted to excess supply of graduates over demand. The direct consequence of this has been the competition of so many graduates over too few jobs leading to a huge number of them finding themselves in mismatched jobs. Sweet & Meiksins (2008) explain how oversupply of graduates in some fields can lead to systematic unemployment and underemployment issues. Similarly, Montt (2015) suggested that saturation in particular fields of studies is a major cause of education-job mismatch. The African Development Bank Group (2012) also found out that Africa has the highest share of social science and humanities graduates than any world region. Cameroon is not an exception in this case as thousands of social sciences and humanities graduates are churned out every year and these graduates find it difficult to secure career jobs. Education and skills open pathway into productive employment and schooling is a good predictor of an individual's eventual occupation (Filmer and Fox 2014). However, the findings of this study revealed that, the type and quality of education also matter.

The result of the study reveal that education-job mismatch among university graduates in Cameroon is a complex issue with significant economic, social and psychological impacts. The African Development Bank (2020) highlights the slow economic growth and the dominance of the informal sector in African countries including Cameroon, which fail to create formal employment opportunities for graduates. This economic context forces many graduates into underemployment and unrelated jobs. One of the impacts of this mismatch on the graduates is financial instability, that is, poor and irregular payments. Serikbayeva and Abdulla (2022), Kaufman and Hotchkiss (2006) elaborate on how economic conditions directly affects labour market outcomes, emphasizing on the idea that without a robust economy capable of generating diverse job opportunities, graduates will continue to face employment challenges and income disadvantages. Njifen and Smith (2023) confirmed this in their study that over-education is associated with wage penalty, that is, individuals who find themselves in jobs inferior to their level of education have the tendency of earning poor incomes.

The study results reveal significant and multifaceted socio-psychological impacts education-job mismatch among university graduates in Cameroon. The strain of underemployment and unrelated employment manifest in mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression and feelings of hopelessness. All these stem from job dissatisfaction, frustration, diminished self-worth and social alienation. Sam (2020) noted that education-job mismatch is generally found to lower the worker's job satisfaction, which may generate counter-productivity behaviours among workers. Similarly, Wen et al. (2023) found out that over-education accompanied by skill underutilization is associated with lower job satisfaction and increases the incidences of job quitting. Price (2003) view that skill-underemployed workers (workers whose jobs do not afford them the opportunity to put their skills and training to use) have lower levels of health and wellbeing than adequately employed workers. Ross & Mirowsky (1995) also found out that 'adequate employment' increases overall well-being by boosting individuals' social status, enhancing their economic independence, as well as social support and recognition from others, all of which have positive health outcomes such as life satisfaction, high self-esteem, and happiness.

'Goal-striving stress' could be inferred from the stories recounted by the participants. Goal-striving stress refers to the discrepancy between aspirations and achievement, weighted by the subjective likelihood of success and the level of disappointment experienced if goals are not met (Seller et al. 2008). Education often precedes occupation (Singh-Manoux et al. 2002) and individuals who pursue education often have occupational aspirations. Such individuals become stressed up when they cannot achieve what they aspired for and this can be deleterious to their health and wellbeing. This has been elaborated by Marshall and Fox (2020), Dewe et al. (2010), these authors discuss the relationship between employment conditions and mental health, noting that job insecurity and underemployment can anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.

Broader societal impacts as highlighted by the findings of the study include human capital depreciation, and economic inefficiency. With mismatched jobs, a significant portion of the educated workforce remains underutilized, representing waste of human capital. Prolonged periods of underemployment or irrelevant

employment lead to the depreciation of the graduates' skills and knowledge. This issue is well-documented by Hanushek and Woessmann (2010) who pointed out the societal costs of underutilized human capital.

CONCLUSION

Education-job mismatch is a feasible issue in the Cameroonian labour market. The phenomenon is characterised by the disconnect between the qualifications and skills acquired by graduates through higher education and the actual demands of the job market. The major contributing factors to this mismatch include the theoretical nature of courses taught in the universities which lack practical relevance, outdated curricula, lack of career guidance, choice of field of study, the culture of clientelism and patronage, and the weak economic system. The consequences of this mismatch are evident in high underemployment rate and poor wages, social discontent, human capital depreciation and economic inefficiency. The issue of education-job mismatch among graduates in the Cameroonian labour market is multifaceted and addressing it requires a comprehensive approach including curriculum reform tailored towards the needs of the modern labour market, integrating practical skills and modern technologies into the learning process, enhance collaboration between industries and universities to ensure the relevance of educational programs, encourage the pursuance of technical and vocational education, and implementation of career guidance programs in secondary schools so as to help students make informed decisions about their education and career path. In addition, the government should play a proactive role by creating policies that promote employment in emerging sectors and invest in sectors that have the potential to absorb the skilled workforce.

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