

From Degree to Career: The Case for Institutionalizing Career Development Centers in West African Universities

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ABSTRACT

The higher education sector in West Africa has grown faster than its capacity to enhance graduate job readiness, which results in elevated unemployment rates and skill mismatches for university graduates. The research supports West African universities to establish Career Development Centers (CDCs) as permanent institutions which will help students transition from their education to the requirements of the workforce. The research uses career development theories and contextual barriers and equity considerations to study how CDCs support reflective career learning, self-efficacy and adaptability development. The research employed a descriptive survey approach to gather data through online questionnaires from 46 undergraduate students and recent graduates who attended universities in Nigeria and Ghana. The study reveals that 47.8% of students remain unaware of career services, while 67.5% rate their institutional job market readiness as moderate or poor and 82.6% believe their educational programs fail to meet industry requirements. The examination reveals that it is crucial to incorporate formalized CDCs within university governance when developing partnerships with employers and government entities to enhance graduate employability and national growth. Resources should be dedicated to developing CDCs alongside measures to adjust course content to market demands and enhance culturally sensitive digital career services that will help West African students achieve better employment outcomes.

Keywords: Career Development Centers; Graduate Employability; West African Universities.

INTRODUCTION

The universities in West Africa have expanded their higher education access during the past decades, which has resulted in a growing number of graduates from multiple academic fields (Materu, 2007; Teferra & Knight, 2008; Okolie et al., 2020). However, the rapid growth of higher education has not produced equivalent enhancements in graduate employment prospects or career counseling, or degree program compatibility with job market needs (Aminu, 2019; Pitan & Adedeji, 2019; Okolie et al., 2020;). University graduates face a crisis because they must choose between underemployment or unemployment or working in fields that do not match their academic qualifications. The current situation demands immediate action to establish institutional systems which connect academic qualifications to actual job opportunities because Career Development Centers (CDCs) can fulfill this requirement effectively (Okolie et al., 2020; Africa Careers Network, 2023).

Career Development Centers function as university-based units which help students and graduates with career planning and exploration, and management activities (Levin & Kammire, 1986; Carter, 1995). The organization provides career counseling services and work experience opportunities through internships and industrial placements, and also conducts skills assessments and employer engagement activities and job search and résumé writing, and interview preparation workshops (Heppner & Duan, 1995; Grobler et al. 2014). CDCs function as essential organizations in developed nations because they help people learn career skills which go beyond finding employment opportunities while teaching them how to adjust to the changing work landscape (Bassot, 2019). Bassot (2019) argues that planned activities which guide students to think about their career identities and goals and contexts produce strong results. The reflective and planned method exists as the core requirement, which numerous West African universities either do not have or fail to use effectively (Okolie et al., 2020). In West

Africa, the lack of organized career development systems creates major challenges because of several interrelated factors, including increasing numbers of young people and changing economies, and educational content that does not match market requirements (Sarkodie et al., 2014; Pitan & Adediji, 2019; Aminu, 2019). Students face multiple barriers when developing their careers because cultural elements together with social systems and institutional structures make it difficult for them to plan their careers effectively (Africa Careers Network, 2023; Iwara, 2025). Studies from South Africa and Australia show that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face career development obstacles because of family expectations, economic status, and restricted access to role models outside their academic environment (Patton et al., 2003). The study does not include West Africa, but it shows that academic preparation fails to develop essential skills for students to succeed in their future careers (Okolie et al., 2020).

Moreover, research that focuses on identity and cultural equity demonstrates that career progression operates outside of any neutral framework. The vocational significance of identity, especially among underrepresented or minority populations, matters in how students understand their futures (Byars-Winston, 2015). Buford and Flores (2021) present similar findings in their work “Centering Race in Career Development: A Critical Review of Career Scholarship and Practice”, which states that career services need to tackle systemic barriers and social capital availability and identity-based experiences for complete student support. The career support system in West Africa must consider ethnic and regional, and class-based inequalities because these social factors exist deeply within communities and their geographical areas.

Despite the growing body of knowledge, many West African universities still treat career guidance as a tangential part of student services, often handled informally, inconsistently, or ad hoc (Pitan & Adediji, 2019; Okolie et al., 2020). Few institutions have fully operational career development centers which include dedicated staff members and allocated budgets and established employer partnerships and performance tracking mechanisms (Grobler et al. 2014; Akintola et al. 2022). The educational system produces multiple negative effects because students leave school without career readiness competence while employers identify graduate deficiencies in both soft skills and real-world experience and graduates encounter difficulties when moving from academic environments to professional settings and national development goals face obstacles because of untapped human potential (Okolie et al., 2020; Pitan & Adediji, 2019; Cheru, 2018).

West African universities must establish Career Development Centers as a fundamental requirement for their operations. The research establishes that Career Development Centers (CDCs) serve as transformative agents for West African graduates by transforming their academic degrees into market-ready professional skills through the examination of career learning literature and institutional structures and identity and equity considerations in West African career development contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education institutions have been extensively studied for career development through theoretical models, empirical research, and practical implementation methods. The review examines critical aspects of CDC establishment in West African universities through an evaluation of career development theories and CDC performance, and African environmental obstacles. The research draws upon existing literature to prove that organized career assistance should become a standard practice for West Africa because it delivers better graduate job opportunities and long-term career development benefits.

Conceptualizing Career Development and Institutional Responsibility

According to Dik et al. (2008), career development functions as a continuous process which combines educational activities with professional work and individual development throughout a person's life. The higher education sector delivers more than job placement because it teaches students to discover their strengths and acquire marketable skills and flexibility for the contemporary job market (Bassot, 2019; Greenhaus et al., 2024). Universities have established Career Development Centers (CDCs) as an institutionalized solution which responds to the new concept of career preparedness. The lack of organized career guidance systems in West Africa hinders universities from supporting national development. It combines with ongoing graduate unemployment and skills mismatches in the region (Akintola et al., 2022).

Career development has evolved into its current state after numerous decades of worldwide theoretical progress. Chaichanasakul et al. (2011) conducted a thirty-six-year content analysis of the Journal of Career Development, which revealed how vocational matching theories evolved from fixed approaches to multicultural and contextual frameworks. Career development depends on personal interests and skills and social and institutional elements which shape career paths. West African universities should make career development a core requirement because it aligns with their educational goals and national economic objectives instead of treating it as an optional service.

Career Learning and Transformational Thinking

Effective career services adopt a pedagogical framework which supports transformational career learning to train students for self-directed, reflective career growth rather than basic job placement tasks. Bassot (2019) presents this concept through her "Career Thinking Session" model, which enables people to perform thorough self-examinations of their identity and values and career objectives. The study results match Coetzee's (2021) research about "career agility" because people who understand digital changes and plan their career paths actively become more employable. Universities in West Africa do not implement reflective models as permanent structures because career guidance programs consist mainly of short-term employer visits and sporadic workshops without any established theoretical base.

The transformation of career learning through educational change aligns with the educational methods used in African philosophical systems. According to Verharen et al. (2014) African philosophy through its communitarian values of Ubuntu and collective self-actualization provides a model for career education systems which unite individual growth with social impact. The adoption of this philosophy within career services creates a framework which connects employability to complete ethical development thus supporting African innovation priorities in higher education (Cheru, 2018). A hybrid career development model would result from combining global best practices with African values in CDC institutionalization because it would create a system that reflects both universal standards and local cultural contexts.

Contextual Barriers to Career Development in West Africa

West African career development faces restrictions because of various socio-economic and cultural, and institutional barriers which do not match those present in the Global North. Patton et al. (2003) documented how non-work-related obstacles, including family obligations and restricted mentor access and gender-based stereotypes, affect career choices among young people in developing nations. West African universities display similar trends because students face parental influence and social expectations that push them toward conventional careers in medicine and law, and engineering, regardless of their personal interests and available job opportunities (Olowu, 2016).

Stead (1996) developed the developmental-contextual model which explains how race and class together with opportunity structures affect Black South African adolescents. The historical background between South Africa and West Africa varies yet West African students from low-income backgrounds face identical obstacles because they lack access to professional networks which limits their career advancement. Social exclusion of particular populations continues to exist because career counseling services remain restricted to students who attend urban schools with affluent student populations. According to Buford and Flores (2021) career development practice that employs culturally responsive service design for racial equity can eliminate existing systemic exclusion practices. The framework was developed in the United States, but it shows the worldwide requirement for equitable career support systems. West African universities must establish.

Institutional Frameworks and Policy Deficits

The South African model developed by Grobler et al. (2014) unites policy alignment with curriculum review and employer engagement under their organizational framework known as the career-enabler framework. The study demonstrates that institutional dedication and staff ability along with strategic alliances serve as determining factors for the extended success of career services. The West African region experiences a problem because universities lack national regulations which mandate career center establishment so their career development offices remain peripheral or non-existent.

The high number of unemployed graduates in Nigeria and Ghana stems from the poor management methods of CDCs (Akintola et al. 2022). Jacobs (2016) argues that universities should develop institutional portfolio methods which replicate the infrastructure development system of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda to enhance both coordination efforts and accountability measures. CDCs should be integrated into governance systems through an institutional logic that includes established goals along with specific funding sources and assessment criteria. The model establishes a system that makes career development a fundamental part of university operations instead of an occasional activity.

Service Delivery and Innovation in Career Centers

Career centers around the world have evolved through multiple phases, which started to implement customer-centered, and research-based methods. Levin and Kammire (1986) documented the transformation of a university career center that restructured to meet student and employer expectations. The case study shows that service sustainability depends on organizations which adapt to change while working with their stakeholders. The research by Carter (2011) suggested using customer service methods which include responsiveness, feedback mechanisms, and data-based quality enhancement to improve student satisfaction with career services. West African universities will achieve better bureaucratic management and funding access through the application of these strategies.

The technological integration process provides CDCs with their value. Coetzee (2021) focuses on digital awareness and agility as essential skills for post-industrial labor market navigation. Online platforms enable CDCs to deliver virtual counseling services while offering e-mentorship programs and employer networking resources through their platforms. Students can monitor their learning progress and identify their knowledge gaps and document their practical learning activities through digital career portfolios which follow Bassot's (2019) self-directed learning framework. Higher education institutions in West Africa need these tools to establish equal access for students and improve their organizational management.

Career Decision-Making, Self-Efficacy, and Motivation

Academic studies show that employability outcomes maintain a strong relationship with self-efficacy for making career choices. A 2006 study by Gushue Scanlan Pantzer and Clarke examined self-efficacy levels in African American students to show that higher self-efficacy levels result in more career exploration and stronger vocational identity development. Zeng and Ma (2025) showed that high school students who took career courses with group counseling sessions developed improved decision-making clarity. West African students who deal with market instability and absence of professional direction receive important advantages from career development centers (CDC) which enable them to build self-assurance and intentional behavior.

Rochat et al. (2025) conducted research which proved that career counseling helps people resolve their internal conflicts about career choices through professional guidance. The research strongly emphasizes that African higher education institutions fail to incorporate counseling interventions which provide psychological value. According to Dik et al (2008) research goal-setting and motivational clarity serve as fundamental components for career planning because CDCs help people develop these skills to reach their employment goals and total personal growth.

Contextual Barriers and Challenges in African Career Development

Africa contains various obstacles which affect career growth through work-related barriers and non-work-related barriers and systemic barriers. The research of Patton et al. (2003) demonstrated that Australian and South African adolescents faced financial barriers, together with family responsibilities and insufficient career guidance in South Africa. The results of the study match the conditions which exist in West African areas because monetary problems and conventional social responsibilities affect career decisions. African American college students encounter the same challenges as West African youth according to Falconer and Hays (2006).

King and Madsen (2007) applied an ecological framework to study how environmental elements affect low-income African American youth through their analysis of community and policy barriers. West Africa faces

worsening challenges because of two main factors which are political instability and weak infrastructure systems (Cheru 1997 and Olowu 2016). Akintola et al. (2019) conducted research on Nigerian university library staff development which demonstrated that current professional development opportunities need improvement to drive institutional transformations.

Cultural formulations serve as essential components in achieving successful outcomes from interventions. Byars-Winston (2008) examined the career evaluation benefits of Black identity by promoting assessment tools that match cultural frameworks. Cheatham (1994) introduced Africentricity as a career development model to support African Americans which integrates communal values with the ubuntu philosophy for West African communities (Verharen et al., 2014). The research conducted by Ngope and Coetzee (2023) and Stead (1996) showed that counseling methods should address the colonial effects which still impact Black South Africans and West Africans through apartheid legacies.

Economic and global factors lead to an increase in complexity. Peter and Muehlfeld (2025) conducted research on job selection during crisis periods which showed that economic recessions lead to changes in motivational systems. Greenhaus et al. (2024) advanced career sustainability research through their study of work-family relationships and success and Koekemoer and Olckers (2025) investigated these relationships in South African settings. The dynamics in West Africa merge with informal economies and migration challenges, which require specific intervention approaches according to Yakushko et al. (2008) and Jacobs (2016). The operational environment of West Africa interacts with informal economic systems and migration problems which need particular solutions as stated by Yakushko et al. (2008) and Jacobs (2016).

Group career counseling programs generate essential results as a result of their implementation. Luzia et al. (2025) discovered that participants who were unemployed showed better self-concept and enhanced networking skills after completing their intervention for one year. The Purposeful Pathways program developed by Stevenson et al. (2025), combines mental health and vocational recovery to produce comprehensive advantages. The authors Harrington and Harrigan (2006) examined career counseling methods from 2005 to determine that evidence-based approaches received their support.

The research conducted by Chai and Park (2021) shows that cultural adjustment acts as a mediator between individual factors and career self-efficacy, which applies to West Africa's multiple student groups. A social cognitive examination of employment anxiety during school-to-work transitions by Carkit (2023) led to recommendations for optimism-building strategies through CDCs. The promotion of racial equity within CDCs stands as a top priority for West Africa because it establishes equal career development opportunities, according to Buford (2020), Buford and Flores (2021), and Heppner and Duan (1995) who studied this subject.

The academic institutions of Africa have career facilitation models which were established by Grobler et al. (2014) and Ngope and Coetzee (2023) yet Kerr (2019) warns about delays that occur during professional development activities. The study conducted by Akintola et al. (2022) discovered educational requirements at Nigerian universities which corresponded to present development needs described by Cheru (1997) and Olowu (2016).

Research dedicated to West Africa continues to be limited when compared to the vast amount of worldwide research yet most African academic work focuses on South African studies (Stead, 1996; Kerr, 2019). Academic research should focus on regional approaches that unite digital tools with Africentric frameworks (Cheatham, 1990; Verharen et al., 2014) and digital technology tools (Coetzee, 2022). West African universities need to establish CDCs as permanent institutions which will generate research facilities for assessment purposes and develop programs that respect cultural traditions (Chaichanasakul et al., 2011; Harrington & Harrigan, 2006). West African educational institutions will achieve regional growth through their development of career adaptability and their commitment to equity and sustainability which stems from their work with CDCs.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a descriptive survey research design was used. Questionnaires were administered electronically to the respondents via online survey forms. Both quantitative and qualitative data was obtained from a total of 46

respondents from diverse Higher Institutions within West Africa, including Federal University Oye-Ekiti (Nigeria), University of Lagos (Nigeria), University of Ibadan (Nigeria), Osun State University (Nigeria), Federal Polytechnic Ede (Nigeria), LASUSTECH (Nigeria), and an international HI, University of Cape Coast (Ghana). The responses from the questionnaire were collated and analysed using frequency counts and percentages, presented in tables to make insight for the study.

The study analyses the experiences, perceptions, and suggestions of students and recent graduates to understand how current career development practices prepares students for career readiness. The findings are discussed in context of previous studies to point out areas of suggestion.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion section demonstrate and interpret the findings of the study from raw data accumulated from the study's samples (undergraduates and recent graduates from several higher institutions within West Africa). This is done in accordance to the study's objectives.

Table 1.

Respondents' current status	Frequency	Percentage
Students	42	91.3
Recent Graduates	4	8.7
Total	46	100

After a systematic analysis of the data from the respondents, the data in Table 1 purpose is to illustrate the proportion of students and recent graduates that participated in the study. It was revealed that a significant number of the participants (91.3%) are undergraduates representing various higher institutions within West Africa while a small portion of the respondents (8.7%) are recent graduates.

Table 2.

Institution of respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Federal polytechnic Ede	1	2.2
Federal University Minna	1	2.2
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti	35	76.1
LASUSTECH	1	2.2
Osun State University	1	2.2
University of Cape Coast	1	2.2
University of Ibadan	1	2.2
University of Lagos	5	10.9
Total	46	100

The essence of the data in Table 2. is to ascertain the institutions of the respondents. Based on the result, a large proportion of the respondents (76.1%) are students from Federal University, Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE). Followed by (10.9%) from University of Lagos. Other institutions; Federal Polytechnic Ede, Federal University Minna, Osun State University, LASUSTECH, University of Ibadan, and University of Cape Coast (Ghana) each constituted exactly 2.2% of the total responses. The institutions represented are varied (federal, state, polytechnic, and international), enriching the study with diverse perspective. The inclusion of University of Cape Coast (Ghana) provides cross-institutional representation, which helps to capture varied perspectives from other institution in West Africa.

Table 3.

Respondents' field of study	Frequency	Percentage
Agriculture or Environmental Studies	1	2.2
Arts, Humanities, or Social Sciences	5	10.9
Business, Management, or Economics	1	2.2
Computer Science or Information Technology	1	2.2
Education or Teacher Training	2	4.3
Health Sciences or Medicine	32	69.6
INDUSTRIAL CHEMISTRY	1	2.2
Microbiology	1	2.2
Nursing Science	2	4.3
Total	46	100

Table 3 reveals that the majority of respondents (69.6%) are from Health Sciences or Medicine field of study, while smaller proportions of the respondents come from Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (10.9%), Education (4.3%), Nursing Science (4.3%), Their fields of study which are: Business, IT, Agriculture, Industrial Chemistry, and Microbiology represent (2.2%) each.

Table 4

Respondents' Perception on Job Market Preparedness	Frequency	Percentage
1 – Very poor	5	10.9
2 – Poor	13	28.3
3 – Moderate	13	28.3
4 – Good	9	19.6
5 – Excellent	6	13.0
Total	46	100

According to Table 4, most of the people who answered said that their institutions were just average or below average at getting them ready for the labor market. 67.5% (31 out of 46) of the people who answered evaluated their university between 1 (extremely poor) and 3 (moderate). This demonstrates that they don't have much faith in how effectively their academic programs prepare them for jobs. Only a tiny number of people (15 out of 32.6%) gave a positive rating (4 or 5).

Table 5

Forms of career-related support received by respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Alumni mentorship or career talks	3	6.5
Am currently in 200level so I have seen any yet	1	2.2
Career fairs or employer networking events	1	2.2
CV/Resume writing workshops	1	2.2
Entrepreneurship or business startup training	12	26.1
Industry guest lectures or seminars	2	4.3

Internship placement or support	11	23.9
Job interview preparation sessions	1	2.2
Job vacancy announcements or job boards	2	4.3
None of the above	9	19.6
One-on-one career counseling or mentoring	2	4.3
Teaching	1	2.2
Total	46	100

The findings indicate that business startup or entrepreneurship training (26.1%) and placement or assistance in internships (23.9%) are the most common forms of career guidance offered to the respondents. Furthermore, some major career development services like career fairs, CV/resume writing training, job interview training, and one-on-one career counseling are rarely offered, each receiving less than 5% coverage. Of note is 19.6% of the respondents who reported not receiving any form of career guidance at all, suggesting that there is absence of formal employability programs in these universities.

Table 6

Respondents' awareness and engagement with CDS	F	(%)	Helpfulness of CDS	F	(%)
No, I was not aware such a service existed at my university	22	47.8	Agreed. The services were generally helpful, though with some limitations	8	23.9
No, my university does not have a Career Development Center or similar service	1	2.2	Disagreed. The services were not very helpful to me	5	17.4
Not sure / I don't remember	5	10.9	Neutral. The services were somewhat helpful but had minimal impact	18	39.1
Yes, I was aware and actively used the services regularly	7	15.2	Strongly Agree. The services were extremely helpful and met my career needs	11	10.9
Yes, I was aware but never used the services	6	13.0	Strongly Disagree. The services were not helpful at all and did not meet my expectations	4	8.7
Total	46	100	Total	46	100

The results in Table 6 revealed a low level of awareness and utilization of Career Development Services (CDS) among respondents. A significant percentage of the participants (47.8%) reported lack of awareness of such services in their universities, also portion of the participant (10.9%) were unsure of their awareness of such service. Only a small fraction of the participant (15.2%) reported actively using CDS, and (13%) reported they are aware but never engaged with the service.

Among those who had used or were familiar with CDS, perceptions of helpfulness were mixed. While 10.9% (11 respondents) rated the services as *helpful or extremely helpful*, However, a chunk portion of the respondents (39.1%), were *neutral*, this however could be implying limited or below average impact. Furthermore, small fraction of the respondents (19.6%, 9 respondents) reported a dissatisfaction in such service, indicating the services as *not helpful*.

Here is mixed feedback which shows that career services may exist, yet, not fully effective in addressing students' needs or preparing them for the labor market. The high neutrality rate suggests that activities may be occasional, poorly structured, or lacking in practical outcomes.

Table 7.

Importance of Structured Career Development Services (CDS) in West Africa (Rating 1-5)	Frequency	Percentage
1 – Not Important	10	21.7
2 – Slightly Important	2	4.3
3 – Moderately Important	4	8.7
4 – Important	5	10.9
5 – Very Important	25	54.3
Total	46	100

Table 7. clearly indicate that most respondents view the establishment of structured Career Development Services (CDS) in West Africa as highly important. This is evident where a significant portion, more than half of the respondents (54.3%) indicated it as *very important*, also, an additional 10.9% considered it *important*. When put together, this shows a strong 65.2% majority respondents recognizing the significant need for formalized career support systems within universities. On the other hand, (21.7%) of the respondents did not consider such services important, and even fewer (4.3%) considered them moderately important. The 8.7% who selected moderately necessary would supposedly be those who see some value in CDS but do not believe that it could or should be better performed.

Table 8.

Recommended Career Development Services (CDS) for Supporting Student Transition	Frequency	Percentage
Career counseling and one-on-one guidance sessions	18	39.1
Career fairs and employer networking events	1	2.2
Digital literacy and skills training	6	13.0
Entrepreneurial training and startup support	1	2.2
Internship and job placement assistance	13	28.3
Labor market information and career path planning resources	2	4.3
Resume/CV and cover letter writing support	2	4.3
Support with graduate school applications	1	2.2
Workshops on soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, leadership)	2	4.3
Total	46	100

The data show that respondents prioritize career counseling and one-on-one guidance sessions (39.1%) as the most essential service that Career Development Centers (CDCs) should provide to help students transition successfully from school to the workforce. The second most recommended CDS for supporting student transition is as indicated by the participants is internship and job placement assistance (28.3%). This shows how crucial hands-on and relevant industrial experience can increase the chance of students' employability.

Other services such as digital literacy and skills training (13.0%), resume/CV writing (4.3%), and soft skills development (4.3%) were mentioned less frequently but remain vital components of comprehensive career readiness. Their relatively lower mention may indicate that students associate employability more with personalized support and job access than with generic skills training.

Table 9

Have you ever participated in internship program, career fair, or job placement initiative in your academic journey?	Frequency	Percentage
No	23	50
Yes	22	47.8
Yes, No	1	2.2
Total	46	100

The essence of Table 9 is to ascertain whether the respondents have participated in internship program, career fair, or job placement initiative in your academic journey. Based on the data a significant proportion, half of the respondents (50%) reported they have never participated in such programs, while (47.8%) reported their participation in the programs. A few fractions of the population (2.2%) were neutral.

Table 10

Challenges or Limitations in University Career Development Support	Frequency	Percentage
Career support services are not well integrated into academic programs	5	10.9
Inadequate funding and resources for career-related programs	10	21.7
Irregular or infrequent career events (e.g., job fairs, workshops)	3	
Lack of a dedicated Career Development Center or office	14	30.4
Limited or no access to internship and job placement opportunities	6	13.0
Poor communication or awareness of available career services	6	13.0
Services not tailored to different fields of study	1	2.2
Shortage of trained staff or career advisors	1	2.2
Total	46	100

The essence of data in Table 10 is to reveal the issue respondents are faced when it comes to CDS support. According to data, (30.4%) of the respondents revealed that the most common issue faced is lack of Career Development Center or office, which in turn evidently reflects the kind of major institutional loophole in formal career counseling among the majority of West African universities. The second most cited issue by respondents as revealed by data in Table 10 is lack of funding and resources (21.7%). Together, the first two issues demonstrate that the problem is as much structural as budgetary, not just that institutions are missing the systems but also the money required to enable solid career programs. Of note are significant problems including limited access to internships and job placement assistance (13.0%) and poor communication or lack of information about career services provided (13.0%). Limited integration of academic programs with career assistance (10.9%). Less frequent but important problems are irregular career events, lack of tailored services (2.2%), and shortage of qualified career workers to different fields of study, each making up less than 7%.

Table 11.

Do you think there is a disconnect between academic program and labour market need in your context?	Frequency	Percentage
No, academic programs are mostly aligned with labor market needs	3	6.5
Not sure / I don't have enough information to say	5	10.9
Yes, there is a significant disconnect and academic programs do not reflect current job market demands	17	37.0

Yes, to some extent but some programs align, but many lack practical relevance	21	45.6
Total	46	100

The data reveal a strong consensus among respondents that there is a disconnect between academic programs and labor market needs in their context. A combined 82.6% (38 out of 46) of respondents believe that either a significant or partial misalignment exists between university curricula and the realities of the job market.

According to the data in 45.6% of respondents believe that some programs align, yet fall short of practical relevance. Furthermore, 37.0% reported a *significant inconsistency* in academic programs and current job market demands. Small fraction of the respondents (6.5%) of perceived their programs are consistent with industry demands, yet a fraction of 10.9% felt neutral about it.

Table 12.

If you could design a CDC for your university, what features or services would you prioritize	Frequency	Percentage
Access to job boards and online career platforms	2	4.3
Alumni mentorship and career talk series	1	2.2
Career fairs and employer networking events	1	2.2
CV/resume writing and cover letter workshops	4	8.7
Digital skills and certification programs (e.g., Excel, coding, design tools)	6	13.0
Entrepreneurship and startup support (e.g., business planning, funding access)	7	15.2
Internship and job placement support	8	17.4
Mock interviews and job interview preparation	1	2.2
Personalized career counseling and guidance sessions	14	30.4
Soft skills and workplace readiness training (e.g., communication, teamwork)	2	4.3
Total	46	100

Findings from the study shows that respondents' most prioritized feature is career counseling and guidance personalized career counseling and guidance sessions (30.4%). Followed by internship and job placement support (17.4%), next is entrepreneurship and startup support (15.2%). A sizable number of the respondents (13%) prioritize inclusion of digital skills and certification programs. Other features as CV/resume workshops (8.7%), soft skills training (4.3%), and access to online job platforms (4.3%) were less preferred but remains relevant.

Table 13.

Perceived Institutional Roles in Supporting Career Transition	Frequency	
Establish and fund Career Development Centers (CDCs)	10	21.7
Facilitate internships, job placements, and mentorship programs	11	23.9
Integrate career development into the academic curriculum	14	30.4
Offer training in soft skills, digital skills, and entrepreneurship	4	8.7
Partner with industries to align education with job market needs	7	15.2
Total	46	100

The purpose of data in Table 13 is to analyze the respondents' perception of institutional roles in supporting career transition. From the data, the most perceived role is the integration of career development into the

academic curriculum (30.4%). The second most reported perceived role is institution in supporting students' career transition is facilitating internships, job placements, and mentorship programs (23.9%). This is followed by a substantial (21.7%) of respondents indicating that institutions should allocate fund for Career Development Centers (CDCs). Meanwhile, (15.2%) of respondents perceived institution-industry partnerships. Only a few portions of the respondents (8.7%) perceived the need to offer soft skills digital skills, and entrepreneurship.

Table 14.

Perceived Employer Roles in Supporting Student Career Transition	Frequency	
Collaborate with universities on curriculum development	13	28.3
Offer mentorship and industry exposure to students	7	15.2
Participate in career fairs and campus recruitment	5	10.9
Provide internship and apprenticeship opportunities	21	45.6
Total	46	100

The essence of Table 14 is to analyze the perception of the roles employers in supporting students career transition. Meanwhile (45.6%) of the respondents' perception are in support employers providing internship and apprenticeship opportunities Followed by (28.3%) perceiving employers' collaboration with universities on curriculum development as a supporting role. Furthermore, (15.2%) of respondents perceived mentorship and industry exposure to students as the supporting role employers should provide. Lastly, a smaller fraction (10.9%) indicated the importance of employers' participation in career fairs and campus recruitment.

Table 15.

What role should government play in helping students transition into meaningful career	Frequency	Percentage
Create policies that encourage employability-focused education	17	37.0
Facilitate public-private partnerships for youth employment	14	30.4
Fund and support career services in public universities	7	15.2
Launch national programs for graduate employment and skills training	8	17.4
Total	46	100

The data in Table 15 show that respondents perceived that government should have a crucial policy and facilitating role in ensuring students' smooth transition from education to career. The most significant proportion (37.0%) reported the need for the government to create and implement policies that promote employability-focused education. The second most indicated responsibility (30.4%) is for the government to facilitate public-private partnerships (PPPs) aimed at youth employment. Furthermore, (17.4%) of respondents support the launch of national programs for graduate employment and skills training. Moving on, a small percentage (15.2%) of the respondents believe the government should fund and support career services in public universities, acknowledging the need for financial backing to establish and sustain Career Development Centers (CDCs) that can deliver structured employability programs.

Table 16.

Additional Comments and Suggestions for Improving Career Support	Frequency	Percentage
All sectors should work together for curriculum development to help students on employability	1	84.2
Alongside teaching theories, practical should also hold a larger percentage because that teaches applicability.	1	5.3

No additional comments	16	5.3
The government should communicate more to us about career development centres being available	1	5.3

Table 16 revealed the response on additional comment and suggestion for improving career support. The respondents reveal there is a widespread need for structured, well-communicated, and practically oriented career development systems in African universities.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the critical role of Career Development Centers (CDCs) in West African institutions was examined. The study aims to bridge the persistent gap between academic training and industry requirements. From the findings of this study, there exist a significant gap between higher institution education, training are policies of Higher Institution plays in equipping students for employability readiness in West African universities. Reflecting on previous studies and empirical data from respondents of this study, this study affirms a significant number of respondents are undergraduates from HI within West Africa. From the findings, it has been evidently observed that most HI are underequipped and underfinanced for preparing students for immediate career readiness, this can be attributed to the limitations in access to structured career support systems. The findings also highlight a low awareness or usage of Career Development Services (CDS), when this happens is shows such service are under-utilized or poorly integrated within institutional system. Meanwhile, the study discovered an inconsistency between academic programs and industry demands, suggesting the structure of HI curricula is highly theoretical and less practical. Career counselling, internship and job placement assistance, digital skills training, and entrepreneurship support are highlighted a core services CDC should prioritize. Of significant importance is the collaborative roles of HI, employers and government in ensuring policies to promote employability and career readiness. The study concludes that the absence of structured and institutionalized CDCs undermines the employability and professional growth of graduates in West Africa. Structured services would ensure students' preparations and readiness for the realities of the labour market. This would go a long way in reducing unemployment and underemployment figures among graduates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study identifies a pressing appeal for Higher Institutions (HI) in West African countries to promote their Career Development Centres (CDCs) beyond the traditional ad hoc to an institutionalized (CDCs) and be committed to providing continuous, structured, and student-centered assistance. Furthermore, Higher Institutions (HI) should fully finance CDCs with and equip the CDCs with trained personnel to render career advice, internship placement, and employability training. This should be an integral component of university program rather than being a peripheral service. Similarly, universities and industries should work hand-in-hands to ensure an aligned curricula with current job demands, unrestricted access to internships opportunities, and provide mentorship and guidance opportunities to exposing students to realities of work environments.

Finally, the government and policy makers should play an active role to develop policies to facilitate employability-oriented education, ensure adequate financing of CDCs, and financing initiatives that connects education and employment. With these ongoing concern, West African higher learning institutions can significantly transform to a platform responsible for sophisticating students for viable and sustainable careers.

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