

Roles and Challenges faced by Heads of Academic Department in Reforming University Curricula to Promote Graduate Employability

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Abstract: This paper examines the roles played by heads of academic department (HODs) and the challenges they face in reforming their units' curricula to promote graduate employability in a university college in Uganda. The study arose as a result of the persistent complaints raised by employers and other stakeholders about the lack of employable skills among university graduates in the country in spite of the several curricular reviews taking place in the institution. Using the qualitative approach, data were collected from four purposively selected HODs through in-depth interviews. Study results showed, among others, that: first, the participants had different understanding of what graduate employability is: while some conceptualised it as the possession of employable skills by the graduates, others viewed it as the ability of a university student to complete his/her study programme and obtain gainful employment. Second, the participants revealed that they often enable the reforming of the curricula to promote graduate employability by: involving and motivating stakeholders in curricular reviews; offering effective leadership; and by providing requisite information and support to their staff during curriculum reviews and development, among others. Finally, the study participants reported facing several challenges in reforming the curricula of their units - including: limited co-operation by stakeholders, rapidly changing societal needs, and shortage of funds to aid the process of curriculum reviews and development. Therefore, we concluded that while HODs seemed committed to reforming university curricula to promote graduate employability, their efforts are fraught by a repertoire of

challenges; thus, we recommend for increased institutional support to enable HODs effectively play their roles in promoting graduate employability.

Keywords: *Heads of department, Graduate employability, Reforming, Curricula, University*

1. Introduction

The employability of university graduates is becoming a matter of grave concern among educators and policy-makers all over the world. This is often attributed to the mismatch between the number of graduates that universities produce vis-a-vis that which the labour market absorbs (Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi, & Eldabi, 2019). Nonetheless, several scholars including Bamwesiga (2013), Beaumont, Gedye and Richardson (2016) as well as Kasozi (2015) - have pointed out that the low rate of absorption of university graduates in the labour market is due to their lack of relevant skills and knowledge that the employers require them to possess. Yorke (2006), however, contends that the high level of graduate unemployment in most parts of the world is attributable to the sluggish economies – economies that are growing slowly or not growing at all – to create sufficient job opportunities for the graduates. Unfortunately, all these scholars have not focused on the roles that the heads of academic department (HODs) in universities could play to reform the curricula of their units in order to promote graduate employability. Yet, university HODs play a critical role in curricular reviews and development; but what is not known is their role in reforming the university curricula to promote graduate employability. In this study, we made an effort to explore the roles played by HODs and the challenges they faced in reforming their units' curricula in order to promote graduate employability in a university college in Uganda. In this section, the background to the study and the research objectives are presented.

Historically, universities have been revered for producing high-level manpower and for generating new knowledge. In Uganda, until 1980s, university graduates used to be booked for employment by private companies as well as government departments well before completing their degree programmes (Kasozi, 2015; Ssekamwa, 2000). Then, there was hardly any problem of graduate unemployment and the language of graduate employability was not as commonplace as it is today. However, with the introduction of the privatisation and liberalisation policies of the Uganda's economy in the early 1990s, there occurred massive expansion of the higher education (HE) sector. But, this expansion was never met by an elastic increase in the size of the country's economy; thereby, resulting into the acute shortage of job opportunities - not only for university graduates - but for several other youths and categories of labour.

Apart from the problem of few job opportunities, the employers have also been complaining about the quality of university graduates whom they alleged lacked employable skills. This has resulted into a serious problem of youth unemployment in the country (Uganda Government, 2014). Yet, the knowledge and skills that university graduates are expected to acquire largely depend on the curriculum and pedagogical techniques that they are exposed to while at university. But at university too, HODs together with the deans, are responsible for, among other things, maintaining and enhancing the highest standards of scholarly excellence and for setting intellectual and academic priorities for the departments (Bozeman, Fay, & Gaughan, 2013; Hess, 2013). Besides, they are also required to plan course offering and faculty teaching, periodically review curricula and ensure excellence in the departments' teaching and mentoring (Lumpkin, 2004). This means that the HODs can play a role in reforming the curricula of their units in order to promote graduate employability. But, are all HODs doing that? And if they are doing it, how well are they doing it? What challenges could they be facing in reforming the

curricula of their units in order promote graduate employability? It is the search for answers to these and many other related questions that prompted the need for this investigation.

Conceptually, this study focused on four major concepts, namely: graduate employability, HOD, roles and the challenges HODs face. The term graduate employability has been variously defined. While Kinash and Crane (2015) defined it as the capacity of the graduates (or alumni) to obtain or create work, Tomlinson (2012) looked at it in terms of the dynamic changes in the relationship between HE and the labour market. Yorke and Knight (2004) meanwhile looked at it as the set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the community and the economy. In this study, however, graduate employability was looked in terms of the possession of relevant knowledge and skills by the graduates and their ability to be absorbed and maintained in employment.

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

The third concept in this study was role(s) of HODs. According to Day (1984), role of HOD refers to the responsibilities that a HOD carries out in order to guarantee the quality of teaching and learning in a particular department. Meanwhile, Edet and Ekpoh (2017) opined that

a HOD “is ...saddled with the responsibility of directing, guiding, coordinating and evaluating lecturers and activities appropriately to ensure good quality education and effective functioning of the department” (p.130). In this study, the role of HOD was looked at in terms of what the HOD does when reforming the curricula of his/her unit to promote graduate employability.

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

Contextually, this study took place in one of the colleges of a university in Uganda. This is one of the largest and oldest universities in the country. However, the literature we read from various sources revealed that a section of employers was already complaining about the quality of the graduates of the same college that we studied. (e.g., see Bagarukayo, Ssentamu, Mayisela & Brown, 2016; Ssempebwa, 2008). They alleged that the graduates of this college lacked employable skills in spite of the several recent curriculum reviews that were undertaken under the supervision of the different HODs. This got us concerned since HODs in universities across the world are required, among others things, to periodically review curricula and ensure excellence in the departments’ teaching and mentoring (Lumpkin, 2004). Nonetheless, while the HODs have a role to play in curriculum development, how effectively they often do it leaves a lot to be desired. This did not seem to be any different with what was happening in the college that we investigated. Yet, the curricula of the college were under constant criticisms for

producing graduates that lacked employable skills. We felt that if the scenario persisted, it could injure the reputation of the college as well as that of its graduates. Therefore, this qualitative study was intended to explore the roles played by the HODs and the challenges they faced in reforming their units' curricula to promote graduate employability. It was expected that the data obtained from the study would help university managers to appreciate what the HODs are doing to reform the university curricula in order to promote graduate employability.

1.1. Study Objectives. This study was intended to explore the roles HODs play and the challenges they face in reforming the curricula of their units in order to promote graduate employability.

Specifically, the study was meant to:

- i) Examine the conceptualisation of graduate employability by HODs;
- ii) Explore the roles HODs play in reforming the curricula of their departments to promote graduate employability; and
- iii) Document the challenges HODs face and the coping strategies they use to overcome the challenges.

2. Literature Review

Several scholars have attempted to define the concept graduate employability albeit with limited success. (e.g., Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet & Rossier, 2015; Yorke, & Knight, 2004; Matsouka & Mihail, 2016; Romgens, Scoupe & Beausart, 2019). In particular, Guilbert et al. (2015) defined employability as “the possibility to access a suitable job or to remain employed, resulting from the dynamic and evolving interactions between governmental and educational policies, organizational strategy, individual characteristics, and the social, economical, cultural and technological context” (p.17). Yorke and Knight (2004) on the other hand conceptualised employability as a “set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make

individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations” (p.36). This means that for the graduates, employability “consists of a set of qualifications, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics that enable the university graduate to seek and find a job” (Matsouka & Mihail, 2016, p.321). Romgens et al. (2019) meanwhile looked at employability as the competencies that an individual possesses to be sufficiently obtained and maintained in the labour market. This perception of graduate employability is not any different with that of earlier scholars including Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) who perceived it as the “ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one’s qualification level” (p.2). In this case, all these scholars pointed to the fact that employability has to do with the possession of skills that are linked to the needs of employers. However, their views about employability also indicate that there is no universally accepted definition of employability whether used in respect to any employee or a graduate. In this study, we sought the views of HODs at a university college in Uganda and matched them against literature in order to gauge the depth and breadth of their understanding of the concept of graduate employability. We believe that their understanding of the concept determines the roles they would play in reforming the curricula of their units in order to promote graduate employability.

Meanwhile, the roles of faculty deans and HODs in universities across the world have also been widely investigated (see e.g., Berdrow, 2010; Bozeman, Fay & Gaughan, 2013; Chinyamurundi, 2016; Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017; Hess, 2013; Jones, 2011; Jowi, 2018; Klar, 2012; Lumpkin, 2004; Otara, 2015; etc.). Several of these studies attempted to link the deans and HODs to programme reviews and development (e.g., Otara, 2015; Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017). In particular, Berdrow (2010) categorizes the roles of heads of department in two ways: first as an actor; and second, as an agent of the institution. Specifically, Berdrow pointed out that

as an actor, the HOD performs three major roles, namely: managerial human capital, managerial social capital and managerial cognition. In performing the managerial human capital role, the HOD is expected to exhibit the learned skills, training and knowledge while performing specific tasks. Meanwhile, “in executing the managerial human capital role, the head of department has a duty to network and connect to various organisations and out source for people who can help to do the work effectively” (p.500). Whereas in performing the managerial cognition role, “the head of department has to display ability of understanding the job by monitoring, coordinating and assessing processes within the department” (p.501). But as an agent, Berdrow points out that the HOD acts within the context of the institution to incorporate academic functions, administrative functions and external relationships of the department.

According to Gaubatz and Ensminger (2017), middle-level managers such as deans and HODs are responsible for extensively reviewing the academic programmes of their units. In fact, they reiterated that these managers accomplish this role by engaging in systematic investigation in order to determine how to align the goals of their units with that of industry. In that regard, these managers would be aiming at reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability, among others. However, different individuals perceive the roles HODs play in reforming the curricula of their units differently.

According to Lumpkin (2004), HODs play three core roles: personnel and budgetary management, and instructional leadership. Specifically, it is in instructional leadership that HODs play the role of overseeing the development and implementation of the curricula of their units. In playing this role, the HOD can enable the reforming of the curricula of his/her unit to meet the need of industry. This view is supported by Bozeman et al. (2013) who posited that departmental chairs are key decision-makers who have the powers to influence policy and

procedure at departmental and institutional levels. This implies that during curriculum reviews and development, HODs have the opportunity to influence the kind of decisions that can be made regarding curriculum objectives, content and implementation. As a result, HODs can help in reforming the curricula of their departments in order to promote graduate employability.

According to Chinyamurundi (2016), university middle-level managers including HODs are seekers and implementers of innovations in their units. These innovations are encouraged in the different functions of their units - including in programme reviews and development. In the case of curriculum reviews, one of its key drivers is to align the goals of the university to that of society. Nonetheless, none of these studies documented the roles played by the HODs in reforming the curricula of their units so as to promote graduate employability; thus, the genesis of this study.

Again, several scholars have looked at the challenges that HODs face in executing their roles. Lumpkin (2004) for instance pointed out that a departmental chair is often faced with a wide range of challenges - one of which is building a team of staff whom although they possess multiple perspectives and abilities, they can choose to work collaboratively together towards the achievement of a common goal. To achieve this, Lumpkin advises that the HOD must demonstrate strong instructional leadership. Besides, the HOD should provide leadership in the redesign of the curricula and enhancement of programmes of the department in this case, the HOD can encourage the reforming of the curricula in order to enhance graduate employability. According to Jones (2011), HODs also have the challenge of energizing their staff to work effectively partly because academics do not want to be led. He adds that HODs also face the challenge of sourcing both internal and external funds. These challenges may curtail the

effectiveness of any HOD to manage a department. It can also limit the opportunity for HODs to reform the curricula of their units in order to promote graduate employability.

3. Methodology

This was purely a qualitative study. It was therefore approached from the interpretivist research paradigm because we believed that the issues of roles played by HODs and the challenges they face in reforming the curricula of their units could best be understood by listening to their stories individually - rather than quantifying the kinds of views they held about the issues. Specifically, we used the case study research design since we never intended to generalise the findings of the study beyond the college that we investigated. In addition, we opted for the use of the qualitative case study design because as Gaya and Smith (2016) observed, it allowed us “to capture the complexity of the object of study” (p.529) adequately - which was the roles played by HODs and the challenges they face in reforming their units’ curricula to promote graduate employability. We collected data by conducting in-depth interviews with four out of seven HODs who were purposively selected from the college that we investigated. Specifically, we employed the criterion sampling technique which according to Patton (2001), is a sampling technique that “involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). In our case, study participants were selected on the basis that: they were HODs, and available and willing to participate in the study. The collected data were analysed using the thematic content analysis technique which according to Saldana (2009) makes it easier to see and compare the emerging views and themes from a given dataset. Specifically, upon data collection, we were able to organise the data in accordance with its type and study participants. Thereafter, we identified our unit of analysis which was the individual study participant before we proceeded to

explore and code the data, accordingly. With the use of the codes, we were able to develop, manually, a more general picture of the data that we had obtained. This enabled us to get meaning of the results that emerged out our study. Finally, we put in place the necessary ethical considerations - including seeking for permission from relevant authorities before we could engage the participants in the study.

4. Results

In this study, we set out to explore the roles played by HODs in a college in a university in Uganda and the challenges they faced in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. In this section, we present the findings of the study. But first, we describe the profiles of the study participants.

4.1. Profile of study participants. In this study, we collected data through in-depth interviews from four HODs. These HODs were drawn from the departments of Science, Technical and Vocational Education (DOSATE), Foundations and Curriculum Studies, Adult and Community Education, and Higher Education. All the four study participants had been HODs between two to four years. They were all males although one out of the seven departments in the college is headed by a female. We had intended to include the only female HOD in the study, but unfortunately she had travelled out of the country and the one acting on her behalf was again male. This finding however also reflects the limited participation of women in higher education leadership in Uganda - an inequality that needs to be separately addressed. Three out of the four HODS who participated in the study were holders of a doctor of philosophy degree and senior lecturers by rank. One of them was a masters' degree holder and still a lecturer serving as a caretaker HOD since the minimum rank at which one can serve as a substantive HOD is senior

lecturer. All in all, the four participants willingly participated in the study and we believe that they provided information that was desirable for answering our research questions.

4.2. Results on objective one. The first objective of this study was to analyse the HOD's conceptualisation of graduate employability in order to gauge their understanding of the concept and the importance each of them attached to it. When the participants were asked: 'What is your understanding of graduate employability and how important is it', different respondents expressed different opinions of what graduate employability is, although virtually all of them contended that it is a very important issue in this era of mass higher education. In fact, one of the participants observed that "in this era of mass higher education, producing graduates who can hardly get employed is unhealthy to both society and the individual graduate". The same participant reiterated that "the skills that students obtain from the university should be relevant to the work setting". But another participant argued that:

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

These views showed that the participants were aware of the importance of graduate employability in university education.

Back to the conceptualization of graduate employability, different study participants expressed different opinions of what the concept means. For instance, one participant defined graduate employability as “the ability of a student to finish a given course of study and obtain better employment”. Therefore, according to this participant, graduate employability is not only a matter of being able to obtain employment, but also complete a given course of study. Of course, university students who academically perform badly and fail to complete their study programmes or pass with weak grades often tend to remain unemployed for a longer period of time than their counterparts who complete their studies on time and with good grades. But another participant, defined the term graduate employability as “the capacity that a graduate has to be absorbed in the labour market and be sustained there”. This particular participant looked at the ‘capacity’ of the graduate in terms of the kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA) that a graduate possesses that enable him/her to obtain gainful employment and be maintained on the job. But another participant had yet another different meaning of what graduate employability is. In fact, the third participant defined the term graduate employability as “the degree to which one is employable given the competencies he/she has acquired as a result of his/her education and training”. Although different in text, the ideas the second and third participants had about what graduate employability is, are essentially the same; that is, it has to do with whether the graduate has acquired skills and knowledge that their potential employers need.

The second part of the objective was to evaluate the importance HODs attach to the issue of graduate employability. The result showed that the participants attached significant importance to the issue of graduate employability. One of the study participants, in fact, remarked that:

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

This view of course showed that this particular participant attached great importance to how the graduates were trained and how they were able to secure employment. Nonetheless, one of the study participants seemed to have a different view. He opined that:

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

According to this participant, it is not necessarily the work of the university to impart in the students specific work-related skills since the students are being prepared for a wide-range of employment options. In fact, the participant reiterated that “employers have a role to play in enabling their employees acquire specific work-related skills - not universities”. Nevertheless, this is a debatable matter bearing in mind that the employers are nowadays denying many graduates jobs allegedly because they lack employable skills. All in all, the study revealed that different HODs had different understanding of what graduate employability is, let alone that they attach slightly different importance to the matter. Nonetheless, it has been difficult for us to attribute these differences in conceptualising graduate employability to the difference in the

participants' fields of study (e.g. departments of Science, Technical and Vocational Education (DOSATE), Foundations and Curriculum Studies, Adult and Community Education, and Higher Education) or places where they obtained their highest academic qualifications. But these differences in conceptualisation of graduate employability may account for the differences in the roles and efforts they put in reforming the curricula of their units in order to promote graduate employability.

Results on objective two. The second objective of this study was to explore the roles played by HODs in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. Again, different study participants were able to express different opinions of what they do during curriculum reviews and development. One of the participants reported that “As a head of department, I actually participate in all the committees that review the curricula of our department after every five years”. He proceeded to say that:

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

This means that HODs are central to the process of curriculum development since they contribute to the process of reforming the curricula to promote graduate employability through stakeholder involvement. This result shows that the HODs do not work alone to reform the

curricula of their departments. According to this particular participants, “we organise a stakeholder workshop where we engage employers, alumni, and other stakeholders to obtain their opinions about the drafted curriculum”. For that matter, their efforts to reform the curricula may be hampered by the response of other stakeholders in curriculum reviews and development such as the employers and alumni,

Another participant, however, observed that one way by which he helps in reforming the curricula of his department towards promoting graduate employability is by providing relevant market information that he would have gathered. In his own word, he observed that: “As a leader, I am expected to guide colleagues during the course of curriculum development. I cannot do that without equipping myself with relevant information about the activity we are engaged in”. He proceeded to say that: “As a result, I often try to collect as much market information about our programmes and alumni so that during curriculum review, I can provide essential information that can be used to reform our curricula towards promoting graduate employability”. In this case, the HOD plays an informational role in the process of curriculum reviews and development. Interestingly, this particular role that this HOD plays appears to be more of an ‘independent leader role’ in curriculum development unlike the “collaborative leader role’ that the earlier participant had insinuated. This implies that although different HODs play leadership roles in reforming their units’ curricula to promote graduate employability, they do not use the same leadership approaches.

In fact, another participant reported that his greatest role in reforming the curricula towards promoting graduate employability is providing effective leadership. He observed that:

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

This particular participant looked at his leadership role in reforming the curricula of his department to promote graduate employability in terms of 'guiding' the process of curriculum reviews and development. However, this 'guiding leadership role' implied that this leader may not to be a risk taker. Yet, effective leadership requires leaders to take calculated risks for the sake of their followers and the organisation. In the context of this study, effective leadership was looked at in terms of playing the leadership role that produces the desired goals such as reforming the curriculum to promote graduate employability. According to another participant, one of the greatest role in curriculum development is resource mobilisation. This particular participant actually observed that:

In this University, getting funds to undertake departmental activities such as curriculum review is not easy at all since there is always a perennial outcry for lack of funds. I therefore lobby a lot to get money for our curricular review activities. To me I think, that is an important role I play because if I do not do it, there is no way we can reform our curricula towards promoting graduate employability.

This implied that HODs generally consider whatever roles they play in curriculum reviews and development as an effort towards reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate

employability. Yet in practice, this may not be true since some of these roles may not directly relate to what kind of curriculum a department may produce. In addition, this 'resource mobilisation role' implies that the academic staff only engage in curriculum reviews when they are paid; yet, curriculum review is an in-house activity that may not require any special funding. Nonetheless, the study participants pointed out that they need funds to finance several curriculum review activities including hosting stakeholder workshops and conducting market research.

Results on objective three. The third objective of this study was to establish the challenges heads of department faced in their effort to reform the curricula of their units towards promoting graduate employability, and how they coped with them. One of the challenges that almost all the study participants alluded to was 'the rapidly changing demands for skills at the workplace'. In fact, one participant remarked that:

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

But while this participant could be right, he appears to forget the role of internships and practicals which his department uses to bridge this gap! In addition, even though no single university curriculum is sufficient to meet the different needs of all the employers, as the participant claimed, there are also strategies that universities have put in place to address this challenge. The participant himself revealed that as an HOD, he has been coping with this kind of

challenge of ‘failing to meet the demands of society’ by identifying and prioritising what is more realistic in the department and practice it in line with the vision, mission and goal of the College, and that of the University.

Another participant reported facing funding challenges during curriculum reviews and development. He observed that the mobilisation of funds to facilitate curriculum reviews is often a challenge in the University. Actually, the participant revealed that he always lobbies a lot in order to receive funds that can ably finance the process of curriculum reviews in the department particularly for hosting stakeholder workshops and conducting market research. This view was also echoed by apparently all the other study participants - except one who revealed that he has sometimes used project funds to facilitate the process of curriculum reviews in their department.

Another challenge that emerged from the study was the “students’ mentality that they must be recruited into a job immediately after they are done with their studies, yet the world of employment is now narrow to absorb the large number of graduates”, said one of the study participants. This implied that the participant did not believe that it is the failure of the University that was responsible for the rising rate of graduate unemployment - but rather - a weak economy that is not able to create many job opportunities. The participant, in fact, reported that he has on many occasions advised the graduates to think of beginning their own projects where they can get employed without waiting for chances of employment from non-governmental and governmental organisations”

During the interview, a participant reported that the lack of co-operation from stakeholders is one of the greatest challenges faced during curriculum reviews. He said that “sometimes when we invite some stakeholders - including potential employers of our students, they do not come to attend our stakeholder meetings. This makes it difficult for us to receive

feedback from them”. The same participant however revealed that he normally ensures that stakeholder workshops are appropriately scheduled in terms of time and venues in order to achieve better stakeholder participation.

Another participant reported on the lack of commitment of some of his staff as a challenge to curriculum reviews. He actually revealed that:

Some staff in my department have a divided attention where sometimes, when I call a meeting to discuss issues to do with our curricula, some of them do not come, and the few who turn up sometimes fail to agree on a number of issues.

This implies that curricular issues are often contentious and cannot be left in the hands of the HOD alone or a few staff. This particular study participant reported that he usually motivates his staff in diverse ways to ensure that they participate in the different activities of the department - although he reminiscence that ‘it is often not easy’.

5. Discussion

This study came out with three key findings. First, the study showed that the HODs that participated in this study had different understanding of what graduate employability is and also attached slightly different importance to it. This finding that the participants conceptualised graduate employability differently is not surprising because the concept - though it began to be used for the first time about the beginning of the twentieth century, its meaning has been evolving since the debates surrounding it and other related concepts have continued to rage on. However, most of the definitions that the participants gave rhymed with that of the earlier scholars such as York and Knight (2006), Bamwesiga (2013), Cai (2013), and Beaumont, Gedye

and Richardson (2016). For instance, the definitions of graduate employability by a study participant that; ‘it is the ability of a student to finish his/her study programme and obtain employment’ is in tandem with that of Bamwesiga (2013) who reported on the conceptualisation of graduate employability by employers in Rwanda. In fact, the employers in Rwanda looked at graduate employability as the ability of the graduate to have professional understanding of a specified discipline, to change and adapt to work life situations and undertake skillful practices. This professional understanding would be obtained upon the successful completion of a study programme by the student.

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

The second key finding in this study was that heads of department often play different roles in reforming the curricula of their units towards promoting graduate employability. This finding was also in congruence with works of other scholars such as Otara (2015), Jowi (2018) and Chinyamurundi (2016) who investigated the roles of middle-level managers in universities in different countries in Africa. Otara for instance reported about how heads of department as well as deans in different universities in Africa often incorporate stakeholders from the labour market

in programme reviews and curriculum development. This was not any different with virtually all what the study participants reportedly said they also do.

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

Last but not least, the study finding revealed that middle-level managers such as HODs and deans face a number of challenges in executing their duties. Seale and Cross (2015) for instance, reported that deans in South Africa faced a number of challenges - including lack of management skills and experience. This was not far from what Otara (2015) also reported. In fact, Otara revealed that middle-level managers in African universities most often take their positions without prior receiving leadership training. This makes them fail to recognise and exploit the metamorphic changes that may occur within their units. It is this kind of challenge that creates others such as limited stakeholder involvement and motivation - which the research participants also reported in this study.

Finally, the finding that HODs often experience the challenge of inadequate institutional support from top management is also collaborated by Jowi (2018) who studied the leadership styles of faculty deans in Kenyan Universities. He actually observed that “it is difficult to work

as a middle-level manager in a university setting: the initiatives from the top have great impact on life at the bottom as well as the other way round” (p.6). This was not far from what the HODs in the university college studied in Uganda also reported as one of their critical challenges. In spite of these challenges, the study participants revealed some of the strategies they used for mitigating them; thus, the contribution of this study especially to the younger HODs.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the subsequent discussion, we concluded that; first, the conceptual differences that HODs have about graduate employability could be responsible for their lackluster response towards it. Second, while the HODs appear to attach significant importance to, and try to ensure that the curricula of their units promote graduate employability, there are a repertoire of challenges that they face and which need to be addressed for effective reforming of departmental curricula towards promoting graduate employability. We, therefore, recommend for increased institutional support for HODs if they are to effectively enhance the process of reforming the curricula of their departments in order to enhance graduate employability. Specifically, HODs need to be trained in managing academic departments; and their units funded in order to host stakeholder workshops and pay for other curriculum reviews and development activities like conducting market research.

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