

HERE IS HOW OUR EDUCATION IS AIDING OUR UNEMPLOYMENT

January is graduation month across several universities, with a reported 40,000 graduates released into the job market. There's every reason to celebrate the milestone, especially for parents who trade everything to get their children through school.

But the joy of completing will be short-lived, and dampened, by the knowledge that our economy apparently only creates about 8,000 jobs a year. As such, a big chunk of the 40,000 who will graduate this year are set to join the 83% unemployed youth. Distressing.

It doesn't take a genius to see that part of the reason for our staggering unemployment has a lot to do with how we are educated. By the time one completes the full education cycle, they will be between 23-25 years old, but without work or life experience. – because our education emphasizes memorization of facts instead of analysis and application of concepts.

But why are our young people starting at 25, when the developed world is teaching the basics of innovation and trade to pre-teens? and We need to start early. Educationists have the responsibility to integrate community-centered and project-based learning models to enable learners to apply and test their knowledge and assumptions. Vocational education and *Do-It-Yourself* schemes must be part of – and not an alternative to – the formal curriculum.

Would it be out of place if, as part of their education schools required students to make their own uniforms, produce reusable sanitary pads, soap, shoe polish – and learn how to sell these items, to help them better understand subjects like commerce and entrepreneurship – and develop work ethic?

Our schools are built on large tracts of land, but students cannot grow a bean or tomato plant – yet agriculture employs over 70% of our labor force. Instead, schools use farming as a punishment, reinforcing the stereotype that agriculture is lesser economic activity.

According to UNEB, about 100,000 students sat their senior six exams in 2017. It is possible, considering our limited employment opportunities, that most of them are sitting idly at home, waiting to drop out at this level, or join university and then join the league of the unemployed. If our education was influenced by our national objectives it would reflect the lofty ambitions of Vision 2040. We would have these 100,000 young people under an apprenticeship/volunteer program that helps them get a feel of the economy, opportunities and challenges that they will be required to solve as leaders in future.

North Americans (and now Asia) have for long used *service learning* as part of their education, to open up more opportunities for their young people. That is why you have tens of young Americans flying here to volunteer on community projects in Rakai, Iganga and Amuru.

It is how they learn. It is how they prepare themselves to lead, invent and innovate. How do we learn? How do we prepare ourselves? Why aren't our 'vacists' volunteering in community schools, health centres, farms, etc to get invaluable experience and exposure?

It is possible to graduate without ever having to clean your room, wash your clothes or cook your own food – because schools will hire people to do these basic but vital things for you.

However, because you also miss out on the consequent lessons from the self-discipline required to do these basic tasks, it becomes much harder for you to develop any work-related skill or ethic; and with that, your employability.

We now know that academic achievement is not enough to guarantee success – especially if it is divorced from life-long learning, as ours seems to be. That’s why our graduates cannot find jobs – because they are not educated to work, invent or innovate. That’s why education must also expose learners to the realities and challenges of the communities they hope to lead, influence and innovate for.

So even as we celebrate the release of results and attend graduation parties, we must reflect on how we can give young people a head-start to prepare them for the realities of life – because the way we are educating right now is doing the opposite.

To spur creativity, nurture skills and open opportunities, we must match academic enthusiasm with creating avenues where students can test their ideas, collaborate, fail and learn from the process, at an early stage. It’s how we can give them a head start and an advantage.

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