

Jobless graduates urged to get vocational training

By Nikky Shillingl and Cecilia Okoth

University graduates who fail to get absorbed into the job market are gradually joining vocational training institutions to acquire certificates in competency-based skills.

George Mwesigye, the principal of Lugogo Vocational Training Institute, said whereas they previously admitted mostly students who completed Primary Seven and Senior Four, they are beginning to attract degree holders.

The trend, Mwesigye said, has been observed over the last five years. While some students genuinely seek to better their skills, he said others enrol out of frustration of failing to get a job, but eventually settle in and excel.

"In 2014, we admitted a senior lecturer from Makerere University department of forestry and he specifically wanted to learn carpentry. We have also had graduates who started up businesses but have enrolled to obtain skills on how to manage their businesses," Mwesigye said.

He said on average, the institute admits between five and 15 degree holders annually.

"We have one-on-one conversations with these students to try to examine what happened during their course of study at university," Mwesigye said.

He was speaking at the beginning of practical exams assessed by Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB) at the institute, yesterday.

Every year, universities churn out thousands of graduates. The question often asked is how will these numbers get absorbed into the job market?

Prof Opuda Asibo, the former executive director of National Council for Higher Education, said university graduates seeking to study vocational courses speaks volumes.

"It is good to acquire skills, but you cannot survive on them because these are often low-paying jobs. There are many graduates working on building sites. In the UK, (there are) PhD holders (who) are taxi drivers," he said.

Asibo said there needs to be deliberate measures by both the Government and the private sector to create employment opportunities.

He added that if the status quo remains, Uganda shall continue to have many people with skills and no jobs.



A student of welding doing her practicals at Lugogo Vocational Institute

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Asked whether some students could have chosen the wrong courses at university, Asibo said a fair qualification is not only meant to help one get a job, but increase their opportunities at life.

"There are no useless qualifications in the world. The question depends on the times. Mechanical and electrical engineering courses were almost phased out of university at one point. This is because factories were being closed and everything became computerised."

Exam progress

A total of 80,306 candidates yesterday commenced their UBTEB exams. The board registered a 31% increase in the number of candidates this year, as compared to last year's 61,253 students.

The exams, to be conducted in two phases, will see students examined across various disciplines. The exams are slated to end on December 17.

The growth in the number of students opting for business and technical courses has also led to the expansion of examination centres, from 525 centres in 2018 to 572 this year.

UBTEB has been conducting competency-based examinations since 2011 for all certificate and diploma programmes offered at various training institutions across the country.

Mercilina Akumu is a first-year student who joined Lugogo Vocational Institute after her Senior Four to study a certificate course in mechanical engineering. She said she picked interest because of her uncle who owns a workshop.

Akumu plans to use capital of sh1m to start her own workshop to repair vehicles and motorcycles after completing her course.