

A degree is not enough

This week, Makerere University—my alma mater—celebrates its 76th graduation. A total of 8,432 students graduate: 185 PhDs, 2,034 Master's, 6,043 Bachelor's, 137 postgraduate diplomas, and 33 undergraduate diplomas.

Yet behind the celebration lies a difficult national conversation. Why are so many graduates, full of ambition and credentials, turning to menial work simply to survive? The answer is not individual failure but a web of structural weaknesses across Uganda's economy, education system, and policy environment.

Uganda produces over 700,000 graduates each year from universities and polytechnics—far more than the number of formal jobs created. Data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (Ubos 2024) shows overall unemployment at 12.3 percent, while youth underutilisation exceeds 40 percent (NEET 42.6 percent). Graduate unemployment varies widely by sector, with estimates ranging from 15 to 88 percent, and fewer than 13 percent securing skilled formal employment. The implication is stark: more graduates, fewer opportunities, diminishing returns to higher education.

Macroeconomic pressures deepen the challenge. Inflation—3.2 percent in January—still erodes real wages amid rising transport and commodity costs. At the same time, global funding shifts, including major reductions in support from organisations such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have left development programmes underfunded and households strained.

Uganda's services sector, contributing about 43 percent of GDP, has historical-

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Employment



ly absorbed graduates through trade, tourism, and ICT, but growth remains uneven amid weak demand and skills gaps. Meanwhile, the agriculture-dependent economy—about 24 per cent of GDP—has not generated sufficient modern employment. The result is familiar: an engineering graduate riding boda boda in Kampala, or a Master's degree holder selling chapati and rolex. At the heart of the crisis is a persistent mismatch. Higher education continues to emphasise fields with limited absorption capacity: more than half of graduates emerge from social sciences, humanities, and business administration, while fewer than 20 per cent train in practical, self-reliant disciplines. Employers consistently report that graduates are intelligent but often lack the practical competence required at work.

Policy inertia compounds the problem. Public-sector recruitment—once a stable pathway—has slowed due to fiscal constraints. The private sector, facing high borrowing costs and weak demand, is reluctant to absorb and train inexperienced graduates. Many young Ugandans therefore ac-

cept survival jobs, migrate abroad, or remain underemployed—a trend that risks social strain and long-term loss of human capital.

Solutions require both urgency and structural reform. Universities must recalibrate curricula toward market realities—embedding data science, artificial intelligence, agritech, renewable energy, and logistics into mainstream programmes. Vocational and technical pathways must be dignified and integrated into higher education, drawing lessons from apprenticeship-driven systems in developed countries.

Structured internships and apprenticeships should be scaled through public-private partnerships that subsidise graduate placements and reduce employer risk. At the same time, industrialisation through agro-processing zones, manufacturing clusters, and export hubs linked to the African Continental Free Trade Area remains essential for large-scale job creation.

Digital entrepreneurship offers another frontier. With a growing fintech and mobile-money ecosystem, graduates can build ventures in edtech, healthtech, agritech, and the creative economy if supported by seed funding, simplified regulation, and intellectual-property protection. Diaspora engagement can further accelerate this transition through mentorship, investment, and global networks.

Graduate underemployment is not a temporary phase. It is a structural warning. If Uganda fails to align education, policy, and economic transformation, degrees will continue to multiply while opportunity shrinks and the country risks sidelining the very generation meant to drive its future.

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reference will be given to insightful articles rather than generalised polemic observations. Attach a portrait and send to editorial@ug.nationmedia.com.