

World Bank Findings Highlight Emerging Employment Challenges for Busitema Researchers

Uganda's ambition to create 4.4 million new jobs under NDP IV will naturally draw attention to numbers. But a harder question sits behind that target: what kind of jobs will those be?

Employment that provides an income today may still offer little security, limited opportunity for skills growth or few prospects for higher productivity. As artificial intelligence, automation and digital platforms reshape occupations, the difference between simply having work and building a stable livelihood is becoming increasingly important.

World Bank findings from East Asia and the Pacific give that question greater urgency. Decades of economic growth have lifted millions out of poverty, yet many households that crossed the poverty line have struggled to move into lasting economic security. The evidence points increasingly towards the quality and productivity of employment, not employment alone, as part of what separates vulnerable households from those able to build more secure lives.

That distinction opens a much wider research space at Busitema University. It invites researchers to look beyond employment rates and examine which skills, technologies, industries and forms of work are actually helping people progress economically, and which may leave them vulnerable even when they are technically employed.

East Asia and the Pacific offers an unusual setting for asking these questions because of how far the region has already travelled. Roughly one in three people now belongs to the middle class, while China's middle-class population grew from about 11 per cent in 2010 to around 40 per cent in 2021. Yet progress outside China has been slower, and urban residents remain about twice as likely as rural residents to reach middle-class economic security.

Jobs have played a major role in that progress, but the World Bank finds that the type of work matters considerably. About 59 per cent of people in the region's middle class are in salaried employment, compared with poorer and more vulnerable groups who remain more concentrated in agriculture, unpaid work and self-employment.

The figures do not mean that self-employment or agriculture cannot provide strong livelihoods. They point instead to the importance of productivity, reliable earnings and the ability to withstand economic shocks.

That is an important distinction for Uganda, where employment discussions often move quickly towards the number of opportunities created. The Fourth National Development Plan, covering 2025/26 to 2029/30, seeks higher household incomes, greater monetisation of the economy and employment for sustainable socio-economic transformation. Strengthening the private sector to create jobs and improving productivity are among its stated objectives.

The challenge is that labour markets themselves are changing while countries pursue those goals.

World Bank analysis shows that employment rates in East Asia and the Pacific remain high by global standards, but productivity is below the global average in most economies outside China and Malaysia. Workers moving away from agriculture are increasingly entering lower-productivity services rather than the higher-productivity manufacturing activities that previously helped many households move into the middle class. Informal employment also remains widespread.

Between 2018 and 2022, the adoption of robots across five major economies in the region was associated with around two million new jobs for skilled formal workers, while approximately 1.4 million low-skilled workers performing routine manual work were displaced. The technology produced more jobs than it displaced overall, but the benefits did not reach everyone in the same way. Education and digital skills increasingly determined who could move into the new opportunities being created.

A curriculum may prepare a student for an occupation that still exists five or ten years later, but the tasks performed within that occupation may have changed considerably. Artificial intelligence can automate some activities while increasing the value of others. Digital tools may allow one worker to accomplish tasks that previously required several people. Entirely new roles may also emerge around technologies that were barely present when current professionals began their training.

Research can help universities understand those changes before they become severe skills gaps.

At Busitema University, this could involve studying how employers' expectations are changing across engineering, computing, agriculture, health, education and other sectors. Graduate tracer studies could also move beyond establishing whether former students are employed and explore what happens afterwards: whether graduates are working in areas related to their training, whether their incomes and responsibilities improve, what additional skills they have had to acquire, and how technology is changing their work.

The questions also extend beyond graduates.

Agricultural researchers, for example, could examine whether technologies that increase production also improve farmer incomes and create opportunities elsewhere in the value chain. Engineering innovations could be studied for their ability to strengthen local production and support new enterprises. Researchers working on digital technologies could investigate not only whether a system performs effectively, but what it means for the people expected to work with it.

Busitema University's current research agenda already provides room for such thinking. The 2026/27 Busitema University Research and Innovation Fund call includes transformative education, entrepreneurship and job creation among its priority areas, alongside agriculture and animal production, appropriate technologies and clean energy, environmental sustainability, STEM and digital transformation. The fund also places emphasis on research capable of

generating measurable societal impact and translating scientific solutions into practical applications.

Connecting those areas to employment could produce research that looks beyond the immediate success of an innovation.

A new agricultural technology might increase yields, but does it also increase farmer earnings? A digital platform may make services easier to access, but does it create sustainable work or mainly short-term opportunities? A manufacturing innovation may reduce production costs, but what new skills will workers require as a result? These questions connect technological progress directly to the livelihoods it is expected to improve.

Digital platform work makes that connection even more complicated. The World Bank notes that platforms have widened access to employment in East Asia and the Pacific, including through e-commerce and gig work. But such opportunities often lack benefits associated with formal employment, including pensions, health coverage and job security. Someone can therefore gain access to work without necessarily gaining the economic protection needed to withstand a major setback.

This creates another useful research direction. Uganda's growing digital economy could be studied not simply through the number of people earning online, but through the stability of those livelihoods, the skills required to sustain them and the opportunities workers have to progress into higher-value activities.

The World Bank identifies investment in education, health and training, a stronger environment for businesses and wider social protection as important parts of building economic security. Skilled workers need productive firms capable of employing them, while businesses also need a workforce with the knowledge required to grow and innovate.

That relationship between skills and opportunity sits close to the role universities already play.

Uganda's NDP IV Human Resource Development Plan acknowledges this challenge directly. Alongside the target of creating 4.4 million new jobs, it seeks to build a skilled and competitive workforce and improve the responsiveness of education and training to labour-market needs. The plan also recognises unemployment, underemployment, skills mismatches and the large number of young people working in informal activities as significant challenges.

The target that begins this discussion therefore becomes more interesting when viewed from the other end.

Four million new jobs would represent millions of individual working lives. Some could lead to growing incomes, stronger businesses and new professional opportunities. Others could remain insecure, low-paying or vulnerable to technological change. Research can help reveal the difference.

Busitema University researchers have an opportunity to contribute evidence on where productive employment is emerging, which skills are becoming more valuable, how innovation affects livelihoods and what enables people to adapt when industries change.

Ultimately, 4.4 million may be the figure that attracts attention. The deeper measure of success will be what those jobs allow people to become: more productive, more skilled and more economically secure.