

SKILLING YOUTH AND YOUNG GIRLS WITH EMPLOYABILITY, BUSINESS, ICT AND LIFE SKILLS FOR 21ST CENTURY CAREERS

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ABSTRACT

The barriers to the gainful employment of youth and girls are many and amongst many others includes the lack of employable skills, business and life skills commonly known as soft skills. The stiff competition in both the employment market and business world leaves them reliant on social networks and those without such networks face an uphill struggle to find gainful employment and lucrative businesses.

Many youths were forced to seek skills that would enable them to earn using technology such as coding, web and app development among others during the Covid19 lockdown. With these skills youths can play a big role not only in ecommerce but in sectors such as service sector, Manufacturing, ICT-based Services, Tourism, Transport, and Agriculture and take advantage of opportunities due to the speed at which the country is undertaking large infrastructure developments.

The current skilling programs have helped girls stay in school, gain interest in mathematics and science subjects as well as gaining other skills such as critical thinking, creativity, typing and writing skills, and has helped the youths who have so far participated to reach their full potential with some of them able to write outstanding CVs, excel in job interviews and secure parttime and full jobs.

For the youth who lack minimum qualifications to join universities other programs should be introduced to enable them to learn relevant skills as they search for the certifications required to join institutions of higher education as a way of encouraging them not to give up on searching for knowledge.

These programs need to be marketed through multichannel marketing methods such as social media, on-air marketing, email marketing and scaled up to reach out to millions of youths in all universities, high school students and those out of school in Uganda and in the East African region.

Since these skills are not acquired through one off training there's need to ensure continuous learning for students with newer topics and technologies that are sort out for by employers and customers through practical and interactive training sessions with trainees' progress being assessed and monitored on a day-to-day and weekly basis by the instructors and their learning level should be individually evaluated at the end of each training.

Keywords: Skilling Youth, Girls, Employability, ICT, Life Skills, Soft skills

Introduction

The barriers to the gainful employment of youth and girls are many and amongst them includes the lack of employable skills, business and life skills commonly known as soft skills. The stiff competition in both the employment market and business world leaves them reliant on social networks and those without such networks face an uphill struggle to find business opportunities and gainful employment.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of youth to seek for skills that will help them to earn income using technology for example coding skills to develop apps, websites and online payment methods for those involved in ecommerce because most of the youth in Uganda work as unskilled labour and those jobs were affected by COVID – 19 restrictions, and other skilled labour jobs for those who couldn't cope with new work methods like working from home, use of digital signatures and other computer skills. However, majority of people in Uganda are poor and thus can't access technology infrastructure such as internet, laptops etc. With the high population increase in Uganda and the high rate of youth unemployment these skills are needed more than ever for survival.

The social and economic development of Uganda depends on how the country empowers her young population to engage in key sectors such as the Service Sector, Manufacturing, ICT-based Services, Tourism, Transport, and Agriculture. Youths must ensure that they have the required skills for those key sectors and catch up with the speed at which the country is undertaking large infrastructure developments.

According to the World Economic Forum (2017), 15 to 20 million young people will join the workforce every year in African and by 2030 Africa will be home to more than 25% of the world's population under 25 which will make up to 60% of Africa's total population and 15% of the world's working age population, the continent's urban population will exceed 700 million (more than 50%) thus need for the youths to be skilled to take up the jobs and other responsibilities.

Over fifty percent of Africa's young men and women fail to turn their knowledge and professional and technical skills and talents into careers, effective employment, and lucrative businesses. One major reason is that they lack the soft skills necessary for finding and retaining jobs, starting successful micro, small or medium sized businesses, overcoming life's dilemmas, and taking advantage of other available opportunities.

Overview

The International Open University (IOU) founded by Dr Bilal Philips in 2007 as a higher education institution that offers intensive online undergraduate and graduate programs in Islamic studies, Education, Psychology, Business Administration, Islamic Banking and Finance among others. In 2019 the university received a licence as an institutional accreditation of the university in The Gambia, by National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority and globally it has over of 421,501 registered students.

The University introduced a project called 1 million Scholarship for African students (1MAS) in 2017 to provide access to online higher education and research for 1 million Youth in Africa. The goal of the project is to build capacity of African youth to contribute actively and effectively in dealing with poverty eradication and contributing to development and growth of the African continent. However, the number of scholarship beneficiary that have dropped out reached 50% of the total scholarship awarded by 2020. This dropout rate is linked to several factors such as inadequate computer skills among the youths especially girls and lack of computers or centres where students can access and learn to use both computer hardware and software before being left to learn independently.

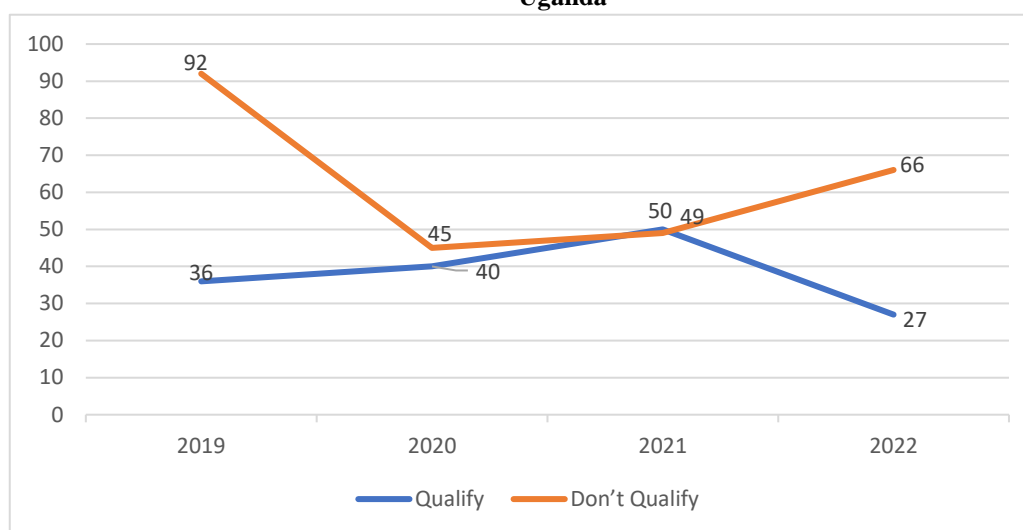
The number of applicants interested in studying online degrees has been increasing as indicated in Table 1. However, majority of the students don't meet the minimum requirements to qualify for the programs and are left out of the program for instance 72% in 2019, 60% in 2020, 49% in 2021 and 67% in 2022¹. All these students are left out and many more from other institutions of higher education thus they end up offering unskilled labour hence there is a need to introduce other programs to teach youth relevant skills as they search for the certifications required to join institutions of higher education.

¹ Annual statistics are got from the IOU database for Ugandan applicants. The numbers for 2022 are only for the month of January, February, and March.

Table1: Statistics showing number of IOU students who complete the registration process Annually from Uganda

Year	Qualify	Don't Qualify	Total students
2019	36	92	128
2020	40	45	75
2021	50	49	99
2022	27	66	83

Figure 1: Graph showing number of IOU students who complete the registration process Annually from Uganda



In order to improve students' skills in ICT, employability and business IOU decided to partner with some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Uganda who have started offering such skills to students despite the challenges that students are also not aware of the importance and existence of such programs currently we have so far partnered with two local NGOs, one is called Her dreams count which teaches girls coding at Community technology access in Nakivale Refugee camp located in Isingiro district in southwestern Uganda. The program currently has about 20 girls who are taught coding on Saturdays for 3 to 4 hours, majority of them are in high school and between the age of 10 to 17 years old, the program doesn't disrupt their school programs and those who complete high school are being promised scholarships at International Open University to study Bachelor of Information Technology the project also aims to introduce more skills such as employability, business, life skills which can help to secure their futures upon completion of their studies.

The second NGO is known as Rounding Up the Edges (ROUTE) International Ltd which is registered in Nkumba, Entebbe district in Uganda to skill young adults with soft skills for Employability, Business and Life at their centre in S&S mall in Nkumba Entebbe. the company provides trainings in career guidance, peer-support, and mentorships targeting young adults of all educational, religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds with an Equity Fund that guarantees the participation of the financially disadvantaged young adults with a special focus on girls, women and those living with disabilities. The program between 2019 and 2020 has reached over 1,000 youths who have undertaken at least one training session.

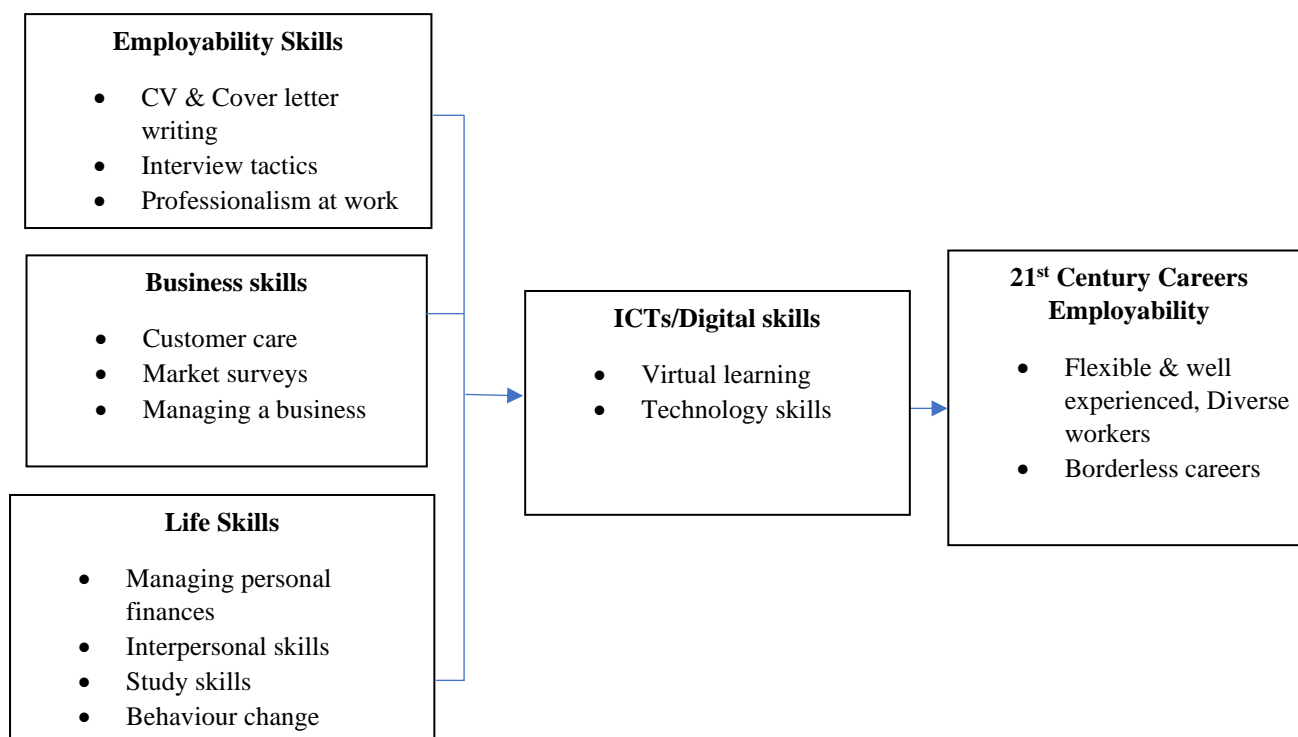
There is need to scale these programs to target youths in all universities and high school students in Uganda and in the East African region, however, these programs usually lack the funding required to reach out to more youth, and girls which could help in organising more training sessions and creation of awareness through multichannel marketing methods such as social media, on-air marketing, email marketing to reach out to millions of youths by using media such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, television, bulk emailing, distribution of digital flyers, supplemented by on-ground mobilization initiatives which involve distribution of printed flyers and banners and word-of-mouth.

The skilling programs are continuously helping people reach their full potential with participants able to write outstanding CVs, excel in job interviews and secure parttime jobs for students and full jobs for graduates. These skills are not acquired through one off training and therefore the programs must be designed to allow students to continue learning newer topics and technologies that are sort out for by employers and customers. Through

practical and interactive training sessions some university students who were extremely shy at making presentations in class and speaking to lecturers were able to improve on their communication skills.

The coding programs has helped the girls to improve on both their education subjects such as learning mathematics by sculpting their fear of Mathematics and science subjects while gaining other skills such as creativity, typing and writing skills. This has also helped the girls to remain personate about education especially during the Covid-19 lockdown where schools were closed for two years in Uganda and some of their colleagues ended up either pregnant or married, and the program motivated them to return to school and pursue their high school certificates that will enable them to enrol for university Degrees of their choice.

Theoretical framework



Employability, Business, ICT and Life Skills for sustainable development

Employability Business and Life skills; These are usually referred to as soft skills. The skills are very important for youth to get and retain jobs and even for securing promotions at work but are very insufficient because most universities or schools only concentrate on teachings based on their curriculums.

Information and communication technology (ICT) skills has played a big role in providing employment opportunities for youths and young girls (Garrido, M., at el 2010). In Uganda very few non-governmental organisations have developed programs and offered trainings to youth on these skills.

Employability Skills such as CV & Cover letter writing, Interview tactics and Professionalism at work, Business skills such as Customer care, Market surveys and managing a business, and Life Skills such as Managing personal finances, Interpersonal skills, communication skills, critical thinking and Behaviour change if any of these skills is combined with ICTs/Digital skills such as Virtual learning, Technology skills for example use of digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information will enable the youths to be skilled and take up the jobs and other responsibilities, thus leading to increased employability of the youths and girls since such skills are widely regarded as key competences for 21st Century Careers where they will be more flexible and well experienced workforce, diverse and able to collaborate and work in borderless teams, and they will also be able to turn their knowledge, professional and technical skills and talents into careers, effective employment, and lucrative businesses. Celume, M. P., & Maoulida, H. (2022).

Literature Review

Literature was mainly searched using Google scholar to get reports, theses and dissertations related to the topic.

Employability is all about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment when required. For an individual, employability depends on the assets such as knowledge, skills and attitudes, the way these assets are deployed and used, presentation of these assets to potential employers, the external environment for example labour market, level of industrialisation etc., personal circumstances among others. Hillage and Pollard (1998).

According to Jothirathne. P (2013), graduate students develop more employability skills that are required to gain employment and undergraduates develop more personal skills at university upon graduation and employers rate graduates much higher than undergraduates due their possession of such skills hence there's a need for the undergraduate students to be equipped with skills such as problem-solving, application of IT, communication and literacy, application of numeracy, business, self-management, and team working.

Communication technology (ICT) skills play a big role in improving employment opportunities for low-income groups such as youths. Based on a research survey of over seventy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide ICT training and various employment services in 30 countries around the world the significance of ICT skills on employability is very big and it's based on characteristics of the individual job seekers and the environmental dynamics that influence employment outcomes such as the economic growth. Basic ICT skills are now very important but are inadequate among disadvantaged groups such as youth and girls to improve their employment situation (Garrido, M. at el., 2010).

Institutions should embed sustainable development into their teaching and learning by encouraging their academic staff to develop extra-curricular resources for sustainability and employability skills needed to create business opportunities in an emerging sustainable economy, and tutors should incorporate Sustainable development in their teaching by creating quality informal co-curricular activities that develop and promote sustainability skills. It is has become increasingly relevant for students to maintain and develop link with employers and internships are currently being seen as the method to further students' skills development because they provide professional, practical, and course relevant experience. Drayson, R., et al. (2012).

According to Jeronen et al (2016) to achieve the goals of sustainable development, active teaching methods such as the process-based instruction, problem-based learning, and outdoor education are recommended because they develop students' independence in learning and problem solving, trigger students to define their own learning objectives where they independent study before returning to the whole group to discuss and refine their acquired knowledge, helps increase connections and develops positive associations among the students. The progressive significance of complex problem solving and knowledge construction in the 21st century emphasizes the need for collaborative activities in institutions, schools, and universities to promote learning and collective competencies especially for environmental issues, which should be solved to support sustainable development. This also supports self-efficacy, autonomy, engagement, and meaningful learning as well as foster creativity and flexibility which are important when solving multifaceted environmental problems to work toward a more sustainable lifestyle.

Soft skills are desirable to recruiters but there is a gap between the business curriculum taught in schools and the industry expectation from the fresh business graduates, business education institutions are therefore required to reform their curriculum and guide their students to develop and master these skills to ensure employability for their graduates while preparing them for real life competition in the job market. Nusrat and Sultana (2019).

Youths should take up any career path of their choice and based on their aptitudes, but they need to engage in continuous personal development projects related to lifelong learning. Milosheva, M., et al (2021).

According to Mainga, W, et al (2021). Graduates can increase their self-awareness and critical reflection on their learning experiences and take proactive steps to enhance their positional advantage in the labour market by acquiring in demand soft skills, developing dynamic psychological-social capital, such as self-awareness, self-directedness, proactivity, adaptability, and resilience, that is underpinned by lifelong learning which are both are needed to navigate multiple job transitions and career challenges throughout one's career span.

Due to rapidly changing technology-based economies there is need to develop new skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in the 21st century and schools should produce graduates who can succeed in an increasingly

complex and interconnected world with emphasis on skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, communication, digital and technological literacy which are important for the success of students after graduation. Martinez, C. (2022).

People's lifestyles have been affected by digitation in the past few years and Covid -19 has indirectly contributed to the promotion of digitalization as people were compelled to use digital techniques and devices for their day-to-day activities such as shopping, studying among others during the lockdown. However, much as digitization made life easy for people during lockdown it created lots of problems on employment for instance in India teaching professionals are now required to have appropriate soft skills, technical skills, and practical focus due to the increase in online instructional learning hence need for adequate training in tools and techniques utilized for online learning and those with low ICT abilities and least interest to upgrade their skills have faced challenges in retaining their employment (Goel, M, 2022).

Methodology

The training of digital skills will be comprehensive and focused on productivity and will run along the normal curriculum for school going students so that they remain in school.

The teachings will reflect situations in the real world of work with projects and assignments simulating the workplace atmosphere and the delivery will be done through both physical and online learning means.

A multilevel framework is proposed to deliver the training to students that is; In-person physical training where tutors can meet with the groups or individuals and this will be done in compliance with COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), Virtual training via zoom and self-paced e-Learning where videos are recorded and can be accessed by learners at any time this provides more flexibility to learners and enables them to study at their own pace and learners will have an opportunity to select and focus on modules with the skills they want to learn.

These methods will be employed in a way that identifies some of the common elements that can help situate basic ICT skills in relation to other factors that can facilitate or impede employability with emphasis on acquisition and practice of skills rather than on getting grades, and outdoor education programs can be introduced to build a community, culture, positive associations, and connection between the students.

The trainees will be assessed on a day-to-day basis; their weekly progress is also monitored by the instructors and their learning level is individually evaluated at the end of each training and certificates will be issued upon completion.

Project target group

The project will focus on.

- Youth between the age of 18 to 35
- Girls at high school and vacation
- Community members of selected Districts in Uganda

Purpose of the project

To empower the youth and girls with soft skills and ICT skills to make them employable and able to start their own businesses amidst stiff competition and co-creation of science-based enterprises that can boost livelihoods of people.

Goal of the project

1. To make sure that youth and girls are skilled for employment
2. To enable the youth and girls to manage 21st century careers
3. To enable the youth and young girls to learn and earn using technology
4. To create Mindset, change and orientation to Business as first choice for a successful career pathway plan among the youth and girls.

Objectives of the project

- i. To enhance youth entrepreneurial productivity and competitiveness in vocational practice.
- ii. To provide employment relevant knowledge and skills and nurture attitude of the young people in secondary Schools.
- iii. To equip unemployed youth and school leavers with employable and marketable skills and moral rehabilitation

Outcome

Youth and girls have improved knowledge and skills needed for 21st century careers.

Impact

To reduce unemployment at district regional and national levels.

Conclusion

From the discussions and arguments, we can assert the following from the barriers to gainful employment of youth and girls due to lack of employable skills, business and life skills commonly known as soft skills which makes it difficult for them to compete in the employment market. Learning these skills will not only make the youth more employable but will enable them to become lifelong learners with ability to study from wherever they may be conveniently and flexibly while empowering themselves not to only look at issues locally but also globally with the aim of building peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many youths to seek for skills that can help them earn income by using technology. However, majority of them can't access programs from which they can learn these relevant skills hence need other curriculum designed.

The current skilling programs in Uganda have helped girls stay in school, gain interest in mathematics and science subjects as well as gaining other skills such as critical thinking, creativity, typing and writing skills, and others have been able to reach their full potential with the ability to write outstanding CVs, excel in job interviews and secure parttime and full jobs.

With increased awareness creation these skills can reach out to millions of youths in all universities, high school students and those out of school in Uganda and in the East African region. Finally, students need to continuously learn newer topics and technologies that are sort out for by employers and customers in the 21st century.

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