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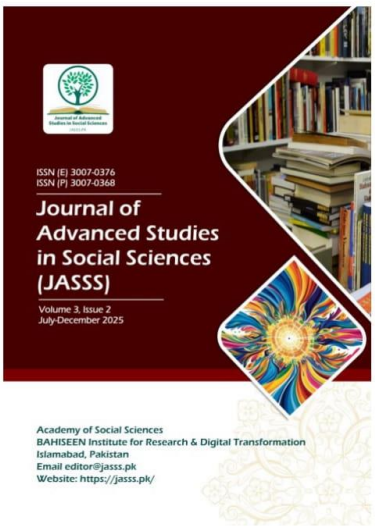

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Integrating Employability Skills in University Programmes: A Qualitative Inquiry into Curricular Practices and Challenges at Selected Universities in Zambia

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Abstract

The increasing global demand for a workforce equipped with relevant employability skills has placed higher education institutions at the centre of preparing graduates for the 21st-century labour market. This study examined the curricular practices and challenges of integrating employability skills into Zambian university programmes to highlight possible strategies for enhancing graduate readiness for the labour market. Using a qualitative research approach, a case study design was employed to gain insights into the curricular practices and challenges associated with integrating employability skills into university programmes at two universities in Zambia. The study comprised a total of 106 participants, consisting of 96 students and 10 key informants, including lecturers and administrators from two universities, A and B, in Zambia. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from administrators and lecturers. Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorise common themes that emerged in curricular practices and challenges of integrating employability skills training in academic programmes. The study revealed that the two universities employed various practices to integrate employability skills into their degree programmes. These practices included embedding employability skills training into course content, practical work, simulations, group assignments, and industrial attachments. However, challenges such as faculty competence gaps, limited time for practical aspects, weak links between industry and academia, and inadequate structured integration of employability skills in the programmes persisted. The study recommended, among other things, the strengthening of industry partnerships with higher learning institutions, enhancing faculty development programmes, revising curricula by working in collaboration with HEA and labour industry organisations to integrate systematic skills, and increasing financial and logistical support for students' industrial attachments. Such strategies could help bridge the employability gap and align university education with labour market demands, and ultimately improve graduate work readiness and employability.

Keywords: Higher Education, Employability skills, Integration, Curricular Practices, Challenges, Zambian

Introduction and background

The increasing global demand for a workforce equipped with relevant employability skills has placed higher education institutions at the centre of preparing graduates for the labour market. For Zambia, achieving this is critical to realising the Vision 2030 goal of transforming the country into a middle-income nation through access to quality education and skills development for all (GRZ, 2006). This approach is also supported by the African and global development agenda (African Union Commission, 2015; United Nations, 2015). Employability skills, which encompass a combination of technical expertise, soft skills, and practical experience, are essential for ensuring that graduates successfully transition into the labour market (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). These skills include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, and digital literacy (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). Curricular practices encompass pedagogical methods used by universities to integrate employability skills training into their undergraduate degree programmes, promoting graduate work readiness. Farooqui and Gupta (2022) argue that it is essential to introduce employability skills training in educational institutions, such as universities, through targeted participatory strategies. Higher education thus has traditionally served as a pathway to career advancement and economic mobility (Ahmed, 2024). With globalisation, internationalisation and a dramatic rise in for-profit institutions, the role of higher education is being redefined. Universities are expected to prepare their students for a complex society that demands for employees with diverse skills and capabilities (Cheng et al., 2022).

In Zambia, many university programmes have been criticised for being inadequate in equipping graduates with critical employability skills needed in the industry (Moono & Rankin, 2013). This has resulted in several university graduates being unprepared for work upon entering the labour market (Mwelwa, Lebeloane, & Mawela, 2021). In addition, Mwelwa, Lebeloane and Mawela (2021) found that employers were less satisfied with graduates' demonstration of employability skills. With the rapidly evolving labour market demands, this calls for rethinking educational delivery in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Zambia to prioritise employability as a key outcome. While previous studies have examined the importance of employability skills and their impact on graduate outcomes (Mwelwa etal, 2021), there is a limited body of research focusing on the specific curriculum practices used to integrate employability skills training into higher education curricula in Zambia. Moreover, the existing literature primarily focuses on global or regional contexts, with limited attention to the role of local institutions and structures in promoting graduate work readiness (Tomlinson, 2012; Abelha et al., 2020; Amarathunga et al., 2024). This underscores the need for context-specific insights into curriculum effectiveness and industry expectations in Zambia. This study, therefore, examined the curricular practices and challenges of integrating employability skills training into higher education programmes in two universities in Zambia to highlight the potential strategies for enhancing graduate readiness for the labour market.

Research Questions

This paper answered the following two questions:

1. What were the curriculum practices through which employability skills training was integrated into selected university degree programmes?
2. What challenges did the selected universities face in integrating employability skills training into their degree programmes?

Theoretical Framing

This study employed Student Identity Theory as its theoretical framework to explain graduate work readiness through the acquisition of employability skills in university programmes, positing that students attend higher education not only for academic learning but also to cultivate a sense of purpose and identity essential for professional life (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Central to the theory are seven interconnected identity-development vectors, including developing competence, managing emotions, establishing identity, and developing purpose, which unfold uniquely in each student and shape the attributes necessary for workplace performance (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 9). As students master disciplinary knowledge and skills, their self-identity concurrently evolves into that of competent graduates, thereby enhancing their work readiness (Lounsbury et al., 2008). By emphasising active, participatory identity formation, the theory provides a robust lens for examining how curricular practices in Zambian higher education can integrate and reinforce employability skills, justifying its adoption to explore the challenges and possible enablers of curriculum design aimed at fostering essential professional attributes (Daniels & Brooker, 2014; Umar & Zubair, 2024).

Literature Review

Employability skills Training in the context of the study

Employability skills, also known as generic skills, generic competencies, core skills, or underpinning skills, refer to transferable capabilities essential for securing and sustaining employment, as well as progressing within an organisation (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). The term skill encompasses values, identity, and personal attributes, highlighting that employability extends beyond technical expertise. These skills enable individuals to contribute effectively to an enterprise's strategic goals and realise their potential. They encompass a blend of personal attributes and generic work-related competencies valued by employers (Curtis & McKenzie, 2002), including communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and teamwork. While definitions vary across the literature (Pitman & Broomhall, 2009), there is consensus that employability skills are critical to career success and are shaped by both formal education and life experiences outside the university context. However, students may not always recognise the career-enhancing value of such experiences. Consequently, governments and educational institutions often integrate opportunities to develop these competencies into academic programmes, assigning tasks and activities designed to strengthen students' readiness for the labour market. This approach ensures graduates possess both the technical and interpersonal skills necessary for long-term employability.

Graduate Work Readiness and Employability Skills Training

Work readiness is a relatively new and still-developing construct in career development and training literature, with no universal agreement on its definition or the specific skills and attributes it entails (Nasheeda, 2019). Despite this lack of consensus, it is widely recognised as a key selection criterion for predicting graduate potential in the workforce. O'Banion (2011) defines it as the extent to which graduates possess attitudes and attributes that prepare them for workplace success, with graduates here referring to adult students over the age of 20 who have completed undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Hart (2008) frames a work-ready individual as one who has the foundational and occupation-specific skills identified through job analysis or occupational profiles, noting

that the importance and level of these skills vary by occupation. Brady (2010) adds that work readiness encompasses personal attributes, worker traits, and coping mechanisms necessary to secure and retain employment, distinguishing these from academic or technical competencies such as literacy and numeracy.

However, a disconnect exists between students' and employers' perceptions of readiness: students often overvalue institutional prestige, personal or professional connections, and high GPAs, while employers place less emphasis on these factors (O'Banion, 2011; Nasheeda, 2019). This misalignment reflects broader fragmentation in the conceptualisation of work readiness within research. Importantly, recent studies, including Mwelwa etal (2021), highlight that targeted employability skills training, integrating both foundational and occupation-specific competencies, can bridge these perception gaps, enhance alignment with labour market expectations, and significantly promote graduate work readiness.

Higher Education and Graduate Employability Skills

Research has shown that employers advocate for the integration of practical skills development into university programmes, with a view that a closer alignment between graduate work readiness and desired employability skills would follow as a result (Finch et al., 2013). Academic degrees are increasingly valued for their relevance to industry needs rather than their intrinsic worth. With the rapidly evolving labour market demands, universities face increasing pressure to equip graduates with the practical skills, competencies, and experiences that align with employer expectations. There is evidence that university programmes are not producing work-ready graduates. For instance, there is a worldwide concern that students are graduating from their university programmes without the skills necessary for their future careers (de la Harpe, Radloff, and Wyber, 2000; Moono & Rankin, 2013; Iwara, 2025). This highlights an existing difference between the academic and industry perspectives on the definition and understanding of the concept of work readiness, placing students in a position where the skills taught to them at university to prepare them for the workforce are not aligned with the demands of their employers in the respective industry. This implies that for graduates to be employable, employability skills have to be fully integrated into the Zambian higher education curricula.

Curricular practices for integrating employability skills training in university programmes

Incorporating employability skills training into university curricula is a viable solution to bridging the significant gap between the skills of graduates and the demands of the work environment (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Previous studies have demonstrated that universities can integrate employability skills directly into their curricula (Koseda et al., 2024). In other words, employability should be embedded in curriculum design. This includes designing courses and modules with real-world applications and encouraging problem-solving, teamwork, and critical thinking. Research has shown that courses can use industry-related case studies and incorporate assignments that reflect job-related tasks, making learning more relevant to the workplace (Sreeramana, Suresh, & Pavithra, 2015).

Additionally, embedding transferable skills is one method to integrate employability skills. Universities can integrate employability skills, like teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, across the curriculum to align academic learning with real-world

applications (Scott et al., 2019). Students, for instance, may engage in practical exercises across their degree programme to develop these skills progressively (Scott et al., 2019).
Another practical approach is offering specialised employability skills modules, often in the final year, which directly address job readiness and industry-relevant skills. These modules may include activities such as curriculum vitae writing, mock interviews, and job application workshops, facilitated by external experts to ensure industry alignment (Dearing, 1997; Cole & Tibby, 2013). Literature has also shown that work-based learning and internships are effective methods for integrating employability skills into university programmes (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016; Mwelwa & Mawela, 2021). Programmes that offer internships, placements, or work-based learning experiences provide students with hands-on exposure to the working environment, building specific job skills and confidence (Iredale et al., 2013; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Guardia et al., 2021).
Furthermore, there is evidence that industry engagement and guest lectures are effective methods for integrating employability skills into university programmes (Srinivas, Suresh, & Aithal, 2015). Programmes that include partnerships with industry enable students to participate in activities such as guest lectures, assessments, and mock assessment centres, helping them apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. This ensures students' positive responses to industry involvement, as it provides hands-on learning and clearer expectations of industry standards (Scott et al., 2019). Engaging with industry experts and incorporating guest lectures from professionals may provide students with current insights into industry demands and trends. Collaboration with industry professionals in delivering specific modules or courses helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical skills required in the workplace (Sreeramana, Suresh, & Pavithra, 2015; Chew et al., 2023). Through industry visits, students gain firsthand exposure to workplace environments and industry practices.
Higher education curriculum practices, such as soft skills development seminars, have also been found to equip students with employability skills for graduate work readiness (Srinivas, etal., 2015; Scott et al., 2019). Seminars focused on developing essential soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and time management, are crucial in ensuring that graduates effectively adapt to the workplace. These seminars are typically structured as stand-alone sessions or integrated into regular coursework to ensure that students gain essential interpersonal skills that enhance their employability (Srinivas, etal., 2015). In addition, other methods may include career services and mentoring programmes (Kaufman, 2013). University career centres can provide career counselling, resume-building workshops, and interview preparation. Mentoring programmes where students are paired with alumni or professionals in their field of interest offer valuable networking opportunities and guidance. Other methods may include reflective practice and career planning (Scott et al., 2019). Higher Education Institutions also encourage students to actively reflect on their skills and career aspirations through frameworks like CareerEDGE, which integrates career development learning, experience, and emotional intelligence (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Integrating these curricular practices into higher education programmes, however, may come with a host of its own challenges.

Challenges faced by higher learning institutions in integrating employability skills training into their programmes.

As the job market continues to evolve, the demand for graduates with robust employability skills has increased significantly (Amarathunga et al., 2024). Employability skills, including critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, have

become crucial for graduates to transition successfully into the workforce. However, universities may face several challenges in integrating employability skills training into their programmes, especially in most African universities and in Zambia in particular. These, among others, include challenges occasioned by skills mismatch, curriculum rigidity, resource constraints for faculty training and reskilling, and weak institutional and student agency to participate in skills development programmes such as internships, as highlighted below.

One of the primary challenges is the misalignment between the skills taught in universities and the industry's needs (Iwara, 2025). Hart (2008) highlighted that there is often a disconnect between academic curricula and the practical skills required by employers. This misalignment can result in graduates who are well-versed in theoretical knowledge (Mbwambo, 2024) but lack the practical skills necessary for workplace success (Andrews & Higson, 2008). In addition, the traditional structure of university curricula can be a significant barrier to integrating employability skills training. Many higher education institutions have rigid curricular frameworks that make it challenging to incorporate new courses or modify existing ones to include employability skills (Curtis & McKenzie, 2002; Tight, 2023). The need to meet accreditation standards and the slow process of curriculum reform further complicate efforts to integrate employability skills training.

Another critical challenge is engaging faculty members in the process of integrating employability skills into their teaching. Some faculty members may lack the necessary training and experience to teach these skills effectively (Curtis & McKenzie, 2002; Mwamba, 2025). This aligns well with the argument that teaching involves not just mastery of content but also the ability to communicate it, inspire students, and adapt to their diverse learning needs. There is no evidence to suggest that productive researchers are inherently skilled instructors, and this disconnect has significant implications for student success (San Francisco, Bay University, 2024). Further**,** resource constraints also pose a significant challenge for many universities. Implementing employability skills training requires additional funding for curriculum development, training materials, and faculty development programs (Lowden et al., 2011; Shoko, 2023).

In many cases, universities, especially in Africa, may struggle to allocate sufficient resources to these initiatives, particularly in the face of budget cuts and financial pressures (Pitman & Broomhall, 2009; Kamanga et al., 2023). As if that were not enough, engaging students in employability skills training can also be challenging. Students may not always see the immediate value of these skills and may prioritise their academic studies over employability training (Finch et al., 2013). Finch et al (2013) noted that motivating students to participate in employability programs requires clear communication of the benefits and relevance of these skills to their future careers. Lastly, institutional support is crucial for the successful integration of employability skills training. This support includes financial resources, strategic planning, and a commitment from university leadership (Bridgstock, 2009). Without strong institutional backing, efforts to integrate employability skills into academic programs may lack coherence and sustainability (Mwelwa & Mawela, 2021).

In many other African countries, the massification of higher education has led to a restriction of resources, which in turn has limited experiential learning (Guarda et al., 2021). Moreover, many universities are reportedly lacking robust career services, functional alumni networks, and employer engagement platforms (McCowan, 2014). This limits the integration of employability skills in the higher education programmes. In addition, Kinash et al. (2018) also highlight assessment as a key vehicle for developing employability skills, especially when

aligned with authentic real-world tasks, and suggest the need to involve employers in the assessment design to ensure relevance and authenticity. Although this is a welcome but also contested proposal, research indicates that many employers do not consider assessment as a factor in hiring, which suggests a disconnect between academic practices and workplace expectations (Kinash et al., 2018). Mbwambo (2024) also advocates for career management modules to prepare graduates for workplace demands by aligning university curricula with labour market needs, including the development of practical and transferable skills. He argues that such curriculum practices are not only important but also required to counter the perception that employers report dissatisfaction with non-disciplinary attributes in graduates, despite their adequate subject knowledge.

From the foregoing, we have highlighted that integrating employability skills training into university programmes is essential for preparing graduates for the workforce. However, many universities in Africa, and Zambia in particular, face numerous challenges in this endeavour, including misalignment with industry needs, curriculum rigidity, faculty engagement, resource constraints, student disengagement, and the need for institutional support. These and many other factors continue to make employability skills training for students a significant challenge in most higher education institutions, as they aim to equip students with 21st-century labour market skills (Kaufman, 2013).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising a case study design to conduct an in-depth investigation into how two universities in Zambia integrate employability skills into their undergraduate curricula. This specific design was selected because it is exceptionally well-suited for exploring complex, real-world phenomena within their natural context, providing a holistic and richly detailed understanding that a quantitative approach might miss (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodology is suitable for addressing how and why questions related to contemporary events, thereby facilitating a precise examination of the practices and challenges through the perspectives of stakeholders involved in curriculum development and implementation in higher education institutions (Yin, 2018). The design guided the collection of multifaceted data through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, facilitating a comprehensive analysis grounded in the realities of the selected academic institutions.

Population and Sampling

The participants in this study were drawn from two universities in Zambia, one public (University A) and one private (University B), chosen for their diverse undergraduate programmes. The paper focuses on qualitative data from 10 key informants, including Lecturers and Heads of Departments as administrators, out of a total sample of 106 participants. A purposive sampling technique was used to deliberately select these individuals based on their direct experience and in-depth knowledge of curriculum development and the integration of employability skills (Vasileiou, Barnett, & Thorpe, 2018). This non-probability method ensures the selection of information-rich cases that can provide detailed and relevant insights necessary for addressing the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). While a larger study involved students, the analysis here is based solely on the rich data provided by these 10 key informants to gain a clear understanding of institutional practices and the challenges faced in integrating employability skills training within the programmes offered. The study participants, purposively selected, were involved in the

implementation of 10 undergraduate programmes. These included the Bachelor of Arts in Development Studies, Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Arts in Economics, Bachelor of Accountancy, Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Public Administration, Bachelor of Banking and Finance, and Bachelor of Business Administration, among others.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis of Data

Qualitative data for this study were collected using semi-structured interview guides from the Lecturers and administrators, a method chosen to gain in-depth insights and facilitate consistent data collection while allowing for probing into participants' opinions (Babbie, 2013). Two distinct semi-structured interview guides were developed, for lecturers and the Heads of Department. Interviews were conducted with administrators (department heads) and lecturers from the purposively selected schools at two universities in Lusaka District. The selection of these participants was crucial for obtaining rich, elaborated understandings of the research problem.

The interview responses were subsequently analysed using both descriptive and thematic analysis. Initially, interview audio recordings were imported into NVivo 10 for accurate transcription. Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 10, was then applied to systematically identify, categorise, and interpret recurring patterns and common themes within the transcribed data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involved a phased coding process to create meaningful thematic ideas, which were then critically examined, organised, and refined into distinct thematic categories on curricular practices and challenges for integrating employability skills training in university academic programmes of study.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study's findings was established using Guba's (1981) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through the rigorous application of an appropriate methodology to ensure data quality. To ensure transferability, the findings were contextualised with existing literature, highlighting both similarities with previous research and novel contributions to the body of knowledge. Dependability was addressed through an audit inquiry, which involved a thorough examination of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. Finally, confirmability was promoted by keeping detailed reflexive notes on the researcher's personal feelings, biases, and insights immediately following each participant interview.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with strict ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. HSSREC IRB 00006464) prior to the commencement of any research activities. Following this, institutional permission was secured from the selected universities, allowing the researchers to engage with the study participants. The principle of voluntary participation was upheld, as every individual freely consented to be part of the study without any form of coercion. As part of the informed consent process, participants also gave explicit permission for their interviews to be recorded. All data collected were handled with maximum confidentiality to protect participant privacy.

Findings

The study revealed some common curricular practices and challenges faced by the two higher learning institutions (Universities A and B) in integrating employability skills training into their academic programmes. These were as shown in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Common Curriculum Practices and Challenges for Integrating Employability Skills Training

Some Curriculum Practices	Challenges associated with the integration of the Employability Skills Training
Practical Work & Simulations	Faculty Competence Gaps
Group Assignments & Business Idea Development	Time & Resource Constraints
Peer Teaching & Class Exercises	Theory-Dominant Course Outlines
Industrial Attachments/Internship Placements	Lack of Systematic Integration
Professional Organisation Involvement	Weak Faculty Appreciation
Career Workshops	Limited Industry Collaboration
Professional Development Courses	Student Attachment Difficulties
Industry-Specific Projects	Voluntary Nature of Attachments
	Misaligned Expectations

What were the curriculum practices through which employability skills training was integrated into selected university study programmes?

From the data that emerged, it was evident that universities integrate employability skills training into their programmes through various curriculum practices and approaches. It was observed from interviews with university administrators and lecturers that the integration of employability skills involved incorporating practical aspects into lessons, simulations, group assignments, field trips, presentations, peer teaching, industrial attachments, and internships, as highlighted in Table 1.1.

Incorporating skills into course content

The study revealed that lecturers integrated employability skills, such as emotional intelligence, into specific courses. For example, Conflict Management was found to be used as a platform to teach emotional intelligence in handling and communicating with people. During interviews with lecturers, one lecturer commented that:

> *For instance, when you talk about things like emotional intelligence, one of the courses I teach is Conflict Management. In teaching Conflict Management, I integrate the concept of emotional intelligence, recognising the inevitability of conflicts in society due to diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Despite following a specific course content, I incorporate these aspects casually into lessons, often during illustrations, to emphasise how emotional intelligence is crucial in handling and communicating with people. Similarly, in research courses, students are exposed to various methods with practical applications, using computer-based statistical packages such as SPSS and Epi Info as an integral part of the course structure. (KII, Lecturer 1, University B).*

Practical work and simulations

It was observed that practical work was highly emphasised, and simulations were conducted to expose students to real-world scenarios. This included hands-on experiences, presentations, and field reports, providing practical exposure to the work students might engage in post-graduation. When asked if practical work was integrated into their teaching, some participants responded:

> *So, to be able to help them we do practical work, sometimes we do simulations, we make them do presentations. Sometimes also they go out in the field and have them write field reports as a practical way to expose them to some of the work they will be engaged in once they graduate. (KII, Lecturer 4, University A)*

Another one added that:

> *Yeah, so, I think simulations are very good because when you simulate it prepares them and whatever the experience after school, it doesn't come as a shock or something strange to them because they had at once been in that particular position. Sometimes the message may not be conveyed accurately when you are just speaking to them, but when they put themselves in that particular position, I think it helps them remember and visualise how it could be when they eventually leave school. (KII, Lecturer 6, University B)*

It is evident from the lecturers' narratives that practical work and simulations were highly considered and used to integrate employability skills training into the lessons.

Practical group assignments and projects

It was also found that group assignments were common and used to foster teamwork and identify group leadership roles. Participants explained that students were given practical assignments, including group projects where they developed business ideas based on the knowledge gained in class. Additionally, data analysis projects were assigned, covering the entire process from data gathering to cleaning and analysis. These assignments frequently required applying theoretical knowledge to real-life situations, such as market structures, car wash businesses, mobile hair salons, and soft drink businesses, as highlighted below. When asked what other approaches were used to promote the acquisition of employability skills, one of the key informants submitted that:

> *In managerial economics, we give learners group assignments, that is what I have done even now. The idea is for them to be able to work in groups and when they are working in groups, we need to identify who the leader is, we need to identify who the supporting people are and also the brains behind that group...issues to do with mobile hair saloon, issues to do with setting up a soft drink business and then try to see how the classroom knowledge applies to things like profit maximisations, short run versus long run cost. So, those are some of the approaches we are using. Sometimes, we give them class exercises where there is peer teaching, one comes to the front to solve a problem, which is also part of helping. (KII, Lecturer 7, University B).*

Another respondent shared that:

> *One example I have already cited is to give them a practical assignment, such as a group assignment where they work together to develop a business idea and then apply the knowledge they gathered in class. The other aspect is to give them a data analysis project where they can go from gathering data to cleaning and analysis from the start. So, those are some of the two I can speak of. (KII, Lecturer 1, University B).*

These Responses indicate that most lecturers emphasised practical application of knowledge and collaborative skills through group work. Students were assigned group projects, encouraging them to collaborate and apply their classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios.

Peer Teaching and Class Exercises

It was also established that lecturers used peer teaching to integrate employability skills into the lessons. Peer teaching was incorporated into class exercises where students were called to the front to solve given problems and scenarios. This approach helped reinforce learning and understanding of concepts through peer teaching. One of the lecturers testified to this by saying:

> *Sometimes, we give them class exercises where there is peer teaching, one comes to the front to solve a problem. (KII, Lecturer 3, University A)*

Industrial Attachments and Exposure to Actual Industry

Furthermore, the study found that universities permitted students to undertake industrial attachments, providing them with practical experience in real-world work environments. Higher Education Institution Administrators and Lecturers were of the view that exposure to actual industries helps students bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

When inquired about, giving students exposure to real work experiences, the responses included the following:

> *What we are doing to prepare the students is teaching them both the theory and the practical aspects. We don't just teach them the theory but also the practical aspect. We provide them with the opportunity to undertake an industrial attachment, and through this experience, they learn how to work effectively once they have graduated. (KII, Administrator, University A)*

One of the lecturers also intimated that:

> *The other point I have already stated is that we now allow them to be exposed to actual industry so that they can distinguish between the theoretical and practical aspects. (KII, Lecturer 2, University A)*

Formal assessments and internship evaluation

Regarding the use of assessments to promote the development of employability skills, the study found that assessments were conducted through reports generated during internships and industrial attachments. Participants explained that supervisors from the organisations where students were attached played a key role in the assessment and provided feedback on their performance. Formal assessments were conducted based on students' performance in various activities and internships. Students were evaluated on factors such as seriousness, motivation, and preparedness, reflecting their ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings outside their tertiary institutions.

Asked about how student evaluations were done with respect to promoting employability skills, most lecturers supported the views below.

For example, one of the lecturers explained that:

> *Yes, so, how we assess it [internship attachment], wherever it has been attached, there is a report, and we follow it. So, once they are attached to the organisation, we visit different organisations, follow them, and observe what they are doing. Then, the supervisors to whom they have been attached also conduct assessments, which they submit to us, and we follow up to see what they are doing in that organisation. That is how we do the assessment. (KII, Lecturer 6, University B)*

Another participant buttressed this, saying:

> *We conduct formal assessments based on their actions. Even in the internships I have mentioned, learners are assessed based on their seriousness, motivation, and*

preparedness by examining their tasks and how well they are completed. (KII, Lecturer 5, University A)

These views suggest that integrating employability skills training involves various ways of assessing the practical work done by students during internship attachments. It is also worth noting that higher education institutions use different curricular practices to promote the acquisition of employability skills among students. However, the promotion of employability skills also comes with its own challenges that must be identified and remedied.

What challenges did the universities face in integrating employability skills training into their study programmes?

In answering this question, the study revealed several challenges related to integrating employability skills training into university programmes in higher education institutions, including gaps in faculty competence, time and resource constraints, theory-dominant course outlines, and a lack of systematic integration of employability skills, among others, as shown in Table 1.1

Faculty Competence Gap

One of the key challenges highlighted in integrating practical skills into higher education curricula was the inadequate faculty competencies to teach practical skills, primarily due to a lack of industrial experience. One lecturer noted that:

Sometimes, particularly if you look at it..., sometimes it is very difficult, sometimes we have lecturers, maybe they come straight from school, and they don't have the industrial skills, I think it would be challenging for them to be able to impart such skills into the students because they have never really had experience of the outside world. That is why at this institution typically when they are recruiting lecturers, they usually like to recruit those that have an industrial background because then they have confluence of both the industry and academia and they are able to give a balanced view to the students on how it is out there and how can you combine what you are getting here and what you expect to find out there. (KII, Lecturer 6, University B)

In agreeing with the view of KII Lecturer 6, another male lecturer with industrial experience also added that:

So, some of the challenges could be in that area where you may have a lecturer coming straight from school and do not have experience about the outside world. (KII, Lecturer 7, University B)

This highlights a concern about the potential challenges faced by lecturers who enter the profession directly from training without prior industrial experience.

Limited time and resources to teach practical aspects

The study revealed that lecturers complained of having limited time and resources for the practical aspects of teaching. Lecturers explained that they faced challenges in providing hands-on experiences due to the structure of the course outlines, which did not give them adequate time to expose students to practical lessons. One of them had the following to say about the resource limitations at their institution:

As I have said, the role of the university is not to teach industry staff to learners; learners need principles, so the university equips them with those principles. The demand now is that the university should teach learners the

> *practical aspects, which is one of the biggest challenges. First of all, we have the course outline; how can they apply if they don't even know? So, we have to teach them, and time is a factor. So, if we teach them one concept and we want them to see how it works at the Bank of Zambia, it defeats the whole purpose. So, that's one of the biggest challenges. Time, resources and also the demand from the corporate world. (KII, Lecturer 1, University B)*

It is evident that teaching practical aspects is a significant challenge as universities primarily focus on imparting principles rather than industry-specific skills. Participants highlighted the absence of an organised system for integrating practical skills into the learning process. The lack of appreciation and value for integrating skills into courses was noted, indicating a potential gap in recognising the importance of skills development alongside course content. One of the lecturers lamented that:

> *There is no organised system for how these skills are to be integrated. If there were an organised manner in which these skills are to be integrated, I think it would be much easier. However, we don't have an organised way in which these skills are integrated into the learning process. (KII, Lecturer 3, University A)*

In agreeing with the views of KII lecturer 3, another female lecturer also commented that:

> *Another thing is that people often focus solely on the course content, ignoring the skills. The lack of appreciation and value in integrating these skills into the courses. (KII, Lecturer 5, University B)*

Weak links between industry and university

Another challenge identified in integrating employability skills training into university degree programmes was the perceived weak connection between the industry and the university. Lecturers felt that this lack of a strong link was a challenge, leading to both academia and industry operating somewhat independently, in silos, without a seamless integration of employability skills and knowledge. The following were some of the excerpts from the interviews:

The first respondent indicated that:

> *The other challenge is that there are weak links between the industry and the university, resulting in a lack of connection. As a result, the university tends to operate independently, and the industry also tends to operate independently (KII, Lecturer 1, University B).*

This was buttressed by another vew that:

> *I think that when you see that there are currently very weak connections between the industry and the university, which hinders the integration of skills, this has led to both parties operating independently of each other, instead of working hand in hand together (KII, Lecturer 7, University B)*

The lack of strong linkages between higher educational institutions and the labour industry further exacerbates students' challenges in securing internship opportunities in the labour market. Lecturers explained that most students faced challenges with the voluntary nature of their work during attachments, as well as issues with allowances.

One of them stated the following:

> *The challenges could be many, yeah. Sometimes, it is just difficult to have an opportunity or to have students accommodated in some industries. (KII, Lecturer 2, University A)*

Another added that:

> *The challenges..., our students once they are attached, they just do the voluntary work and so these are some of the challenges that they face moving from where they are and going for work on a daily basis. Maybe they are not given allowances in some industries and so, those are some of the challenges that we mostly face. So, on the part of the students who pose the most challenge to us, the upkeep and accommodation when they are attached. (KII, Lecturer 4, University A).*

The views from the study participants above highlight that most higher learning institutions, including universities, faced several obstacles in integrating employability skills training into their programmes to produce work-ready graduates.

Discussion

This study examined how Zambian universities incorporate employability skills training into their curricula and the challenges they encounter, revealing that institutions integrate these skills through hands-on activities, including practical work, simulations, group assignments, and peer teaching. Integrating these employability skills teaching directly into course units reflects the advocacy for embedding employability skills within core curricula. Andrews and Higson (2008) for instance, assert that curriculum design must foreground real-world applications, as mock trials, role-plays, and scenario-based exercises deliver authentic contexts where students refine their critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills (Sreeramana, Suresh, & Pavithra, 2015). Scott etal., (2019) further demonstrate that progressive skill development across diverse academic programmes cements transferable competencies, enabling students to connect discrete lessons into cohesive professional practices. Zambian universities' use of collaborative business-idea projects mirrors Koseda et al.'s (2024) argument that problem-solving tasks simulate entrepreneurial environments, preparing students for multifaceted workplace challenges. From the perspective of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) identity formation theory, these active-learning strategies promote the development of competence and interpersonal engagement. As students negotiate group dynamics and assume teaching roles, they internalise self-efficacy and establish professional identities. Nonetheless, whereas literature recommends a vertically integrated skills trajectory spanning all academic years, the study established that programmes in the two higher learning institutions, applied these practices sporadically, often confined to certain courses in the programmes, limiting cumulative identity development and hindering students' capacity to weave employability capabilities seamlessly into their evolving self-concepts (Sreeramana et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2019).

The study established that work-based learning practices were also used in some programmes to promote the development of employability skills. It is thus worth noting that work-based learning practices, including industrial attachments, internship placements, and industry-specific projects, have garnered significant support as cornerstone strategies for integrating employability (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016; Mwelwa & Mawela, 2021). Empirical studies confirm that sustained field placements, evaluated through reflective reports and employer feedback, expedite students' transition from theoretical knowledge to practical competence (Iredale et al., 2013; Guardia et al., 2021). Within Chickering and Reisser's identity framework, immersive workplace experiences activate the vectors of developing competence, managing emotions, and establishing

identity. As students navigate real-world demands, they crystallise their professional self-concepts and develop resilience. The Zambian context echoes these outcomes but also presents challenges, such as logistical barriers, limited voluntary participation, and inadequate incentives, which restrict the depth and duration of attachments, thereby attenuating their identity-forming potential. Research highlights the importance of institutionally coordinated, credit-bearing internships that integrate formative assessment with employer co-design (Kinash, Crane, & Judd, 2018). Without such systemic support, students receive fragmented field experiences that may enhance discrete technical skills but fall short of nurturing a stable, purpose-driven graduate identity capable of adapting to evolving labour market exigencies of the 21st Century (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

The study also revealed that industry engagement practices, such as industry-specific projects, were used at the two universities to promote employability skills training. Industry engagement through guest lectures, professional-body involvement, mentoring, and reflective practice rounds out a comprehensive curriculum design, as evidenced by Srinivas, Suresh, and Aithal (2015). Zambian universities that partner with employers for seminars, assessment centres, and site visits enable students to calibrate academic learning against current industry standards (Scott et al., 2019; Chew et al., 2023). Career centres offering counselling, resume workshops, and alumni mentoring mirror best practices recommended by Kaufman (2013). Frameworks like CareerEDGE (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) advocate for ongoing reflective cycles to align personal aspirations with market realities. In terms of identity formation, these interventions support the development of interpersonal competence and confidence in others, as students engage with mentors and peers to test assumptions about workplace norms. However, we must caution ourselves that without strategic embedding and institutional commitment, these industry-infused activities risk remaining peripheral, diluting their impact on sustained identity growth (Bridgstock, 2009). To maximise outcomes, Zambian higher education institutions must institutionalise employer engagement within core curricula, ensuring that external expertise and reflective practice coalesce to produce graduates with coherent, adaptable professional identities primed for both local and global labour markets.

Despite the efforts to integrate the employability skills training in the university programmes, the study revealed that the proliferation of theory-driven curricula at the two higher learning institutions may result in the misalignment between academic content and industry requirements, mirroring the global trend documented by Iwara (2025), who argues that graduates are often theoretically proficient but practically deficient. Hart (2008) underscored this disconnect, noting that rigid course outlines prioritise disciplinary knowledge over applied skills, a gap further evidenced by Mbwambo's (2024) finding that higher education curricula in most higher education institutions in Africa and Zambia, inclusive, seldom incorporate real-world tasks. Andrews and Higson (2008) argue that embedding critical employability competencies, such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, into the curriculum is essential for authentic work readiness. When courses remain dominated by theory, students miss opportunities to engage in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors of developing competence and managing emotions through concrete practice, thereby stalling the evolution of their professional identity (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). The absence of systematic frameworks for skills integration exacerbates this misalignment, leaving each institution or department to navigate employability training in isolation. Without strong adherence to a unified higher

education curricular framework, students struggle to internalise a coherent set of professional attributes, which hinders their sense of purpose and dampens their motivation to transition theory into action. This foundational challenge not only misfits academic timelines with industry expectations but also curtails students' capacity to see themselves as competent actors in the workplace, undermining both their emerging self-identity and overall work readiness.

Faculty competence gaps and resource constraints represent another tier of obstacles hindering the integration of employability skills in the two Zambian universities. Curtis and McKenzie (2002) highlighted that teaching employability skills demands both content mastery and pedagogical adaptability, qualities not guaranteed among academics whose careers have been rooted exclusively in research. Mwamba (2025) and San Francisco Bay University (2024) similarly report that lecturers without industrial experience struggle to contextualise theory in practice, limiting their ability to model and mentor students through Chickering and Reisser's vectors of establishing identity and developing purpose. Furthermore, Lowden et al. (2011) and Shoko (2023) document the acute scarcity of funds for faculty reskilling and development, leaving many instructors underqualified to design or deliver skill-based courses. Pitman and Broomhall (2009) and Kamanga et al. (2023) describe how budgetary restrictions force universities to streamline curricula, often at the expense of experiential learning components. In such environments, overloaded course loads leave little time for simulations, case studies, or industry visits, which are essential for reinforcing a professional identity through hands-on engagement. As a consequence, students receive fragmented exposure to practical scenarios, which hinders their ability to integrate competence with self-awareness and purpose, critical identity vectors that underpin sustained employability and adaptability in shifting labour markets of the 21st Century.

Furthermore, another cluster of challenges relates to weak university-industry collaboration, which often tend to be transactional rather than strategic internship arrangements, and logistical barriers to student attachments. Guarda et al. (2021) note that African universities frequently lack robust partnerships with employers, a shortfall echoed in McCowan's (2014) observation of underdeveloped alumni networks and career services. Mwelwa and Mawela (2021) emphasise that limited industry engagement curbs opportunities for co-designed courses or employer-led assessments, while Kinash et al. (2018) argue that authentic, employer-aligned evaluation schemes are vital for embedding employability skills. In Zambia, the voluntary nature of attachments, combined with insufficient incentives and financial support, reduces student participation. As Finch et al. (2013) demonstrate, clear incentives are key to driving engagement. Misaligned expectations, where academic timelines conflict with employer schedules, further complicate placements, resulting in sporadic and short-lived interactions that may be insufficient to promote graduate identity for work readiness. From an identity formation perspective, these deficiencies disrupt students' progress along the vectors of developing competence and purpose. Without sustained immersion in professional settings, students cannot construct a stable graduate identity or internalise the norms, values, and emotional resilience required for workplace success (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Thus, a lack of strategic, well-resourced industry partnerships hinders the very experiential processes that forge a confident, purpose-driven professional self.

Lastly, student agency and institutional support emerged as pivotal factors shaping employability outcomes in the two universities. Finch et al. (2013) reveal that students

often undervalue skill development activities when they perceive them as peripheral to academic assessment. In contrast, Bridgstock (2009) emphasises that strategic leadership is necessary to embed employability within institutional culture. Kaufman (2013) and Mwelwa and Mawela (2021) both argue that explicit policy frameworks, endorsed by university leadership and regulatory bodies, are crucial for the sustained integration of 21st-century skills. In the absence of coherent institutional backing, initiatives remain fragmented, diminishing students' engagement and thwarting the trajectory of identity development along Chickering and Reisser's vectors of managing emotions and establishing identity. Kinash et al. (2018) further argue that involving employers in assessment design legitimises skills training in the eyes of students, reinforcing their professional identity. When universities fail to invest in career services, alumni networks, or employer engagement platforms, students lose channels through which to validate and refine their emerging self-concepts. Consequently, graduates lack the assurance and purpose necessary to navigate the transition from campus to career. Addressing these interrelated challenges, through robust policy support, sustained institutional commitment, and authentic employer partnerships, is imperative for cultivating a graduate identity that resonates with both local and global labour-market expectations.

While the findings on curricular strategies revealed similarities in how the two universities integrate practical, real-world experiences, the study also highlighted distinct institutional challenges. For University A, these challenges included limited time and resources, a lack of systematic integration of employability skills into its curricula, and significant difficulties for students in finding and funding their internship placements. Conversely, the primary challenges for University B were a faculty competence gap, where some lecturers lacked the industrial experience to teach practical skills, and weak university-industry links, which hindered efforts to promote graduate work readiness.

From the foregoing, it is worthnoting that while the findings from the two higher learning instutitions considered in the study cannot be expressily generalised to other higher learning institutions in Zambia and over, the study highlight that higher learning institution employ various curricular practices to integrate employability skills taining in their academic programes to enhance the work readiness identity of the graduates, despite the challenges encountered in so doing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has shown that the two higher learning institutions in Zambia have made important strides in embedding employability skills into study programmes via practical work, simulations, group projects, peer teaching and industrial attachments. However, persistent gaps in faculty competence, curriculum adaptability and academia–industry engagement continue to leave graduates underprepared for the dynamic 21st-century labour market and stifle their professional identity formation in vectors such as competence, purpose and emotional management. To close this gap, higher learning institutions must explicitly map core competencies, communication, teamwork, digital literacy and problem-solving, onto every course outcome, establish cross-faculty employability courses co-designed with industry, and institute continuous curriculum reviews (with substantive updates every three years) that respond to evolving labour-market demands, while keeping the Higher Education Authority informed to ensure compliance with national standards. Simultaneously, the HEA should clearly incorporate employability metrics into accreditation criteria, such as the proportion of courses

featuring work-based learning and graduate internship placement rates, and require all new academic hires to undergo certified training in modern pedagogical methods and workplace immersion. This approach would strengthen teaching quality and enhance the real-world relevance of academic programmes.

In addition, deepening university–industry partnerships is equally essential through initiatives such as the formation of Memoranda of Understanding, guaranteeing structured internships, job-shadowing schemes, and joint research projects. There is also a need to create government-backed incentives to drive private-sector involvement in curriculum co-development, mentoring and in-company training rotations. Moreover, there is a need to foster exchange networks that enable graduates to test and expand their professional identities in diverse contexts, which is not just important but indispensable. Finally, implementing a national monitoring system to track graduate outcomes, such as employment rates, employer satisfaction, and identity-formation indicators, and using these data to inform continuous policy and curriculum refinements can help graduates acquire the employability skills that will render them work-ready. By pursuing these integrated reforms, anchored in robust quality assurance, deliberate policy action and sustained industry collaborations, Zambian higher learning institutions, supported by the Higher Education Authority and other key stakeholders from the state and labour industry organisations, can decisively bridge the employability gap and empower graduates to thrive across Zambia, the continent and beyond.

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