



Research Article

Balancing supply of skills with demand in the labour Market: higher education fundamental issue in Malawi

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Abstract

Development policies in Malawi have been directed towards economic growth and development through higher education. Thus, higher education remains critical to the resolution of the complex economic, technology and development challenges that faces Malawi and the entire African continent. The current higher education is expected to produce, engineers, technicians and artisans guided by the policy and the industry needs. The study adopted a descriptive method. Data was collected using semi-structured interview. The sample in this study included five (5) industry managers, five (5) training institutions managers. The participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study. The finding of the study reveals that there is weak link between training institution of higher learning and the industry which has affected both parties. The study has recommended that training system should respond to the education and economical policies and industry needs. The study further recommend for comprehensive industry training needs study and results from the study should inform the development of a substantive training program framework with clear outline guiding training providers for effective implementation of the higher education programmes.

Keywords: industry, higher education, skills, labour-market, tertiary education

INTRODUCTION

Malawi considers higher education to be an important component of the entire education system because of its role in creating and advancing new knowledge and skills through teaching and research (GoM, 2007). Education policies in Malawi describe tertiary education as post-secondary education which comprises teacher education, Technical and vocational education and training and higher education (university) (GoM, 2007). However, this paper will discuss higher education and tertiary education partly as one.

Teacher education addresses two key areas primary and secondary school teacher needs. It is aimed at quality and relevant teacher education at both primary and secondary levels. The primary teacher training is two year long, leading into a certificate in primary school teaching and the secondary school teacher training has two levels a diploma and degree programme. (GoM, 2007)

Technical Entrepreneurial Vocational Education and Training (TEVET) aims at orienting training to the needs of the labour market in addressing technical and vocational skills requirements. Based on the recognition of the role the TEVET sub-sector plays in the economy, the education sector is committed to provide qualified and competent skilled workforce to meet the needs of the economy(GoM, 2007).

The government of Malawi acknowledges the significance of producing adequate skilled and qualified human capital

to meet the development goals of the country. As such, higher education continues to play a key role in the generation of new knowledge and strengthening of skills. Higher education in Malawi is provided by both public and private universities that are scattered across the country. (GoM, 2007)

According to Teferra and Altbach (2004) if Africa is to succeed economically, culturally and politically it must have a strong post secondary sector, because academic institutions are central to the future. Bloom et al. (2006) appended that recent research findings indicate that expanding HE promotes faster technological catch-up and improves a country's ability to maximize its economic output. But the question remains, what incentives can be established to encourage training providers to organise training around this enhanced labour market and societal orientation?

The current higher education is expected to produce, engineers, technicians and artisans guided by the policy and the industry needs (GoM, 2007, 2012). However, this same bracket of education has been labeled producing not enough and ill prepared graduates. This means technical and vocational education and higher education are supposed to be connected because they serve the same market.

Balancing supply of skills with demand in the labour market constitutes one of the fundamental issues in skills development policy (Atonalli, 2008). Historically, however, since economic and technological change worldwide accelerated in the 1980s the inability of most higher education systems to adequately respond to these challenges can mostly be seen as a skills mismatch due to an insufficient demand orientation in higher education.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss higher education and industry situation and its impact on the economy, in order to initiate thoughts and action of addressing the disconnection between training institution and the industry which are expected to benefit from one another.

Literature Review

Recent research findings indicate that expanding HE promotes faster technological catch-up and improves a country's ability to maximize its economic output (Bloom et al., 2006). This emanates from the conviction that higher education if strategically positioned can provide knowledge for public benefit and human development (CHE, 2004). While higher education, remain critical to development, but the ability to supply knowledge and apply the knowledge and technological skills acquired for industry use remains central if higher education is to remain relevant for development (Varghese, 2004).

Since its inception, higher education has been experiencing limited accessibility by different groups of people in different countries (CHE, 2000). However, there have been some efforts by government of Malawi on access and equity by raising higher education enrolment numbers. The number of public universities has risen from one to four. There is also open market to opening private universities and the number has risen to more than ten (10) (Kufaine, 2014). There are also seven public technical colleges and more than fifteen (15) private technical colleges (TEVETA, 2009). In an effort to increase the number of artisans in the industry and widening access to technical and vocation education and training, the governing extended the responsibility of training TEVET public students to private technical colleges (Kufaine and Chitera, 2013). It appears emphasis is on increasing enrolment, very little about the consistence and relevance of knowledge in relation to education objective and industry needs.

The current economy and wealth of a country depends on its capacity to produce and that depends in turn on its possessing a labour force which is highly skilled and very flexible (Schot and Geels, 2007). For this, we need a better education and training system. However, most countries including Malawi draw policies, but few put in place the skills development strategies needed to implement them.

Chatterton and Goddard (2000) indicated that a core function of higher education has been to educate through dissemination of its knowledge. However, the challenge has been the type of knowledge and the relevance in African context. Teferra and Altbach (2004) pointed that universities in Africa have adopted the western model of academic organisation. This means that higher education in Africa is shaped and organised according to European model which may not be relevant to African industry.

Higher education expectations have been evolving over time, according to Chatterton and Goddard (2000) higher education is now expected to meet various needs of a more diverse clients population, new demands such as industry technology reform and changing skill demands and more locally based education. This makes higher education critical because the new demands require new kind of resources and new forms that enables higher education institutions to make relevant contributions to the industry. Thus, CHE(2004) append that higher education need to encompass, policy, strategies, plans, and infrastructure both as higher education system and higher education institutions in order to respond the higher education objectives and industry needs.

As earlier argued by Teferra and Altbach (2004) that if Africa is to succeed economically, culturally and politically it must have a strong post secondary sector, because academic institutions are central to the future. But the challenge has been what Teferra and Altbach (2004) indicated that most of the universities in Africa are prototype of the western model of academic organisation and this means that academic institutions in Africa are shaped by colonialism and organised

according to European model. This is evidenced by curriculum restricted to specific programs and language of instruction. Teferra and Altbach (2004) also reiterate that after more than forty (40) year of independence African higher education has not changed language of instruction, this shows Africa is preparing for its tomorrow using the knowledge models for the western perspective.

From Chatterton and Goddard (2000) point of view higher education is expected to meet various needs of a more diverse clients population. The needs are relatively new demands such as flexible structure for long life learning created by changing skill demands and more locally based education. They pointed that response to the new demands requires new kind of resources and new forms of management that enables higher education institutions to make a dynamic contributions to the development process (Varghese, 2004).

However, the context of higher education provision needs to change as a result of demands to create more industry, society relevant and sustainable education. But the challenge is to balance the needs of higher education institutions and the need of today and tomorrow industry (Godin and Gingras, 2000),

This is even more fundamental of late because the demand for skilled labour has risen significantly as a result of globalisation, changes in technology, the organization of work, new development policies, including the transition to a low carbon economy, and the recent international financial crises and subsequent worldwide recession (Antonelli, 2008).

Further, this skill mix in turn forms an essential component of a sustainable institutional and economic environment in which public and private enterprises enable growth, the generation of greater employment and income opportunities for all citizens, and whereby societies achieve their goals of economic development, good living standards and social progress (Antonelli, 2008) Consequently, there is a demand for a more skilled labour force, with more autonomous, adaptable and multi-functional workers. But the question remains: what incentives can be established to encourage training providers to organise training around this enhanced labour market and societal orientation?

In 1999 the Government of Malawi, through the Vision 2020 Paper, enacted a new TEVET system (TEVETA 2009). This system of training is integrated, demand driven, sustainable and autonomous, which responds in a flexible way to personal development needs as well as the labour market. The system is supposed to improve Malawians' knowledge, skills and attitudes through improved access to training, improved quality of instruction and increased equity (Kufaine and Chitera, 2013). Technical Entrepreneurial Vocational Education and Training Authority is therefore mandated to promote an integrated demand driven competency-based modular technical, entrepreneurial, vocational education and training and to monitor the skills gap in the labour market and to support the adoption of appropriate technologies (TEVETA, 2009).

The need for competent workforce to execute professional skills required is there, but can only be achieved if the curriculum concords with the technological needs of the industry. This means then, the supply of the competent workforce should involve all relevant stakeholders. The supply should be understood by the institutions for training of the workforce and the trainee according to the expectation of those formulating the policies, as well as the end user of the competent workforce. (Nelson and Nelson, 2002)

The workforce is expected to be coherent and work as one unit. The current higher education is expected to produce, engineers, technicians and artisans guided by the policy and the industry needs (GoM 2007, 2012). The ration of these groups is one engineer to five technicians to twenty five artisans (Kufaine, 2005). Technicians work with engineers and with artisans, this means a technicians bridges the gap which exist between an engineer and artisan. Engineers are planners or designers and the artisans are the assistants to the technicians (Kufaine, 2005). The University of Malawi is currently training engineers and Ministry of labour through technical colleges both public and private are training artisans. Since the dissolving of Board of Governors in 2002 there is no technician training in Malawi (Kufaine, 2005).

The study

Since this study attempts to gain an in-depth understanding and identify the higher education and industry relationship and its impact on the industry in Malawi, the study adopted a qualitative research approach whose purpose is to understand the social phenomena from the respondents and participants' perspective (Macmillan and Schumacher, 2010). The sample in this study included five (5) industry managers, five (5) training institutions. The participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative methods were used to uncover the ways in which higher education is being implemented in relation to industry needs. The research methods employed in this study included in-depth individual interviews with the managers both from training institution and industry and document analysis which involved the reviewing and analysis of official

documents that were useful in terms of the information and themes the research is investigating. The documents included policy documents, circulars and curriculums.

The study looked at engineering programmes, technical education programme and applied science programmes and technical college programmes. The collected data was analysis using qualitative analysis approach known as thematic analysis approach where emerging themes were compared for similarities and differences as well as source. .

RESULTS

The study revealed that higher education as a sector is disconnected in terms of structure as well as programmes offered. There is no collaboration between university and TEVET on content of the programmes they offer despite serving the same industry.

The study revealed that the link between higher education and industry is not professional enough because the influence of the industry on the programmes offered by higher education is rare. The lack of technicians on the labour market shows that training institutions and the industry are working in isolation.

The results reveal that there was working relationship between higher education and industry in the past but the situation changed after the Malawi economy was liberalised and companies failed to cope with the economical challenges and relinquishing relationship with industry was an option for survival.

It was reported by one manager that;

The Government of Malawi (GoM) International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) embarked on Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s with the aim of facilitating economic development through liberalization and stimulation the private sector. This was inaugurated on the premise that economies with highly performing private sector enjoy higher personal incomes and the converse is said to be true. There was general acceptance that meaningful inroads into poverty in Malawi can be gained by improving performance of the private sector. Contrary to the notion above, several companies in the country closed, some scaled down operations while others relocated to neighboring countries.

The economical situation in Malawi suggests that liberalization had both positive and negative impact on the economy. Firstly the initiative led to formation of many companies and other business operations in Malawi. However, on the other hand Malawi economy deteriorated into one of the heavily indebted poor countries. The Malawi Government has of late emphasized diversification of the economic base through manufacturing and adding value to agriculture products. However the manufacturing industry has been affected by unknown virus which has led to closing, downsizing or relocating to neighboring countries. However, there is no record about involvement of higher education in this closing and downsizing of companies.

Due this closure and scale down of companies engineering programmes are not getting places for industrial attachment for the student expected to be exposed to new technology. Most of the existing companies have no resources to pay trainees. The technical education students have opportunity for teaching practice because this is conducted mostly in government secondary schools and the department pays for the training allowances. However, for technology and industry practical exposure places the problem still stands.

Those that get places for industry attachment are mostly from the TEVET sector because their grade in the industry is very low than the students from the university. However, even the few attached for industrial attachment are experiencing challenges in relation to mode of training. The training pattern is not focus to what they are supposed to master. This is because most companies do not have training section to develop training plan for the students on industry attachment therefore, students are allocated any department.

The interaction between industry and higher education institutions is partly available but not as beneficial as one would expect from both parties. The involvement of industry representative during curriculum development has been the most outstanding engagement between industry and higher education institution. However, during implementation of the same curriculum industry supported to develop, industry is not being supportive by due to economical challenges.

TEVET sector designed a competence based curriculum which has modules which are industry taught not as industry practice but as a comprehensive learning process. This approach as well has not been able to successfully achieve the expectation. Over and above failure to get the specific knowledge for the student to master in the industry, students are failing to graduate due to grade cards scores deficit which are not complete because of the modules which are not covered when students are in the industry.

The higher education training institution reiterated that efforts to work with the industry have been played down by the industry because of miss understanding on the rationale of the interactions. The manager said;

Every time we try to interact with the industry, the industry see request for support and money. It is not every time we interaction with industry we ask for support, sometimes we want to understand their problems and turn them into our student projects.

Manager from one training institution said;

The industry however, enjoys complaining that university graduates are ill prepared while they did not contribute anything to produce the best student. The few companies we interact with have benefited the relationship between training institution and industry.

This shows that there is a lot industry and training institution can benefit if they work together, and the current situation is just created by some misunderstanding which can be corrected. With the new technologies, the industry will benefit content for the curriculums and the industry will have well prepared workmanship for the current technologies.

The current situation is pathetic because students are finishing without undergoing industrial attachment. This means the industrial attachment is not graded while the curriculum indicates that there are class modules and industry modules. But the study also revealed that some students attached to heavy industrial company learn more than those sent to small companies. It was also indicate that in other cases students learn more than what they learn in the classroom. This means the curriculum is in some cases not covering sufficient to what the industry would want. Or the new technology available in the industry is not yet exposed to the training institution.

The study also revealed that, the industry does not understand the role of trainee in the industry. The student is oriented to all departments of the company this takes too much time of the student denying the students an opportunity to master the specific technology and skill from a relevant department. This demonstrates lack of collaboration between training institution and the industry.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate some trends which could lead to some recommendations for the improvement of the higher education and industry relationship to balance the programme offered to the industry needs. Different levels of training implementation need to be regarded as distinct processes for effective training.

Higher education and existing labour market policies are not explicit, thereby handicapping young people especially in obtaining careers. The key issue according to this situation would be reforms to address the lack of cooperation and create greater synergies between training and skills development producers, and employers, in ways that render the transition from education and training to employment more responsive to labour market needs.

The results reinforces the idea that university-industry relationship in Malawi is still weak, and requires some support in order to assert itself as an instrument to innovation and development. Thus, therefore we recommend for comprehensive industry training needs study and results from the study should inform the development of a substantive training program framework with clear outline guiding training providers for effective implementation of the higher education programmes.

Finally, the role of government, although not verified in this study, may be an important success factor of this relationship, between higher education and industry. There is need for development of relevant regulations to promote the likelihood of improved partnerships between universities and the private sector, and creation of institutional structure to hold the links between universities and industry.

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