

Are graduates prepared for the job market? Rethinking Africa's university model

By [Seth Trudeau](#) and [Keno Omu](#)

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Across Africa, students arrive on campuses full of hope that a university degree will improve their lives. The reality is far less certain.



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In 2014, [a British Council study](#) estimated Nigeria's graduate unemployment at 23.1%. In [Kenya](#), it takes an average of five years for a graduate to find a job. Yet business leaders frequently say there are jobs – just a [lack of skilled talent](#) to do them. How can this be?

There are two commonly cited explanations. The first is that financial, human capital and infrastructure constraints have a negative impact on the range and [quality](#) of skills students graduate with. The second is the disconnect between what universities teach and the skills needed in the [market](#).

However, another more fundamental explanation has to do with *how* students are educated, irrespective of what they study or the resource constraints they face. How students learn matters to employers because it shapes how they think and what they do at work.

A growing number of employers are no longer looking for graduates with the most impressive degree certificates. In fact, trailblazers like Ernst & Young have [removed degree classifications](#) from their entry requirements because they do not believe that academic success is always a sign of professional success.

A new kind of graduate

Employers are now looking for graduates who can think for themselves, integrate into fast-paced work environments, learn new ways of working and develop creative solutions to real problems. These abilities depend more on how they were taught than what they learned.

We are at a unique moment in the history of education. Information was once scarce but is now everywhere. In the last 15 years, we have also made a giant leap forward in our understanding of how the brain works and [how people learn](#). These

developments have radically altered the way we think about higher education.

In the traditional university model, “learning” meant access to information and knowledge, education resources and teaching expertise. Today, technology has made it easier for anyone to get information, knowledge and learning resources.

The advantage retained by the traditional university is in producing and organising knowledge. But academic researchers form a very small percentage of the knowledge workers needed in the information age.

Time to revisit old models

Universities need to rethink their approach to learning if they are to produce people with the critical thinking, leadership, collaboration and problem solving skills needed for [modern life](#).

Learning in many African universities still happens in large lecture halls and rewards [the ability to remember and repeat information](#). Researchers such as Nobel Prize winning physicist [Carl Wieman](#) have shown that this is one of the [least effective](#) ways of learning.

Effective learning takes three things. First, students must be able to reflect on what they are learning. Reflection helps students assess what they know and what they don't. It also helps them to integrate new ideas and concepts into their body of knowledge. When students reflect, they strengthen the neural pathways in their brain, and build new pathways that link information that was [previously not associated](#). These links enable critical thinking.

Second, true learning happens when students stop being passive recipients of information and become active experimenters. When students take an active part, they take responsibility for the results and ensure that learning is relevant to them. They develop habits that help them learn later in life, such as self-regulation, motivation and curiosity.

Third, learning happens when students apply new concepts or skills. This is the most natural test for a student's comprehension of what they are studying. Doing something, receiving feedback about it, refining the approach and then doing it again also builds neural pathways for [retrieval and association](#).

Universities are the planning stage for a society's aspirations. African universities must begin to produce employable leaders who will meet the challenges that are hindering the continent's progress. To produce graduates with the appropriate skills and ways of thinking, they will have to change the way they see, design and assess learning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Trudeau is director of learning, African Leadership University. Keno Omu, engineering curriculum designer and faculty, African Leadership University.

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