

Value Addition of Graduate Tracer Studies in Ugandan Higher Education: A Road Map to Improved Service Delivery

Assoc. Prof. Maria Kaguhangire-Barifaijo* and Dr. James L. Nkata

Uganda Management Institute, Uganda

*Corresponding author: Maria Kaguhangire-Barifaijo, Uganda Management Institute, Uganda. Email: mbkaguhangire@umi.ac.ug;
Co-author: jlnkata@umi.ac.ug (JLN)

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Abstract

Effective service delivery – worldwide has become a critical concern in the recent past, requiring combined efforts of different continents and nations to jointly confront this challenge. Recently, there has been finger pointing and blame games in the education sector, on who is responsible for unsatisfactory service delivery due to graduates that allegedly lack the requisite work-related skills. Due to such concerns higher education institutions have aggressively engaged in ‘tracer studies’ to bridge the gap. Considering that graduate tracer studies are a powerful tool in the provision of valuable information on how the churned out graduates are performing, a key approach for enhancing effectiveness of study programs and content delivery, this research was timely. The paper reveals that the value-addition of these tracer studies has remained a virgin territory, since no effort has been made to deliberately share such critical information with the end users. The paper recommends that there should be intentional and deliberate effort to information sharing so as to link institutional efforts with the industry. More so, institutions should develop and continuously update portals which generate information on the previous graduates and their work stations to ease such studies. Lastly, Ugandan HEIs need to plan for graduate tracer studies in a systematic methodological processes with themes that can be lessons to contribute to quality enhancement.

Keywords: information sharing, higher education institutions tracer studies, value-addition.

Introduction

This paper is part of the larger ongoing research that set out to establish the value addition of tracer studies considering the enormous resources expended on them. In order to track specific work performance of graduates for specific programs. This is because institutions use tracer studies to measure the relationship between objectives/learning outcomes with the current performance trends, whose results are never shared. Ideally, institutions should make their graduates as impactful and engaging as possible, using skills and competencies acquired while at college. Hence, the imparted skills should be mastered and transferred to the industry.

For about two (2) decades, institutions have struggled with quality [1,2], employability [3-5] and sustainability of programs [6]. Recently, Ugandan higher education institutions have committed to improving quality and relevance through end of course/module evaluation, self-assessments, of individual lecturers, assessment of essential organs, such as the University Council, Senate, Academic Boards and whole program evaluations (UMI Quality Assurance Report, 2019). Whereas strategic plans of most universities in Uganda plan and budget for strategies for tracing their alumni and places of work to obtain specific information such as; areas of weakness or even performance improvement, there has been little information about the contributions of these studies. It is such gaps that the proposed research intends to close.

At national level, Uganda’s higher education institutions have embraced tracer studies in order to determine and systematically apply value-added approaches to socio-economic development and institutional reputation, but also, to ensure our programs and

graduates remain relevant. While some studies have focused on the importance of graduate tracer studies [7,8] has concerned himself with the whereabouts of former students, while [9] investigated the graduates’ performance. Nonetheless, whereas the authors appreciate all the existing efforts on tracer studies, there remains a knowledge gap on the ‘value-addition’ of tracer studies, the effectiveness of the tracer studies’ results, how the effectiveness is measured, but also, whether, the information from tracer studies has been productively utilized.

The context and problem

The Uganda’s higher education sector regulator revised the duration for accreditation of programs from five to seven years for three-year undergraduate courses, five to nine years for four-year courses and retained 10 years as the duration for reviewing doctoral programs. Every year, units charged with the role of ensuring quality and relevance of programs, content, delivery and assessment, collect data to establish the suitability, relevance and applicability of academic programs and methods in which the content is delivered and assessed. The purpose of such efforts is to support and strengthen the quality and performance of emerging companies and stabilize them. Hence, both, the institutions as the producers, and the industries as the consumers, must have a basis for their actions. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether the decision to review these programs is based on results from tracer studies. To interrogate such challenges, three questions were set (1) what are the areas of ‘integration of the lessons’ learnt after the tracer studies? (2) what is the ‘value-addition’ of the results from tracer studies for HEIs? and (3) what are the measures of improved performance of graduates after career advancement?

Literature Review

Education and training systems have a key role to play in ensuring that opportunities are provided for all individuals to develop their skills continually in a lifelong learning perspective, enabling them to adapt to rapidly changing labour market requirements and conditions [10]. This leads to policy makers decide on the configuration of education and training systems, employment policies and investments more indispensable. Whereas training institutions decide on the type and content of the training courses to be delivered (Kaguhangire, 2018) [4], individuals and their families decide on their own education and training [10], while employers take decisions on how to enhance the skills of their workers. The purpose of tracer studies, therefore, provide information that is valuable for all these actors that in turn, helps in inspiring education, training and employment policies, curricula of education and training courses, guidance to help individuals decide on their education or training paths, and clearer judgements about (re)-skilling the labour force. Tracer studies can be defined as retrospective analyses of graduates through a standardized survey, which takes place sometime after graduation (normally between 6 months and 3 years). Tracer studies are also known as graduate surveys, alumni surveys, or graduate tracking. Normally, the target population is a homogenous group of students / trainees who finished their studies at the same time (generation or graduation cohort). Tracer studies are common in higher education, but are becoming more and more popular.

The Skill Acquisition Theory, developed by Robert Dekeyser (2007) [11] guided the discussion. The scientific roots of 'Skill Acquisition Theory' can be traced in different branches of psychology, which ranges from behaviorism to cognitivism and connectionism [12,13]. The theory draws on Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) model which itself is a kind of cognitive stimulus-response theory. Skill Acquisition Theory, accounts for how people progress in learning a variety of skills, from initial learning to advanced proficiency. Skills studied include both cognitive and psychomotor skills, in domains that range from classroom learning to applications in the place of work. According to Chapelle (2009) [14], this theory falls under the category of general human learning, i.e., it focuses "on language learning as a process of human learning". Although this theory may not explain the aspects of information sharing, it brings out issues that may impede graduates from participating in tracer studies.

According to literature [15,8,4], the main objective of tracer studies is to inform actors about the relevancy of programs and labour market success of the graduates. A graduate survey is a standardized survey of graduates of educational institutions, which takes place after graduation or at the end of training. Every academic institution's goal is to produce competent and highly qualified graduates not only to become competitive in a local and global arena, but also, to make the institutions continuously improve and excel [6]. Although, graduate tracer studies, are imperative for continuous improvement, institutions rarely uptake them due to the dynamics therein, yet, even as powerful and significant as it may be, little effort is made to evaluate its actual contribution to the users [15,1]. Describes the different types of tracer study - ranging from institutional, national, and international types. Tracer studies, have for long been glorified as powerful and valuable tools for providing credible information regarding previous graduates and their whereabouts, but also the impact of the given training on their

performance. Similarly [5,1], confirm how reports from tracer studies conducted by higher education institutions remained unutilized or underutilized, despite the fact that the role of tracer studies is a strategic quality assurance function, that takes a lion's share of the institutional budget.

Despite its high value, some institutions do not engage in tracer studies. According to Grooves (1989) the reason institutions avoid this exercise is its high cost and time consuming and; quality demanding activities. Similarly, Heidemann (2010) [16] concludes that the complexity of tracer studies' quality processes, affected the uptake of this critical exercise. Whereas the non-utilization or underutilization of tracer studies could be due to multiple expectations of the users [17], [18] findings revealed the lack of skills by the investigators. Hence, if the contribution of tracer studies was well conceptualized and comprehended, intentional competencies could be imparted so as to change workplaces for better livelihood [18]. Therefore, effectiveness of conducting tracer studies largely relies on the competencies of those engaged in conducting the studies,

Methodology

This research was guided by a qualitative approach, and specifically, a case exploratory - longitudinal design using specific programs at Uganda Management Institute (UMI). Creswell (2013), recommends this design, especially where the investigators need concrete information. The investigation followed a snow-ball sampling strategy, where, the known subjects assisted in identifying those they knew. Where the numbers were big, focus-group discussions and individual interviews with members were used as supported by Kothari (2012). Interviews included top leaders and officers in charge of quality assurance and then proceeded to curriculum developers and the implementers. Content and thematic analyses were adopted.

Findings and Discussion

Although tracer studies are normally planned at institutional level, the industries played a significant role in the development of relevant, identification of training skill gaps, as well as teaching strategies that are useful for skills' acquisition. Particularly, there has been a significant focus on intentional building of capabilities of these institutions on the use of evidence-based training [3]. Whereas the focus on getting feedback has improved study/training programs and understanding the relationships between education and the world of work. In fact, the feedback from tracer studies become useful in curriculum development or review.

Similarly, Schomburg & Ulrich's (2011) [5], analysis explained how important it is to transform feedback from tracer studies especially on study programs which then becomes the area of improvement of the content that must be aligned to the assessment [19]. Significantly, whereas skills gained was the object of the discussion, there existed issues to do with employment conditions that could potentially affect usage of work-related competences. Yet again, whereas tracer studies were sometimes used to analyze the mismatch at national level in order to improve education/training and related policies, national frameworks often dictate the processes, thereby affecting institutional practices. University graduates are a useful resource that can provide important information about the program they studied at the university. This information could be in the form of feedback and evaluation which the university

could utilize in improving academic programs as well as running future ones. One way to obtain and make use of such strategic information is through graduate tracer studies (GTS) [3].

Effective collection and utilization of data and information is essential in mapping and bridging the gap between tertiary education provision and labor market demands for the strengthening of skills development. Although value added is widely regarded as a laudable measure of the contribution of higher education, there have been only spasmodic attempts to measure it and use it as a criterion for evaluating institutions' provision and performance. Bennett (2001) [20] states: Easy as it is to state, assessment of value added is difficult to carry through. Let me briefly mention just a few of the more important difficulties. Value has many dimensions. No college or university is trying to develop only a single capability in students; all are trying to develop an array of capabilities. Measurements of value added must therefore attend to a number of different dimensions of value. We probably should develop several different measures of value added and invite institutions to select the measures that reflect their intentions [14].

It was revealed that considering that institutions are different, colleges and universities do not all seek to add the same kind of value to students' development. Even liberal arts colleges do not all have the same mission. We need to assess value added against a college's chosen aspirations--its mission. Any effort to rank colleges or universities along a single dimension is fundamentally misguided [14]. However, there are some effects that unfold, and these may have some consequences in the utilization of information provided by uses [21]. We may need to assess some aspects of value added with alumni rather than with graduates which the fresh graduates may not have. We established that the custodians of information experienced complexities, especially in organizing workshops for information dissemination. This was because, measuring 'value added' was likely to be complex considering that the vast of tracer studies are done by the departments that house those programs. For Example, Olwenyi et al (2021) conducted a tracer study on "Monitoring and Evaluation" Program, which information exists on the internet, but the users are not aware. Yet, according to Kasozi (2017) [22], it can be more expensive for society to have no serious assessments of not only whether we are succeeding in having students learn, but whether the information from the assessment is being put to good use. Hence, a value-added approach is the best way to move beyond assessment of the students' learning and work performance to whether the value addition can be verified. Nonetheless, as Kabeba Muriisa and Rwabyoma (2020) [23] observed, that higher education has not yet committed itself to developing reliable measures of the most important dimensions to be assessed, and recommended some possible strategies for assessing areas of improvement.

In conclusion, the increasing desire to produce quality graduates, and to leverage competition in service delivery demanded sophisticated measures of value addition. It was concluded that there was a misconception between publication, dissemination and intentional sharing of information. Therefore, whether such studies are done institutional-wide or otherwise, there must be deliberate effort to share such critical information so as to resolve challenges of service delivery through planned, systematic and intentional information dissemination. Lastly the

institution should reinvigorate the alumni portal for generating information on the previous students.

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