

## Exploring Synergies Between Employers and Educators: Towards Graduate Effectiveness

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### Abstract

The idea for this study originated from the University Council of Jamaica's 2023 webinar hosted as one of the events for its annual Quality Assurance in Higher Education Week. The theme under consideration was *Strengthening Quality in Teaching and Learning Practices in Higher Education: The Graduate Effectiveness Imperative*. The webinar highlighted the need for consistent practical exposure to the field/industry, the importance of non-technical skills, work ethics and values, and the need for greater synergy between academia and employers. This paper focuses on the importance of graduate effectiveness in higher education; the quality assurance systems used in higher education to strengthen graduate effectiveness; and possible strategies to improve graduate effectiveness in the workplace. Given the concerns expressed and the strategies shared, an exploratory sequential design mixed methodology was used to explore the articulated gap that exists between the graduates' skills and competencies and the employers' needs and expectations. Data derived from the employers' themes from the webinar; the survey responses from the purposively selected higher education institutions (HEIs); and document analysis of selected UCJ Standards were analysed for patterns, trends and relationships. The findings indicate that there are both HEI and employer-related barriers which impact the technical and non-technical preparation of students for the world of work. This suggests that there is scope for employers and HEIs to engage in strategic partnerships towards the strengthening of the graduates' effectiveness.

*Keywords:* Employability, employability skills, graduate effectiveness, employer engagement, non-technical skills, higher education institutions

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## Introduction

The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) Quality Assurance (QA) Week 2023 Webinar addressed the theme *Strengthening Quality in Teaching and Learning Practices in Higher Education: The Graduate Effectiveness Imperative* and shared views on the involvement of employers in programme development towards building synergies between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the employers. The presenters were Dr Michaela Martin, Programme Specialist and Interim Deputy Director; International Institute for Educational Planning - UNESCO; Professor Shermaine Barrett, Dean, Faculty of Education & Liberal Studies, University of Technology, Jamaica; Mr Lenworth Kelly, President, The Incorporated Masterbuilders Association of Jamaica (IMAJ); and Mrs Carla McIntosh-Gordon, Group Chief Strategy Officer, VM Group.

In setting the context, Martin (2023) shared that there has been a rapid expansion of enrolment from 2000 to 2020 in HEIs worldwide. Data shared from the World Bank reveal that between 2007 and 2013 there was an increased number of unemployed persons with tertiary education suggesting that there is a mismatch between skills required in the labour market and graduates' profiles (Martin, 2023). To correct this mismatch, Martin (2023) expressed that there is more pressure on HEIs to adapt their education and training to labour market needs. Employability is currently seen as a major outcome of higher education (HE), and there is a need to develop Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) processes that are directed towards the enhancement of graduate employability. However, Martin (2023) also emphasized that HEIs should navigate the existing tension between educating for the future versus meeting short term needs.

Barrett (2023) continued the discussion on quality, stating that quality education is a right for all individuals at all levels; quality education must be responsive to its context and valued by stakeholders such as students and employers. She further stated that a quality curriculum is fit for purpose and should be holistic. Barrett (2023) emphasized that education must aim for the development of the individual's technical/work-related skills and non-technical skills. Education should also facilitate personal growth and transformation; ultimately promoting the development of a fully functioning and humane society.

Martin (2023) also shared findings from the International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) Research Project *Internal quality assurance: Enhancing higher education quality and graduate employability*. The research established that context matters; there are different views among universities and among faculties on the role of the university regarding employability. The priority of employability and the priority of academic quality are influenced by strategic orientation (for

example, national policy context and the level of unemployment), type of institution and the orientation of the academic offer. According to the research shared, IQA plays a role in enhancing employability as the IQA practices enhance the university's reputation and graduate employability; and consequently, IQA also helped to build strong interaction between academics and labour market representatives (Martin, 2023). The findings from the research indicated three effective IQA tools and processes for employability: graduate tracer studies, job market analysis and employer involvement in programme development and revision (Martin, 2018, 2023).

Kelly (2023) and McIntosh-Gordon (2023) expressed that both technical and non-technical/soft skills are critical to the preparation of graduates who are effective in the workplace. Kelly (2023) and McIntosh-Gordon (2023) opined that the performance of the graduate is more influenced by non-technical skills including adaptability, critical thinking, problem-solving, the ability to communicate, and a teachable spirit as described by Kelly (2023). The employers emphasized that new graduates enter the workplace with theory, in need of experience and practical exposure to the world of work. As such the employers invest in and subsidize the graduates until they are sufficiently experienced to add value to the organization (Kelly, 2003 & McIntosh-Gordon, 2023).

Given the articulated gap between HEI graduates' skills and competencies and the needs and expectations of employers, this study aimed to explore the synergy between HEIs and employers towards graduate effectiveness. The study sought to: identify perceived barriers to the HEIs development of employability skills and the engagement of employers in the preparation of graduates for the workplace; identify the perceived barriers to teaching employability skills and to engaging employers in this process; and possible strategies for the further engagement of employers in the preparation of graduates for the workplace.

The study sought to identify the strategies that HEIs used to prepare the graduates for the world of work and how HEIs engaged employers in the preparation of the graduates for the workplace. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

- What are the strategies that are used by HEIs to prepare work ready graduates?
- What are the perceived barriers to the development of employability skills in students in HEI programmes?
- What are the perceived barriers to the engagement of employers in the development of the work-ready graduate?
- How do HEIs engage employers in the development of the work-ready graduate?

## **Literature Review**

The literature reviewed provides an understanding of the key concepts to be explored when examining the synergies between employers and educators that should result in effective

graduates. It presents employability as a complex multidimensional concept, understood by employers and HEIs as critical to graduate preparedness for the world of work; the barriers that exist between employers and HEIs; and the role the external quality agency plays in fostering the synergy between them.

### **Employability**

According to Yorke (2006), employability derives from complex learning and is a concept of wider range than those of ‘core’ and ‘key’ skills. Employability has many facets which range from understanding of one or more subject disciplines to ‘soft skills’ (such as working effectively with others; the ability to reflect productively on experience) (Yorke, 2006). Yorke (2006) further defines employability as a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2006).

Employability is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as relating to:

portable competencies and qualifications that enhance an individual’s capacity to make use of the education and training opportunities available in order to secure and retain decent work, to progress within the enterprise and between jobs, and to cope with changing technology and labour market conditions...Individuals are most employable when they have broad-based education and training, basic and portable high-level skills, including teamwork, problem solving, information and communications technology (ICT) and communication and language skills... This combination of skills enables them to adapt to changes in the world of work. (ILO, 2013, p. 1)

Higher education institutions, employers and quality assurance agencies have found it useful to specify employability skills that are not usually related to a particular job, an academic discipline or area of knowledge, but can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings, and which employers value in changing environments (UNESCO, 2014). These non-technical or employability skills are also referred to as transversal skills, 21st century skills, soft skills, higher-order skills, non-academic skills, non-cognitive skills, and generic skills. Examples of these include critical and innovative thinking, interpersonal skills, interpersonal skills, global citizenship and media and information literacy (UNESCO, 2014).

The UCJ Standards refer to general education courses which provide this broad-based educational experience to enhance the learner’s ability to acquire information, reason clearly, and communicate effectively. The Standards recommend that the general education curriculum content should give students opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in order to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and diverse global society. The Standards also indicate that the general education component is often not directly related to a student’s area

of specialization but is a common foundation for all areas of study. General education courses serve to address that facet of employability skills popularly described as the soft skills and are intended to impart common knowledge, intellectual concepts, and attitudes that every educated person should possess (UCJ Bachelor of Education Standards, 2018, pp.11-12).

An effective graduate is therefore an individual who in their outlook and operation utilizes both the technical and non-technical skills to adapt to changes in the workplace and to make a meaningful and productive contribution to society.

### **Employer engagement**

Hogarth et al. (2007) are of the view that active forms of employer engagement include significant levels of partnership with the employer which adds to the learning process in the HEI educational process. Examples of such engagement include funding; work placements; standard setting; course design; assessment, involvement in/contribution to teaching, lecturing or workshops; and releasing staff for workforce development activities (Hogarth et al., 2007, p.8). This type of engagement varies from passive HEI engagement in which employers “purchase the products and services of HEI” and are involved in the recruitment of graduates, career days and job fairs (Hogarth et al., 2007). Whilst active engagement is more desired and is the focus of this study, it is acknowledged that the latter may act as a pathway to a more effective engagement.

### **Barriers to employer engagement and employability skills in the curriculum of HEIs**

Barriers to employer engagement with HEIs may originate from both the HEI and the employer. Suleman, Videira and Araujo (2021) report from the perspective of employers, that the barriers from the HE systems seem to be structural, indicating as an example, that HEIs have curricula and pedagogical methods that are not readily changed, and as such are less responsive to the employers and students’ needs.

From the employer’s perspective, one of the barriers to an ongoing HEI-employer engagement relates to a dependence on “interpersonal relationships that were vulnerable to staff turnover so that it was difficult to maintain links even where they had been established” (Hogarth et al., 2007). Suleman, Videira and Araujo (2021) found that while some employers believed that personal contacts through faculty and alumni were adequate ways to engage with HEIs (p.10), there was research that indicated that such engagement becomes inconsistent and irregular if processes are not institutionalized (Suleman et al. p.14).

This raises the question of an overall institutional strategy to employer engagement within institutions, as a feature of their internal quality systems. In highlighting the importance and role of libraries, and the increasing trend to produce Library Employability Guides by HEIs in the United Kingdom, Mawson and Haworth (2018) cite Cole & Tibby (2013) view that

*...employability is a university-wide responsibility...requires combined effort, working in partnership with other institutional services and departments, e.g. all schools of study,*

*careers centre, enterprise and business departments, placement support, students' union, student support services, library and information services, etc. (p.12)*

Asonitou (2015) reported that accounting teachers identified multiple barriers to the introduction of employability skills in accounting courses, including those that originated with HEIs management, missing policies, the teachers, and students (Asonitou, 2015)

### **External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA) engagement with employers**

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, ASPA (2017) survey of 62 programmatic accreditation agencies in over 100 disciplines reported that 90% of its members had requirements for accredited programmes to be engaged with employers. The mechanisms in place for engagement were primarily in the areas of community and employer involvement in curriculum design, employer satisfaction surveys, advisory boards/councils and practical placements for students. These were evident in 100% of ASPA member accreditors of programmes whose mission is linked to employment. ASPA (2017) also stated that the programmatic accreditation agencies directly engaged with employers and that more than one method of engagement was used. The areas of involvement were chiefly standard development and review, employer participation on decision-making bodies, job practice analysis to inform accreditation standards, employer surveys, and employer/industry councils.

Other areas of involvement were reported which sought to include “employers’ perspective of the nature of the practice and employment in the field to inform the accreditation process and establish competencies” (ASPA 2017, p.5). Employers were also reported by ASPA to be engaged in the self-study report preparation and the site visit interviews, a position supported and recommended by The UCJ in its programmatic and institutional accreditation. The UCJ’s Standards and Guidelines reviewed as a part of this study also outline requirements for Jamaican HEIs to engage with employers and to facilitate the development of employability skills.

## **Methods**

This inductive study used an exploratory sequential design mixed methodology. The sources of data were The UCJ Quality Assurance in Higher Education Week March 2023 Webinar recording, survey results from a sample of HEIs, and a sample of The UCJ Standards. Data were derived from multiple sources and analysed. Each data source is further discussed.

The established outcomes of the Webinar were to reflect on the importance of graduate effectiveness in higher education; identify the quality assurance systems used in Higher Education to strengthen graduate effectiveness; and commit to adopting possible strategies/solutions to improve graduate effectiveness in the workplace.

The Webinar recording was reviewed and analysed for significant patterns and the critical themes voiced by the presenters. It was distilled and words, phrases and sentences representing employability and engagement themes were highlighted. The excerpts from the audio transcripts were shared with the presenters for feedback regarding possible errors or misrepresentations.

The main themes identified from the employers' presentations were used to design a 16-item survey "*Graduate Effectiveness/Employability*" with a combination of open-ended and objective type questions (See Appendix 1). The survey, designed using Google Forms, was shared with a purposively selected sample; 11 of the 47 Jamaican HEIs that have been quality-assured using The UCJ's accreditation standards and guidelines. The anonymous responses provided by 46% of the targeted HEIs were analysed. They were also checked to ensure that they did not inadvertently include words or phrases that could reveal the identity of the participants or the institution.

The third component of the data collection involved reviewing and analysing a sample of The UCJ Standards and Guidelines to explore HEIs' employer engagement and employability skills requirements of programmes and institutions. The Standards reviewed were Guidelines for Programme Accreditation, Standards for Institutional Accreditation, Standards for the Bachelor of Education, Standards for the Occupational Associate Degree and the Standards for the Generic Bachelor's Degree Programmes.

The themes from the employers, findings from the HEI survey, and the analysis of The UCJ Standards were examined for patterns, trends, and relationships. These were then further analysed and discussed.

The study's ethical considerations emphasized obtaining participants' consent and ensuring their confidentiality by using pseudonyms.

## **Results**

In this section the findings from the employers' presentations; the document analysis of the sample of The UCJ's standards and guidelines; and the Graduate Effectiveness/Employability survey are shared.

### **Employers' presentations**

The following themes were identified from presentations by the employers, LK and CMG.

### **Gender**

The theme of gender was introduced in a preliminary comment by CMG in relation to the format used by webinar presenters. This comment raised thoughts about institutions' consideration of gender in terms of placements during internship, work experience or summer assignments as applicable, or other partnership engagements with employers.

### ***Non-technical/Soft Employability Skills- A Paradigm Shift in Employment Focus***

The employers, LK and CMG agreed on the type of employability model that ought to inform the preparation of graduates. While not downplaying the importance of the technical skills, the stated emphasis was on the importance of non-technical/soft/employability skills for the work-ready graduate. Such a graduate, according to LK, and also supported by CMG, was seen to be “*trainable, having a teachable spirit*” with an understanding of the culture and ethos of the workplace and the employer/industry. CMG indicated that this resulted in a paradigm shift in the recruitment and employment of graduates with “*less focus on the technical competencies*” that graduates bring to the workplace.

### ***Disconnect***

The employers emphasized the “disconnect” between the skills demanded by the workplace and the skill set of the new graduate. CMG referred to the “*disconnect with how our organization understands the emerging generation and how they think, their values, their attitudes and their beliefs*”. Both employers opined that graduates are not able to apply crucial skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving in the world of work.

LK highlighted the “*lack of summer employment*” and “*... placements in the field*” which occurred more routinely in the past. LK also expressed that “new graduates are totally lost... have no appreciation of the field”. This supports the view of CMG who addressed the importance of learning from experience versus learning from others versus learning in structured settings. CMG stated that the HEI programmes are not meeting the needs of the employers.

### ***Proactive HEI Sector-Information Sharing***

Employer LK indicated that the findings of HEI's tracer studies, and other related research pertaining to the graduates should be shared with employers. LK also stated that the higher education sector should be proactive in forecasting the demands of industry/employers, adjusting the training to meet the needs and not just relying on the standard curriculum. As a country, Jamaica should prepare graduates for the global labour force.

### ***Bridging the Divide Through Partnership***

Both LK and CMG argued for the need to implement strong partnerships between employers and HEIs. The employers alluded to what they viewed as the “employers subsidizing the graduate,

building the graduate while they work” until they can add value to the workplace. The employers reported that this leads to a loss of efficiency in the workplace.

CMG argued for strategic partnerships to bridge the divide between the employability skills which employers need and the HEI graduate, indicating that there were various strategies which when implemented, result in an “exponential growth in the mind-set change” of the graduate and how they lead.

*Internships sustained assigning of mentorships; coaching; use of organizational hurdles as case studies for agile, faster, more meaningful learning; introduction to transformational leadership; partnered research and funding; partnerships.... Earlier involvement of the graduate in voluntary activity, corporate social responsibility and environmental, social and governance... [CMG]*

### **Early and Consistent Engagement**

The employers suggested that there would be greater efficiency with an earlier engagement with work- related concepts that assist in developing the required skills and competencies. LK shared that the student should be consistently exposed to practice in order to develop a real appreciation of what exists in the world of work; and that academic work should include significant exposure to the practices of the industry in which employment is desired.

*Greater synergy is necessary between academia and industry; to facilitate industry presenting to students; ...professionals sharing each week on aspects of industry... professionals share ethics, integrity ... failures/ malpractices in the industry... creates an appreciation of what is out there... what is not on paper... not academics or field trips... [LK]*

CMG also pointed to the attitude and skills required of the graduate. CMG emphasized the importance of understanding change management; workplace culture; and the focus on innovation, team, and maximizing the use of technology.

### **Document Analysis**

The focus of the document analysis was to identify words and phrases in The UCJ Standards which represent HEIs’ engagement of employers and the development of employability skills in HEIs’ students. Five UCJ Standards were analysed. These included:

- The overarching standards which govern the two forms of accreditation practiced by The UCJ, namely: the Guidelines for Programme Accreditation and the Standards for Institutional Accreditation. The analysis is presented in Table 1 under section headings including governance and management; quality of the programme (*teaching, learning and assessment*); students; students support services; faculty; and resources.
- A sample of the supporting discipline-specific and programme-level standards, namely the Bachelor’s Degree in Education, Standards for Occupational Associate Degree Programmes and Bachelor’s Degree Programmes Generic Standards. The analysis is

presented in Table 2 under the section headings including the process to develop the standards, the graduate profile, curriculum and programme management and quality assurance.

In Table 1, the governance and management standard recommends engagement with employers by obtaining their feedback, sharing improvement processes with employers, and involving them in planning and monitoring activities. The quality of the programme (*teaching, learning and assessment*) standard includes elements of feedback from external examiners, a role played by some employers, and its implementation towards continuous improvement. The inclusion of employability skills is evident in the requirement to ensure that programmes include general education courses and adequate practical components to include field experiences.

The standards pertaining to students urge HEIs to document and analyse statistics related to the graduates' employment patterns to inform programme improvement, whilst strengthening the competencies in areas such as oral and written communication. In relation to student support, the standards outline the need for HEIs to coordinate work/study arrangements and other interventions to develop students' employability skills. Included among these interventions is the opportunity for students to participate in HEI's governance and operations, which provides early development opportunities for skills needed in the workplace. Faculty standards require that as relevant to the programme, contact with industry is ongoing through a range of mechanisms including study tours, furloughs and workshops.

In Table 2, the three discipline specific standards were reviewed according to the four major subsections of the standards: preface/background, graduate profile, the curriculum and programme management and quality assurance. A review of the preface/background subsection revealed that engagement of the employers was a recurrent theme in all three standards; development/review of programmes in these areas should consider the employers needs and standards from relevant international bodies. The graduate profile for each standard describes the expected outcomes, these include the knowledge, skills and attitude that individuals should possess both as professionals and as individuals and are reflected as employability skills such as communication, work ethics and life skills. The input from employers and professional associations were recommended for curriculum development and review. The programme management and quality assurance section of the standards notes that formal procedures for developing, approving, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and maintaining the quality of the programme should include feedback from all stakeholders, including the employers.

**Table 1**

*A Review of Employer Engagement and Employability Skills in Two Overarching UCJ Accreditation Standards/Guidelines*

Accreditation Standards and Guidelines headings	Sample of findings	
	Employer engagement	Employability skills
Introductory sections	Employer feedback used for on-going improvement (PAG, p. 6).	
Governance and management	Regular feedback from stakeholders (employers, students, faculty) facilitated (PAG, p. 19). Needs analyses, market research, industry liaison, review of national priorities, professional requirements (SIA, p. 2). Improvement processes are shared with stakeholders (SIA, p. 3).	To enhance the communities served by HEIs; the objectives, goals are relevant to society's needs. (SIA, p. 1).
Quality of the Programme, Assessment/ Teaching and Learning	Students feedback evidenced by improvement strategies (SIA p. 22). Examiners' feedback implemented (SIA, p.23).	Adequate practical component Laboratory/Clinical Work/Field Experiences (PAG, p. 21); Effective relationship between curricular content and current field practices (PAG, p. 39)
Students	Graduation statistics; performance of graduates captured and analysed (PAG, p. 24).	Competence in communication skills (PAG, pp. 24 & 47). Career and graduates' employment patterns analysed to inform improvements (PAG, p. 23; p.25).

Accreditation Standards and Guidelines headings	Sample of findings	
	Employer engagement	Employability skills
Student support services	Evidence of work/study arrangements and career guidance (PAG, p. 29); (SIA, p. 25).	Career guidance, work/study (PAG, p. 29). Students participate in the institution's governance (SIA, p. 24).
Faculty	Maintain and report on business/professions/industry/ contact (PAG, p. 25).	Evidence of relevant industry furlough, study tour, workshops; technology training (SIA, p. 18).
Resources	Access information in a variety of formats so that they can continue life-long learning (PAG, p. 41).	Cooperative arrangements with other organisations, information resources and services (SIA, p. 23; p.30)

*Note: PAG -Programme Accreditation Guidelines; SIA -Standards for Institutional Accreditation*

**Table 2**

*A Table Showing that Employability Skills (ES) and Employer Engagement (EE) are in Selected Discipline-specific/programme-level UCJ Standards*

Accreditation Standards Sub-Sections	Sample findings		
	The UCJ Standards: Bachelor's Degree in Education	The UCJ Standards: Occupational Associate Degree Programmes	The UCJ Standards: Bachelor's Degree Programmes Generic Standards
Preface/Background	<b>EE:</b> “taking into account the needs of ...employer (p. i); respond to accountability demands by ..., employers, (p. 3)	<b>EE:</b> incorporates a work-based experiential learning component (p. 3)	<b>EE:</b> ...taking into account the needs ... employers (p. i)
Graduate Profile	<b>ES:</b> communication, self-management (pp. 4, 5 & 6)	<b>ES:</b> work ethics (p. 9)	<b>ES:</b> life skills (p. 2)
The Curriculum	<b>EE:</b> employers reflect the expectations of professional associations (p.11); <b>ES:</b> prepare <i>student teachers</i> for lifelong learning and responsible citizenship (e.g., p.17)	<b>EE:</b> involve employers - achieve the intended employers' requirements; Appoint an Occupational Advisory Committee... to ensure that programmes are relevant to employers (p. 20). <b>ES:</b> The programmes must ensure ... work ethics ... (p. 9); Includes courses in General Education... English and Communications (p. 21)	<b>EE:</b> ...include external evaluators such as employers... in periodic programme reviews. <b>ES:</b> The curriculum... comprises four parts: general education courses...
Programme Management (PM) and Quality Assurance (QA)	<b>EE:</b> ...shall include ... the use of feedback from ...employers for continual improvement (pp. 28 -29).	<b>EE &amp; ES:</b> ...nine listed standards and requirements to be satisfied (pp. 25 - 26) and these include #3 incorporate current job market information in its programme delivery through the involvement of employers	<b>EE:</b> ...Of the ten elements listed #9 refers to “Obtaining feedback from ...employers ... for continual improvement. (pp. 21 & 25).

*Note.* The table reflects relevant phrases/words/terms which represent employers' engagement (EE) and employability skills (ES) as described in the three standards which were reviewed.

Cotton (1993) categorizes employability skills into three groups: basic skills, for example communication; higher order thinking skills such as problem solving and decision making; and affective skills and traits such as dependability, motivation and self-management (Cotton, 1993). These are consistent with those expected outcomes identified by the graduate profiles in the selected standards reviewed.

The curriculum as outlined in the standards comprises the learning outcomes, the instructional strategies, the learning experiences and the assessment activities used within a programme. The curriculum for the programmes should reflect the philosophy and approach adopted in the programme structure. Institutions are encouraged to have a clearly defined process which outlines how the curriculum is developed, reviewed and monitored. The sampled standards not only identified that content should be technical or field specific, but they also pointed out the need for content that is non-technical and attitudinal, the employability skills (Table 2). These are introduced in general education courses such as communication courses and through other interventions and include work ethics, working collaboratively, self-assessment and career management. All the standards sampled address the curriculum being developed, reviewed, and monitored. This task, though owned by the institution, should incorporate feedback from other stakeholders such as other HEIs, students and employers (Table 2).

Programme Management and Quality Assurance refers to ensuring that academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in the programme and by the HEIs- developing, approving, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and maintaining the quality of the programmes. The processes must emphasize consistency, openness, standards and outcomes and shall include among other processes, the feedback from employers for continual improvement as stated by the Bachelor's in Education and the Generic Bachelor's Degrees Standards. The Associate Degrees Standard uses the involvement from the employers to incorporate current job market information in its programme delivery. Employer engagement is therefore identified as an important internal quality assurance tool to enhance quality and ensure fitness of purpose of the programme.

### **Graduate Effectiveness/Employability Survey Results**

The five HEIs that responded to the survey represented both the rural and urban areas of the island. Four HEIs described their funding as public/government funded and one as privately funded.

### ***HEIs Engagement of Employers in the Development of Technical Skills***

The HEIs stated that students are involved in practicum and/or work experience/internship in their area of specializations. These included teaching, agriculture, and health sciences. Other strategies that engaged students in consistent, practical exposure to a particular field/industry aligned to the programme of study included field trips; the use of labs and other hands-on activities; research projects; seminars; workshops and guest speakers in the areas of specializations. In addition, students engaged in other areas of service to the community through social outreach programmes.

The HEIs agreed that the technical preparation for the specified job at the identified HEI is sufficient for graduates to be effective in the workplace.

### ***HEIs Non-Technical Preparation of Students***

HEIs reported that the course of study for the programmes included non-technical preparation such as non-academic skills, work ethics and values.

In response to the question “what opportunities are in place for students to practise the non-technical, non-academic skills required to succeed in the particular field?” HEIs reported the following:

- *In presentations, group work and role plays non- technical skills are identified and students have opportunities to demonstrate how to apply these skills. Staff and other students will provide feedback on identified (exposed) behaviours. This activity provides the basis for monitoring these behaviours during the practicum/internship experiences. (HEI1)*
- *Soft skills are explored in professional development courses, sporting activities, debates, and other student-led activities/initiatives such as the Student Council and student affairs. (HEI2)*
- *Academic Advisement facilitates professional development; advisors are assigned to each programme, and they meet with students; Work Experience leader (dean/coordinator) along with team members visit students in industry and where weaknesses are identified they are addressed; Students Services and Guidance Department also provide support in this area, e.g. they facilitate mock interviews. (HEI3)*
- *Mandatory courses in Communication Skills and Ethics; Students voluntarily participate in health camps, career days at schools, and public health education events. (HEI4)*
- *Students engage in a business expo where they market their development and services learned from the course requirements; Presentations and workshops in identified non-technical areas. (HEI5)*

Seventy-five percent (75%) of the respondents indicated that the non-technical preparation provided by the HEI is sufficient for the graduate to be effective in the workplace; twenty five percent (25%) said it was not sufficient.

### ***HEIs Engagement of Employers***

The HEIs engage employers in curriculum development and review and the delivery of the content to students.

### ***Curriculum Development and Review***

The HEIs indicated that they engaged employers in the process of curriculum development and review through advisory committees/boards and other mechanisms which facilitate employer feedback during the review process. Twenty percent of HEIs reported that the internship programme provides a channel for employer feedback to the HEI. Twenty percent of the HEIs

reported that the employer engagement feedback was only applied to some programmes within the institution but not to others; indicating the need for a consistent institution-wide approach.

Concerning the frequency of the interaction between the employer and the HEI, one HEI volunteered that semesterly meetings were held by an advisory board inclusive of employers, which suggests that a structured, consistent and operationalized mechanism is in place to review the curriculum and receive employer recommendations. Twenty per cent of the HEIs referred to the role of their governing bodies which “engage and contract employers to be a part of curriculum development along with academic staff”.

### **Curriculum Delivery**

The HEIs reported that employers are engaged in the delivery of the curriculum as guest lecturers. Other methods of employer engagement in curriculum delivery were field trip involvement (40%); laboratory support (20%); and one HEI reported that employers assessed students' projects.

### ***HEIs' Proposed Strategies for Further Engagement of Employers***

The HEIs proposed a range of strategies to support further engagement of employers in the preparation of the graduate for the world of work. The HEIs reported that having regular meetings and receiving feedback from employers would underscore the importance of the partnership and improve employer interest (20%). They pointed to the need to establish more partnerships, by introducing the co-operative education concept into programmes; and to have the industry partners keep them updated with the evolving technologies, as well as involvement in work experience and internship programmes (60%). They also suggested increasing involvement in mock interviews and hosting more employment fairs (20%); the use of more guest lecturers (40%); a mentorship programme with industry partners (20%); more involvement in curriculum development and review (40%); revenue sharing programmes (20%); showcasing success stories of our graduates to employers (20%); and involvement in talks at workshops and seminars (20%) as strategies to further employer engagement.

### ***Barriers to HEIs' Development of Employability Skills and Engagement of Employers***

The HEIs reported that barriers to more opportunities for the technical preparation of the graduates were: the limited number of sites at which students can do work experience; rural location which provided less opportunities; the location of some employers far from students' place of residence; an insufficient number of employers who are willing to accept trainees or interns; an inability to keep abreast of the technologies which change faster than they are able to upgrade the programmes; the programme being mostly geared for progression to higher level programmes; and limited funds.

In response to the question on “perceived barriers to your HEI providing more opportunities to non-technical preparation for the world of work” the HEIs identified multiple barriers at each institution. The barriers identified again highlighted the unwillingness of some employers to accept trainees or interns while other barriers generally fell into the categories of

implementation, financial constraints, time constraints and location. Table 3 outlines the responses from the HEIs.

**Table 3**

*Barriers to Providing Opportunities for Non-Technical Preparation for the World of Work*

<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Barriers to Providing Opportunities for Non-Technical Preparation for the World of Work</b>
HEI#1	<i>This is clearly outlined in the Policy; facilitators should ensure that activities are in place to practice these skills. [implementation]</i>
HEI#2	We have financial constraints. [ <i>financial limitations</i> ]
HEI#3	<i>Students' failure to participate as required in professional development activities; Advisors not participating in sessions as scheduled.[implementation]</i>
HEI#4	<i>safety concerns; intensity of the academic programme coverage [time constraints]; resources [financial limitations]; rural location [location]</i>
HEI#5	Limited funds [ <i>financial limitations</i> ]; insufficient employers willing to accept trainees or interns; some employers are located far from students' place of residence [ <i>location</i> ].

*Note:* Information italicised in square brackets [] are the interpretation of the authors.

All the participants identified barriers to involving employers in the development, review and delivery of curriculum in their HEI. Sixty percent (60%) of the respondents identified employers' time constraint/unavailability. Twenty percent (20%) also mentioned the employers' unwillingness as a barrier. Other barriers (20%) stated include: a lack of compensation for guest lecturers; the institutional process for securing guest lecturers and organising field trips; and [*lack of/need for more*] institutional planning for this area [development, review and delivery of curriculum].

## Discussion

### HEIs Development of Employability Skills

All HEIs surveyed indicated that the technical preparation of the students is sufficient. However, forty percent (40%) of HEIs agreed that there was a gap in preparing students with non-technical skills. Martin (2018) refers to this as a mismatch; although the number of graduates from HEIs was increasing, there was a gap between the labour market needs and graduates' profiles. This has resulted in an increased number of unemployed people with tertiary education.

The HEIs revealed that technical preparation involved students' participation in work experience and internship opportunities which would take place in the workplace. However, the non-technical preparation opportunities shared by HEIs did not include any employers' interventions. Research supports that active engagement of employers in the development of

the students' preparation may be more effective than if the employers were not engaged (Hogart et al., 2007; Suleman et al., 2021).

While the survey did not explicitly explore early and consistent engagement with employers, the webinar presenters emphasized that early exposure to work-related concepts, ethos and culture is important to strengthen students' employability skills before entering the workforce. For example, the use of the findings of tracer studies and other related research about the graduates to inform the preparation of students for the world of work. Martin (2018, 2023) identified tracer studies as one of the effective IQA tools and processes used by the eight HEIs case studies in a previous research project.

The UCJ Standards present a balanced approach to the need for both technical and field-specific content as well as non-technical and attitudinal, employability skills. As it relates to employability skills, both the programmatic accreditation guidelines and the discipline-specific standards urge HEIs to incorporate stakeholders, including employers in the development, monitoring, reviewing and maintaining the quality of the programme; the incorporation of job market information from employers in the programme delivery; and the use of such feedback for continual improvement.

### **HEIs Engagement of Employers**

The five HEIs surveyed reported active engagement of employers in curriculum development and review processes by way of advisory committees/boards or other mechanisms that provide employer feedback. This implies that HEIs have a structured and operationalized mechanism in place to review the curriculum and receive employer recommendations; in contrast to passive engagement where the employers simply receive the graduates produced by the HEIs. The HEIs surveyed demonstrate that the employers have "significant levels of engagement involving situations in which employers contribute to the learning process in educational institutions" (Hogarth et al. 2017, p. 8).

The HEIs listed guest lecturer, laboratory support, project assessment, and field trips as methods of employer engagement. They also reported that employers were actively engaged in the curriculum development, review and delivery processes. Although this study did not confirm that formal arrangements were in place with the employers in the delivery of the curriculum, research such as Suleman et al. (2021) expressed concerns about the use of informal arrangements to engage employers and questioned the efficiency of engagement strategies to address the skills gap (p. 11).

HEIs responses suggest that they are also concerned about informal arrangements; expressing that there is a need to have established partnership between HEIs and employers as employers further engage in preparing graduates for the world of work. Examples of partnerships identified included regular meetings to receive employers' feedback, mentorship programmes with industry partners and involvement in work experience and internship programmes.

Suleman et al (2021) and the responses of the HEIs support the employers' (LK and CMG) reasons for the implementation of strong and strategic partnership to bridge the divide between employers and HEIs.

### **Barriers to the Synergy between HEIs and Employers**

The five HEIs surveyed reported several barriers to HEI - employer engagement, which were either employer - related or HEI - related. Financial limitations, time constraints/unavailability of employers to participate in the curriculum development and review processes, implementation of institutional processes, and geographical proximity were among the top barriers identified by the HEIs. Other HEI - related barriers included: institutional processes, for example, securing and compensating guest lecturers, organizing field trips; and the need for more institutional planning. Employer - related barriers identified included: the limited number of sites available for work experience; an insufficient number of employers' who are willing to accept trainees or interns; and the location of employers.

Suleman et al. (2021) reported on employers' view that geographical proximity enhanced the relationship with HEIs. Institutional plans and programmes should maximize all the attendant advantages associated with geographical proximity and minimize any disadvantages.

The failure to participate in the required professional development activities on the part of both students and professional development staff in some HEIs was highlighted as a barrier. This brings into focus the importance of both students and staff in achieving the objectives of established HEI - employability initiatives. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2017) also support the use of professional development activities in HEIs to enhance employability. They state that personal development activities play a role in strengthening students' employment related skills and self-awareness; and help them to apply those skills to different environments. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) in their CareerEDGE employability model, highlight students' self-reflection and evaluation of learning experiences as essential elements towards developing employability skills.

Based on the responses it appears HEIs should address these barriers through strengthened and strategic engagement with employers to prepare graduates for the world of work.

### **Conclusion**

The HEIs in this study have actively engaged employers in curriculum development and review, which was identified by Martin (2018; 2023) and supported by The UCJ Standards as an effective IQA tool for the development of employability skills. This type of engagement improves the synergy between employers and HEIs and is achieved through a number of strategies used by the institutions as they seek to prepare effective graduates.

However, barriers exist that affect the synergy between HEIs and employers. Chief among these are financial limitations, time constraints/unavailability of employers to participate in the curriculum development and review processes, implementation of institutional processes, and geographical proximity.

The UCJ Standards encourage HEIs to develop and deliver programmes that prepare graduates to meet the needs of employers, by engaging the employers during curriculum development and review; and incorporating current job market information in its programme delivery through the involvement of employers.

Informed by the employers' perspectives, The UCJ Standards should prove useful to HEIs in the process of building synergies with employers. They provide guidance through the criteria stated and the prompts to engage with employers in the process of developing employability skills; curriculum development and review; and the delivery of the curriculum.

HEIs should consider implementing a strategic and institutional-wide approach to facilitating employability skills and employer - engagement, towards eliminating or limiting barriers to the synergies between HEIs and employers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This is an exploratory study that did not consider the impact (face-to-face, online, hybrid) of the Covid-19 pandemic and how this affects HEI-employer engagement and the development of employability skills. Participation in the study was limited to presenters in the webinar, (two employers from the private sector, a higher education administrator, and a global quality assurance expert); and to those HEIs who completed the survey.

The UCJ's quality assurance review processes - the submission and review of the institution's documentation, selection of the evaluation team, the site-visit meetings and the visit reports were not included in this research.

### **Future Studies**

1. Expanded research including the students who are beneficiaries of the partnership between HEIs and employers is suggested.
2. Inclusion of focus groups within institutions to obtain data from several perspectives, including gender; and from wider stakeholder groups including administrators, faculty and students.
3. Public and private sector employers' perspectives on bridging the graduates' employability skills gap could also be explored.
4. The importance of graduate effectiveness in higher education:
  - a. the quality assurance systems (EQA/IQA) used in Higher Education to strengthen graduate effectiveness; and
  - b. possible strategies/solutions to improve graduate effectiveness in the workplace.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix A - Graduate Effectiveness/Employability Survey

### Graduate Effectiveness/Employability

One of the UCJ's 2023 Quality Assurance Week Webinars explored **Strengthening Quality in Teaching and Learning Practices in Higher Education: The Graduate Effectiveness Imperative**. As the UCJ continues its collaboration with Higher Education institutions we are asking that you take 15 - 20 minutes of your time to complete this instrument. The shared information will not be used to identify any specific institution. The findings will assist institutional stakeholders to enhance graduate's skills and competencies to meet the needs and expectations of employers as identified by the employers and other experts at the QA Week 2023 Webinar on Graduate Effectiveness.

We would appreciate receiving your feedback on or before Aug 14, 2023.

Thank you!

\* Indicates required question

1. Identify the type of institution which you represent by selecting the most appropriate response from the options below. \*

*Tick all that apply.*

- College
- Training Institution
- University
- University College

2. Select the most appropriate response from the options below to identify the location of your institution \*

*Tick all that apply.*

- Rural
- Urban

3. Which of the following best classifies your institution? \*

*Tick all that apply.*

- Privately funded
- Public/Government funded
- Mixed

4. How does your institution ensure that students engage in consistent, practical exposure to a particular field/industry aligned to the programme of study? \*  
Please separate response items with semicolons.

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5. Do you believe that the technical preparation for the specified job is sufficient for the graduate to be effective in the workplace? \*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes  
 No  
 Not applicable

6. What do you perceive are the barriers to your institution providing more opportunities for technical preparation in the field of study? Please separate response items with semicolons. \*

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7. Do you include non-technical preparation (non-academic skills, work ethics and values, teachable spirit/trainable) in the programme of study? \*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes  
 No

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Graduate Effectiveness/Employability

8. If answer to question above is "Yes", what opportunities are in place for students to practise the non-technical, non-academic skills required to succeed in the particular field? Please separate response items with semicolons.

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9. Do you believe the non-technical preparation identified above is sufficient for the graduate to be effective in the workplace?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes  
 No

10. What do you perceive are the barriers to your institution providing more opportunities for non-technical preparation for the world of work? Please separate response items with semicolons.

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11. Do you engage employers in curriculum development and review? \*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes  
 No

12. If answer to question above is "Yes", how are employers engaged in curriculum development and review? Please separate response items with semicolons.

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13. Do you engage employers in the delivery of the curriculum? \*

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

14. If answer to the question above is "Yes", how does your institution currently involve employers/industry in curriculum delivery? Please separate response items with semicolons.

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15. What do you perceive are the barriers to involving employers/industry in the development, review and delivery of curriculum in your institution? Please separate response items with semicolons.

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Graduate Effectiveness/Employability

16. How can your institution engage or further engage employers/industry in the preparation of the graduate for the world of work? Please separate response items with semicolons. \*

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