

Militants and Mitigants: A Scoping Review of Graduate Employability Discourse in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors militating against graduate employability in Africa and maps corresponding mitigation strategies to inform curriculum reforms and sustainable labour market integration aligned with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and the African Union Agenda 2063. Following the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) five-step scoping review framework and the PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018), a systematic search across six databases (PubMed, ProQuest, Sabinet, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and library assist) was conducted. Of the 381 initially identified publications, 49 published publications between 2015 and 2025 met the inclusion criteria. Qualitative data synthesis was conducted using ATLAS-ti v8 open coding software. Four principal deterrents to graduate employability were identified across Africa's regions: skills mismatch (grounded in 13 sources), inadequate graduate competence (12), systemic failure including corruption and poor governance (9), and negative self-perception (3). These challenges persisted consistently across pre- and post-COVID-19 contexts, suggesting structural, rather than temporal causality. The study advances a continental framework linking colonial educational legacies, institutional dysfunction, and individual-level psychological barriers to graduate unemployment. It contributes to theoretical debates on human capital development, calls to decolonial education, and designing of sustainable labour market policies in the Global South. The findings call for urgent higher education curriculum reforms in African institutions, including the phasing out of redundant programmes, integration of experiential and entrepreneurial learning, strengthening university–industry partnerships, and scalable government investment in agriculture and technology sectors as viable graduate-absorbing economic pillars.

KEYWORDS *Africa's economy; entrepreneurial university; graduate employability; youth unemployment.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION *01;125*

1. INTRODUCTION

Millions of young Africans earn qualifications from various higher learning institutions across the continent's 54 countries every year, yet the majority remain without prospects for meaningful employment (Okolie, Nwosu & Mlanga, 2019; Wakkee & Sleetbos, 2023; Iwara, 2025). This trend is evident even in prominent African economies, such as Nigeria (Agwatu Chioma & Adenekan, 2023), Ghana (Emmanuel & Dzisi, 2024), South Africa (Terrance, 2023), Kenya (Njeru, 2025), Ethiopia (Demissie et al., 2021), Zimbabwe (Mhazo & Thebe, 2021), among others, thereby, catalysing economic inequality, poverty levels, crime involvement among young people, and international migration in search of stability. The surging continental challenge, which leaves most graduates struggling to engage with their desired careers, thrive and attain a decent life, raises concerns and need for empirical discourses around 'graduate employability' determinants on the continent. In line with these

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narratives, the research question for this study was: “What militates against graduate employability in Africa and what strategies are in place to mitigate the issue?”

Graduate employability is generally defined as ‘a set of achievements, skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that position graduates to gain meaningful employment and be successful in their career pursuits, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy’ (Mgaiwa, 2021). This emphasises that graduate employability is primarily an individual trait and accomplishment. Rather than merely highlighting the pitfalls of African governments' strategies (Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2020), which are frequently criticised, evidence suggests that a significant portion of the failure is attributed to young graduates; they bear the responsibility of either creating opportunities for self-employment or strategically securing a firm position within the labour market for prospective job placements. This proactive narrative has fostered the development of entrepreneurial competencies and facilitated engagement across diverse sectors (Wakkee & Sleetbos, 2023; Thetsane, 2023), thereby enhancing unemployed graduates' likelihood of success and contributing to overall growth.

The growing focus on higher learning institutions aiding graduates in acquiring essential skills and competencies for both self-employment and job placement has fostered a stance in which scholars increasingly view graduate employability as an institutional responsibility (Joshua et al., 2015; Kraak, 2015; Shabangu & Madondo, 2024). Institutions of higher learning are responsible for developing broad, cutting-edge transferable skills that appeal to employers, the workplace, and fields, moving away from the previous emphasis on addressing recognised occupational requirements in curricula. This study addresses this challenge from the perspective that graduates and higher learning institutions bear the responsibility for graduate employability. Synthesising empirical discourses on graduate employability from 2015 to 2025, a framework was proposed that illustrates shortcomings in higher learning institutions and among graduates, as well as strategic interventions.

The subsequent sections present the significance and scope of the study. Subsequently, the discussions focus on the methodology, detailing the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) five-step scoping review strategy and PRISMA-ScR guidelines followed to determine qualified samples. In addition, the Atlas-ti v8 qualitative data analysis model was defined, which provides the data charting that resulted from the scoping review and discussion of findings, alongside the strategic interventions targeted at mitigating graduate employability in Africa, and concludes with key recommendations.

2. SIGNIFICANCE

The study's continental, multi-country scoping approach offers breadth that individual empirical studies lack. Furthermore, addressing the determinants of graduate employability is pivotal in translating graduate competencies into tangible employment opportunities, thereby bridging the gap between academic qualifications and labour market integration, a critical requirement in Africa. The research perspective aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 and the African Union Agenda 2063, both of which advocate for promoting decent work opportunities, especially among young people.

2.1 Scope

This study focuses specifically on graduate employability issues documented in Africa, particularly pre- and post-COVID-19 eras. The data charting table (Table 1) is a strong

bibliometric instrument, covering studies from 14 African countries across 2015–2025. The research predominantly concentrates on graduate employability issues on the continent; however, it is crucial to acknowledge the intrinsic relationship between employability and employment, as these two concepts are frequently intertwined within socioeconomic discourses, notwithstanding their definitional distinctions. This conceptual ambiguity highlights the dynamic interplay in which employability serves as a pivotal determinant of employment outcomes.

Similarly, in Africa, where graduate unemployment figures are not just on the rise and a multifaceted challenge, but also breeding socioeconomic complexities (Iwara, 2025), a comprehensive insight into issues around employability cannot be well-articulated in isolation from broader employment patterns. In other words, addressing employability issues on the continent requires an in-depth exploration of the socio-economic, structural, and institutional factors underpinning graduate un/employment challenges, vice versa. Through this understanding, strategising an informed intervention aimed at fostering sustainable labour market integration comprehensively, is possible. These conceptual ambiguities are evident in existing literature, for example, studies by Van Broekhuizen (2016) and Fika et al. (2021) in South Africa, Demissie et al. (2021) in Ethiopia, Gelle et al. (2021) in Somalia, and Emmanuel and Dzisi (2024) in Ghana.

2.2 Legal requirements

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3. METHODS

The Arksey and O'Malley (2005) principle for scoping reviews was adopted, following a five-step strategy to interrogate extant discourses and map emerging patterns on graduate employability issues within the African continent. This was necessary, as the process enabled rapid and logical scoping of scientific information from qualified secondary data (Munn et al., 2018). In step one, the research question guiding the formulation of the instruments and data collection for the study was articulated. Step one of the strategies was approached using the PEO framework (see Figure 1), where P represents the population, E, the exposure, and O, the outcome(s).

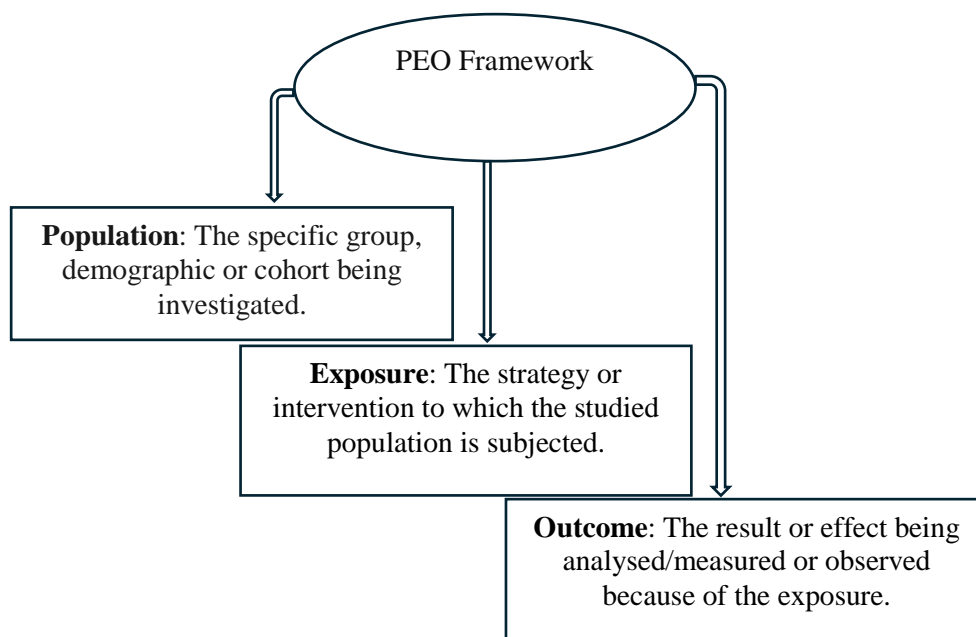


Figure 1. The research structure - based on the PEO framework

Source: author's illustration

The PEO framework is commonly applied in research design to define and structure study components. This structure helps in formulating effective research aims and objectives, research questions, data collection instruments, and analysis. The aim of the study, which is to synthesise graduate employability issues and map potential interventions, was approached using the following research question: *What factors cause and exacerbate graduate employability challenges in Africa, and how can they be mitigated?*

Step 2 of the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) principle for scoping reviews involves literature mapping based on the research objectives and their associated questions. The literature was selected from different sources. First, the institutional subject librarian service was consulted. Through this resource, a wide range of empirical articles on the research thematic area and scope were sorted. Second, regional databases such as Sabinet African Journal and Science Direct, and global outlets, for instance, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, PsycINFO, and PubMed were isolated. Scientific publications that met the inclusion criteria were retrieved from these databases. The literature mapping process across databases became more streamlined utilising search strategies such as Boolean operators, truncations, and subject heading terms. Third, in addition to these strategies, a backwards and forward literature search on Google Scholar was conducted for additional relevant publications that may not have been identified in prior searches. This approach was necessary to ensure high saturation points during the data collection.

In the data collection process, a search strategy - “((((("Graduate employability") OR ("Graduate employment")) AND (Challenge*)) AND (Issue*)) AND (Problem*)) OR (Solution*)) (Mitigations*)) AND (intervention*)) AND (Africa) AND (African countries) AND (African continent)” – was used, ensuring that the data is streamlined and facile.

Stage 3 of the literature review process was mainly data screening. It began with qualifying the enrolled publications with criteria, such as Topic and Abstract (TA), Full text (Fx)], conformity, scope, and relevance. Given that the primary focus of the study was Africa and

graduate employability issues, the terms "Africa" and "graduate employability" and related concepts constituted the key themes and search strategies. As a result, studies whose titles or abstracts did not include these key terms were automatically disqualified during the data screening process. The screening was performed through EndNote version 20 and facilitated using the PRISMA-ScR guidelines, in accordance with Tricco et al. (2018). PRISMA is an acronym for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses. It is a widely recognised research strategy/guideline designed to improve the adequacy, transparency, and clarity of the reporting literature, specifically in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The strategy, however, has been harnessed in scoping reviews and in some cases, narrative review studies. PRISMA's prominence across contemporary research fields primarily hinges on the fact that it provides a structured framework/guideline, including a checklist of essential items and a flow diagram. The checklist is designed to ensure that scholars thoroughly profile each stage of their literature review process, from data mapping, enrolment criteria, extraction, to synthesis. Adhering to these guidelines enables researchers to enhance accountability, reproducibility, and credibility of their research findings, facilitating crucial appraisal and evidence-based decision-making in different scientific endeavours.

In the final enrolment, four critical inclusion criteria were set. First, full-text publications; secondly, peer-reviewed articles published in scientific journals, including reviewed published PhD and master's theses accessible through institutional repositories; thirdly, verifiable reports published by recognised and reputable organisation, and fourth, studies published between 2015 and 2025. The scope was strategic, ensuring that the review reflects recent dynamics and further illustrates trends around graduate employability issues in Africa for at least 11 years. The verification process for the enrolled data involves systematically examining the publication records. Peer-review acknowledgements and indexing status within scholarly databases and online institutional repositories were consulted to confirm that the publications underwent rigorous peer-review procedures.

While the peer-reviewed criterion during data screening guaranteed the quality assurance of publications incorporated into the analysis, the time factor was necessary to determine where conditions fluctuated over the desired period, specifically, the pre- and post-COVID-19 eras; subsequently, materials below the defined threshold were excluded from the analysis. During the data collection, a total of 381 publications (N) were gathered from various channels; however, only 48 met the inclusion criteria for analysis (Figure 2). This constitutes the actual sample (n) for the study. These were diverse scientific research studies relating to graduate employability performed in various countries across Africa's five regions; these were carefully and strategically evaluated for risk of bias, consistency of results, direct relevance to the outcome, precision, applicability, and reliability. Countries focused upon were - Ghana and Nigeria in West Africa; Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda in East Africa; Cameroon in Central Africa; Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Lesotho in Southern Africa, and Sudan in North Africa. The included publications, consolidated in a file format, were subjected to a qualitative analysis modelled on the Atlas-ti v8 software open coding system for content and thematic data analysis. Atlas-ti is ideal for synthesising and grouping large volumes of textual information (Smit 2021), such as those used in this study.

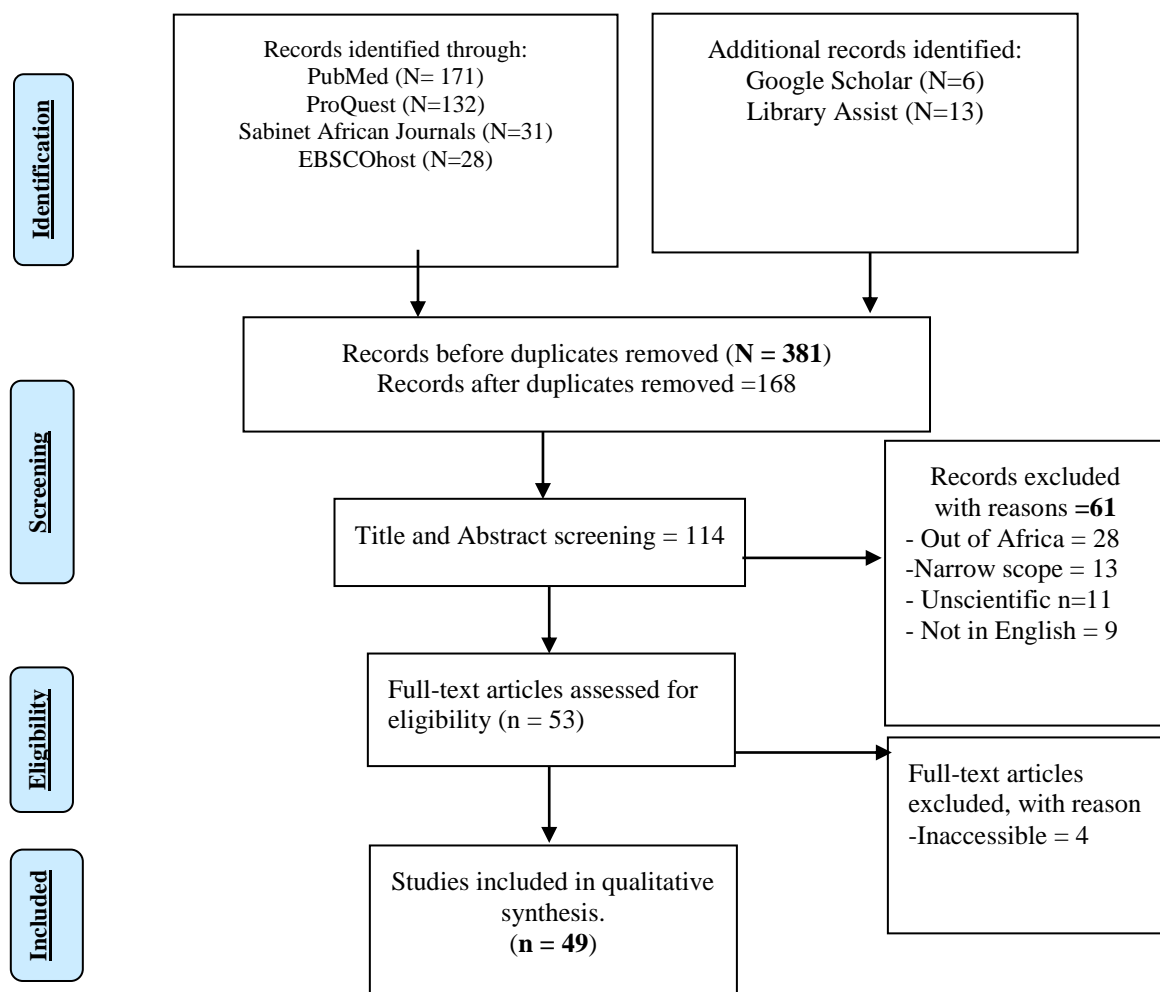


Figure 2. PRISMA-ScR sampling flow chart of the study

Source: adopted from Tricco et al. (2018).

The coding/annotation technique is critical for isolating relevant information and summarising large text into a network diagram that allows visualisation (Figure 3). It generates themes in line with arguments around a subject matter. Each ‘open network diagram’ summarises the findings of one of the arguments around graduate employability in Africa. There are three outliers in the diagram. The first is the central outlier, which explains the fundamental idea of the project - it is considered the broader theme (code). The outlier with receptive arrows, also known as ‘quotation neighbours’ or ‘sub-themes’, follows. This outlier presents the samples’ generative ideas that informed the formation and classification of their main themes. Frequently, sub-themes are connected to explain causal relationships linked to the theme. Lastly, the ‘common neighbours’ are the third outliers. This category of outliers provides a summarised source of information through which neighbours and codes were derived.

The data charting table, which guides the structuring of information in the result section, was formulated in Step Four (Table 1). It contains valuable information, such as the author(s) and year of publication, title, research design/approach, and key findings from each publication included in the analysis. This was followed by Step Five - synthesising, summarising, and reporting the findings of the scoping review, appropriate in different categories on the data charting table, in line with the headings.

Table 1. A Synthesis of Key Issues Militating Against Graduate Employability in Africa.

Author	Country	Topic	Methodology	Deterrents
Maunganidze et al., 2016.	Botswana	Graduate Employability in Botswana: Challenges and Prospects.	An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was followed, exploiting the Yorke and Knight USEM model of employability.	The lack of practical skills and the mismatch between degree programme content and labour market requirements. Limited demand for knowledge and technology-intensive jobs.
Ngoma & Dithan Ntale, 2016.	Uganda	Psychological capital, career identity and graduate employability in Uganda: the mediating role of social capital.	A quantitative research methodology was adopted, surveying 215 respondents from a skills development program.	Higher graduate volumes compared to limited job opportunities. A general mismatch between employers' and employees' expectations.
Van Broekhuizen, 2016.	South Africa	Graduate Unemployment and Higher Education Institutions in South Africa.	Quantitative methodology was followed, utilising a probabilistic approach to link multiple labor force surveys and administrative datasets.	Skills mismatch, and severe heterogeneity in the quality of education received by different racial groups and cohorts.
Ismail, 2017.	South Africa	Graduate employability capacities, self-esteem and career adaptability among South African young adults.	A quantitative, cross-sectional research design approach was followed; descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlations and canonical correlation analysis were utilised.	Career adaptability and self-esteem.
Mukurunge & Tlali, 2017.	Lesotho	Curriculum Reform at Tertiary Level as Key to Graduate Employability and Entrepreneurship in Lesotho.	A qualitative research methodology was followed, incorporating interviews and document analysis.	The emphasis on theoretical and academic excellence rather than entrepreneurial skills development constrained readiness.
Pheko & Molefhe, 2017.	Botswana	Addressing employability challenges: a framework for improving the employability of graduates in Botswana.	A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive approach was followed.	Competencies and industry skills mismatch, resulting from inadequate training. Lack of confidence and low self-efficacy beliefs in the labour market.
Eta, 2018.	Cameroon	Enhancing Graduate Employability in Cameroonian Universities Through Professionalisation in the Context of the 'Licence–Master–Doctorate'	This study applies a qualitative research methodology, utilising text documents and interviews.	There is a mismatch between skills acquired and skills required by potential employers. Graduates receive training for a job or profession rather than education for life, which

Author	Country	Topic	Methodology	Deterrents
		Reform.		undermines traditional academic abilities, such as critique, synthesis, and analysis.
Kadhila et al., 2018.	Namibia	Perspectives on Graduate Employability Attributes for Management Sciences Graduates.	A quantitative approach using a survey method, in which questionnaires were administered to the three types of stakeholders.	A mismatch between the skills acquired and the important competencies for the job market results from inadequate training to enhance graduate employability attributes.
Mwita, 2018.	Tanzania	Tanzania Graduate Employability: Perception of Human Resource Management Practitioners.	It utilises a quantitative research method, administering structured questionnaires to a sample of 100 human resource practitioners.	Limited practical experience and shallow knowledge depth, resulting in competency gaps relative to labour market expectations.
Adam, 2019.	Sudan	The Future Perspectives of Agricultural Graduates and Sustainable Agriculture in Sudan.	A quantitative research method was utilised, involving descriptive, analytical statistics, and a multistage random sampling.	The quality is below the expected threshold.
Kamal & Idris, 2019.	Sudan	Matching MBA Graduates' Competencies with Employability Requirements in Sudanese Organisations.	A quantitative research method was followed, utilising paired sample technique to select a sample size of 214 graduates and HRM for analysis.	Competency gap between the acquired and required skills.
Kessy, 2020.	Tanzania	Higher Education and Prospects of Graduates' Employability in Tanzania.	A mixed approach, utilising qualitative and quantitative methodologies.	Lack of essential skills required for the labour market.
Chitema, 2021.	Botswana	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Botswana.	Qualitative research methodology, including interviews and document analysis.	Quality of education acquired and their relevance to current economic paradigms. Lack of labour market competence
Demissie et al., 2021.	Ethiopia	Graduates' Unemployment and Associated Factors in Ethiopia: Analysis of Higher Education Graduates' Perspectives.	Quantitative design, sampling 359 graduates from five regions for statistical analysis.	Shortfalls in relevant graduate skills, current economic challenges, and labour market conditions.
Fika et al., 2021.	South Africa	Unemployment of the built environment graduates.	A quantitative method was followed with a sample drawn from the Nelson Mandela University.	Deficiencies in practical experience and relevant skills, resulting from curriculum shortfalls.
Gelle et al.,	Somalia	Graduate Unemployment in	A quantitative research method was used, with	Inadequate developmental skills,

Author	Country	Topic	Methodology	Deterrents
2021.		Somalia: Causes, Socio-Economic Consequences, and Possible Solutions.	data gathered from 216 respondents, comprising graduates, recruitment managers, administrators from local universities, and government officials.	political governance, and heightened corruption.
Guàrdia et al., 2021.	Kenya/ Tanzania	Graduates' employability skills in East Africa.	A mixed-methods approach was utilised, including a survey and focus group discussions. Regional stakeholders attending the Open Day events organised by three East African HE Institutions constitute the research sample.	Employability skills are insufficiently developed.
Mgaiwa, 2021.	Tanzania	Fostering Graduate Employability: Rethinking Tanzania's University Practices.	A qualitative method - narrative review approach was used to identify theoretically pertinent university practices with implications for graduate employability.	Mismatch between employee skills and employer expectations, and a lack of essential soft skills.
Mhazo & Thebe, 2021.	Zimbabwe	Hustling Out of Unemployment': Livelihood Responses of Unemployed Young Graduates in the City of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.	This study followed a qualitative research methodology, utilising in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.	A mismatch between aspirations and livelihood pathways. Societal perceptions of occupation contributed to the challenge.
Agwatu Chioma & Adenekan, 2023.	Nigeria	Graduate Youth Unemployment: Root to Socio-Economic Problems in Nigeria.	A descriptive survey design was utilised. Guided by a 16-item questionnaire, a proportionate random sample of 290 subjects was reached.	Political instability, lack of internal competitiveness, and institutional weakness in employment planning.
Héritier Nsenge et al., 2023.	Congo	Exploratory Factor Analysis of Congolese Information Technology Graduates' Employability: Towards Sustainable Employment.	Through a quantitative research methodology, the study surveyed 355 graduates (274 male, 81 female) using 43 questionnaires.	Socio-political background and competencies.
Mseleku, 2024.	South Africa	Transitioning from higher education to the labour market: The role of graduate internship on youth graduate employability.	It applies an exploratory qualitative research method, drawing perspectives of 50 participants.	Lack of contemporary skills, and Qualification typology.
Terrance, 2023.	South Africa	Determinants and Prospects of Graduate Unemployment in South Africa.	Qualitative - critical doctrinal examination of secondary data and materials gathered from 2013 to 2022.	Nature of qualifications obtained and skills mismatch.

Author	Country	Topic	Methodology	Deterrents
Emmanuel & Dzisi, 2024.	Ghana	The Effect of Graduate Unemployment on Career Development in Ghana.	Mixed research methodology. Using a structured questionnaire and interview guide, 250 stakeholders from private and public universities and Human Resource professionals were engaged.	Nature of programs and qualifications obtained, and age-related shortcomings.
Njeru, 2025.	Kenya	Massification and Employability of University Graduates in Kenya.	Following a causal-comparative research survey design, 437 samples were drawn from eight universities, randomly sampled across the country.	Lack of qualification and skills, and labour market mismatch.
Sangaré-Oumar et al., 2025.	Tanzania	Evaluation of Factors Influencing University Graduates' Unemployment in Developing Country: A Multi-Criteria Decision-Making Perspective.	A combination of expert opinions and a literature review identifies key factors contributing to graduate unemployment.	Mismatch between jobs and skills, inadequate career guidance and counselling services, and an ineffective labour market information system.

Source: The author's illustration is based on a scoping review

This scoping review study employs a unique and rigorous methodology frequently overlooked in theoretical discourses on graduate employability issues on the continent; this was striving to illuminate the phenomenon and drive strategic interventions. A vast majority of current studies in this context, for instance, tend to be empirical and focused on specific regions or countries, thereby, failing to capture the holistic nature of the phenomenon from a continental perspective. Similarly, the application of Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-step approach for conducting scoping reviews, combined with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) rigorous sampling guidelines as well as the Atlas-ti v8 model for qualitative data synthesis, effectively addresses the methodological gaps observed in contemporary literature. In addition, the time dimension, considering both the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic era, provides clarity on whether graduate employability issues are influenced by temporal or enduring factors, for informed intervention. Consequently, this study sought to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of graduate unemployment/employability complexities in Africa and their broader implications on the continent.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The trajectory of the graduate employability challenge in different African regions, both prior to and following the COVID-19 pandemic, exhibits remarkable consistency, as research conducted in these two distinct epochs highlights analogous concerns (Table 1). Emerging studies linked the rising continental problem to historical and structural factors associated with Western hegemony, especially through the legacy of segregated education systems. The literature argued that under colonial rule, these educational frameworks were deliberately designed to limit the intellectual and professional development of the African populace. Bantu education, for instance, implemented in South Africa, aimed to prepare young black graduates for roles within a subservient economy, thus perpetuating socioeconomic disparities and marginalising critical thinking and innovation (Gallo, 2020; Meda, 2020). In examining how the quality and type of higher education institutions impact graduate employment outcomes, Van Broekhuizen (2016) admits racial disparities in graduate unemployment, linking it to the varying quality of education received, a legacy of apartheid. As a result, the educational system produced a workforce equipped with skills inconsistent with the needs of a dynamically changing economy, leading to high unemployment rates, particularly among women and African graduate cohorts (Netshivhambe, 2025).

Parallel to South Africa, this legacy of redundant education/qualifications persisted in contemporary African institutions of higher learning, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges. To date, curricula in a vast majority of the continent's institutions reflect outdated paradigms that do not align with local economic realities, societal needs, or global market demands (Higgs, 2016; Olsson, 2023; Gumbo et al., 2024). Most of the continent's educational institutions, especially higher learning, continue to offer programs and qualifications steeped in Western-colonial academic orientation – those that prioritise rote learning and theoretical knowledge, over experiential learning, resourceful skill acquisition and entrepreneurial thinking (Mukurunge & Tlali, 2017; Iwara, 2025). As a result, most young and vibrant African graduates emerge from these weak and outdated programs without the essential employability skill set or qualities (Demissie et al., 2021; Gelle et al., 2021; Terrance, 2023), limiting their potential in the competitive global labour market or the continent's lucrative entrepreneurship landscape.

The adherence to these antiquated curricula and pedagogies demonstrates a reluctance to redefine Africa's education systems in response to the continent's evolving, physical,

structural, environmental and socioeconomic landscape, thereby, displacing many young graduates. This assumption justifies Mseleku's (2022) and MacGinty's (2024) empirical standpoints, whose findings within the South African context reveal that a significant number of young graduates from the country are ill-equipped to navigate employment complexities and contribute to their societies. As demonstrated in the current study, this narrative is consistent with the ongoing challenges in other African countries.

Like the commonalities observed across two temporal contexts illustrated earlier, analysis of scientifically published research conducted in different African countries, following a variety of research methodologies, reveals harmonious and persistent continental conditions that must be addressed through a common intervention. In order of priority, as illustrated in Figure 3 and elaborated in Figure 4, four fundamental deterrents emerged. These include, skills mismatch, incompetence, systemic failure and negative self-perception. It is worth noting that understanding how these challenges resonate across diverse countries is critical for improving Africa's graduate employability outcomes.

Skills mismatch, in the context of this study, explains a condition in which the qualifications young graduates obtained in higher learning, the knowledge acquired through formal education and training, do not align with the current labour market's requirements or expectations. This challenge, according to scientific evidence, resulted from a wide range of pitfalls, including a surplus of redundant programs, resulting in qualifications that are either irrelevant or inconsistent with available job opportunities (Ngoma and Dithan Ntale, 2016; Kadhila et al., 2018); in other words, higher education curricula devoid of emerging skill sets required by evolving industries (Eta, 2018; Mwita, 2018); and lack of capacity development programs and opportunities, which can expose students to real-world experience (Guàrdia et al., 2021; Mseleku, 2024). The implication of this employability challenge is profound, especially in terms of income inequality (Mwakalila, 2022), unfulfillment, and career dissatisfaction (Mseleku, 2022). Research further proves that the youth unemployment crisis on the African continent, which currently ranks over 60% (Chigudu, 2025), along with its associated consequences, such as international migration (Nworgu & Amadi, 2024), political instability (Okafor, 2011), and increased crime (Chigudu, 2025), is a matter of significant concern. If left unaddressed promptly, especially in countries like South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Egypt, and Somalia, where the challenge is prominent, it could escalate uncontrollably and impose strain on the broader African economy and society. Consequently, remedying skills mismatch challenges, is imperative to Africa's evolving multidimensional crises.

Incompetency explains the inability or incapacity of a qualified individual to perform a particular task effectively and diligently (Kamal & Idris, 2019). The incompetence of some young graduates often results in poor performance, if not failure to meet stipulated standards, consequently leading to retrenchments, which further exacerbate unemployment issues and reinforce the cycle of unemployment and /or underemployment, undermining socioeconomic wellness. According to Mseleku (2024), the competence issue can be attributed to a compromised education system where learning falls short of labour market expectations, including knowledge depth, lack of practical experience, and essential skills, a situation hindering employment potential for young graduates.

Much like skill mishmash and incompetence, system failure poses threats to young graduates. When educational systems fail to provide adequate resources that facilitate cutting-edge skills acquisition, hands-on practical experience, and market exposure, it becomes a challenge for

young people to shape their employment competitiveness while in the tertiary education. Systemic failure in Africa, according to Demissie et al. (2021), Gelle et al. (2021), and Agwatu Chioma and Adenekan (2023), is the result of institutional breakdown, unethical governance, corruption, and lack of political will. Recent studies on ethical governance in Africa conceptualised how endemic corruption has led to resource misappropriation, undermining critical sectors, such as education (Senadjki et al., 2021; Iwara & Ojokorotu, 2025). Similarly, political instability in most African countries disrupts economic growth and hinders investment in all sectors, including (Fika et al., 2021). These issues, combined, hinder the development of relevant skills among African graduates, limiting their ability to compete in the evolving labour market. Mitigating these issues requires strategic upskilling programs at tertiary levels, building industry-academic partnerships, and policy development that aligns skills acquisition with labour market demands.

Negative self-perception explains an unfavourable view of one’s abilities, competence, worth, and potential. Often, such perceptions manifest into self-doubt and low self-esteem, significantly hindering an individual’s willingness and motivation to pursue opportunities (Pheko & Molefhe, 2017). When young graduates, for instance, feel incompetent or experience low self-esteem, it becomes challenging to present themselves positively in the labour market; they often become discouraged in their abilities, consequently hindering their motivation and persistence in the job-hunting process. Over time, such a mindset can lead to a vicious cycle of avoidance, where graduates refrain from job pursuit, ultimately limiting their chances of career success (Ismail, 2017).

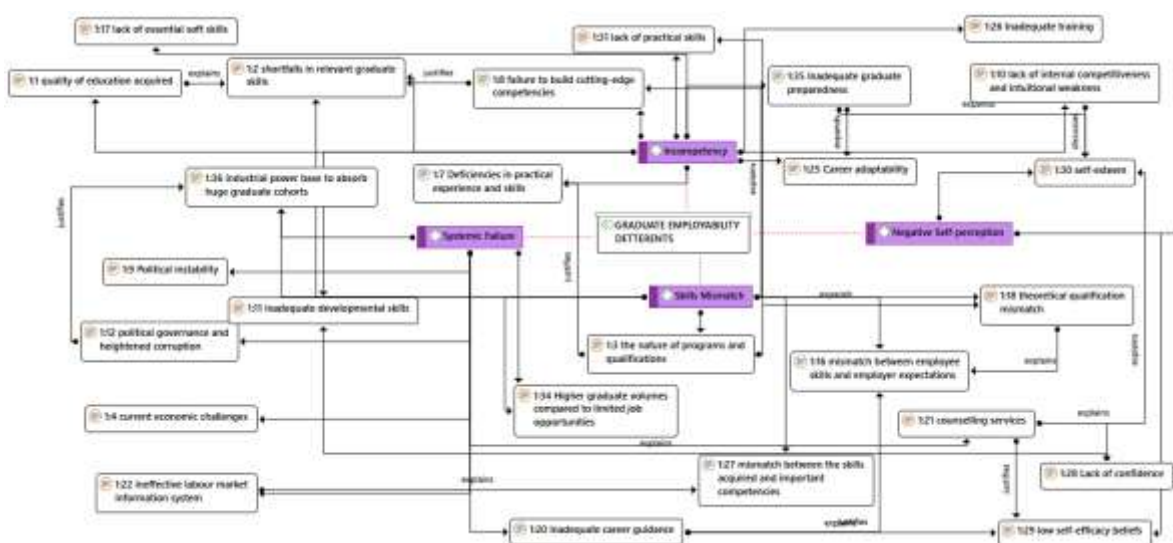


Figure 3. Atlas-ti code diagram depicting graduate employability issues in Africa
 Source: author’s illustration

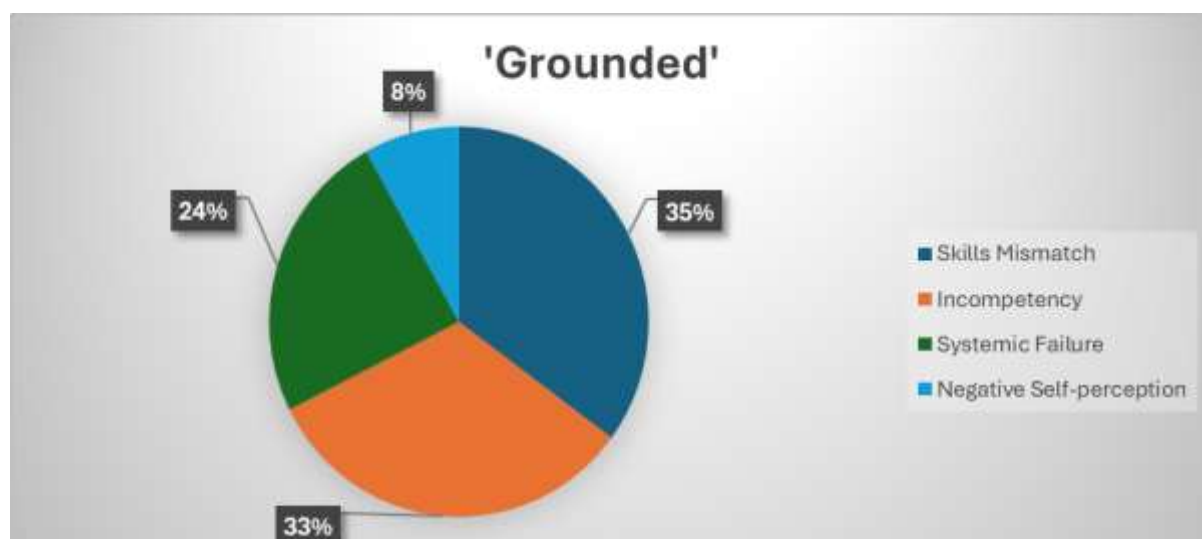


Figure 4. Atlas-ti grounded report on graduate employability issues in Africa
Source: author's illustration

Mitigating the qualification-labour market demand mismatch, requires a pragmatic approach. The current global Fourth Industrial Revolution era is characterised by the convergence of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, automation, and the Internet of Things (IoT), which are fundamentally transforming industrial paradigms and everyday life. Similarly, the African local economic landscape is progressively shifting from predominantly white-collar jobs toward more pragmatic domains such as production and manufacturing, with a notable emphasis on self-employment, particularly within agriculture, technology, and trade. As illustrated in Table 2, a concerted transition from irrelevant theoretical programs is essential to allow for a focus on aligning educational curricula with evolving industry needs and emerging local economic issues (Kessy, 2020). Higher learning institutions can regularly conduct labour market analyses to identify redundant qualifications to remove from the curriculum and, in the same direction, map out critical skill shortages to channel efforts (Pheko & Molefhe, 2017; Sangaré-Oumar et al., 2025). Implementing these strategies will enable Africa to create a more responsive education system that equips graduates with the cutting-edge qualifications required in the evolving labour market.

Table 2. Graduate Unemployment Challenges and Interventions in Africa

Deterrents	Interventions	Directions	Authors
Skills Mismatch	Learning institutions must embark on critical curriculum reforms, strategically bridging discrepancies between skills offered, market realities/expectations, and existing local economic needs:	Monitor, observe, and evaluate graduate labour market outcomes, disciplinary variations, and racial differentials. The resultant action will direct the necessary shift in curriculum design to align with the nature of the skill set required and development paradigms for every learning institution.	Ngoma & Dithan Ntale, 2016; Maunganidze et al., 2016; Pheko & Molefhe, 2017; Mwita, 2018; Kessy, 2020; Chitema, 2021; Demissie et al., 2021; Gelle et al., 2021; Mgaiwa, 2021; Mseleku,
	1) Introduce relevant cutting-edge qualifications that not only align with local economic realities,	Strengthen university-industry, as well as government and grassroots community stakeholder partnerships. Such a holistic and	

Deterrents	Interventions	Directions	Authors
	but also interact with contemporary labour market demands and entrepreneurial imperatives. 2) Significantly reduce enrolment/intake, if not total shutdown of redundant programs.	dynamic approach will facilitate a collective curriculum review, ensuring that education aligns with economic development plans, emerging societal issues, local economic opportunities, and labour market demands. As a higher learning institution, adhering to continental and global standards in the provision of education and training services will ensure the production of cutting-edge qualifications of international standards.	2024; Emmanuel & Dzisi, 2024; Njeru, 2025; Sangaré-Oumar et al., 2025.
Inadequate competence	Institutions of higher learning should provide career guidance and hands-on practical job skills across disciplines.	Embed experimental learnings in the curriculum, regardless of discipline. Introduce initiatives aimed at improving employability skills - workshops and seminars, internships, mentorship programmes, and special courses.	Maunganidze et al., 2016; Kadhila et al., 2018; Eta, 2018; Mwita, 2018; Fika et al., 2021; Mgaiwa, 2021; Terrance, 2023.
Systemic Failure	Scale-up government support for youth skills development programs with an emphasis on labour market demand-driven skills and local economic demands.	An effective university-government partnership to prioritise investments in sectors that can absorb huge graduate cohorts. Scale up government investments in youth capacity development, specifically in areas of agriculture and entrepreneurship, where Africa has competitive advantages.	Mukurunge & Tlali, 2017; Gelle et al., 2021; Mhazo & Thebe, 2021; Agwatu Chioma & Adenekan, 2023.
Negative Self-perception	Strengthen career guidance services, especially entrepreneurial and communication skills training, and improve labour market information systems.	Analysing graduate labour market negative self-perceptions and redirecting investments.	Ismail, 2017; Sangaré-Oumar et al., 2025.

Source: author's illustration

Producing decorative qualifications contrary to skill competence in relevant fields, does more harm than good to graduates and Africa. The continent's higher learning institutions must prioritise producing graduates who can think, innovate and apply their discipline in real-world settings. Integrating hands-on, experiential learning opportunities, such as internship schemes, co-op programs, and industry projects through which students apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings and gain marketable experience, is integral in building skills and competence in their respective specialisations (Maunganidze et al., 2016; Chitema, 2021). Targeted mentorship programs, confidence-building workshops, and practical experience opportunities are essential for a positive self-perception among graduates (Ismail,

2017; Pheko & Molefhe, 2017); this implies that higher learning institutions need to prioritise mentorship initiatives that connect students with professionals in their respective fields. Through such platforms, graduates can gain insights, encouragement, and real-world perspectives that are resourceful in counteracting self-doubt. Similarly, soft skills development, including entrepreneurship, public speaking, effective communication, and self-presentation, must be emphasised, regardless of the qualification, as this can enhance graduates' confidence in their abilities to articulate their qualifications and contributions (Mukurunge & Tlali, 2017; Sangaré-Oumar et al., 2025), thereby empowering graduates with practical skills and accomplishments that reinforce a positive self-image.

Years have passed since Africa transitioned from the colonial era. The continent is a sovereign entity, endowed with vast human capacity and abundant natural resources that, if well harnessed, can bring transformative reform in higher education and standard of living (Iwara & Ojatorotu, 2025). The continent's higher education systems must move beyond legacy structures rooted in outdated curricula that deter their development. Africa should adopt a holistic approach to curriculum reform – one that emphasises niche qualifications, experimental education, practical skills, and critical thinking, aligning its offerings with local economic realities and emerging global labour market trends. An effective higher education curriculum, especially for a continent like Africa that is grappling with several socioeconomic uncertainties, must cultivate competent young graduates, equipped to drive local development and sustainable growth.

In addition, the persistent disconnect between qualifications offered, current labour market demands, and Africa's local economic needs, stresses the urgency for collective action – a strategic shift in educational paradigm, as opposed to continuation of colonisation and empathy. Effectively phasing out obsolete disciplines while prioritising cutting-edge programs will potentially bring the continent's young graduates to the fore. Strengthening investments in skills development initiatives and experiential learning, equally, promises to reshape the continent's educational landscape and empower young graduates. Similarly, through collaborative efforts involving higher institutions, government bodies, civil society, and local businesses, the continent has the potential to craft a contextually relevant and innovative Afrocentric pedagogical framework that can enhance the continent's graduate employability.

5. CONCLUSION

This scoping review, drawing from 49 publications in 14 African countries from 2015 to 2025, identifies four persistent determinants of graduate unemployability on the African continent: skills mismatch, inadequate graduate competence, systemic failure, and negative self-perception. Notably, these challenges demonstrate remarkable consistency across temporal contexts - both pre- and post-COVID-19 and across countries - indicating that graduate employability issues in Africa are driven by structural and institutional factors rather than transient disruptions. This finding directly addresses the study's research question and emphasises the urgency of systemic, rather than symptomatic, intervention.

From a scientific perspective, the study confirms and synthesises existing empirical evidence while extending it into a coherent continental framework. The four-deterrent model contributes to human capital theory discourse by demonstrating that the African graduate employability crisis cannot be attributed solely to macroeconomic conditions; it is equally rooted in institutional dysfunction and individual psychological factors. The theoretical

attribution to colonial educational legacies offers a valuable lens, although future research should apply decolonial theory more rigorously and objectively, to explore how post-independence curricula can be reconstructed along Afrocentric epistemological lines.

From a practical perspective, the study's implications align with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Higher education institutions are called upon to: (1) decommission redundant academic programmes; (2) embed experiential, entrepreneurial, and digital literacy learning across all disciplines; (3) establish formal university–industry–government partnerships for continuous labour market monitoring; and (4) invest in career guidance and soft-skills development to counteract negative self-perception. Governments should prioritise funding for youth skills development in sectors with genuine graduate-absorbing capacity, particularly agriculture, technology, and manufacturing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study carries important limitations: its scoping, rather than systematic design, precludes meta-analytical conclusions; the geographic sample underrepresents North, West, and Central Africa; and the absence of inter-rater reliability data constrains the reproducibility of the Atlas-ti coding process. Future research should conduct empirical multi-country studies with standardised measurement instruments to test the proposed framework and specifically examine stakeholder preparedness for curriculum reform across different African regional contexts. Longitudinal studies that track graduate outcomes before and after curriculum interventions would significantly advance the evidence base for policy action.

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