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Assessment of Potential Measures Aimed at Improving Graduates' Employability at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin

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Abstract

Given that employability was recently considered to be the third mission of higher education institutions (HEIs), after teaching and research, both public and private HEIs have not yet adopted this new mission. Therefore, potential employability measures have not yet lived up to expectations on the one hand, and are not yet capable of achieving sustainability indicators on the other hand. The main objective of this research is to assess employability measures at the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) in Benin using a framework of four sustainability criteria: participation, institutional efficiency, employability, and satisfaction. A multi-phase case study involving surveys and seminars finds high internal stakeholder participation but weak institutional structures, poor graduate tracking, and a significant soft skills deficit identified by employers. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for public authorities, businesses, and university actors to collaboratively improve graduate employability by defining the content or indicators of the criteria identified in the upstream and downstream dimensions of university education.

Keywords

Professional Integration of Graduates, Participation, Institutional Efficiency and Effectiveness, Employability, Employer and Student Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Measures aimed at improving employability have become one of the areas to be exploited in order to pursue and achieve the third implicit mission referred to as graduate employability (Weerts & Freed, 2016), mainly in emerging Asian coun-

tries and developing African countries (Wang, 2020). Stakeholders, higher education advocates such as university officials, teacher-researchers and even graduates; business/corporate professionals, individuals and communities alike, welcomed the new trend of bringing their respective institutions together to pursue this goal of greater well-being for the entire community, little would be achieved in terms of promoting institutional sustainability and even actor-to-actor experiences (Jeantet, 2003). There is a clear link between knowledge transfer and employability in employability measures (Sahakyan, 2021). However, there remains the question of whether this enthusiastic effort will suddenly come to an abrupt end with dramatic consequences, bringing to the surface the opposition between business professionals, communities and so-called theoretical teachers, which this research aims to draw the attention of stakeholders in higher education institutions to the need to establish new rules and standards for employability measures (Robinson, 2019). A hasty decision to withdraw the research mission would be devastating and counterproductive if the aim was to lighten professional workloads in order to accommodate employability measures. Research, more than any other activity, would be the main driver of these new measures. For example, how can extracurricular activities be incorporated into so-called measures (Marletta, 2013; Reuter, 2013)? Why not take on board the vision of learners/students who challenge employability measures with innovative initiatives in terms of student lifestyle, but also in terms of learning content and research programs (Boutet, 2012)?

The sustainability of employability measures refers to long-term relationships, which require the individual participation of stakeholders, the institutional efficiency and effectiveness of businesses, higher education institutions and communities, the employability of graduates, and the satisfaction of employers and learners (Powell & McGrath, 2014). These criteria, which are negotiable to say the least, remain those on which stakeholders should exercise greater vigilance, especially university stakeholders, who were perceived as the weak link in the chain and were regularly mocked (Ahmed, 2014).

If employability measures were to achieve a goal shared by all (Simard, 2008), it would be the responsibility of university officials in general, and teachers in particular, to initiate negotiations around these critical criteria. Of course, several issues have fuelled doubts among stakeholders about the achievement of common goals. Firstly, the creation of any kind of employability measures unit requires funding, which is not readily available. Secondly, most academic training institutions rarely have the human resources available and willing to start up such employability measures. Thirdly, both sides-academic training institutions and businesses/companies-need to be fully and strongly motivated to bridge the gap between the pragmatism of professionals and the theoretical models of teachers. An additional issue of interest is the sensitive nature of the request or simply the fear of poor management of technical equipment by students on the part of host structures/companies or communities. An additional issue of interest is the poor be-

havior of students in general during their time in companies/businesses. So, many questions arise, such as:

- How demanding are the employability measures in terms of resources?

- How critical is the contribution of a dedicated administrator or volunteer teacher to the employability measures?

- How feasible is it to build bridges between professionals in companies/ businesses/communities and teachers in academic training institutions for the benefit of the employability measures?

- How could the employability measures inflect the reluctance of professionals towards learners/students?

This study has highlighted a number of questions that cannot be satisfactorily answered here, but above all, it has provided outlines that other researchers are called upon to supplement. Education and employability measures should remain significant strategies for age groups (children, adolescents, and adults) to pursue their way of life, and not otherwise. Unless a sustainable kit of employability measures for education is achieved, social demand at the higher education level would shift towards more attractive alternatives. The remainder of this article will then emphasize the theories that would serve as the foundations for this research. This will be followed by the empirical foundation, analytical framework, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Theoretical Foundation

The literature has documented how technological transformations have reduced the demand for child labor in factories, facilitating the introduction of compulsory schooling for children in response to the need for 'educated' wage laborers in developed countries (Rikap, 2018). However, what about developing countries? Hashim found a contrary social demand for schooling in Ghana, as evidenced by this report:

«*Someone could go to Primary Six and have a job as an educated person. If you went to Middle School, Form 4, you have done something great. Now you can go to university and have no job*» (2011: Concluding Discussion).

Recalling the three components of education typology, namely formal, non-formal and informal (Ahmed, 2014); it is worth emphasizing formal education here. Given that education is a continuous process, spanning from early childhood to adulthood, this study focuses primarily on formal education in university training institutions. As Hashim (2011) proclaimed, "Education is a means of securing livelihoods as adults", suggesting a livelihood approach to education. However, it should be noted that Powell and McGrath (2014) drew attention to Amartya Sen's 'capability approach' as being more appropriate for education systems in South Africa. The capability approach allows for a more holistic assessment of higher education by including social justice (Rajapakse, 2016), without obscuring the competitive dimension (means, economic growth) contained in the human capital approach (Cornali, 2022). In the same vein, Ahmed (2014) advocated this ca-

pability approach to better describe the education systems of Southeast Asian countries.

By analyzing education from a livelihood perspective, which is not dissimilar to the capability approach, social demand for education appears to take precedence over economic needs (Powell & McGrath, 2014). The capability approach would help to justify the primacy of education over economic growth in China and elsewhere (Ahmed, 2014; Powell & McGrath, 2014). The latter approach would focus more on the values and goals of individuals and institutions, while retaining economic rationality as another key analytical tool. This is why measures such as participation rates, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, employability rates, and employer and learner satisfaction rates should be monitored and evaluated (Drennig, 2015), if the sustainability of employability measures is to play a role in the effective choice between education and other alternatives of interest.

What are the prerequisites for the capability approach? It is the acceptance and credibility of employability measures among the participating actors. Also, does the distinction made in this approach between means and ends, and the resulting emphasis on human well-being, differ from human capital and traditional approaches to education implemented in recent years?

3. Empirical Foundation

What are employability measures and how did they evolve at the University of Abomey-Calavi?

It is a system with conceptual, organizational and operational functions, which has been implemented at the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC), with the exception of doctoral schools. However, each HEI is at a different stage of maturity in terms of numbers and quality. These are coordinated units responsible for developing curricula/declarative knowledge, defining rules and conditions for internal and external internships, complementing behavioral skills or soft skills, designing continuing education systems, informing stakeholders through newsletters, professional integration, and so on (Dedehouanou, 2022).

From the creation of the National University of Benin in 1970 to the advent of the University of Abomey-Calavi in 2001, there were changes during which HEIs only had to provide manpower to state institutions. Indeed, there was no question about how competent graduates were, especially since they were immediately recruited into the public sector, except for those graduates who were not in need of employment. After years of structural adjustments followed by a drastic reduction in the size of the public sector, the state had independently opted to cease indiscriminate recruitment of graduates in 1986. Shortly afterwards, each of the HEIs began to project so-called employability measures, initially relying on foreign cooperation. HEIs engaged in technical training were the first to obtain priority funding from international cooperation to adapt to the new environment. For example, the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, with its vocation as a professional and technical HEI, had benefited from Dutch, Belgian and French cooperation, each

of which focused on goals other than market orientation. This required a refocusing of goals and, above all, an assessment of whether or not they corresponded to the cooperation agenda (portfolio).

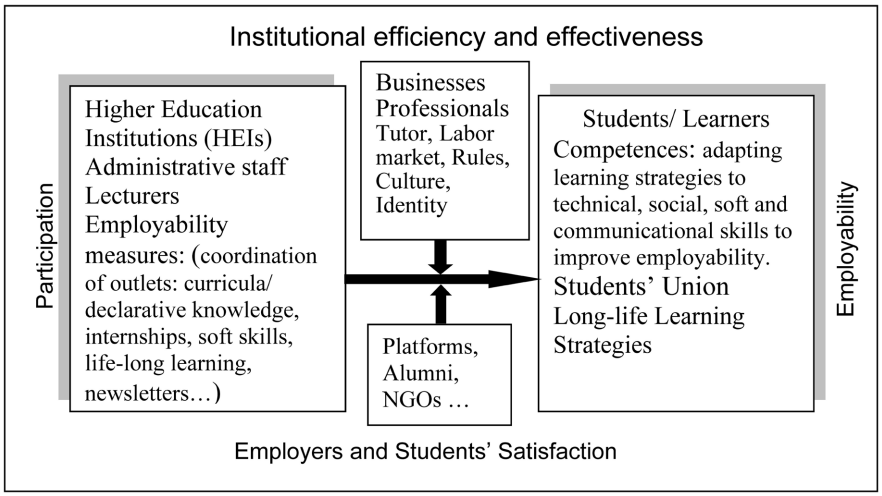
In 2005 and with the advent of a new system (Bachelor, Master and Doctorate), the LMD system, diagnostic studies of the labor market had made it possible to develop training curricula in a large number of training institutions (HEIs) at the UAC and concomitantly to enhance HEIs-Businesses relationships. Since then, there had been *missing and not clearly stated measures with respect to employability.*

In general, technical HEIs have developed ways of strengthening technical training over time by gradually creating workshops, laboratories, and technical learning infrastructures. Although these infrastructures would give technical HEIs a comparative advantage in terms of technical skills over the faculties, they would not exempt them from behavioral and cross-disciplinary skills, known as soft skills.

4. Analytical Framework of the Research

The curricula for the various technical training programs would indicate the essential elements that teachers would provide to learners in terms of resources/"declarative knowledge", which learners would then process using sophisticated cognitive processes based on the rhetorical structures available to them and, above all, their five senses, in order to achieve learning strategies once they are in a company/business/community (Dedehouanou, 2022). Of course, learners (university students and trainees once in a company, business or community) would learn to adapt to the rules of conduct (statutes and internal regulations) in the workplace, corporate culture, knowledge of the labor market, and professional identity; all this under the supervision or guidance of tutors or managers in the workplace. It is unlikely that HEIs would initiate all the work to shape students' careers on their own, but rather that they would rely on platforms of committed and voluntary actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and alumni associations. A dynamic student union would be welcome in this effort.

It has been suggested that the initiative for these platforms should come from HEIs with the consent of businesses, civil society and communities, which would also have needs to express. These platforms would function as learning environments for students (Galaup, Lelardeux, & Lagarrigue, 2016). According to Blagojevic (1997) and Molaie (2016), the processes involved in employability measures required 'collaboration, participation and engagement' on the part of each institution and each stakeholder. The other processes would take place both internally and externally within HEIs (Dedehouanou, 2022; Powell & McGrath, 2014). Therefore, 'Sustaining Employability measures' required sustainable measures of participation, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, employability, and employer and student satisfaction. This would be the simple justification for why established learning environments would be entirely immersed in the four criteria of sustainability (**Figure 1**).



Source: Adapted from Powell & McGrath (2014)

Figure 1. Analytical framework for sustaining employability measures.

5. Methodology: Evaluating Activities Related to Employability Measures at UAC

Research materials

Research on employability measures was organised into four phases.

Phase 1: Strengthening the content of curricula and essays/reports

The first phase addressed one of the educational aspects, following a general observation that training curricula were based on a skills-based approach. Alongside the implementation of new training curricula over a number of academic years, what support would be needed to improve the profile of graduates? The gap identified relates to the content of dissertations/reports at the end of bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral programs. This phase of the research focused mainly on bachelor's degrees. A one-day seminar was organized at a UAC vocational training institution to discuss the methods for assessing the content of dissertations/bachelor's degree reports. The methods adopted were essentially that: i) the dissertation/report would remain descriptive and summarily analytical; ii) it would contain more verbs relating to application, execution and implementation than analytical ones; iii) it would be punctuated with lessons learned in relation to the applicant's field of study in all its aspects.

Phase 2: Diagnostic study of measures contributing to employability

Phase 2 consisted of a diagnostic study and lasted approximately six (6) months from May 2021. As such, it included several sub-phases, including documentary research, selection of research areas, sampling, etc.

-Documentary research:

The UAC's statistics and enrollment services, the UAC website, the Belgian cooperation's P4 Project, the Dutch Nuffic Projects, international journals focusing on the acquisition of academic skills, etc. were targeted by the team in charge of the study.

In the past, the UAC experienced ever-increasing student numbers, reaching an unprecedented 104,602 enrollments in 2013-2014 (UAC, 2023). In 2021-2022, enrollments are around 69,624, of which 3.92% are double enrollments. The total number of teachers (statutory or otherwise) has generally remained above eight hundred (800); and the number for the 2021-2022 academic year is expected to be eight hundred and ninety (890) in particular.

-Choice of research areas

The field survey was conducted on all campuses of the University of Abomey-Calavi, namely Abomey-Calavi, Cotonou, Ouidah, Porto-Novo, Adjarra, and Dangbo. If the variability of the territories hosting the different campuses was considered to be a barrier to accessibility for businesses, the relative dispersion of UAC's educational establishments would therefore be a constraint on the management of internships. However, it is worth noting that the multitude of private university training institutions competing with the UAC in "University-Business" partnerships would also constitute a constraint.

-Sampling

Given that the study seeks information on internal and external internship organization practices, the actors targeted for data collection are teachers, administrative staff in charge of organizing internships, and students who are at least in their bachelor's degree year (which ensures that they would have had internship experience if applicable) or graduates who completed their training at one HEI of the UAC. It is therefore clear that this study population, although heterogeneous, would be relatively less dispersed. In order to take into account the heterogeneous nature of the population and obtain a representative sample, the purposive sampling method was adopted.

Thus, two categories of statistical units were defined. These are, on the one hand, (i) teaching and administrative staff from the various HEIs of the UAC and, on the other hand, (ii) graduating students and graduates who have completed internships as part of their bachelor's degree program.

At least three levels of statistical unit selection were considered for the first and second categories. The first level was the "HEI" (all HEIs of the UAC were taken into account, with the exception of doctoral schools and the School of African Heritage (EPA)), the second level concerns departments (all departments within a given HEI are taken into account), and the third level concerns training programs (these are the training programs offered in each department). It should be noted that the selection at this level was random, given that internship practices would be uniform within a given department, even though they may vary from one department to another within the same HEI.

Thus, following this approach, the selection at the first level includes four people, namely: Vice Deans (VD)/ Assistant Directors (AD), Entity Secretaries General (ESG), Department Heads (DH)/Training Program Coordinators (Coord), and Internship Managers (Internship-Man) / Professional Integration Managers (Integration-Man).

Table 1. Number of statistical units (persons) according to the levels of choice involved in the survey.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC)	Characteristics of the HEIs (fields / domains of study)	Staff to be surveyed among teaching and administrative personnel (VD/DA, SGE, CD/Coord., and Internship/Integration Manager)*	Number of students per HEI	Total number of persons to be surveyed per HEI
CEBELAE	Foreign languages	4	4	**8**
CEFORP	Population	4	4	**8**
CIFRED	Environment, public health & Sanitation	4	4	**8**
ENAM	Administration (public finance, ...)	4	12	**16**
ENEAM	Management/Applied Economics	4	16	**20**
ENS	Teaching disciplines	4	8	**12**
ENSTIC	Information/Communication	4	4	**8**
EPAC	Polytechnics	4	36	**40**
FADESP	Laws	4	12	**16**
FASEG	Economics/Management	4	16	**20**
FASHS	Human & Social	4	32	**36**
FASHS/ADJARRA	Human & Social	4	12	**16**
FAST	Fondamental Sciences & Technics	4	28	**32**
FLLAC	Letters, languages, arts & Communication	4	20	**24**
FSA	Agricultural sciences	4	20	**24**
FSS	Health & Chemistry	4	16	**20**
HERCI	Trading &Marketing	4	4	**8**
IC	Chinese language & Didactics	4	4	**8**
IFRI	Computer Sciences	4	8	**12**
IGATE	Living environment	4	20	**24**
ILACI	Arabic language & Islamic culture	4	4	**8**
INE	Water resources	4	8	**12**
INJEPS	Youth, physical education, sports, leisure & Andragogy	4	8	**12**
INMAAC	Arts, Archeology & Culture	4	8	**12**
INMeS	Medical and health care	4	4	**8**
IRSP	Public Health	4	4	**8**
Total		**104**	**308**	**412**

Source: UAC-MCSP (2021). ***(VD/DA, SGE, CD/Coord., and Internship/Integration Manager)** is for Vice Dean/Deputy Director, General Secretary of the HEI, Head of Department/Training Coordinator, and Internship/Employment Integration Manager).

As for the second category, levels 2 and 3 are considered. Level 2 allows all departments within a HEI to be considered, and level 3 allows a training program to be chosen at random, within which two people studying for a bachelor's degree and two other people who have already completed a bachelor's degree in this training program/field (the latter may be continuing their studies and be enrolled in a Master's or doctoral program, etc.) with internship experience would be interviewed. For this category, four respondents per HEI were planned.

The rationale behind the choices made in both categories is linked to the content of the survey. Among other objectives, the survey aims to prove the existence of measures to improve employability within a HEI, verify that respondents are aware of these measures, and finally validate their participation or commitment to these measures. The quadruplets of respondents are literally intended for the triangulation of information and, above all, for the deduction of discrepancies in the event of proven malfunctions.

It is important to note that gender criteria were taken into account. As such, for graduates, one woman and one man are required, and the same applies to bachelor's degree graduates. Gender criteria are not required for the selection of teaching and administrative staff. However, these criteria were applied in entities that promoted compliance. The numbers of staff in the statistical units according to the levels of choice involved are presented above (see Table 1).

Phase 3: Professionals' satisfaction of university graduates

The third phase of the research took place in 2023 with a seminar conveniently organized between university lecturers and researchers and professionals to fill the gap left by the second phase. This meeting was targeted to professionals' satisfaction of university graduates and the extent to which their skill set is short of what is needed at the workplace.

The conditions of this meeting were rather favorable to the professionals, who imposed their agenda in terms of physical and temporal availability. Thanks to the flexibility and understanding of both parties, the two NGOs institutionally committed to employability, professional integration structures, university leadership, faculty development, ethics and professional conduct in university education, and entrepreneurship, which organized the event, were able to reconcile their differing positions. The NGO ACCESS-Benin is the national version of ACCESS-Africa (African Centre for Career Enhancement & Skills Support), an initiative launched by the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Program (SEPT) at the University of Leipzig in Germany. As for the NGO Support for Guidance and Employability in University Training Institutions (NGO APPUI-OEEUF), which is committed to promoting the employability of university graduates, it has succeeded in building bridges between the academic world and the professional world, a role previously played by its CEO with the aim of facilitating the professional integration of university graduates. In this vein, the collection of cross-disciplinary and entrepreneurial skills lacking among graduates is carried out.

Phase 4: Rector's appointment of administrative staff responsible for professional integration

The fourth phase came about when the Rector authorized the appointment of one administrator per HEI to take on the role of professional integration from 2023 onwards. To date, these administrators continue to consult with each other to define their role and the subsequent steps to be taken with regard to the professional integration of graduates.

Methods of analysis

The data analysis is descriptive and focused on calculating indicators and ratios based on criteria relating to stakeholder participation and engagement. This research has enabled the development of basic ratios (benchmarking) or reference ratios for the UAC, which would be used in the future or beyond to assess the rates of progress or regression of the same criteria. Indicators are frequencies and percentages:

Most HEIs have benefited from technical and financial support from partners to strengthen their training curricula by emphasizing a skills-based approach and, at the same time, the content of graduates' reports and dissertations. The more support there is, the greater the employability.

Participation criteria: Participation has a "knowledge" dimension related to awareness of the measure. The greater the awareness, the more participation is expected from stakeholders. Lack of awareness reduces participation.

Criteria for institutional efficiency and effectiveness: These are driven by institutional leaders at the HEI level. The higher the position of those leaders, the more they inspire institutional efficiency and effectiveness in the measure.

Employability criteria: Information and measures in place do not provide insight into the employability of graduates. Feedback from graduates on employability is not tracked, as there are no official channels for doing so.

Employer and graduate satisfaction levels: Employer and graduate satisfaction levels could be indirectly measured through the opinions of public decision-makers and professionals. With regard to graduates, social demand as expressed by enrollment in training programs would be an important indicator of satisfaction.

With the advent of administrators responsible for professional integration, new opportunities are opening up in fields that were previously closed off due to a lack of information on graduates or relationships with enterprises/companies.

6. Results

Socio demographical characteristics of the surveyed respondents

Table 2 below shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed respondents, particularly their status. Teachers and administrators are grouped together, while students are considered homogeneous despite their diversity.

As shown in Table 2, 356 respondents (an achievement rate of 86.41% with reference to Table 1 in the methodology section) were actually surveyed: 84 respondents (23.60%) out of 104 belong to the teaching and administrative staff category, and 272 respondents (76.40%) out of 308 belong to the category of third-year students (in semester 5 or 6) or holders of at least a bachelor's degree, across all HEIs except doctoral schools. 65.2% of respondents come from schools and

institutes, while 34.8% come from HEIs with large student numbers (faculties) at the UAC. It should be noted that 31% are female and 69% are male within the category of teaching and administrative staff. Among students, 43% are female and 57% are male.

Table 2. Distribution of Lecturers/ Administrative (Lect/ Admin), students and graduates (Stud/ Grad. Stud) as respondents.

	Lect/ Admin		Stud/ Grad. Stud		Total	
	Numb.	%	Numb.	%	Numb.	%
Tech. HEIs/Institutes	61.0	72.6	171.0	62.9	232.0	65.2
Faculties	23.0	27.4	101.0	37.1	124.0	34.8
Total	**84.0**	**100.0**	**272.0**	**100.0**	**356.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021). **Abbreviations**: Numb. is for number; Tech. is for Technical.

Another discrete trait points at that 232 respondents (65.2%) were from vocational training institutes/schools while only 124 (34.8%) were from faculties (see Table 2). In terms of their status, 12 respondents were vice-deans or deputy directors of HEIs, while 13 respondents were heads of department and 6 were training program coordinators (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of respondents following their status.

	Lecturers/Administrative	
	Numb.	%
Deputy dean/deputy director	12.0	14.8
General Secretary of HEIs	20.0	24.7
Person in charge of Internship	8.0	9.9
Chief of Department	13.0	16.0
Program Coordinator	6.0	7.4
Others	22.0	27.2
Total	**81.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021).

"Knowledge of and participation in" a committee in charge of measures promoting employability.

This refers to awareness of a committee responsible for professional integration activities, which extends learning processes to businesses, companies and communities. In general, 100% of respondents from training institutes/schools are aware of the existence of such a committee, while few respondents from faculties (approximately 5%) are unaware of such a committee.

With regard to the knowledge that learning processes are exclusively external or a combination of internal and external, 76% and 24% of respondents from training institutes/schools answered affirmatively, while 73% and 27% of respondents from faculties answered affirmatively, respectively.

Table 4. Number of learning processes following bachelor's and master's degrees in the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi.

	Tech. HEIs/ Institutes		Faculties	
	Numb.	%	Numb.	%
Number of formal external learning processes following the Bachelor degree				
One formal external	90.0	45.5	68.0	68.0
Two formal external	24.0	12.1	19.0	19.0
Three formal external & more	84.0	42.4	13.0	13.0
Total	**198.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Number of formal internal learning processes following the Bachelor degree				
One formal internal	15.0	45.5	5.0	71.4
Two formal internal & more	18.0	54.5	2.0	28.6
Total	**33.0**	**100.0**	**7.0**	**100.0**
Number of formal external learning processes following Master degree				
One formal external	68.0	63.6	38.0	86.4
Two formal external & more	39.0	36.4	6.0	13.6
Total	**107.0**	**100.0**	**44.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of the employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021). Tech. HEIs is for Technical HEIs.

Table 5. Types of relationships between the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi and Businesses/Communities.

	Tech. HEIs/Institutes		Faculties	
	Numb.	%	Numb.	%
Existing relationships between the HEIs & Businesses / Communities				
No	81.0	39.3	58.0	55.8
Yes	125.0	60.7	46.0	44.2
Total	**206.0**	**100.0**	**104.0**	**100.0**
Types of relationships (formal, informal, both types)				
Formal relationships	56.0	48.7	14.0	33.3
Non formal relationships	21.0	18.3	10.0	23.8
Both types of relationships	38.0	33.0	18.0	42.9
Total	**115.0**	**100.0**	**42.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of the employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021). Tech. HEIs is for Technical HEIs.

With respect to knowledge of the number of learning processes for which the committee is responsible at Bachelor's and Master's level, Table 4 shows that institutes/schools organize more internal learning processes than faculties. External learning processes are more valued in Bachelor's and Master's programs, while internal processes are minor and only present in the preparatory years of the Bachelor's program.

Table 5 clarifies the relationships between HEIs at the University of Abomey-Calavi and businesses/professionals. There is a significant gap between respondents from training institutes / schools (approximately 61%) and those from faculties (approximately 44%). In terms of relationships, they are formal for institutes /schools (49%) and a combination of formal and informal for faculties (43%).

The survey showed that the majority of authorities at university training institutions participated in committees responsible for professional integration (see Table 6). The status of committee members clearly reflects both institutional and individual commitment.

Table 6. Status of members of the committee in charge of internships, relationships with businesses and others at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi.

	Tech. HEIs/Institutes		Faculties	
	Numb.	**%**	**Numb.**	**%**
	Dean of faculty / Director college or Institute as member			
No	63.0	68.5	24.0	88.9
Yes	29.0	31.5	3.0	11.1
Total	**92.0**	**100.0**	**27.0**	**100.0**
	Deputy dean / Deputy director as member			
No	64.0	69.6	24.0	88.9
Yes	28.0	30.4	3.0	11.1
Total	**92.0**	**100.0**	**27.0**	**100.0**
	General secretary of the HEIs as member			
No	58.0	63.0	19.0	70.4
Yes	34.0	37.0	8.0	29.6
Total	**92.0**	**100.0**	**27.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of the employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021). Tech. is for Technical.

Institutional efficiency and effectiveness in implementing employability measures

The quest for institutional efficiency and effectiveness would explain why respondents set minimum thresholds for the operational learning processes on both sides, i.e. on the side of academic training institutions and on the side of businesses/companies or communities.

The minimum conditions in HEIs to make such a process efficient and effective are: More than 50% of respondents emphasize the presence of a willing and proactive teacher (see Table 7).

More than 80% disagree with the presence of an administrator as a 'good endeavor'.

The minimum conditions from the perspective of university respondents are:

Over 50% of respondents emphasize the importance of having a proactive, volunteer teacher;

Over 80% disagree with the presence of an administrator as a 'good endeavor'.

The minimum requirement from the perspective of university respondents is:

-More than 80% of respondents recognize the presence of a qualified tutor in businesses/companies or communities.

Table 7. Existing guide on learning processes in relation to employability Measures within HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi.

	Tech. HEIs/Institutes		Faculties	
	Numb.	**%**	**Numb.**	**%**
Existing guide on learning processes at the disposal of students				
No	131.0	58.5	95.0	88.0
Yes	93.0	41.5	13.0	12.0
Total	**224.0**	**100.0**	**108.0**	**100.0**
Existing learning objectives as content of the guide				
No	40.0	45.5	5.0	38.5
Yes	48.0	54.5	8.0	61.5
Total	**88.0**	**100.0**	**13.0**	**100.0**
Methodological steps of learning processes as content of the guide				
No	70.0	79.5	7.0	53.8
Yes	18.0	20.5	6.0	46.2
Total	**88.0**	**100.0**	**13.0**	**100.0**
Instructions on how to organize learning processes into a report				
No	53.0	60.2	7.0	53.8
Yes	35.0	39.8	6.0	46.2
Total	**88.0**	**100.0**	**13.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021). Tech. HEIs is for Technical HEIs.

However, respondents (70% to 80%) paid less attention to existing activities to ensure learning activities, the reputation of the host organization, and finally the professional profiles of employees.

In order to embed sustainability in activities related to professional integration, supervisory visits in the field provide a form of quality assurance for institutional

efficiency and effectiveness. However, due to a lack of resources, particularly financial resources, supervision visits have become an unaffordable luxury, with 64% of respondents from technical and vocational training institutes/schools compared to 44% of respondents from faculties.

An additional and necessary condition for improving institutional efficiency and effectiveness would be the presence of a learning guide containing instructions at the HEI level, which professionals and communities adhere to. The results showed a controversial trend between the two types of academic institutions. Respondents from institutes/schools (59%) compared to those from faculties (88%) recommended the relevance of a learning guide. The same controversial trends are observed for objectives, methodological steps, reporting guidelines, and instructions for evaluating learning process reports. While the sections cited above constitute the core of the guide, the responses clearly show that professional integration structures/mechanisms are not yet optimal at the UAC.

Employability; employer and students' satisfaction

Table 8. Respondents' satisfaction of activities related to the employability measures as a major input for professional insertion.

	Tech. HEIs/Institutes		Faculties	
	Numb.	%	Numb.	%
Not satisfactory at all	7.0	3.5	4.0	3.9
Not satisfactory	14.0	7.0	13.0	12.6
Neutral	38.0	18.9	15.0	14.6
Satisfactory	113.0	56.2	59.0	57.3
Very satisfactory	29.0	14.4	12.0	11.7
Total	**201.0**	**100.0**	**103.0**	**100.0**

Source: Extracted from a report on the survey of the employability measures at the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi (May 2021). Tech. HEIs is for Technical HEIs.

Vice-deans or assistant directors traditionally thank corporate or community authorities in letters of recommendation given to each learner before they leave for the field. More than 90% of respondents from the groups (learners from institutes/schools and faculties) admit to sending these letters for internship, research or other purposes. This reflects the satisfaction of HEI officials.

With regard to the challenge of having a list of host structures (businesses/enterprises/communities) in HEIs, respondents ranked this as low-around 20% of respondents from both groups.

With respect to the logistics involved, for instance supervision visits, around 70% and more respondents feel satisfactory and very satisfactory with activities related to the employability measures as a major vector for professional insertions in both types of institutions, the technical HEIs or institutes and the faculties (see Table 8).

With regard to professionals and officials in business/enterprises and communities, graduates have a skills gap in the workplace, particularly in soft skills (behavioral and cross-disciplinary skills, which account for between 60% and 80% of the skills deficit, compared with technical skills, which account for between 20% and 40% of the remainder. As a result, the level of dissatisfaction is very high and clearly explains the bulk of the criticism leveled by professionals. In short, activities which promote the professional integration of graduates in line with the criteria of 'participation' and 'efficiency and effectiveness' are more successful at UAC.

However, there is insufficient information to estimate the degree of satisfaction of stakeholders with regard to 'employability' and the satisfaction of 'employers and learners'. It should be noted that the four criteria defined for sustainability clearly encompass existing activities, and their traceability and adjustments could ensure sustainability. The other side of the iceberg is that activities related to professional integration and even employability, which are still absent from the list of activities identified at the UAC, should finally be completed, implemented and evaluated.

7. Discussion

Assessment of participation in activities related to employability measures

In general, participation as a criterion is very intensive in terms of the number of staff who are aware of the committee responsible for professional integration, although relations between academic training institutions and businesses/enterprises and communities are still in their infancy. In Ghana, Hashim (2011) reported a gap in participation in schooling, which in his view would be a pragmatic response to the context in which formal education would be of little practical value in the way of life. No one could understand the challenge of participation, or non-participation, in formal education without considering the opportunities to pursue and use formal education in the local economy. In South Africa, persistent political pressure to transform vocational integration, and to do so in a way that expands participation and increases gender parity, has contrasted with participation rates (Powell & McGrath, 2014). This is likely due to the shift in policy discourse towards an integrated and expanded post-school system focused on "the needs of the poor", which emphasizes dimensions that would have been largely absent (Shaw, 2013). Obviously, the lifestyle approach differs significantly from meeting the needs of industry; rather, the needs of learners and communities should be incorporated.

Assessment of institutional efficiency and effectiveness in activities related to employability measures

In terms of institutional efficiency and effectiveness, these two criteria are highly valued, although standards are low for the detailed conditions except for the tutor in the host structures and the volunteer teacher in the university training institution at the UAC. It should be noted here that Slavin (2008) ranked "efficiency and effectiveness" at the forefront for institutions as well as for professional

integration. According to Powell and McGrath (2014), the South African government has adopted the 'New Public Management' approach and is focusing attention on aspects of institutional development such as governance and management systems, marketing strategies and the quality of teaching staff, rather than 'institutional efficiency and effectiveness'. However, reforms have diminished theoretical work because it is considered to be of lesser value. On the contrary, academic institutions in Benin should increasingly focus on theoretical work, i.e. enterprise management, information and communication, socio-anthropology, and workplace and organizational psychology, which will improve institutional 'efficiency and effectiveness' in the context of prioritizing the livelihoods of individuals and communities.

This needs to be put right as soon as respondents should care about existing production / learning activities which would provide opportunities to students for achieving their learning goals.

The fact that respondents underrate the combination of a voluntary lecturer and a good administrative unfolds the new consensus of installing lecturers in the administrative functions in most HEIs at the UAC.

Assessment of employability, and employer and student' satisfaction with respect to activities related to employability measures

In the absence of a system for tracking statistics on the employment of university graduates, it would be questionable to debate low employability in Benin's university training institutions. Measures of 'employer and student satisfaction' ratios would lead to controversy.

Professionals criticize university training institutions for failing in their duty by refraining from teaching or immersing learners in behavioral and cross-disciplinary skills. Professionals criticize university training institutions for failing in their duty by refraining from teaching or immersing learners in behavioral and cross-disciplinary skills. This was confirmed by Hernandez (2016) and Peyron and Lanquar (2023), who argued that such an educational system has rarely existed without universities. While those involved in university education highly valued their satisfaction with professional integration in various ways, there is a growing collective awareness among teachers that something is missing from the education system, according to public opinion. While well-being appears to be a collective success, it is up to each individual to provide support and recognition within the ecosystem (Peyron & Lanquar, 2023). In South Africa, policies in the field of professional integration have targeted unemployment, poverty reduction and economic growth (Powell & McGrath, 2014). In the absence of an economic boom such as in Benin, employability would be erratic and companies/businesses would attribute this to HEIs, whose propensity to release unskilled labor en masse is exposed. Although some of the formerly segregated youth became more interested in learning skills and developed a sense of a new identity (Molaie, 2016), for the South African government having to deal with the racial divide, much of the blame was placed on inequality of opportunity (Powell & McGrath, 2014).

Unless formal education stands for learning strategies and henceforth improved employability (Blagojevic, 1997; Dedehouanou, 2022; Djambian & Agostinelli, 2013; Robinson, 2019), potential students would scarcely resist interesting alternatives other than higher education while pursuing their livelihoods (Hashim, 2011).

Missing activities in relation with employability measures: Professional guidance and others

After identifying and evaluating measures promoting employability in HEIs, several others were noted in the literature, and many more were created as a result of the progress made in thinking about employability at UAC.

The first measure of interest refers to the lack of a permanent committee in charge of students' orientation, i.e. "*Information, Advice and Guidance" of* increasingly improved employability systems. Chevaillier (2005) stressed those activities if employability was an end-goal. While none of the already existing activities related to professional insertion did not concern doctoral students at the UAC, Bangali & Veilleux (2015) claimed that the "orientation" would reshape their identity and henceforth what can be known as "oneself Professional anticipations" compatible with the labor market. The authors also stressed a disciplinary approach (psychology, sociology, philosophy and others) to the activities involved in "orientation" as in Dedehouanou (2022). The question of whether this unit should be present in HEIs, as is the case elsewhere (Chevaillier, 2005), is not the concern here, but rather that in Benin, the Ministry of Higher Education has taken on the responsibility of providing such a service as a 'public' good just for new entries. The daily guidance of students in HEIs would have remained unresolved for the time being. These concerns would increasingly escalate if employability measures remained within the remit of the State. Although the role of the state is to mitigate the commercial nature of access to these measures and to maintain the capability approach, it is no secret that the state alone cannot keep pace with demand in this area. How could fairness be ensured with regard to the territorial dimension of education? Would employability measures be collective goods or private goods that each stakeholder could exploit as they saw fit?

The second important missing activities refer to the immersion of learners in soft skills. Should it be recalled that findings on the soft skills gap from the perspective of professionals, contrary to the 2021 survey data presented, derive from the 2023 seminar (Phase 3). The question of how is still at stake since pedagogic methods currently at use in the universities revealed their imperfections with respect to the soft skills (Hernandez, 2016). The question of when this should be performed remains unanswered and needs to be clarified through further researches. More importantly, the sector-wise concerns of soft skills should also be addressed.

The third missing activities refer to the report or dissertation component of the Bachelor's degree. These would call into question the consensus needed to anticipate content and chart the course for professional integration. While the professional Master's dissertation is recommended to be analytical, with a focus on man-

agerial rather than operational skills, the Bachelor's report would remain descriptive and only summarily analytical. This is in line with what Bangali & Veilleux (2015) put forward as internal structures characterized by cognitive structures, schemes, scripts, mental representations, framework that allows to "perceive" an object, to "apprehend" a problem-situation and behave rationally for one-self and for others. Boundaries are to be set and discrimination observed between Bachelor and Master degrees; while the focus of a report must stay descriptive on learning processes and lessons learned, the dissertation is analytical, more and more conceptualized and inferential (Dedehouanou, 2022). From the diagnosis at UAC, it would seem to indicate that the seeds sown to enable teachers to appreciate this differentiation are still meeting with resistance. Therefore, ways and means of adjusting standards and consensus would remain avenues for research and analysis, but above all the prerogative of proactive and constantly renewed academic leadership.

The fourth missing activities refer to the lack of leadership in the conduct and organization of activities related to professional insertions. It is of interest to stigmatize the difficulties of students to get recruited in the presence of non-linear academic pathway (Albandea, 2020). The lack of leadership and the presence of a poor organization are the facts of organizational ambidexterity according to Alis, Baslé, Dubois & Mouline (2015). The authors conceded that no one can expect all actors in general and the teaching staff as a whole to be part of the new system from the start. Therefore, ways and means of adjusting standards and consensus would remain avenues for research and analysis, but above all the prerogative of proactive and constantly renewed academic leadership.

The fifth missing activities refer to the lack of taking advantage of the Research-Development (R&D) approach recommended by four generations of UAC Competitive Research Funds to reveal the potentials of students and to upgrade their employability. Following the example of the "service learning" methodology (Naudé, 2007) and that of the Living-Laboratory (Dedehouanou, 2025; Scaillerez et al., 2022; Simard et al., 2022), academic researchers should work hard to learn from these methodologies in order to bring together the synergy of stakeholders towards the employability of graduates. Various authors strongly emphasized the role of service learning in building up capacities and competences of students in the socio-economic development of beneficiary communities (Adeyeri, 2012; Paquin, 2006; Resch and Lavie, 2021; Weerts & Freed, 2016). In the same vein, Scaillerez et al. (2022), Simard et al. (2022), and much more recently Dedehouanou (2025) revealed the invaluable potential of exporting research activities to communities in order to provide development solutions to seemingly intractable challenges. What is required is to focus the research efforts of HEIs on development activities that benefit the entire community in which the university is located (Furco, 2010). One example of missed opportunities was the questionable quality of meals served to users of the Abomey-Calavi university campus, which has been studied by the Department of Food and Nutrition with a view to learning lessons for catering services. By adapting this study to the community service ap-

proach (Service Learning), it should have been extended to the entire Abomey-Calavi locality, where the shocking results obtained would have revealed the researchers, laboratories and the University, while promoting the employability of the graduates assigned to such a mission.

The additional missing opportunities, which entail a pyramidal hierarchy, are related to UAC Competitive Research Funds. The doctoral student who should divide up work and supervise the progress and pace of operations carried out at the laboratory or at the community level by the Master student, the latter in turn should supervise the Bachelors' work in fields. In such organizations, there is not just a delineation line between implementation work and that of organization and management, but the management tasks are also divided into "technical" and "administrative". Authors who described businesses corroborated the similarities of those expectations in terms of skills, competences and entrepreneurial initiatives (Mazaud, 2013; Méda, 2018; Rikap, 2018). So, are skills destined to enhance students' professional profiles accordingly acquired (Mazaud, 2013). Therefore, hierarchical organizations of businesses can be replicated in the laboratories and on the research & development ground for the sake of a dynamic employability.

The further missing activities stem from the hitherto proactive nature of the missions carried out at university level by various actors. In recent years, with the advent of the ethics and professional conduct committee and the subsequent teaching supervision, a shift away from pro-activity is more likely to be envisaged. This remains to be proven over time as events unfold and the committee achieves success. These also stem from the multi-dimensional nature of the skills expected at university level. No teacher or stakeholder can accurately determine their role in pluralistic education, or rather the pluralistic skills to be imparted to learners. While specialists in the fundamental sciences are expected to primarily focus on learners' observational skills, specialists in the humanities and social sciences are to emphasize behavioral skills. Last but not least, another reason could be the low priority given to training trainers in the budgetary program of decision-makers.

The final missing activities refer to *Rector's appointment of administrative staff responsible for professional integration.* The employability project in the HEIs of UAC is a work in progress. There is confidence, despite the trial and error, that a solid foundation is being laid for graduate employability. However, there is a need to build a good leadership in the process to enhance the HEIs in particular, the universities in general while reforming their mission by introducing issues related to the professional insertion as a new momentum in addition to research and teaching.

8. Conclusion

The following lines will sum up the findings in relation to the outstanding question on sustainability of employability measures in the HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi. The endeavor is to streamline the employability measures following four sustainability-based criteria: measures of participation; measures of insti-

tutional efficiency and effectiveness; measures of employability; and measures of employer and student' satisfaction.

In terms of participation most HEIs of the University of Abomey-Calavi are well quoted from their own actors' point of view. Nonetheless, the question whether businesses/communities have full participation in the employability measures initiated and piloted by HEIs still need to be clarified as they were not surveyed. There were lately, however, occasions of high communication on partnerships between some HEIs and businesses. The promotion of those partnerships is the way out for participation of all actors.

In terms of institutional efficiency and effectiveness, there is still much to be done to propel sustainability in such domains. Minimal conditions which are set for employability measures at the institutional level hardly satisfy expectations. Conditions on a qualified tutor and existing production / learning activities on the side of businesses/communities are very important for the employability measures. On the side of HEIs, conditions such as voluntary lecturers to take care of the employability measures, administrative staff to coordinate and keep memory of processes, supervision visits, minimal financial resources, documents as guide for employability measures and its core instructive parts constitute the "quality-insurance" for institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

Because of the lack of employability tracking mechanisms, this criterion for sustainability is lagging behind, while it should remain the concerns of most officials from the HEIs. Due also to tradition of economic recessions, most actors put the blame on HEIs which, from their point of view, are unable to ascertain the professional quality of graduates. The degree of satisfaction on both employer and student side is very low and needs remedial solutions. The imperfections impeding the existing employability measures, notwithstanding, satisfaction of all actors is at the reach if the following recommendations are satisfied:

At the level of public authorities and decision makers:

- really invest in competence building as a levering mechanism for economic growth and poverty alleviation;
- assess education costs and really plan and effectively invest in education;
- proceed with educational reforms which pull all stakeholders together for participation and engagement.

At the level of businesses/ communities:

- ascertain the economic gains from the employability measures involving their businesses;
- conquer more and more competitive economic positions through employability-oriented partnerships;
- really open employment to graduates from HEIs as soon as satisfactory technical and behavioral skills are satisfied.

At the level of lecturers, researchers and administrative of the HEIs:

- continue researches on cognitive analysis of learning, psychology of the learning processes, sociology of employment and communication to improve skills acquisition;

- build values-based and ethically concerned leadership to live up to employability ambitions;

- analyze and upgrade aspects of the employability measures according to economic growth.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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