

AFRICA: New plan for graduate employment

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Higher education leaders meeting in Ghana last month agreed that Africa needs to enhance the employability of graduates by supporting students in their attempts to prepare themselves for the labour market. The 150 delegates from 14 African countries produced a draft 10-point plan aimed at ensuring industry absorbs the growing numbers of graduates on the continent.

They also agreed that universities must monitor students after they graduate. Graduates were challenged to develop and adjust their skills throughout life to adapt to industry's changing needs.

The Association of Commonwealth Universities, or **ACU**, and the **British Council brought together** university leaders, academics and policy advisors in Accra, Ghana from 16-18 January.

The plan, which is still being amended and is due to be finalised and circulated in the coming weeks, noted that universities must adopt clear strategies to integrate the needs of graduate employment and the development of employment-related skills into curriculum design.

Universities also need to provide clear and accessible information and advice for students regarding employment issues. And employers must designate staff with specific responsibility for graduate recruitment and university liaison.

The delegates agreed on the development of mechanisms at national and local levels for continuing dialogue between universities, employers and other stakeholders.

The development of clear incentives for academics and employers to prioritise graduate employment issues in their work was also discussed.

Other ingredients of strategies to tackle graduate joblessness included better mechanisms for surveying graduate employment issues and feeding these back into institutional planning, and better use to be made of alumni, diaspora and other contacts in industry, to provide information, advice and mentoring for students.

The development of further funding programmes, such as the **British Council Africa Knowledge Transfer Partnerships**, to provide direct access to industry for graduates and act as a catalyst for further collaboration, were also discussed.

Discussion highlighted the expansion of effective international networks, such as the **ACU Graduate Employment Network**, to develop dialogue between practitioners and facilitate the flow of information regarding job opportunities.

Delegates also agreed to include graduate employment issues in future major policy debates on higher education.

Professor Dorothy Garland, director of Professional Networks at the ACU, told *University World News* that several universities committed to an immediate review of their curricula, with reference to the needs of business and industry, to ensure they meet those needs.

She said another positive development was that "many came to realise just how important and fruitful partnerships - both national and international, inter-university and university-industry - can be, and will work to develop such partnerships."

Garland said the Graduate Employment Network will help disseminate the recommendations of the conference and will press for universities that were not represented at the conference, or are situated in other parts of the Commonwealth, to address the recommendations.

One barrier to dealing with graduate unemployment is that many universities in Africa do not have dedicated careers offices, she said.

Another barrier is that some universities have no wish to move away from the 'ivory tower' character of their institution or be perceived to be lowering their academic sights by "pandering to the pressure to produce employable graduates" - an issue that could be the same in other regions, said Garland.

Particular problems include a lack of buy-in from academic staff, and unwillingness on the part of business and industry to take students on placements or internships.

Dr John Kirkland, ACU deputy secretary general, said delegates at the conference took a realistic and practical approach to the issues.

"It's important to realise that tertiary education alone can't do everything. In particular, universities can't prepare graduates for jobs that don't exist," he said.