

Employment Challenges: Key Influential Factors in the Higher Education-To-Work Transition Experiences of Graduates in Sebeta Town, Oromia Region

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Abstract

Transitioning from school to work is a critical period in young people's lives, marking their entry into the labor market and the pursuit of economic independence. However, in Ethiopia, a growing number of higher education graduates, coupled with limited job growth, have made this transition nonlinear, challenging, and increasingly complex. This study aimed to explore the key factors influencing the entry of higher education institution graduates to work and their success of transition to work in Sebeta Town, Oromia Region. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to enhance the depth and breadth of the research findings. A total of 146 survey respondents were selected from 378 higher education institution (HEI) graduates, using Taro's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence interval. Participants for the qualitative approach were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection utilized a multi-source approach, incorporating primary data and secondary data sources. The findings reveal that graduates' transition to work is influenced by multiple structural and institutional factors, such as the nexus between education and the labor market, collaboration among key sectors, the competency and integrity of service providers, ethnicity and cultural proximity, and access to finance and infrastructural facilities. Furthermore, individual-level factors, including job preferences, entrepreneurial mindsets, and social networking, contributed to difficulties in the transition to work. The key factors identified are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. The findings suggest a

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comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to address the complex and contextual nature of the key factors influencing the education-to-work transitions of graduates.

Keywords: Graduates, Higher Education Institution, Key influencing factors, Labor market, School to work transition, and Youth.

1. Introduction

Transitioning from school to work is a critical period in young people's lives (Tafere, 2014; Morrow, 2015; Young Lives, 2022). It symbolizes a departure from formal education, entry into the labor market, and the pursuit of economic independence from parents and relatives. This period encompasses the completion of full-time education or training and subsequent entry into continuous full-time employment (Elder, 2009; ILO, 2017). However, in Ethiopia, a growing number of higher education graduates coupled with limited job growth have made this transition nonlinear, challenging, and increasingly complex (Abeje 2021; Kassa & Abebe 2016). Consequently, many graduates in Africa including Ethiopia find themselves trapped between the education system and the labor market (Elder & Koko, 2014; Melese, 2016).

Ethiopia has a predominantly youth population, with individuals aged 15-29 comprising 60 to 70 percent of the working-age population (World Bank, 2013). Additionally, evidence from different sources show that the youth labor force in the Ethiopia has expanded rapidly due to a surge in universities and technical and vocational training institutions over the past three decades, resulting in hundreds of thousands of graduates entering the labor market annually (Asmera, 2017; Zeru et al., 2018; Amare et al., 2018). The economy's inability to absorb this increasing labor supply has led to extended job searching periods and a high unemployment rate among graduates (CSA, 2014; Alemayehu, 2014). Consequently, the school-to-work transition among higher education institution graduates is a growing concern as the supply of labor exceeds the capacity of the economy to provide the jobs graduates aspire to. For instance, the number of graduates from higher education institutions has increased significantly, from

approximately 250,000 in 2018 to 450,000 in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022). Nevertheless, the employment opportunities have not kept pace with the steadily increasing number of graduates. The Ethiopian Development Research Institute (2021) report shows that only about 100,000 formal jobs are created annually. The report of Central Statistical Agency (CSA) of Ethiopia, moreover, indicates that in 2022, the unemployment rate for graduates was approximately 21.5%, markedly higher than the national average of 18%. The statistical evidence indicates a substantial gap between the number of graduates and available employment. Data from the study area shows similar trends that the numbers of HEI graduates have increased rapidly (Plan Commission of Sebeta, 2020). This issue necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the transition process encountered by higher education graduates, as well as the inherent challenges associated with this transition.

Thus, this qualitative and quantitative mixed case study aimed to provide area-specific and context-based empirical findings regarding the higher education-to-work transition experiences of graduates and key influential factors in Sebeta Town, Oromia Region. The finding would contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a contextualized understanding of the school-to-work transition dynamics and challenges, going beyond generalized explanations. In addition, it contributes significantly to how higher education institutions can better prepare graduates for the labor market and improves their school-to-work transition prospects. It also informs policy making on how to adequately deal with employment needs and education-to-work transition prospects of higher Education Institutions (HEIs) graduates.

2. Problem Statement

Studies and reports from various sources indicate a rapidly rising rate of graduate unemployment in Ethiopia (Ethiopian Ministry of Education, 2020; African Development Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2020; International Labor Organization, 2020). The Ethiopian Ministry of Education (2020) report acknowledges that graduate unemployment rose from 18% in 2015 to 29% in 2020 due to a rapidly increased university enrollment, driven by mass higher education policies. Similarly, the ILO global employment

trends for Youth (2020) identifies Ethiopia as one of the highest rates of educated youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa. The report estimates that 32% of Ethiopian graduates aged 15-29 were unemployed in 2019, compared to 19% for non-graduates. Studies have also indicated that elevated rates of youth unemployment have profound social, economic, and political implications for youth, their families, and the nation as a whole (Martha, 2012; ILO, 2010; UNDP, 2014). Specifically, Martha (2012), the ILO (2010), and UNDP (2014) noted that high rates of youth unemployment jeopardize national security, contribute to the underutilization of human capital, and exacerbate the challenges to national growth and development. Underemployment, along with issues of unemployment, has negatively impacted the future career development and other transitional aspects of graduates, including marriage, family formation, civic participation, and citizenship (Tesfaye & World Bank, 2020; United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2020). Literature suggests that several factors are contributing to the employment challenges faced by graduates. Among these, the education system in Ethiopia is identified as a significant challenge, primarily characterized by an overemphasis on maximizing enrollment at the expense of quality (Edukans Foundation, 2012; Jerusalem, 2016; World Bank, 2015; Woldeyohannes 2017). A study by Woldeyohannis (2017) noted the quality of education in Ethiopia has been compromised due to the rapid expansion of enrollments. This assertion is also supported by the World Bank report that indicates rapid expansion of enrollment in Ethiopia's education system has led to a decline in educational quality (World Bank, 2015). It's a fresh memory where nearly 97 percent of secondary students who sat for the national school leaving examination scored below the 50 percent minimum proficiency benchmark established by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (Tiruneh & Molla, 2023). A weak link of education with the labor market has also been a significant challenge in the Ethiopian education system (ILO, 2019). As a result, many graduates from higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ethiopia find themselves caught between the education system and the labor market. Mesele (2016) described the disconnection between these two sectors as a "broken bridge". In addition to the quality of education, the transition of graduates to the workforce is a complex process influenced by various structural,

institutional, and behavioral factors (Kameni et al., 2020; Anyanwu, 2013; ACET 2014; Wang 2012; Zhang et al., 2022; Adejibowo, 2020; Makinde, 2020; Kiprono, 2020; Tsegaye, 2020).

This case study aimed to explore the key factors influencing the transition from education to work for a relatively understudied population: graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs). Several bodies of literature suggest that the labor market conditions for young HEIs graduates remain underexplored, with existing research often focusing on broader trends that encompass the general youth and adult populations (Shimekit & Oumer, 2021; Karkee & O'Higgins, 2023; World Bank, 2019; ILO, 2019; OECD, 2018; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019; Cedefop, 2015; Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018; African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), 2018; Ethiopian Economic Association (EEA), 2020). Meanwhile, studies such as 'Youth Employment in Ethiopia: Trends and Challenges' by Shimekit and Oumer (2021), 'The Impact of Informal Employment on Youth in Ethiopia' by Karkee and O'Higgins (2023), 'Characteristics and Determinants of Youth Unemployment, Underemployment, and Inadequate Employment in Ethiopia' by Kirishinan et al. (2005), 'Child Labor and Youth Employment in Ethiopia' by Guarcello and Rosati (2008), and 'Unemployment and Labor Market in Urban Ethiopia: Trends and Current Conditions' by Fitsum (2014) primarily focus on the broader youth and adult populations.

This gap indicates the need for targeted studies that address the unique challenges faced by young graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs). Specifically, this study aimed to investigate the key structural, institutional, and individual behavioral factors influencing graduates' transition from education to employment in Sebeta, Oromia Region. Additionally, it sought to suggest actionable policy directives to enhance the transition prospects of these graduates.

Key Factors Influencing the Transition from Education to Work: A Brief Literature Review

Literature from various contexts, including Ethiopia, reveals that several key factors significantly influence the transition to work. Among these, the

mismatch between the skills acquired during higher education and the requirements of the labor market is a major barrier (Kameni et al., 2020; Anyanwu, 2013; ACET, 2014; Wang, 2012; Zhang et al., 2022; Adejibowo, 2020). Limited job opportunities have also been cited across multiple studies (Adejibowo, 2020; Kiprono, 2020; Tsegaye, 2020). Additionally, corruption and bureaucracy in hiring processes are frequently mentioned as significant factors (Makinde, 2020; Tsegaye, 2020).

The support provided by higher education institutions, quality of education and training, as well as its relevance to labor market needs, are widely cited as key institutional factors (Al-Ajam et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2022; Adejibowo, 2020; Anyanwu, 2013; ACET, 2014; Wang, 2012; Mark et al., 2016). Furthermore, the employer-employee relationship (Makinde, 2020) and university-industry partnerships and collaborations (Kiprono, 2020) are also significant institutional factors influencing transitions.

Behavioral factors, such as career adaptability and flexibility, are suggested in the literature as key influences on the transition to work (Adejibowo, 2020). Individual factors, including career aspirations and self-efficacy, are also discussed in studies by Tsegaye (2020) and Makinde (2020). Evidence from the literature review indicates that most studies on the factors and determinants of employment have primarily focused on structural and institutional factors affecting youth employment outcomes, while insufficiently addressing the influence of individual behavioral factors. Therefore, this case study aims to examine the influence of individual behavioral factors such as job preferences and expectations, entrepreneurial mindsets, and social networking in conjunction with institutional and structural factors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Description of the Study Area: The study was conducted in Sebeta, a town adjacent to Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. Sebeta town offers several features that make it suitable for this study. In addition to its location adjacent to Addis Ababa, Sebeta town is characterized by diversified livelihoods: a combination of on-farm and off-farm livelihoods,

and a blend of urban and rural lifestyles. It also exhibits the highest rate of youth in-migration for job seeking (Abate, 2014); Tadesse, 2019; Gashaw, 2016); and Mesfin and Melaku, 2018). These researchers mentioned that the town's proximity to Addis Ababa and its expanding job market attract many rural migrants seeking improved livelihoods. Particularly, Abate (2014) indicated that economic opportunities and the search for better living conditions are primary drivers of in-migration to Sebeta. A remarkable labor dynamic marked by spontaneous hiring and firing and the researcher's informal knowledge of the study area were also factors in selecting Sebeta Town for this inquiry.

In 2018 the total population of the town was estimated to be around 352,000, and over half (52.6 percent) of the population was aged between 10 and 35 years old (Oromia Planning and Economic Development Bureau (OPEDB), 2017). This indicates that young and middle-working age groups dominate the population, similar to the age structure in many sub-Saharan African countries (World Bank Report, 2018; African Development Bank (AfDB), 2019; United Nations (UN), 2015 and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2020). The migrant population constituted about 56 percent of the total population of the town administration where the mass influx of youth migration to the city is mainly in search of employment opportunities (OPEDB 2017; Efa, & Gutema, 2017).

3.2. Research Design: The study employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The qualitative approach was used to depict the overall situation of the transition process mainly focusing on graduates' experiences and feelings about their journey from education to employment and difficulties they face in the process. It was advantageous for examining ongoing processes and allows for iterative data analysis that enables researchers to move back and forth between data, which is particularly useful when new situations may arise during the overall progress of the research (Fossey et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021). It also allowed for deeper engagement with the data, facilitating the emergence of themes and insights (Fossey et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021). Quantitative approach was employed to generate numerical data analyzed statistically, offering concrete evidence to supplement

qualitative findings. It was to examine trends and patterns across different demographics (Tariq and Woodman, 2013; Ford and Goger, 2021).

3.3. Data Collection: Sources and Instruments

Data Sources: Data collection involves a multi-source approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data include graduates from higher education institutions and service providers of sector offices in Sebeta town. Additionally, academic staff and leadership of the higher education institutions and employment providers in the study area were the primary sources of data. The use of multiple primary data sources was to capture a wide range of perspectives. Secondary sources of data were archives of the Sebeta City Administration, the periodic labor force survey, and urban employment and unemployment survey of Ethiopia, and relevant domestic and international journals on labor markets and school-to-work transition. Secondary sources were reviewed to situate the findings within broader national and international contexts.

Data Collection Instruments: The quantitative data was collected from graduates using structured questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed to participants through hand delivery, and for those with internet access, survey guides were sent via Telegram. Ultimately, 146 (76%) questionnaires were returned, while 29 graduates declined to participate for various reasons, predominantly time constraints and 19 graduates did not respond for unknown reasons. The qualitative data was collected using in-depth interviews and FGD. The in-depth interview method was employed to thoroughly explore the subject and to gather the experiences and opinions of the participants. A semi-structured interview was utilized to facilitate detailed discussions while allowing participants the freedom to express their views. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to enable participants to share their experiences in a group setting on selected topics, moderated by facilitators. Data from secondary sources were reviewed to shape the study and to relate with the findings from the field data.

3.4. Sampling Design: A total of 378 graduates from universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges were

screened from the archives of the Sebeta City Administration (Plan Commission of Sebeta, 2020), serving as the basis for sample size determination for the survey. The inclusion criteria for these 378 graduates, drawn from a total of 730 archived records, required that they possess reasonably complete documentation, including a valid residency ID for the study area, complete credentials, and an active address. Consequently, 194 respondents were ultimately selected for the survey.

The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula at a 95% confidence interval. Yamane's formula for calculating sample size is expressed as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N*e^2}$$

Where: n = sample Size, N=Total Population: 378 and e=Margin of Error: 0.05

Substitute these values into the formula:

$$n = \frac{378}{1+378*(0.05)^2}$$

$$n \approx 194$$

Thus, the sample size for a total population of 378 graduates at a 95% confidence interval with a margin of error of 0.05 is approximately 194. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were employed to select participants for the survey. Graduates were grouped by sex, age, academic track, and labor market status to ensure diversity and facilitate comparative analysis. A simple random sampling technique was then used to select samples from each stratum.

Sampling for the qualitative approach involved the selection of participants using a purposive sampling technique. A total of 39 participants were purposefully selected. Among these, 16 interviewees were chosen from two categories of graduates: (a) three graduates who successfully transitioned to work, and (b) thirteen graduates who are still struggling with the transition. Additionally, eight participants for in-depth interviews were selected, comprising four service providers from the Sebeta sector offices including the offices of Job Creation and Skill Development, Labor and Social Affairs, Planning Commission, and Youth and Women's Affairs and four employment

providers from the manufacturing, construction, service, and urban agriculture sectors. These sectors are the significant sources of employment for graduates in the study area (Ethiopian Investment Commission, 2019; Tesfaye, 2020; Admasu et al., 2021). Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted. The first FGD included five academic staff members and leadership from higher education institutions (HEIs), while the second and third FGDs consisted of seven officers each from the One-Window Service of the Job Creation and Skill Development Office at Alemgena and Furi Kebeles in Sebeta City.

3.5. Data Analysis: Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Among the various components of descriptive statistics, frequency tables and percentages were used to supplement the qualitative analysis. A frequency table helps understand how data points are distributed across different categories, (Jahan & Rahman, 2016) while percentages complement frequency tables by offering insights into the relative size of each category compared to the total dataset (Rasmussen, 2009).

The qualitative analysis was employed through thematic analysis. The choice of thematic analysis was supported by the research question and the nature of the data (Bryman, 2012). It was suitable due to its flexibility and ability to explore the multifaceted nature of the school to work transition experience and challenges of graduates. The major steps followed in qualitative data analysis were: Data transcription, coding, categorizing codes into potential themes and sub themes, interpretation and finally story writing. A decision was made between single and double coding, with double coding employed due to its ability to capture more detailed information from data that may have multiple interpretations and fit into more than one category. The literature suggests that the choice between single and double coding depends on the research objectives, the complexity of the data, and the level of detail required for analysis (Creswell, 2014; Saldaña, 2015).

3.6. Concepts of Key Terms: terms used in this study were conceptualized within the Ethiopian labor market framework. Below are the definitions of these terms:

- First Significant Job: The first job that has a substantial impact on a graduate's career trajectory, providing essential skills, experience, and income.
- Current Job: The job graduates is presently engaged in, regardless of its nature or level of stability
- Informal Jobs: jobs that typically lack formal contracts, benefits, or legal protections.
- Insufficient Employment: Earnings that do not meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, preventing graduates from achieving a decent life.
- Decent Job: Employment that offers fair remuneration, job security, and safe working conditions, promoting both dignity and personal development.
- School to Work Transition: transitioning to decent jobs, the job characterized as stable and satisfactory
- Stable and Unstable Jobs: Stable jobs are characterized by employment contracts lasting more than 12 months, whereas unstable jobs may be temporary or subject to frequent changes, lasting less than 12 months.
- Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory Jobs: Satisfactory jobs meet the expectations and needs of the graduates regarding pay, working conditions, and other benefits, while unsatisfactory jobs do not meet these expectations.
- The employed: graduates engaged in income generating activities for their own gain at time of the survey.
- Unemployed: Graduate at reference point, that is, during field work is available to job, seeking job, but without any job.
- Prolonged unemployment: A situation where graduates are unable to find a significant job for an extended period, for more than one year, leading to economic, social, and psychological challenges.
- Migrant Population are graduates who have relocated from their areas of origin in search of employment due to a lack of similar local opportunities while non-migrants are graduates who reside within or near the administrative unit of the study area.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Demographic and Socio-Economic Background of the Study Participants

This section presents the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the study participants. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the survey participants.

Table 1: Graduates by Sex, Age Group, Marital Status, Number of Children, and Migration History

Variable	Category	Percentage
Sex	Female	39.8
	Male	60.2
Age Group	15-19	7.4
	20-24	41.7
	25-29	50.9
Marital Status	Married	32.4
	Single	66.7
	Divorced	0.9
	Widowed	0.0
Migration History	Non-Migrant	25.9
	Migrant	74.1
	1-2	93.3
Number of Children	3-4	6.7
	More than 4	0.0

Correspondingly, data in Table 2 displays the characteristics of in-depth interview participants.

Table 2: Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of In-depth Interview Participants

Participants								
	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Education	Field of Study	Level of Education	Labour Market	Employment Status
1	M	28	Married	Academic	Civil Eng./	B.Sc./Level	Employed	Self-
2	F	26	Married	Academic	Accounting/	B.A/Certifi	Employed	Self-
3	M	27	Married	Academic	Agricultural	B.Sc.	Employed	Government
4	F	18	Unmarried	Academic	Economics	B.A	Employed	Micro
5	F	23	Married	TVET	Textile	Level 4	Employed	Private
6	M	24	Unmarried	Academic	Post-Harvest	B.Sc.	Unemploye	-
7	F	23	Unmarried	Academic	Accounting	B.A	Employed	Self-
8	M	26	Married	TVET	Textile	Level-4	Employed	Private
9	F	22	Unmarried	Academic	Civil Eng.	B.Sc.	Unemploye	-
10	F	24	Unmarried	Academic	Accounting	B.A	Employed	Government
11	M	27	Unmarried	Academic	Urban	B.Sc.	Employed	Micro
12	M	24	Unmarried	Academic	Management	B.Sc.	Unemploye	-
13	M	23	Married	TVET	Drafting	Level 4	Employed	Government
14	M	29	Married	Academic	Mechanical	B.Sc.	Employed	Self-
15	F	21	Married	Academic	Social Work	B.A	Unemploye	-
16	F	23	Unmarried	TVET	Concrete	Level-3	Employed	Private

The sample consists of an equal number of male and female participants (8 each), indicating gender balance in the qualitative data collection. A higher proportion of participants are from the academic track (12) compared to those from TVET (6). Out of the 16 participants, 12 are employed and 4 are unemployed, while the employed are distributed across various sectors: 3 in government, 2 in the private sector, 4 self-employed, and 3 in micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Data on the demographic and socio-economic background of study participants is essential for comprehending the transition experiences among various categories of graduates, given that graduates represent a heterogeneous group (Baah-Boateng, 2016).

4.2. Key Influential Factors of Transitions from Higher Education to Work

Sebeta, the study area of this research, situated on the outskirts of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, attracts graduates from across the nation seeking employment. This influx of job seekers creates a rapidly blending labor market characterized by high rates of hiring and firing, making the transitions to work challenging. The Findings reveal that graduates' labor market disadvantages and challenges in transitions from education to work stem from a confluence of structural, institutional, and individual behavioral factors discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1 The Structural Factors

Economic Context and Graduates' Employment Outcomes

The opinions from study participants show the investment climate in the study area has significantly impacted graduates' employment prospects and their ability to transition successfully into the workforce. For instance, one of the focus group discussion (FGD) participants, an academic staff member from Sebeta Polytechnic, shared his insights;

The investment climate in our town has become increasingly hostile, primarily due to instability in the country. As an academic, I witness how this environment negatively impacts our graduates' job prospects. Employers are hesitant to hire due to uncertainties surrounding the stability of their businesses, and this reluctance left our graduates without viable employment options. Moreover, the fear of potential conflicts discourages new

investors from entering the market, which further suppresses job creation. It's disheartening to see so many capable graduates struggling to find work, and the cyclical nature of this problem only exacerbates their challenges.

Similarly, FGD discussant from the leadership of Sebeta Polytechnic shared;

The persistent conflicts have created an environment of uncertainty that makes an area difficult for businesses to operate effectively. Many of the businesses that could provide jobs are struggling to maintain productivity, let alone expand their operations to hire new employees.

Opinions of these discussants indicate, a hostile investment environment, exacerbated by persistent conflicts in the area, has hindered graduates' ability to obtain jobs. This finding conforms to the literature from different sources. Mlatsheni (2014) noted that employment creation tends to decline during economic downturns. Similarly, Haider (2016) emphasizes that the state of the economy, coupled with a lack of a business-friendly environment and infrastructure deficiencies, are critical determinants of employment outcomes. The author asserted youth are particularly vulnerable during economic hardships, often being the first to face layoffs. Evidence from African economies consistently shows that inadequate structural transformation limits economic opportunities and weakens employment generation for citizens (Baah-Boateng, 2016; Fox & Thomlin, 2016; Malik & Awadallah, 2013; Elder et al., 2015). Broussard and Tekleselassie (2012) further linked youth unemployment in Ethiopia to the broader economic context.

The impact of economic conditions on employment outcomes, particularly during periods of instability, is well-documented in literature. These documents illustrate that economic fragility could limit job creation. This study adds to the documents by specifically linking ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia to graduate unemployment, providing a localized example that enhances understanding of these dynamics.

Curriculum and the Labor Market Alignment

This section presents the results of in-depth interviews with graduates and the FGD discussants of the HEIs academic staff and leadership. FGD

discussants of the Sebeta Polytechnic, one of the training institutions in the study area have shared their experiences about the alignment between curriculum and the labor market in their institution. The institution has implemented several strategies including competency-based training, cooperative training, institutional assessments, COC certification, entrepreneurship education, and the Kaizen philosophy to ensure the relevance and quality of training it offers. The institution has also disaggregated broad economic sectors within the city administration into specific occupational standards aligned with the economic activities and business opportunities available at study areas.

One of the FGD discussant shared, "The disaggregation of aggregate sector into different Occupational standards (OS) aims to enhance the quality of training and create job opportunities across various industries"

However, employers have expressed reservations regarding this approach. For instance, Participant 23 from the automotive sector stated:

For me, this is a joke; how can I pay for several employees handling different tasks of vehicle maintenance? It's not cost-effective for us to hire employees who cannot manage all aspects of vehicle service. Customers prefer it when a single worker completes the servicing of their vehicles.

The opinions shared by interviewees indicate a significant mismatch between the training provided and the actual needs of the labor market. For instance, the automotive industry participant noted the necessity for employees who can perform multiple tasks, suggesting that a more integrated training approach might be beneficial. He argued that hiring multiple specialists is impractical and costly, while academic leadership continues to emphasize the importance of occupational specificity in training programs. The academic staff and leadership of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) asserted that the disaggregation of economic sectors into specific occupational standards is intended to enhance training quality by producing graduates who are well-equipped for defined roles within various industries. They emphasized that this disintegration aims to cultivate a skilled workforce that meets the diverse demands of the labor market.

Graduates have also voiced concerns regarding the relevance of their education to labor market needs. For instance, a graduate from the academic track expressed frustration about the lack of alignment between his education and the requirements of the job market, which has contributed to his prolonged unemployment.

He articulated the issue in the following words:

After graduation, I found vacant positions in my field of study and applied to various companies, both online and in person. Despite my efforts, I have yet to secure a job. In the agriculture sector, employers prefer plant science graduates or those specializing in general agriculture, not my field (Participant 6).

He further elaborated on his experiences, stating:

Some employers ask me about my qualifications in Post-Harvest Management and the duties I would perform during the harvesting period, rather than responding to my queries. This frustration led me to change my field of study; I am now pursuing a B.A. degree in Economics (Participant 6).

The frustration expressed by the graduate also shows the disconnection between education and employment opportunities. He attributes his extended unemployment to the irrelevance of his qualifications, noting that employers often prefer candidates from more directly relevant fields. Despite the presence of vacancies related to his studies, he finds that job requirements frequently diverge from his training.

The opinions expressed by TVET staff further reveal significant gaps in the structure of the TVET curriculum and its impact on student readiness for employment. Key complaints identified from the academic staff's feedback include: exclusion of foundational subjects from the curriculum, insufficient instructional hours for foundational subjects, and qualification mismatch of instructors teaching the foundational subjects and soft skills.

Exclusion of Foundational Subjects from the Curriculum: TVET staffs involved in FGD express their concern over the exclusion of foundational subjects like mathematics and English from the curriculum though these foundational subjects are critical for students to develop the analytical and

communication abilities necessary in today's job market. Literature indicates that, in addition to mathematics and English, a variety of subjects contribute to fostering innovation and creativity among graduates in the workplace. The National Research Council (2012) suggests the importance of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education. Furthermore, López (2017) discusses the significance of Art and Design, while Nussbaum (2010) emphasizes the role of Critical Thinking. Kuratko (2005) discusses the importance of Entrepreneurship Education, and Eime et al. (2013) examine the contributions of Physical Education.

Insufficient Instructional Hours for Foundational Subjects: There is a complaint about the minimal number of contact hours allocated for essential subjects like Mathematics and English. Academic Staff members feel that the limited exposure to these subjects hinders students' overall competency and preparedness for various tasks in their future careers. In addition to foundational skills, the curriculum of TVET allocates minimal credit hours for soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and work attitudes. Given that employers place high value on these skills during the recruitment process, TVET staff believes that this neglect could disadvantage graduates in the job market. The literature regarding this issue presents mixed views. A significant body of research supports the approach of minimum training hours for foundational subjects, arguing that a focus on major skills is essential for meeting immediate labor market demands by equipping graduates with specific vocational skills (Hanushek et al., 2017). In contrast, Ayalew (2015), UNESCO (2018), and Kibret & Melaku (2019) argue that inadequate attention to foundational subjects, such as mathematics and communication, limits students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The findings of this study suggest that a well-rounded education, incorporating both foundational skills and major fields of study, enables graduates to perform better in the labor market and adapt more easily to changes in technology and today's digital economy. These findings align with those of the World Bank (2020), Fisher et al. (2021), and Kassahun (2022), who advocate for a balanced curriculum that includes both practical skills and foundational knowledge. The debate continues to evolve as the needs of the labor market change.

Qualification of Instructors Teaching Foundational Subjects and Soft Skills: participants from the focus group discussion (FGD) who are academic staff members further shared the idea that primary occupation teachers, who may lack specialized training in subjects like Mathematics and English, are often responsible for teaching these courses. This raises concerns about the quality of instruction and the effectiveness of teaching methods, which could impact students' learning outcomes and their performance in the workplace.

Employers' Expectation and Graduate Employability Skills

The qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews with graduates and employment providers shows a mismatch between employers' expectations and the employability skills of graduates. Employers indicated that while graduates possess a strong theoretical understanding of their fields, they lack the practical skills necessary for enhancing productivity and problem-solving in the workplace.

Participant 23, an employer from a manufacturing enterprise, expressed this concern: "Graduates are more academically oriented while lacking skills on how the world of work operates."

Participant 21 reinforced this view, stating:

We (employers) are more interested in transferable skills essential for job fulfillment than in academic literacy, which often overshadows the practical skills graduates have acquired in higher education institutions. Graduates tend to focus on their academic achievements, which do not align with our needs and expectations.

Participant 24 similarly echoed these sentiments, noting that while transferable skills attract employer interest, these skills are often lacking among graduates. Employers prioritize transferable skills such as interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, leadership, assertiveness, and problem-solving, whereas these skills are less recognized by graduates. Participants 21, 23 and 24 suggested that while graduates possessed theoretical understanding, they often lacked the practical skills, problem-solving abilities, and work-readiness necessary for success in the workplace. Graduates themselves acknowledged the importance of transferable skills, such as communication, leadership, assertiveness, and

problem-solving, but expressed a lack of reliance in these areas. They prioritized mastery of their field of study, work experience, and social networking as crucial for labor market success. The feedback from participants show a disparity between the perceptions of employers and job seekers regarding the skills valued in the labor market.

In addition to perceptions and expectations regarding skill requirements, participants' opinions provide insights into the actual job-skill mismatches currently experienced by graduates in the labor market. Interviews with participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, and 16 revealed that these individuals were employed in positions that did not correspond with their fields of study or levels of qualification.

The participants' responses reveal a significant discrepancy in perceptions between employers and graduates regarding the essential skills required for the labor market. Employers report that, while graduates possess a broad theoretical knowledge base, they frequently lack the practical skills necessary for effective job performance and problem-solving. Graduates acknowledge the importance of mastery in their fields, work experience, and social connections for securing employment. However, they often underestimate the value of co-curricular and transferable skills, such as interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, leadership, and problem-solving abilities.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that the misalignment between the curriculum and the labor market is a critical issue affecting employment outcomes and the education-to-work transition of graduates in the study area. This aligns with the literature suggesting that educational systems in many low-income countries fail to cultivate the essential skills required by labor markets (Fox et al., 2016; Baah-Boateng, 2014; Filmer Fox et al., 2014; Grant, 2012). Additionally, this observation supports Jerusalem's (2016) assertion that a significant proportion of Ethiopian college graduates are employed in positions unrelated to their field of specialization.

Wage Offerings in the Labor Market

The data indicates that while job availability is recognized as a concern, it is perceived as less critical than the issue of low wages. Qualitative data supports this finding, as illustrated in Table 5. When graduates were asked to identify the challenges they face in securing decent jobs, low wage rates emerged as the most significant barrier affecting their transition to better job opportunities, even more so than job loss.

Table 5: The Key Factors Influencing the School-to-Work Transition

Key Factors	Participants															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Access to Finance																
Startup capital to create own job			x		x	x			x		x		x			x
Pocket allowance for Finding Wage Jobs			x		x	x									x	
Business Expansion	x	x					x							x		
Availability of Jobs and Wage Rates																
Unavailability of Jobs				x								x				
Low Wage Rates	x		x		x	x		x	x		x				x	
Job Searching Behavior																
Social Networking			x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x			x	
Entrepreneurial Mindset	x	x	x	x	x			x					x			x
Infrastructural Facilities					x	x						x				x
Roles of school to Work transition Service Providers																
Weak <u>collaboration and Disintegrated Service</u>	x		x			x		x			x	x		x		
Lack of Competency and Integrity	x		x			x						x				
Stereotypes and Discriminations																
Ethnicity and access to job opportunities			x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x			x	
Skill Mismatch																
Job-Skill Mismatch			x	x	x	x		x					x			x

Source: Field Data, 2023

The findings reveal that the labor market challenges graduates face in the study area is more closely associated with the quality of jobs available rather than a mere scarcity of employment opportunities. This observation diverges from existing literature, such as the studies by Mlatsheni (2014) and Browne (2016), which attribute employment challenges primarily to a lack of job opportunities. While the literature focuses on availability of jobs

and wage levels, the current study adds that the quality of available jobs needs urgent attention alongside the creation of more jobs. This dual focus on quality and quantity of employment opportunities is less emphasized in existing literature, which often prioritizes job creation alone. This distinction emphasizes the importance of not only increasing job availability but also enhancing job quality to facilitate a more effective transition for graduates.

4.2.2. Institutional Factors

In addition to structural factors, the study identified institutional factors, such as ethnicity and cultural proximity, which manifest in various forms, weak collaboration among service providers, and a lack of competence and integrity among these providers were a significant barriers for graduates seeking to access decent wage jobs and aspire to establish their own businesses, as discussed in the following section.

Ethnicity and Cultural Proximity

Participant testimonies indicate that stereotypes and discrimination based on ethnicity and language are pervasive in the study area, hindering access to job opportunities. Table 5 illustrates ethnicity and cultural proximity emerged as factors influencing graduates' access to job opportunities. Data shows that participants 4, 12, and 15 reported losing employment opportunities due to their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

Participant 12, for instance, emotionally expressed, “Your ethnicity and language play a significant role in finding jobs. If you have an 'X' name, there's no space for you”. He further lamented the prioritization of ethnic identity over qualifications, stating: “Even if you meet the requirements and hold the necessary credentials, getting jobs or establishing your own business is difficult”

Participant 2 revealed experiences of unequal treatment during the job application process, stating,

I was called for written exams several times for vacancies in Addis Ababa and surrounding areas, but I always failed the interview for unknown reasons. We receive no feedback on the selection criteria.

In addition, participants 3, 4, 8, 6, 12, 15, and 16 identified overt and subtle forms of discrimination, particularly in private sector recruitment practices

as barriers to access decent jobs in their localities. The discriminatory practices include favoring applicants with shared socio-cultural backgrounds, relying on subjective selection criteria such as trust and loyalty, reserving higher-paying and leadership positions for those with connections, and relegating individuals from certain backgrounds to low-status, manual jobs. Participants 3, 8, 6, and 16 further emphasized the prevalence of "localism" referred to as "Gotegnet" in Amharic or "Naannummaa" or "Gandummaa" in Afan Oromo, disadvantages job seekers from outside the immediate vicinity, even if they share similar ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. This "localism" creates barriers for those who have migrated to the city administration in search of employment. In general, a large majority of participants perceived ethnic affiliations as more significant barriers than political connections. Only participants 6 and 8 mentioned political affiliation as a significant barrier to accessing jobs, particularly within the public sector.

Evidence from participants' opinion and feelings disclosed the pervasive nature of stereotypes and discrimination within the study area. Participants reported losing job opportunities due to their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, even when their qualifications met the position's requirements. This finding aligns with research by Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016) which, through 43 field experiments in OECD countries, demonstrated a clear link between ethnic discrimination and unequal access to employment. Similarly, a study in Côte d'Ivoire by Castilla and Ranganathan (2020) revealed how ethnic and regional biases influence hiring decisions. Adding complexity to the issue of discrimination, the study found that even job seekers from similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds experienced disadvantages due to a phenomenon termed "localism"- a preference for individuals from the immediate vicinity. This belief shows how deeply ingrained notions of place and belonging influence employment opportunities. This echoes findings by Beaman et al. (2013) in India, where local leaders demonstrated a clear bias towards candidates from their own communities during recruitment.

Collaboration and Integration among Key Sectors

The results revealed a lack of effective collaboration and integration among key stakeholders responsible for addressing employment needs in the city administration. Despite the existence of a coordinating body, specifically the Job Creation and Skills Development Office of Sebeta town, participants 1, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12, and 14 faced substantial challenges in navigating the fragmented system. Graduates encountered bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of coordination among various departments when attempting to obtain necessary support and approvals for starting businesses or joining the Medium and Small Enterprises (MSE) program.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with academic staff and leadership identified these concerns, emphasizing the disconnection between training institutions and industries. Despite the proximity of Sebeta Polytechnic to numerous industries, opportunities for dual training, industry extension services, and competency-based assessments were found to be limited. Interviews with industry representative participants 21, 23, and 24 expressed concerns regarding mutual cooperation, noting that while some collaboration exists, it is insufficient. They acknowledged the challenges associated with partnerships between training institutions and industry. For instance, one of the participants representing the manufacturing sector, stated,

Enterprises in Sebeta City Administration, including ours are supporters of trainees from Sebeta Polytechnic and universities by providing resources and manpower, yet our contributions receive little recognition from the city administration (Participant 24).

The opinions of industry representatives indicate that resource constraints, concerns about disclosing company information, and a desire for government recognition and incentives to offset the costs of cooperative training are the primary factors contributing to insufficient collaboration. The findings indicate a lack of effective collaboration and integration among key stakeholders responsible for addressing the employment needs of graduates in the study area.

Competency and Integrity of the Service Providers

In addition to the weak collaboration and integration among key sectors, when graduates were asked about the factors constraining their ability to find decent jobs and establish their own businesses, many identified the incompetence and lack of integrity of service providers as significant challenges in their transition to work (Participants 1, 3, 6, and 12). Participant 3 expressed his frustration, stating: “There are posters of 12 principles of professional ethics displayed in every corridor of the sector office. They merely serve as decoration.”

Participant 8 commented:

Some leaders tend to exaggerate the success stories of their departments, which often do not reflect reality, while downplaying their unsuccessful stories. This is a challenge I have observed in public sector offices.

Participant 6 added: “I believe government officials' false reports mask the true challenges graduates face in the labor market”

The responses from participants show a disconnection between the stated principles of professional ethics and their actual implementation in the workplace. The presence of ethical guidelines appears to be more ornamental than functional, suggesting that ethical standards are not genuinely integrated into daily operations. The opinions from the interviews further suggest that leaders in public sector offices tend to inflate their departments' successes while neglecting or minimizing failures. Additionally, the integrity of reports generated by government officials was a serious concern. Participants found that the reports often obscure the struggles graduates encounter in the labor market. Such a distorted presentation may misinform decisions, potentially exacerbating the challenges faced by graduates in securing employment.

4.2.3. Individuals Behavioral Factors

Job Preferences: A Factor Influencing Employment Decisions

Graduates were prompted to articulate their job preferences by asking them about their desired employment since graduation. Qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews revealed that graduates are actively seeking jobs that offer salaries rather than pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities

available in their surroundings. Additionally, graduates demonstrated a preference for the service sector, particularly in service marketing, over roles in manufacturing, construction, or urban agriculture. For instance, participants 2, 4 and 7 were engaged in service marketing businesses: stationery, mobile accessories sales, and snack bar respectively. Data from the annual performance reports of the Plan Commission of the City Administration shows similar results and trends. It shows jobs such as a petty trade was a primary livelihood strategy for several self-employed graduates every year. Approximately two-thirds of participants expressed that the service marketing sector is more appealing due to its lower barriers to entry and exit.

In addition to expressing their job preferences, graduates were probed to articulate the criteria they employ in selecting the sectors they wish to enter following completion of their education.

The results of survey data indicate a mixed result. The wage expectations are moderate among graduates of both genders; however, female graduates exhibit a greater willingness than their male counterparts to accept lower wages. They prioritize safe and harassment-free working environments over higher salary offerings. Conversely, the majority of male graduates prefer positions that align with their academic qualifications and contribute to their future career development. Findings from in-depth interviews substantiate these survey results, revealing almost similar trends in the criteria influencing sector selection among graduates.

Social Networking and Job Searching Behavior of Graduates

Study participants widely acknowledged the importance of social networking in securing employment, particularly within the public sector. Many believed that personal connections often outweighed qualifications and merit. Participant 10 observed, "To get a job here [study area], you need someone you are affiliated with through religion, ethnicity, or locality" Participant 2 emphasized the role of networking, stating, "An access to job opportunity is highly determined by whom you know."

Participant 3 share his feelings as follows;

I was hopeful when I completed my degree, thinking that it would open doors for me. However, I soon realized that many job opportunities seemed to be tied to personal connections rather than qualifications. I often heard about job openings through friends or family members who were already working in certain companies and public organizations. Unfortunately, I didn't have those connections, and I was at a disadvantage position because of that"

Participants widely acknowledged that personal connections often outweighed merit and qualifications. Data further indicates that the network served graduates in two ways: for some, jobs were generated directly through referrals to employers, while others received information about vacancies. The study recognizes that social networks play a critical role in securing employment for graduates, particularly within the public sector. This finding is consistent with research in Ghana, which identified a strong link between graduates' labor market outcomes and the strength and nature of their social networks (Baah-Boateng, 2014). The reliance on social networks for job searching, as reflected in the literature, indicates the importance of social capital. However, this study offers fresh insights from graduates of higher education institutions.

Entrepreneurial Mindset and Job Creation Behavior

An entrepreneurial mindset emerged as a key factor influencing transitions into the workforce. Insights from graduates, such as Participants 1 and 2 indicate that their success in establishing their own businesses can be attributed to early experiences that integrated academic learning with work. These experiences fostered self-reliance and cultivated essential business expertise, thereby enhancing their entrepreneurial capabilities. Conversely, Participants 3 and 6 attributed their challenges to a deficiency in entrepreneurial experience. This lack of exposure hindered their ability to effectively navigate the complexities of starting and managing a business. Besides, the opinions from participants show that family support played a crucial role in shaping career aspirations and developing entrepreneurial mindsets. Participants 1, 2, 7, and 14 recognized the positive influence of

their families in encouraging self-employment and providing opportunities to gain work experience while studying.

Moreover, focus group discussants expressed their concerns regarding the entrepreneurial mindset among graduates. They posited that the limited entrepreneurial orientation among Ethiopian youth is closely linked to familial influences on vocational choices.

One of discussant in FGD 1 noted;

Ethiopian families often encourage their children and teenagers to aspire to careers as doctors or pilots, rather than guiding them toward understanding contemporary labor market trends and directions

Another discussant from the same FGD voiced;

When asked about their future aspirations, a significant majority of teenagers in Ethiopia express a desire to become doctors, pilots, or engineers, showing a notable preference for civil engineering over mechanical, electrical, or industrial engineering. There is considerably less aspiration toward entrepreneurship, as terms such as “businessman,” “innovator,” or “entrepreneur” are rarely articulated in their responses. This cultural inclination toward traditional professions largely contributes to a job-seeking mentality rather than fostering a mindset oriented toward job creation.

Participants' opinions reveal that families often prioritize traditional career paths, such as medicine or engineering, which constrains the exploration of entrepreneurial opportunities. The familial guidance not only shapes aspirations but also reinforces a cultural narrative that undervalues entrepreneurship, ultimately hindering the development of an entrepreneurial mindset among young individuals.

In addition, an entrepreneurial mentality associated with the pursuit of supplementary education and training emerged as a significant advantage. Graduates engaged in additional certifications and training programs alongside their primary degrees reported greater success in securing employment (Participants 1, 2, and 14). This study recognizes an entrepreneurial mindset - a composite of attitudes, skills, and behaviors that empower individuals to identify opportunities, navigate challenges, and

pursue innovative solutions is a key factor enabling transitions into the workforce.

The recognition of an entrepreneurial mindset as a crucial factor enabling transitions into the workforce is supported by a wealth of existing knowledge. Study by Kuratko et al. (2015) suggests that individuals with a strong entrepreneurial mindset are more adept at spotting gaps in the market and developing viable ideas to address them. The ability to build relationships and collaborate effectively is another critical aspect of the entrepreneurial mindset mentioned in the literature by Kauffman Foundation (2017). Thus, encouraging a shift towards entrepreneurship education and experiential learning can equip the next generation with the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly complex and competitive labor market.

To comprehend important observations from the findings, transitions from education to decent employment are shaped by the interconnections among education, the economy, and labor markets. In addition to this nexus, ethnicity and cultural proximity, collaboration among service providers, infrastructural facilities, and wage rates are key influential factors in transitions to work. The study recognizes that graduates are not hindered by a single challenge, but rather by a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and behavioral factors. The fragmented support systems coupled with persistent stereotypes and discrimination based on ethnicity and languages create significant barriers for graduates entering the labor market. Furthermore, the lack of appropriate skills, including both technical expertise and an entrepreneurial mindset, further limits their opportunities. Navigating this complex landscape is also hampered by a lack of social capital and professional connections, placing graduates at a distinct disadvantage.

The challenges graduates face are not mutually exclusive, but rather interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Structural barriers, such as discrimination and fragmented service provision, intersect with individual factors, such as skill mismatches and a lack of entrepreneurial mindset, to

create a web of disadvantages. A single factor has vastly different implications for graduates depending on their individual circumstances, including their socio-economic background, gender, migration history, and field of study. The study further observed competing perspectives and controversies surrounding issues such the role of entrepreneurship versus wage employment.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following concluding remarks are made regarding the key areas of the study.

The transition from school-to-work for graduates is fraught with significant challenges that are intertwined and multifaceted. The key factor is that opportunity is often influenced by personal connections rather than merit, creating inequities within the job market. The "localism" fosters preferential treatment for local candidates, disadvantaging graduates from outside the area. Access to decent jobs and the potential for MSEs has been stunted due to various factors such as nepotism, incompetence, and lack of integrity among service providers and the disconnection between the skills acquired through education and the requirements of labor markets.

The challenges graduates face in the labor market are not isolated; rather, they form a complex network of interrelated barriers. The intertwined factors necessitate comprehensive strategies that take into account the diverse backgrounds and experiences of graduates. Furthermore, competing viewpoints exist regarding the nature and impact of the key factors. These differing and competing perspectives indicate the need for targeted, context-sensitive solutions for all graduates.

Theoretical, Practical, and Policy contributions and Recommendations

The researcher believes the findings have several important implications and contributions to existing knowledge, policymaking, practitioners and target populations. The case study findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a contextualized understanding of the school-to-work transition (SWT) dynamics and challenges, going beyond generalized explanations. The findings provide a more holistic view of the complex

realities of HEI graduates ‘in their transition to the labor market. The study not only enhances academic discourse but also provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners, specifically, Ethiopia's Ministry of Job Creation and Skill Development in addressing the employment needs of graduates and enhancing their school-to-work transition.

The findings suggest a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach that addresses the complex and contextual nature of the key factors influencing SWT. It addresses a need for stronger collaboration between academia, industry, and policymaking to bridge the gap between education and employability. The findings emphasize graduates are not a homogeneous group; they have different needs, interests, and capabilities. Therefore, interventions and support programs should be designed to address the specific needs, opportunities and challenges of graduates based on their background characteristics.

Finally, the complex, non-linear and multifaceted nature of the challenges graduates face in trajectories of school to work transition presents opportunities for deeper academic research to better understand the underlying factors and dynamics at play

Limitations of the Study and Future Focuses

The study relied on a limited sample size and lacked diversity in terms of geographic representation that may not fully capture the breadth of challenges faced by all graduates. A more comprehensive approach with a larger, more varied sample could provide a clearer picture of the issues at play. Variability in local economic conditions, cultural factors, and labor market structures means that conclusions drawn may not reflect the experiences of graduates in different contexts.

In addition, the study may lack adequate consideration of the global and regional current labor market situations, economic changes, technological advancements, and shifts in educational policies that limit the applicability of the findings to future contexts. The research primarily concentrates on graduates, potentially overlooking the experiences of non-graduates.

Understanding the broader youth employment landscape, including informal sector workers, could provide a more holistic view of the labor market.

Thus, the future research could focus on:

Comparative studies across different geographic locations of the country to identify commonalities and differences in graduate SWT prospects and challenges.

Longitudinal studies would allow tracking changes in the labor market over time, providing insights into how economic fluctuations, educational reforms, and other factors affect graduate employment. This would help in understanding trends and predicting future challenges.

Expanding the focus to include non-graduates and those in informal economies regardless of educational attainment would provide a more comprehensive view of youth labor market outcomes in general.

Finally, given the increasing importance of the digital economy, future research could investigate effective digital skills training programs and their impact on employability. This would be valuable for educators and policymakers.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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