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Rethinking the Value of Education amid the Economic Crisis: The Experiences of University Graduates

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Abstract

Even though many nations invest heavily in education to boost economic growth and development, evidence continues to show that university graduates struggle to find employment and eke out a living, obscuring our understanding of the true value of education. Comprehending the experiences of university graduates can assist in determining the support needed for their personal and economic growth. However, research in Zimbabwe on the experiences of graduates after university education is limited. This study explores the experiences of 14 university graduates, drawn from one university in Zimbabwe, who were in their fifth year after graduating. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews and analysed through the lens of credentialism theory. Findings revealed a significant discrepancy between education and employment wherein the value of education is being re-evaluated by people, with many questioning the assumption that higher education guarantees job opportunities. The disconnect highlights the need for policymakers to reassess the way education is delivered and aligned with labour market needs. The study proposes that universities should draw insights from industry leaders when crafting their curriculum and determining enrolment figures. The research extends scholarship on the interplay between education and employment, thereby guiding educational policy formulation in developing countries.

Keywords: economic outcomes; education; employment; industries; university graduates

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1. Introduction

The value of education has been extensively studied globally, with research highlighting its importance in promoting economic growth, social mobility, and individual well-being (Roshan & Rahman, 2025; Wang, 2024). Education is widely regarded as a crucial factor in human success, since it gives people the information and abilities they need to navigate life effectively (Leoni, 2025). Based on its potential to promote economic benefits, governments worldwide invest in formal education (Murray, 2023). However, the value of education has long been a topic of debate globally, with many questioning its relevance and effectiveness in enabling individuals to secure job opportunities. For example, Pikovskaia (2024) argues that young people in Zimbabwe have begun to challenge the modernist presumption that social mobility and employment are correlated with education. In another study, Wang (2024) employed the social class lens to interrogate the purpose of education and concluded that because of the diverse educational results and aims associated with education, the fundamental purposes of education could not be addressed from a single point of view. Contrary, Roshan and Rahman (2025) argued

that the main role of education is to enhance the lives of the underprivileged by giving them useful knowledge and abilities, leading to better job opportunities and improved personal growth. This suggests that education is the key to opening the door to a brighter future. While research suggests that education opens job opportunities (Gazi et al., 2024), evidence continues to mount that most university graduates remain unemployed years after graduation (Pikovskaia, 2024). As an illustration, Goulart et al. (2022) explored the future of jobs and the purpose of higher education. They found out that the main goal of the present higher education system, which was to create workers with the abilities that employers needed, was not being met. A recent study by Pikovskaia (2024) reported that the inability of their education to be applied to real-world situations has greatly irritated the youth. While the above research has contributed significantly to our discernment of the nexus between education and job opportunities, research exploring the experiences of university graduates remains limited. This study unfolds against the backdrop of this scholarly gap to explore university graduates' experiences using the context of Zimbabwe, of which the findings can be applicable in other developing countries in a similar context. The research was directed by the following questions:

a. What are the perspectives of university graduates on the nexus between education and job opportunities amid economic crises?

By examining the perspectives and exploring the experiences of university graduates, the current research seeks to shed light on the value of education in Zimbabwe and guide practices and policies intended to enhance the employability and well-being of the youth. This work is important since it adds to the expanding corpus of research that questions the value of education in a developing country beset by economic challenges and poor governance by exploring the experiences of university graduates.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Context of the Study: Postcolonial Reforms, Education and Employment

Education in Zimbabwe, as in other developing nations, is regarded as central and critical within the political, social, and economic growth of the society (Mudavanhu et al., 2025). In recognition of that, when Zimbabwe gained political independence in 1980, efforts were made to promote access to education by all citizens, a changed narrative as education was once a preserve of the minority population during the colonial period (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024). Garwe and Thondhlana (2019) succinctly explain that the new administration implemented drastic policy changes to rectify colonial injustices and irregularities and to meet the increasing need for highly qualified workers. Concurrently, Mahuni et al. (2025a) further enlighten that the reforms in education after colonisation in Zimbabwe were driven by the democratisation of educational access, of which key policy initiatives encompassed the establishment of free and mandatory elementary education, the lifting of age limitations to permit older children to attend school, the development of community education support, as well as automated grade level progression. As a result, enrolments in institutions of higher learning increased sharply (Bhebhe et al., 2015). Due to those reforms, Garwe and Thondhlana (2019), though not backed by statistical evidence, argue that Zimbabwe then emerged as a regional leader in education, enhancing the nation's standing abroad as the education system managed to churn out highly skilled experts and became a well-known global source of labour. What motivated the Zimbabwean to learn was the same belief and acknowledgement shared with UNESCO (2024), which acknowledges the transformative power of education in reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. As argued by Wang (2024), many people believe that education is essential to ensuring human prosperity because it equips people with the knowledge and abilities they need to navigate life with ease. Little did the Zimbabweans know that

possession of credentials is not a guarantee of employment and better opportunities for them. It was after experiencing the economic meltdown from 1997 that Zimbabweans' hopes for education as the primary means of moving up the socio-economic hierarchy were ruined.

Thus, as the educational sector witnessed an upsurge to unprecedented levels, significant economic difficulties plagued Zimbabwe, resulting in a deterioration in both urban and rural livelihoods (Magidi, 2024). As backed by Mahuni et al. (2025a), Zimbabwe had several episodes and policies that had a detrimental impact on its economy and, eventually, its people. As explained by Bushu and Kufakurinani (2024), one may argue that the Zimbabwean financial difficulties have their roots in the nation's unstable political system and poor governance. According to research, several factors contributed to Zimbabwe's economic crisis, such as its participation in the 1997–2006 Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) war, the contentious land reform programme of 2000, corruption in the government, and inadequate fiscal management (Bushu & Kufakurinani, 2024; Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024; Magidi, 2024; Mahuni et al., 2025b). These variables caused social, economic, and cultural shifts for the workers, whose lives were inextricably connected to their occupation, wages, and workstations. That led to extensive company closures in every sector, creating a serious economic decline marked by considerable declines in maximising industrial capacity (Magidi, 2024; Mbira, 2015) against the many universities that opened new programmes and recruited students without coordinating with employers (Bhebhe et al., 2015). The result was a rapid increase in university graduates, many of whom experienced long delays in finding employment at expected salary levels (G. Yamada, 2015; G. A. Yamada & Lavado, 2018). That subsequently led to widespread unemployment, which exacerbated food insecurity and poverty. As reported by Hupile and Siambombe (2024) in support of Chikandiwa (2023), the unemployment rate has skyrocketed, leaving many Zimbabweans without a reliable source of income or the resources to provide for their families. With a rate of roughly 46.7% as of 2023, almost 2.8 million persons of working age are unemployed (Chikandiwa, 2023). Amidst Zimbabwe's economic downturn, which had been marred by widespread wealth destruction, business closures, and a decline in the production of basic goods and services, as well as a decline in international trade (Nyanga, 2023), young people were becoming increasingly pessimistic about the value of pursuing formal education and employment, in part because of the lack of job opportunities in the local labour market (Pikovskaia, 2024). This widespread pessimism stemmed from the belief that the advantages of formal education and work were exaggerated, given Zimbabwe's current economic circumstances, when people of all educational backgrounds face significant barriers to obtaining long-term employment.

While the above studies shared insights on the economic crisis in Zimbabwe, others concentrated on the challenges the education system in Zimbabwe is facing. For example, Magidi (2024) reports that while many people and families in Zimbabwe continue to place a high importance on education, devoting a substantial amount of time, money, and energy to obtaining higher education credentials, the education system is fraught with challenges that include inadequate resources, outdated curricula, and high unemployment rates among graduates. That scenario pushes the sense of scepticism to great heights among youth regarding the positive nexus between education and job opportunities. Yet, the experience of university graduates in that matter remains underexplored. This study unfolds against the backdrop of a growing interest in understanding why individuals with credentials have a difficult time obtaining stable jobs amid the collapse of the economy. To understand the complexities between education and job opportunities, it is important to explore the experiences of university graduates.

2.2. The Broader Context

The growing scepticism about the positive nexus between education and job opportunities might not be isolated and confined to Zimbabwe. As substantiated by Maulani and Agwanda (2020), in several developing countries, the destructive impact of adolescent unemployment has prevented young people from assimilating into economic life patterns like earning money, saving for the future, and developing a career. Although the findings are not always applicable to other nations, they do illustrate what might happen. For instance, in Albania, a developing country like Zimbabwe, Merkuri and Cera (2024) in their study reported that a mismatch between supply and demand exists in the relationship between the educational system and employment, where in most disciplines of study, there was an excess of graduates. That suggests that completion of higher education is not enough to ensure that young people in low-income countries achieve better labour market results. In contrast to degrees in science and mathematics, Żyra and Shevchuk (2012) showed in an earlier study that the rise in graduates in the humanities, economics and business, and engineering may be one of the causes of Poland's higher unemployment rate. In a similar period, Erdem and Tugcu (2012) found that greater college graduation rates in Turkey lead to higher unemployment rates because the labour market could not accommodate more highly qualified workers. A study by Pompeia and Selezneva (2019) examined whether universal formal education still promotes alternative labour market statuses over unemployment and idleness among young people. According to their findings, young persons with university education had more difficulty finding employment in nations with low levels of educational mismatch, such as Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Croatia, the Slovak Republic, Poland, and Hungary. The issue of unemployment is a worldwide occurrence. Vasilescu et al. (2025) observe that Europe's youth are particularly susceptible in the labour market since their unemployment rates are disproportionately high when compared to those of other demographic categories. The young unemployment rate in the EU was 11.2% in 2023, with Greece and Spain reporting rates higher than 20% (Vasilescu et al., 2025); yet, these young unemployed persons are educated.

In Nigeria, Ogbonna (2025) explored the relationships between curricula misalignment, skill mismatch, unemployability, and unemployment, with a special emphasis on how the relationships between these factors went a long way in escalating the nation's labour market crisis. A salient finding of that study showed a pervasive skill mismatch, unemployability, and increased unemployment trends and the study argued for the industry-academia collaboration to 'give graduates the capability of workforce readiness, reduce unemployment, and also support sustainable economic growth in Nigeria' (Ogbonna, 2025, p. 24). Similarly, Mseleku (2025, p. 1532) reports that 'South Africa continues to battle against the constantly increasing unemployment rate despite the major improvements in the massification of higher education.' A good overview of the unemployment account in Africa is provided by Cieslik et al. (2022), who observe that 'of the 420 million young people in Africa today, more than 140 million are unemployed and another 130 million are underemployed and/or in working poverty.'

Taken together, we discern that while many studies in Zimbabwe have been conducted in a different context from the rest of the world, they however share some similar findings with those conducted elsewhere, be it in developing or developed countries. That suggests that the insights gleaned from this study will not only be useful to the Zimbabwean community but will also be significant to other countries in similar settings. Although the existing literature highlights the dissonance between education and job opportunities as seen from the lenses of policymakers, limited research exists that draws references from the university graduates' voices. This study plugs this lacuna and expands the scholarship that questions the value of education by exploring the perspectives and experiences of

university graduates, a group that has been sidelined in that discourse. Understanding the narratives of these graduates and their perspectives on the value of education as an enabler to job opportunities can help identify the support needed for the graduates' personal growth and community development.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

At the centre of the credentialism theory is the idea that the employment market selects people based on external standards of their possessions rather than their productivity in and of itself. Collins (1979) contends that formal education acts as a gatekeeper for employment and frequently trumps real abilities and capabilities. Certification requirements and degree credentials are frequently given priority by employers as measures of competency, even if they may not accurately represent a graduate's suitability for a position. Seen this way, degrees and diplomas obtained at universities provide access to higher-status occupations, and the higher the educational credentials, the better access to higher-status occupations individuals have. According to this credentialing mechanism, qualifications are therefore valued not only because they indicate a candidate's prospective productivity but also because these credentials are used to control access to jobs (Bills, 2003). As explained by Maier (2012), following Collins (1979), credentials restrict the labour supply in certain sectors by preventing entry for those lacking them, giving credential holders unique advantages in the labour market. Thus, Collins (1979) suggests using credentials and qualifications as a direct means of appointing employees. To get exclusive access to professional positions and legitimate authority within organisations, people typically pursue credentials in the form of degrees (Bills, 2004). That basic assumption embedded in the credentialism theory makes the theory relevant in this study, as it assisted in justifying why most young people pursue university education. Many believe that the nexus between credentials and the employment market is meritocratic and logical, with credentials serving as a signal of an individual's aptitude, output, drive, and/or employability (Maier, 2012).

The purpose of credentials is to certify that holders have acquired critical job-related skills or to offer useful information about the potential of the job seeker. That suggests that the theory contends that credentials are frequently arbitrary ways to restrict access to elite occupations and have no bearing on job abilities, responsibilities, or worker productivity (Bills, 2003), since it speaks to 'related' job skills rather than 'true' job skills. That assumption was also helpful in unpacking why some university graduates were still unemployed, as what they possess is merely what Collins (1979, p. 62) coined 'cultural currency' or 'formal summary announcements of the quantity of cultural goods an individual has acquired,' rather than possessing the job skills needed to perform in labour markets. Credentials in this view are thus seen as membership cards used to enter job markets. That explains why some graduates remain unemployed despite having qualifications. However, critics of the theory argue that credentialism runs the risk of over-education, which could result in underpaid or unemployed qualified graduates (Bills, 2004). Credentialism in this context refers to an excessive dependence on degrees and certifications rather than specific work competencies and appropriateness. Yet, even without considering diplomas and degrees, education, in general, fosters crucial transferable skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, and resilience through modern pedagogical approaches like problem-based learning, collaborative projects, open-ended discussions, and real-world applications of knowledge. These skills remain highly valuable, especially during economic instability, because they equip individuals with the capacity to navigate complexity, embrace change, and remain employable in a dynamic job market. It is thus a propensity to place more importance on degrees and certifications than on the transferable talents and abilities that companies find most valuable. While the theory has its limitations, it was useful in this study as it provided

insights into why some university graduates managed to secure employment while others struggled to secure jobs despite possessing university qualifications.

2.4. Methodology

By adopting the qualitative approach, the study generated new understandings into the nexus between university education and employment by x-raying the value of education from the perspectives and experiences of university graduates at one university in Zimbabwe. A descriptive and interpretative case study was used for the research design, which was in line with the interpretive methodologies (Ledford & Gast, 2018). According to Yin (2018), a case study is characterised by diverse viewpoints that are grounded in a particular setting. We employed a qualitative analysis strategy based on a corpus of 14 semi-structured interviews with university graduates who were in their fifth year after graduating from one university in Zimbabwe. The study was part of a large project titled '*Education and Employment amid Economic Crisis in Zimbabwe*.' The two-phased project was undertaken over a period of six years. In the first phase, the students were asked to share their perspectives on why they decided to pursue university education, drawing from their experiences. That stage was when students were still at university doing their final year. Then, the second phase was conducted five years after the students had completed their studies. That, however, was problematic because not all students who participated in the first phase were available at the last stage. That reduced the participants to 14 from the original 30 students. That second phase sought to explore whether the students' dreams were fulfilled as revealed earlier, and their views on the value of university education. The initial 30 mixed-gender graduates from the seven participating schools were specifically selected during the first phase with the help of the deans of faculties (Demographic data had no bearing whatsoever on the findings). In the next phase of the study, we used the participants' contacts to invite them for an interview. Nonetheless, we ensured that the study comprised university students from microcosm representations of six faculties that were present in the university, allowing for multiple voices and accommodating a range of perspectives (Yin, 2018). Thus, 14 graduates participated in the study to give their experiences and perspectives. We thought that selecting one graduate from a school would undo the aim of data triangulation; thus, we selected two participants from each sampled faculty. We avoided relying too heavily on a single graduate from a school as a source of data, as this could skew the understanding of the situation under investigation. Primary data were then generated from 14 graduates using semi-structured interviews.

Before beginning the study, we got ethical permission from the gatekeepers. Authorisation was initially requested and given by the university under study. The Dean of each participating school was then asked for permission to use their students. Participants signed consent papers following the advice of Yin (2018). Permission was obtained for using a voice recorder during interviews, as well as using interviewee quotes for publications. Fictitious names were employed to conceal identities. To identify them, we used U1 to U14 to stand in for their names. Participating University Graduates were given a provisional interview schedule with dates for home visits. Contacting participants by telephone helped to arrange interviews ahead of time and schedule appointments. A telephone reminder of the interview date and time was sent one day prior. Interviews were done at interviewees' homes or workplaces during their free time, typically during lunch or after hours. To establish relationships and trust, we conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with teachers, with each session lasting approximately 30 min to 45 min. The semi-structured interviews helped us spot non-verbal clues and probe for additional information. Before the interview, the goal of the research and ethical concerns were discussed. Permission was obtained to record narrations using a tape recorder, and the interview began. Semi-

structured interview guidelines, as described by Yin (2018), provide researchers with a set of questions and prompts to utilise during interviews. We created a guide to ensure thorough coverage of the study questions during semi-structured interviews.

We employed Miles and Huberman's (1994) coding guidelines for data interpretation and analysis. Coding is summing up brief parts of text in a few words, line by line. This study focused on participants' interpretations of the narratives and why they were 'the way it was' (Maree, 2012, p. 103). The data was evaluated to align with the study's focus and research emphasis. Thus, the data were recorded, transcribed, processed, reduced, presented, and evaluated while still fresh in our minds (Punch, 2011). Member checking, which involved sending themes to the participating graduates, who confirmed whether the data matched or not to their experiences, improved the trustworthiness of the study. Confirmability of the findings was further aided by the usage of several graduates drawn from various schools of the university. Below are the themed findings.

3. Results

The main findings of the study pertain to the nexus between education and job opportunities and the value of education given that 'unemployment has reached staggering proportions, with the educated increasingly swelling the ranks of the unemployed in Zimbabwe' (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024, p. 9). Hereunder, we report the findings of the study drawn from the university graduate experiences and perspectives.

3.1. Education Lost the Key to Success

While education has been described as the key to job opportunities and social mobility in many countries, it emerged from semi-structured interviews that education has lost the key to success, as evidence exists that shows there is a disconnect between education and employment, which had been aggravated by the economic collapse in Zimbabwe. In the words of U13:

> My parents and teachers used to say education is the key to success, but as of now, in this economic crisis, education has lost the key to success. Rather, it wasted my precious time doing studies which are not helping me in any way to get employment. With my degree in Social Sciences, I am still unemployed five years down the line. That was not my expectation when I entered university years ago.

U4 shared similar sentiments and echoed that:

> When I joined the university five years ago, I aimed to get employment in the education sector. I saw myself rising from a mere teacher to a university lecturer. But guess what, I am still an unemployed youth roaming the streets hustling for survival.

The finding suggests that one of the expected roles of education from the perspectives of university graduates is to open opportunities for them to enter the industries as workers. Those expectations resonate with Pikovskaia (2024, p. 349) who contends that 'education in Zimbabwe played social mobility and social transformation and reproduction functions from colonial times and continued to have an inherent value to Zimbabweans in the postcolonial period.' Early expectations and aspirations clash with labour market realities. As such, graduates revealed that education was no longer presenting graduates with those opportunities, leading them to believe that going to school is a waste of time. The sentiments raised also reject Murray's (2023) argument that education has the power to change lives by promoting sustainable development and eliminating poverty, because to them, education was not used as a tool for social mobility.

3.2. Education Qualifications as Membership Cards

Even though many people and families in Zimbabwe still place a high value on education and devote a substantial amount of time, money, and energy to obtaining higher education credentials, it emerged from the interviews that educational qualifications were seen as membership cards. As narrated by U5:

> What I know is that I am a lawyer. That is what university education has done to me. I now belong to those who are said to be lawyers. My certificate in law is a membership card. It has not yet opened any opportunity for me other than to brag that I am a lawyer.

In collaboration, an accounting graduate had this to say:

> Yes, education crowned me an accountant. But where do I practice accounting? I have been in the street for years selling airtime, music discs and videos. I wonder when I will get formally employed. Does selling these items require accounts? Evidence to show that I am an accountant is the certificate that I have at home, but it is just for membership.

Drawing from the above sentiments raised by the graduates, the findings revealed that job opportunities were hard to find despite their having qualifications shown on certificates. That contradicts Roshan and Rahman (2025), who argue that the impoverished can benefit from education by gaining useful knowledge and skills that will lead to greater employment chances and more promising personal growth. From the perspectives of interviewed graduates, education remains ineffective in eradicating poverty among them. In addition, labelling educational certificates as membership cards shows a mounting perception of scepticism among the graduates concerning the value of pursuing university education

3.3. The Status of the Educated and the Uneducated

From the semi-structured interviews, graduates revealed that education has lost its value as an enabler of life chances and has reduced the status of the educated to a deplorable state. To the graduates, education has pushed them to the periphery and to abject poverty, considering the expenses they incurred. On that issue, U2 expressed her perspective, stating that:

> Instead of creating opportunities for me, it has led my family members and I to be paupers. My parents sold all the cows to send me to university. What I get is a certificate which cannot present me with employment opportunities to replace the lost cows. I spent years in school. Those who did not go to university are now filthy rich. Why go to school then when the educated are the poor while the uneducated are the rich? Is there a need to go to university then?

That sentiment suggests graduates are expected to gain returns from their effort in undertaking university education. Their expectations were in line with Leoni (2025, p. 228), who contends that 'the future earnings of an educated man are expected to at least compensate for the cost of that education, implying it is undertaken to secure future returns.' The question raised by U2 suggests a growing disgruntlement in Zimbabwe on the value of education and amplifies the concerns raised by Chimbunde and Moreeng (2024, p. 9) who ask, 'What then is wrong with education systems in Africa in general, why do we have educated but poor citizens?'

3.4. Whom Do You Know and the Employment Opportunities

A striking finding of the study was that graduates employed were selected not because they were qualified but rather because they were considered friends of those who held a position of authority. U10 confessed that:

> I do not consider myself competent to have been offered a position where I am working. It was because the Chief Executive Officer of the company is related to my mother. Had it been because of qualifications, normal procedures could have been followed before my appointment. Rather, I was called for a mock interview and then . . . boom, I got the position.

Such frankness suggests that employment in Zimbabwe amid the economic crisis was not based on meritocracy but on networking, which defeats the purpose of embarking on university education. Similar findings were reported by Espinoza et al. (2024, p. 205) that 'not having social networks that could make it easier to contact employers had made employment more difficult.' That also implies that the uneducated could also fill positions meant for the educated if they are connected to those in authority. That obscures the true value of university education. In support of the sentiment, Wang (2024) observes that although education is commonly marketed as a tool for empowering individuals and fostering personal development, it can also be used to legitimise and spread social class disparities. The finding mirrors employment patterns in South Africa, where Mseleku (2025) reports that besides having qualification, nepotism, favouritism and connections through family members, relatives, friendships, political affiliations and professional networks determine the chances to get employment. That shows that social networks as capital can be used to achieve employment resulting in social and economic outcomes. Nevertheless, the sentiments raised by U10 challenge Peijen and Muffels (2024), who argue that there is fierce competition for entry-level jobs that are sustainable for young people who lack the necessary credentials. The stiff competition was unavoidable since Zimbabwe's economy declined and failed to generate new positions, while on the other hand, university expanded to absorb the students who expected to climb the social ladder through education (Wang, 2024).

3.5. The Collapse of the Industries

The graduates reported that some industries had closed because of a lack of fiscal space to operate in the volatile environment, leading to a lack of employment openings. To justify that industries were hamstrung by the economic instability, U4 had this to say:

> We sometimes do not blame the industries for lack of employment openings because most of them had shut down following the fall of the economy, which is characterised by hyperinflation. Most industries are not expanding but rather are stagnant, with most closing because of the economic crisis. On the flip side, many universities were established in the country, and thousands graduate yearly. The equation of education and employment is not balanced. So, our university education has become useless amid this crisis.

Deducing from that sentiment, it implies that the number of graduates has increased while those of industries has been declining. That confirms Bhebhe et al. (2015), who argue that the decline of industries was attributed to the economic collapse, while the boom of graduates was due to the effectiveness of the education sector. That suggests that the drop in economic performance coincided with the education sector's improved efficacy. The finding shares similar sentiments raised by Cieslik et al. (2022, p. 1136), who claim 'the rapid upsurge in the number of young people in tertiary education has outpaced the demand for highly skilled labour, pushing down graduate wages through the labour supply effect.' They go further to claim that in the last ten years, tertiary education returns have been falling globally, demonstrating that promoting university attendance alone is not a solution. The finding also confirms Magidi (2024, p. 3), who argues that the economic crisis 'led to the widespread closure of companies across all sectors, precipitating a severe economic crisis characterised by significant decreases in industrial capacity utilisation.'

Resultantly, a sizeable section of the population lacks a reliable source of income or the resources to maintain their family due to the skyrocketing unemployment rate, which is currently at 46.7% (Chikandiwa, 2023; Hupile & Siambombe, 2024).

When participants were probed whether education did play a role in their lives at all, graduates were quick to say education opened their mental faculties that they used in their daily lives. As clarified by U8:

Yes, even though my qualification has not helped me to enter the job market, I am far better than those who did not pursue a university education. My thinking capacities have changed, and how I view the world is different from those who have never been to university. My survival skills are different from those who have never been to university.

That suggests that despite the criticisms levelled earlier on, education remains vital in encouraging self-development because it has the potential to open individual mental capacities to take part fully in society toward social, economic, and cultural aspects of life.

4. Discussion

The study, drawn from the perspectives and experiences of university graduates, revealed a significant discrepancy between educational qualifications and employment opportunities, demonstrated by the growing scepticism among the graduates about the true value of education. While education has been traditionally acknowledged as a key to open job opportunities, the findings suggest that university education has lost this value, and thus educational certificates resemble membership cards that one can use to belong to a club. The analysis shows that university graduates see no value in credentials as passports to employment, but rather as membership cards for them to belong to a club. To them, networking has taken over credentials, resulting in unfair labour practices, confirming what Collins (1979, p. 62) coined 'cultural currency' or 'formal summary announcements of the quantity of cultural goods an individual has acquired that enables one to be a member of a group'. The study discovered that young people are becoming increasingly doubtful about the benefits of going to university and getting a job, primarily because of the lack of openings in the local labour market. As argued by Pikovskaia (2024, p. 359), 'youth have become incredibly frustrated by the inapplicability of their education to real life.' The widespread suspicion about the affordances of education results from the belief that the advantages of formal education and employment appear to be overstated in the current economic environment, where people of all educational backgrounds have a difficult time obtaining stable employment. The finding challenges the credentialism theory, which argues that credentials (qualifications) are frequently given priority by employers as measures of competency, even if they may not accurately represent a graduate's suitability for a position. The study rather shows that entry to employment is based on social networking. That resonates with the findings of a study conducted in South Africa by Mseleku (2025) that reports that graduates without connections, particularly from poor families, are disadvantaged in the labour market. That assumption is backed by Wang (2024) and Musgrave (2017) who claim that social networks can be used to legitimise and spread social class disparities, though in stark contrast, Peijen and Muffels (2024) contend that there is fierce competition for entry-level jobs that are sustainable for young people who lack the necessary credentials.

The experiences of university graduates in Zimbabwe suggest that the value of education may be more complex and nuanced than previously thought (Magidi, 2024). Findings regarding employment challenges that are comparable to those in this study have been documented in other nations (Merkuri & Cera, 2024; Mseleku, 2025; Pompeia & Selezneva, 2019; Vasilescu et al., 2025). The studies illustrate that there is an imbalance between the supply of professionals and the demands of the labour market because of the expansion of higher education systems during either the economic decline or boom. To illustrate the com-

plexities, Maulani and Agwanda (2020) report that in several developing countries, youth unemployment has become a damaging legacy that has prevented young people from assimilating into economic life patterns like earning money, saving for the future, and developing a career. (Cieslik et al., 2022) also submit that youth employment is a huge problem in Sub-Saharan Africa because an extra 10–12 million youths join the workforce annually without success. That could be because, as suggested by Espinoza et al. (2024), worldwide growth in enrolment in and graduation from higher education is directly linked to the high expectations and aspirations that youth have had for attaining a university credential, suggesting over-emphasis on educational qualifications. As argued by Collins (1979), credentialism has an excessive dependence on degrees and certifications rather than specific work competencies and appropriateness. That could be a justification for the difficulties that university graduates face in joining employment. Our finding suggests a growing scepticism in Zimbabwe about the value of education, given the challenges university graduates face in entering the job market despite having credentials. The positive nexus between education and employment is questioned, especially so in a country whose economy is volatile.

5. Conclusions

Our study sought to explore the perspectives of university graduates on the nexus between education and employment openings. This paper addressed the critical research problem of understanding the university graduates' perspectives and experiences, focusing on the value of education in shaping their mobility on the social ladder. Key findings indicate that there was a discrepancy between education and employment opportunities. The findings underscore the need for the reconfiguration of the nexus between education and employment. We conclude that the disconnect between education and employment highlights the need for policymakers to reassess the way education is delivered and aligned with labour market needs.

Drawing on the main findings, this study suggests that there is a need for a strong partnership between universities and industry leaders. The industry must determine the number of students to be enrolled for each programme, and university courses must be informed by the demands of the industry. That will ensure that all graduates will be absorbed by the job market after graduating and will not outnumber the job opportunities available in the industries. Thus, the enrolment of students at universities must be determined by the expected openings in the industries. That can only happen if industries provide statistics on their expected growth/decline over a specific period, and that information should be supplied continuously, if not yearly, after studying their fiscal space. Additionally, given that most graduates struggle to secure employment due to a lack of skills, universities should align their curricula with evolving industry needs, including the inculcating of digital, entrepreneurial, and technical competencies. That will address the skills mismatch. In a situation where thousands of graduates are produced each year by the nation's universities, contributing to the high unemployment rate, and leading to nepotism and unfair labour practices, governments must monitor the recruitment of graduates into the labour market. A database can be created with a waiting list formulated. Once an opening arises, the graduates are then selected randomly using computer software. In the age of Artificial Intelligence, human interaction in the recruitment of new members into the labour force can be limited, promoting fairness and crushing the networking system. The current study is limited in terms of its geographical setting, which limits the applicability of results in diverse contexts. However, the sample size for a case study was quite robust; hence, the findings of the study can be used in comparable contexts. The case study design also allows generalisation to the efficacy of the credentialism theory as affirmed by Yin (2018),

who argues that a case study is not to generalise findings to a specific population but rather to theory. The findings of the study resonate with the theory of credentialism, which argues that formal education places people into employment, although we have some cases where other factors contribute. Even though our results are encouraging, future studies are required to confirm these findings in broader settings since the data from the study did not represent a significant advance within the whole country's university community—one university is not sufficient to allow generalisation of the findings. Additionally, future studies should investigate the experiences and perspectives of industry leaders and university administrators. Additionally, the long-term effects of the disconnect between university education and job openings remain a fertile territory for further investigation.

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