

## Degrees are not an end in themselves and must add value

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**By Mwangi Wanjumbi**

The month of August is synonymous with many negative events in our history. We lost our founding President in the same month. Much later, we lost a sitting Vice President.

It is also not lost on us that in a similar month; the country experienced the worst terrorist activity ever through bombing of the former American Embassy.

At the moment, the country is going through the worst water and power crises to ever be experienced in any month of August. All is not lost though, in this dark month as it is sometimes labelled.

August is also synonymous with graduation ceremonies in private and public universities in Kenya. Many academic milestones are marked by many knowledge hungry Kenyans.

#### **Hawks in the sky**

Incidentally, there is neither age limit for graduating candidates nor gender discrimination.

The areas of study are as numerous as the graduands. This effectively means there is knowledge galore every August.

This "the power to read" is transformational if properly employed.

Like a hawk in the sky, the graduates can see the world from an advantaged position and should immediately start making a difference in the world.

The reality is, however, somewhat disappointing.

It appears most of the knowledge largely goes into passing final exams. The application becomes another matter all together.

Graduates take the next natural step — looking for formal employment — period.

The majority slip into our presumed national mindset whereby an education is merely supposed to enable us secure formal employment.

This is sad in a nation where unemployment levels are at an all-time high and signs are that the situation can only get worse.

#### **Textbook theories**

Worse still, the graduates who finally become the force behind industrial and organisational development perceive knowledge as an end in itself.

The textbook theories are never integrated in practical situations and focus is lost.

Graduating students must realise society looks upon them to make a difference in the world around them, by devising ways of incorporating theories to practice, rather than complacently conforming to existing situations.

They will at the minimum need to be creative, analytical and critical thinkers, if they are to be positive change agents.

—*The writer is a management consultant and trainer at Newtimes Business Solutions.*

## **Unedited Version**

### **August Graduations: Academic Exploits Should Continually Add Value to the Society**

**By Mwangi Wanjumbi**

The month of August is synonymous with many negative occurrences in both our history as well as our ongoing national activities. We lost our founding President in the same month. Much later, we lost a sitting Vice President. It is also not lost on us that in a similar month; the country experienced the worst terrorist activity ever through bombing of the former American Embassy. At the moment, the country is going through the worst water and power rationing crises to ever happen in any month of August. All is not lost though, in this dark month as it is sometimes labeled.

This month of August is also synonymous with graduation ceremonies in both the private and public universities in Kenya. Many academic milestones are marked by many knowledge searching Kenyans. Perhaps you have attended one ceremony or the other this month. Incidentally, there is no age limit for the graduating candidates. Neither is there any gender discrimination. This writer attended the graduation ceremony of a 21 year old gentleman and later a 55 year old lady. Even, the areas of study are as numerous as the graduating students. This effectively means that there is knowledge galore in every August of each year. Interestingly, this allows the various students to acquire 'the power to read and do what appertains to the degree (s) conferred.' This power is without doubt transformational if properly employed.

Like a hawk in the sky, the now educated students are placed high above the ground service. The higher, the level of education attained, the higher the distance from the ground service. In that advantaged situation, the graduating candidates are capable of seeing the world below them. Having understood the world view through studies, these celebrants are expected to position themselves in a way that they can immediately start making a difference in the world. They should be in a position to scan beneficial opportunities based on their newly acquired strengths. But, what actually happens to the power acquired?

There is no clear-cut answer on this. But, it appears that most of the knowledge acquired during the undergraduate and graduate studies largely goes into passing the final exams. The application of the said knowledge becomes another matter all together. Soon after the celebrations, the graduates make the next natural step. That is looking for formal employment – period. Indeed, majority slip into our presumed national mindset whereby education is supposed to enable us to secure formal employment. This is sadly in a nation where unemployment level is at an all time high. Certainly, signs are that the situation can only worsen rather than getting better.

Worse still, those who are lucky to acquire formal opportunities end up putting the theory part of their knowledge aside. In the recent past, I have continually been conducting research on how the theory is applied to the workplace especially in

the organizations that I have continually been interacting with. Notably, our students who finally become the force behind industrial and organizational development perceive knowledge to be in two perspectives.

These include the book knowledge which involves the theory and practice of the various disciplines. In my findings these theories are perceived to be abstract when compared to the practice, from more than 90% of the respondents. The theories are never integrated in the practical situations. Sadly, focus is lost on the fact that, when the theories and principles were developed, they were meant to interrogate and eventually solve ensuing challenges. In our case, the challenges remain and sometimes escalate, yet the solutions are right within our reach.

A good example is the theory and principle of teamwork which among others was developed in the 1920's and 30's during what is known as the Industrial revolution. At that time, business was expanding from family outfits operating from domestic backyards, to fully fledged factories and industries. The need to engage more players in the business led to development of the said principles and theories with the aim of controlling and sometimes moderating behavior in the workplace. Incidentally, those principles never change. They are only improved through continuous incorporation of new ideas.

Ironically, you will find numerous organizations that do not bother testing the applications of these theories in their own businesses. In fact, it is only about 20% of corporate bodies in Kenya which take their employees through continuous training and development processes, in line with changing circumstances. Yet, our universities have not incorporated training particularly in soft or life skills in their mainstream curriculum.

This observation may however not apply to technical skills. Nevertheless, the requisite competencies need to be enriched through soft skills development. Imagine a professional who is challenged in decision making or problem solving for example. Imagine managers who are challenged in delegating work to their juniors or even leadership skills. It is in fact difficult to comprehend how business would move to new levels of performance without consistently nurturing the workforce with requisite soft skills.

Our graduating students need to realize that book knowledge is supposed to be applied to the practical situation. Society and especially the business and organizational sector look upon the newly educated to make a difference in the world around them, by devising ways of incorporating continually improving theories to the practice, rather than complacently conforming to the existing situation. They will at the minimum need to be creative, analytical and above all critical thinkers, if they will succeed in creating change in the society, especially in a dynamic global environment.

Above all the graduates need to align their desired occupations with their strengths coupled with own personalities. Needless to emphasize, every career has its own personality orientation. It is only with all the above observations in contemplation, will continued academic exploits consistently add value to our personal, organizational and national circumstances.

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