

Bridging the Gap: Higher Education and Graduate Employability in Zanzibar

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Abstract

University graduates in Zanzibar face employability challenges due to a discrepancy between the skills imparted by higher education and the needs of the labour market. This study explores the relevance of higher education to graduate employability. Using a descriptive design and a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 342 respondents across three universities and analysed using descriptive statistics with Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The study found that while graduates perceive higher education as contributing to employability, they often remain unemployable in both formal and informal settings. The main issue observed is the lack of relevant skills and practical experience in university curricula, which restricts graduates' adaptability to labour market demands. To address this, the study recommends that higher education institutions review their curricula to better align practical and theoretical knowledge. Such changes would enhance graduates' readiness for the labour market and increase their employability in dynamic professional environments.

Keywords: Labour market, graduate employability, higher education

Introduction

Concern over higher education and employability is intensifying, driven by the growing number of unemployable graduates, a trend influenced by advances in the education sector and the evolving demands of the job market (Nalawade et al., 2024). Individuals, families, and nations invest in education, expecting graduates to secure meaningful work. The skills, knowledge, and attributes cultivated through education play a critical role in shaping employment outcomes. Graduate employment rates are frequently used to assess how well educational programmes align with job market

demands and facilitate workforce integration (Ma'dan et al., 2020). The employability of higher education graduates is influenced by a wide range of factors, including those connected to society, the educational system, and the individual (Guo, 2024).

Universities are among higher education institutions responsible for equipping graduates with knowledge and the skills necessary for employability (Gauthier, 2018). The concept of employability refers to the ability of university graduates to be employed or self-employed (Azmi et al., 2018). *University graduates, therefore, are expected to possess certain skills and competencies that can determine their employability status (William et al., 2018).*

Globally, the issue of graduate employability has been addressed through various policies and strategies to strengthen the relationship between higher education and labour market needs (UNESCO, 2022). In Asia, labour market reforms and university curriculum adjustments have been introduced to ensure graduates acquire employable skills (Marklund et al., 2017). In New Zealand, incorporating work placements and internships into tertiary qualifications for international students has become a central element of government efforts to enhance graduates' employability and improve pathways to employment and residency (Education New Zealand, 2015). However, graduate unemployment remains a global challenge. In Europe, Greece recorded one of the highest graduate unemployment rates at 15.7%, followed by Finland (4.9%), Belgium (3.8%), and the United Kingdom (2.3%) (Reboot, 2019). Similarly, in Malaysia, approximately 53,373 graduates from higher education institutions were reported unemployed, contributing to about 3.5% of the country's total unemployment rate (Ma'dan et al., 2020).

In Africa, graduate unemployment remains a major development challenge despite numerous interventions. In South Africa, university graduates continue to experience high unemployment because many fail to secure jobs that match their qualifications (Ramoroka et al., 2024). Kenya has also struggled with graduate unemployment despite implementing the Development Sector Plan for Labour, Youth and Human Resource Development (2008–2012) (UN, 2021). In Tanzania, including Zanzibar, several poverty reduction strategies and youth employment policies have been introduced to improve graduate employability and reduce unemployment (URT, 2023). However, the gap between educational outcomes and labour market expectations remains significant, making graduate unemployment a major barrier to poverty reduction and economic growth.

In Zanzibar, graduate unemployment persists despite the continued expansion of higher education and various policy efforts to improve employability. According to the Office of the Chief Government Statistician (OCGS, 2020), unemployment among graduates increased by 11.3% between 2018 and 2020, indicating that many graduates are still unable to transition successfully from university to sustainable employment. Despite ongoing initiatives to strengthen employability competencies, many graduates struggle to convert their academic qualifications into stable career opportunities. This situation suggests a mismatch between the skills and knowledge provided by higher education institutions and the actual demands of the labour market. As a result, many graduates remain unemployed, underemployed, or engaged in temporary and part-time jobs that do not fully utilise their qualifications and potential. Such scenarios highlight inefficiencies in aligning education and career development initiatives with the broader goal of enhancing graduate employability (Sophia & Onen, 2024).

The persistently low levels of graduate employability in Zanzibar, despite various initiatives such as curriculum reform, Support for Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship aimed at improving it, highlight the need for this study. Previous studies on employability have largely focused on skill mismatches between graduates and labour market demands, but they have not fully addressed Zanzibar's unique socioeconomic conditions and employment realities. For instance, Kalufya and Mwakajinga (2016) found that employers frequently failed to distinguish between university graduates and non-graduates based on skills and knowledge, indicating weaknesses in the development of employability-related competencies within higher education institutions. However, their research, like many others, focused narrowly on formal employment as an outcome, overlooking key dimensions of employability, such as self-employment, entrepreneurial skills, and other adaptable competencies necessary for success across varied work environments.

Similarly, Kibona (2024) found that the influence of higher education on graduate employability is shaped by the region's unique socio-economic conditions, particularly the mismatch between university training and labour market expectations. In addition, Mseleku (2024) found that although internships contribute slightly to career and professional development, their role in facilitating graduates' transition into full-time, permanent employment remains unclear, as they mainly provide soft skills and limited relevant work experience that do not adequately meet employability needs. Therefore, there remains a gap in understanding of how higher education influences graduate employability in Zanzibar beyond formal employment, particularly regarding entrepreneurship, self-employment, and the local labour market.

Despite the increase in higher education graduation rates between 2018 and 2023, Zanzibar continues to experience high levels of graduate youth unemployment. Employers have raised concerns about skills gaps among university graduates, particularly in technical competence, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, leadership, entrepreneurial skills, digital literacy, and professionalism. These concerns raise critical questions about whether higher education institutions (HEIs) are adequately preparing graduates with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for employability. Given this, there is a need to examine the reality of these perceived skills gaps and to identify institutional challenges within HEIs, including curriculum misalignment with labour market demands and limited career development support (OCGS, 2020). The study therefore explores the influence of higher education and graduate employability in Zanzibar within the context of Job Match theory, which examines the extent to which academic programmes correspond with labour market needs and how this alignment or disparity influences graduates' employment outcomes.

The main objective of this study was to examine the influence of higher education on graduate employability in Zanzibar. Specifically, the study assessed graduates' career expectations and employment trends, curriculum alignment with labour market demands, and institutional factors affecting employability.

Theoretical Review

This study was guided by the Job Match Theory. The theory states that "A worker's productivity in a particular job is not known ex-ante but becomes known more precisely as the worker's job tenure increases" (Jovanovic, 1979). According to the theory, the labour market operates as a matching process where employers seek workers and job seekers search for employers until both find an optimal match. The theory emphasises that this matching process depends on aligning job seekers' skills and attributes with employers' specific demands. In support of this, Heriel (2025) found that graduate unemployment is strongly associated with skills mismatch, indicating that a substantial proportion of unemployment can be attributed to the misalignment between graduates' competencies and labour market demands.

In the context of this study, the Job Match Theory is particularly relevant as it highlights the importance of ensuring that higher education aligns with the labour market demands. A mismatch between the skills imparted by universities and the requirements of the labour market could lead to unemployment among graduates. As Robst (2007) suggests, graduates' employability is compromised when their education does not adequately consider the evolving needs of the global economy.

This theory serves as a guiding framework for the study by providing a lens through which to analyse the influence of higher education on graduate employability in Zanzibar. It informs the investigation into whether higher education institutions in Zanzibar are effectively equipping students with skills that match the demands of the labour market, thereby facilitating better job matches and reducing unemployment. By applying the Job Match Theory, the study sought to test its applicability in the Zanzibar context and provide insights to improve the alignment between higher education curricula and labour market requirements. It also helps explain why some graduates remain unemployed or end up in jobs that do not match their qualifications, despite completing higher education.

Empirical review

The relevance of higher education to graduate employability

Empirical evidence globally emphasises the increasing relevance of higher education in shaping graduate employability in a rapidly changing labour market. UNESCO (2022) emphasises that higher education plays a central role in equipping graduates with transferable skills such as adaptability, critical thinking, innovation, and digital literacy, which are essential for employability in a competitive global economy. This reflects a shift from traditional knowledge-based education to competency-based learning aimed at improving graduates' readiness for work.

Countries like Germany and South Korea have successfully bridged the gap between learning and employment by ensuring their universities work closely with industry. These countries have developed systems where students gain hands-on experience through internships and apprenticeship programmes, making them more employable immediately after graduation (OECD, 2022).

In contrast, the study conducted in Malaysia by Fernández-Suárez et al. (2016) indicates that HE institutions contribute little to enhancing graduate employability. The study concluded that there was a need to prepare students for the world of work with a focus on both local and international employment opportunities. The findings further indicated that some university graduates lacked techniques to prepare and present a curriculum vitae and respond to interviews. This was attributed to the fact that some HE institutions focus more on theories and paper-based examination results than on developing competencies. Another study conducted in Bangladesh reported that the majority of HE graduates remain unemployed because they lack confidence, rely on memorisation, and lack soft skills (Fahim, Majumder, Faruk, & Sutradhar, 2018).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the relevance of higher education to employability is further challenged by persistent skills mismatch. The World Bank (2022) indicates that although millions of graduates enter the labour market annually, many struggle to secure employment due to weak alignment between university training and labour market needs. The African Development Bank (2021) similarly attributes graduate unemployment to outdated curricula, limited practical training, and weak collaboration between universities and employers. In Nigeria, Omoniwa and Adedapo (2017) found that although graduates possess theoretical knowledge, they often lack practical experience and relevant competencies required by employers. Oketch (2020) further argues that many African higher education systems remain largely theory-driven, limiting the development of essential employability skills such as problem-solving and digital literacy.

In Tanzania, Mwita (2018) conducted a study on employability in the Dodoma region and found that employers believe higher education institutions do not adequately equip graduates with the practical skills and competencies required in the job market. Mwita insisted that the mismatch can occur because educational systems may not align with the rapidly changing labour market demands in technology-driven fields. The employability situation Mwita discussed can vary widely depending on socio-economic conditions, particularly across contexts such as developed versus rural areas or different cultural settings. This diversity affects graduates' ability to secure employment. In economically advanced regions with high-quality education and employment systems, graduates tend to fare better, whereas in less developed areas, the lack of institutional support and economic opportunities may hinder employability.

In Zanzibar, the situation becomes even more urgent. Even though more students are joining university than ever before, many graduates are still unemployed. A study by Kibona (2023) shows that in Zanzibar, this is largely due to university programmes not being closely linked to the local economy. Students often graduate with degrees in fields such as general arts or humanities, while the growing sectors in Zanzibar, such as tourism, ICT, marine science, and blue economy-related industries, are in dire need of specialised skills.

The Zanzibar Labour Force Survey (OCGS, 2020) found that nearly 30% of graduates were unemployed a year after graduating from university. This shows a clear disconnect between education and the job market. The problem is made worse by the fact that most universities in Zanzibar lack strong internship or industrial training programmes. Kessy (2020) found that very

few students gain real-world work experience before they graduate, leaving them unprepared for employer expectations.

Efforts to address this issue remain limited. Zanzibar's education policies have begun to identify the problem. The Zanzibar Education Policy (2019) and Development Vision 2050 discuss linking education to national priorities such as the blue economy, ICT, and youth entrepreneurship. But universities are often slow to update their curricula or work together with employers. COSTECH (2024) points out that, although data on employment trends exist, universities do not use it enough when designing programmes. As a result, students often seem to be academically qualified but not employable.

Research Gap

The existing studies (Kibona, 2023; Kessy, 2020; OCGS, 2020) have focused on the existence of unemployment and mismatch between education and labour market needs. These studies remain descriptive, focusing on the problem rather than systematically analysing the influence of higher education variables on employability outcomes, including both formal employment and self-employment. Consequently, these studies do not adequately explain how and to what extent higher education influences graduate employability in Zanzibar. This study addresses this gap by empirically examining how institutional factors contribute to the production of graduates who are either employable or mismatched with labour market demands.

Methodology

Research Approach

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach. This approach represents a research approach that involves collecting, analysing and interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon (Bentahar & Cameron, 2015). A mixed-methods approach provides a better understanding of research problems and research questions and more evidence, while offsetting possible shortcomings from using a single approach (Cohen et al., 2018).

Research Design

The study used a descriptive research design because it is suitable for examining how higher education institutions influence graduate employability outcomes, including skills acquisition, job readiness, and self-employment tendencies (Tsai, 2021). This design enabled the researcher to obtain factual information from graduates and university administrators regarding their experiences, perceptions, and real-life conditions within the

existing educational and labour market context. A descriptive research design is intended to observe, describe, and record the characteristics of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs (Shinija, 2024).

Selection of the Research Sites

This study was conducted at three universities in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Zanzibar was selected as the study location due to its distinct economic characteristics, thus making it a significant focus for understanding graduate employability patterns. The region's reliance on formal employment opportunities over self-employment or entrepreneurship has contributed to high unemployment rates among university graduates. Specifically, SUZA (State University of Zanzibar), the largest public university, contributed a significant share of graduates across various fields. Zanzibar University (ZU), a leading private institution, was included for its focus on business and management studies, areas critical to employability. Lastly, Sumait University was chosen for its prominence in producing graduates in education and related disciplines. Additionally, Zanzibar consistently reports elevated levels of graduate employability challenges, aligning with national trends. The region also hosts various programmes addressing these challenges, further underscoring its relevance as a case study (UNICEF, 2018).

Sampling Procedure

The sample estimated was 384 respondents, including finalist students and graduates. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula (equation 1) for calculating sample sizes in social research, thereby ensuring an appropriate balance between statistical power and resource availability.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \dots\dots\dots 1$$

Where:

n = Sample size

N = Total population (which includes all three universities, including finalists and alumni)

e = Marginal error of 0.05 (when the level of accuracy is 95%)

$$n = \frac{9800}{1 + 9800(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{9800}{1 + 9800(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{9800}{1 + 24.5}$$

$$n = \frac{9800}{25.5}$$
$$n = 384$$

The study population comprised 9,800 individuals across the three universities. The study planned to collect data from a sample of 384 respondents (100%), selected through simple random sampling based on Yamane's (1967) sample size determination formula. Data collection involved distributing questionnaires to respondents in the selected universities, public and private organizations, and their residences. In this case, a total of 342 questionnaires, equivalent to 89% of the total, were successfully received with complete responses, while only 42, equivalent to 11%, were not returned. The risk of non-response bias is considered minimal, as although 11% of the disseminated questionnaires were not returned. The non-response rate of 11% is considered relatively low and falls within the acceptable range for most social science research, suggesting that the risk of non-response bias is minimal. To further minimize this risk, follow-up visits and reminders were made to respondents at the participating universities and organizations.

In addition, the possibility of non-response bias was assessed by comparing early and late respondents, a commonly used approach for detecting potential bias. No statistically significant differences were observed between the two groups on the key study variables, indicating that non-respondents were unlikely to differ systematically from respondents. Therefore, non-response bias was considered minimal, and the findings are regarded as representative of the target population, thereby enhancing the validity and generalisability of the study.

Key informants were purposively selected for their roles and expertise in higher education, employability, and the labour market. They included university administrators, such as 3 heads of departments who gave insights into curriculum development, career support services, and the employability of graduates. 2 employers representing private and public organisations that hire graduates were chosen to reflect diverse sectors relevant to Zanzibar's economy, and a director from the Ministry responsible for Youth was also included. They were selected for their knowledge of education policies and labour market trends. Despite the relatively small number of informants, saturation has been reached, as responses began to repeat similar ideas regarding graduate employability, skills gaps, and institutional challenges. Therefore, the sample size was deemed sufficient for achieving depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation (McLeod, 2024).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods included structured questionnaires with a Likert scale: 5 =Excellent, 4= Very Good, 3 = Good, 2 = Poor, 1= Very Poor. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher, who requested that respondents complete the questions under the researcher's guidance to allow clarification of any questions or terms before returning it to the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions and was administered to both finalists and alumni. The same questionnaire was used for both alumni and finalists for comparative analysis.

The key variables assessed included graduate expectations, alignment of the academic programmes with the labour market demands, and satisfaction with the learning environment during their studies. To ensure reliability and validity, the questionnaires were pretested, and data collection methods were reviewed and refined based on feedback from experts and pilot testing. Pre-testing of the questionnaires was conducted with 30 respondents to evaluate their phrasing, appropriateness, flow, and ability to capture the time required to complete the survey. A few unclear questions were eliminated, while some were rephrased. Following revision, a duplicate of the questionnaire was prepared for use in the survey.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide to gather information from key informants. The semi-structured interview provided opportunities for the researchers to explore the challenges faced by universities in aligning education with labour market needs, employers' perspectives on graduates' competencies, and policy-level interventions aimed at enhancing graduate employability (Fox, 2009). The interview questions also addressed employment application trends among graduates from various departments, including bachelor's degrees in Information and Communication Technology (BSCICT), Accounting and Finance (BAF), and Education (BAED). The information was sourced from the President's Office, Constitution, Legal Affairs, Public Services, and Good Governance. This is the Ministry responsible for recruitment in the government sector, as it authorises employment and maintains records on government employment. The use of multiple data collection methods, such as interviews and questionnaires, enabled triangulation of the findings, thus enhancing the credibility of the results.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods to summarise and interpret the findings. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to represent the distribution of responses across variables, thereby

providing a clear overview of the data. A weighted mean score was computed for the responses collected through the Likert scale, as described by Adeniran (2019) and summarised in Equation 2. The weighted mean captured the participants' overall perceptions and levels of agreement on various aspects of employability, such as the relevance of academic programmes, graduate skills, and their alignment with labour market demands. This analytical approach ensured that the results were presented in a structured and interpretable manner, hence contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the data. Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis, in which information obtained from interviews with key informants was carefully organised, coded, and grouped into themes aligned with the study objectives (McLeod, 2024).

$$M_w = \frac{(\sum f_i * w_i)}{\sum f_i} \dots\dots\dots (2)$$

Where:

Mw = Weighted mean score

Fi = Frequency for respective Likert scale

Wi = Weight in Likert scale

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are vital for maintaining the integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study (Cameron & Herrmann, 2023). To ensure this, the researcher adhered to several ethical principles throughout the research process. First, the study protected respondents' anonymity by omitting personal identifiers, such as names or specific job titles, from the research report. To preserve the depth and richness of participants' responses, especially in qualitative interviews, pseudonyms were used to maintain participants' confidentiality. Second, informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection began. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences. Finally, responsible data integration was maintained by ensuring that both quantitative and qualitative data were handled objectively and interpreted fairly. All collected data were securely stored and used strictly for academic purposes only.

Findings and Discussion

Characteristics of the Respondents

Respondents' characteristics based on sex, age, graduation status and discipline of studies are presented in Table1 and discussed in the next sections. These characteristics were selected based on their influence on employability, as reported by other researchers, such as Segbenya et al.

(2023). Also, using the selected respondent characteristics, helps assess how well findings relate to a wider population.

Table 1:
Characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Variable	Responses (%)	ZU n=100	SUMAIT n=42	TOTAL
		SUZA n=200			
Sex	Male	41	55	24	43
	Female	59	45	76	57
Age (years)	18-29	84	62	64	75
	30-39	15	33	33	22
	40-49	1	5	3	3
Categories	Finalist	24.5	37	52.4	31
Discipline	Graduate	75.5	63	47.6	69
	Business	35	30	0	29
	Science	40	45	42.9	42
	Arts	25	25	57.1	29

Sex Distribution

The results indicate that more than half (57%) of the respondents were female, reflecting increased participation of women in higher education, particularly in arts disciplines. However, these fields have limited opportunities for formal employment, particularly in the government sector. If the curricula do not focus on employability skills such as digital literacy and entrepreneurship, female graduates may face higher unemployment rates. Adapting curricula to provide diverse, marketable skills is essential to enhancing female graduates' employability and broadening their career options beyond oversaturated fields. These results are consistent with the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) reports on enrolment in higher education institutions, which indicate higher enrolment of female students in universities of Zanzibar (Tanzania Commission for Universities, 2018).

Age Distribution

75% of the respondents were aged 18–29 years, the most active segment of the labour force. This age group's preparation for the workforce is crucial, as a mismatch between education and labour market needs could lead to high levels of underemployment and frustration. If graduates lack relevant skills, they may depend on family or government support, thus straining social systems and hindering economic growth. Ensuring this age group is equipped with the right skills is key to preventing these issues. This result is quite similar to the study conducted by European Commission & Eurydice (2024), which gives a thorough summary of the achievements and difficulties encountered in carrying out the promises made in the Bologna Process in

each of the 49 member nations of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and it was observed that, the most dominant age group for higher education, students between the ages of 18 and 34, saw notable shifts in their university enrolment rates between the academic years 2015–2016 and 2020–2021.

Graduation Status and Disciplines

The results show that the majority (69%) of the respondents were graduates, with 42% from science and 29% from arts and business disciplines. The variation in disciplines across universities highlights the need to ensure that all graduates acquire employability skills. It should be noted that although science graduates often possess technical skills that meet industry needs, arts and business graduates may require additional practical training and entrepreneurial education to enhance their employability. Therefore, adjusting curricula to address these gaps is vital for improving employability (The Business Standard, 2024).

These findings emphasise the need for higher education to align with labour market demands. This ensures graduates are equipped with the technical, soft, and entrepreneurial skills essential for successful entry into the workforce. Without these, Zanzibar could face widespread underemployment and economic strain. Curriculum reforms, career guidance, and entrepreneurship initiatives are necessary to help graduates, especially in underrepresented fields such as the arts and business. Thus, they become more employable and contribute to economic growth.

Graduates' Expectations from Higher Education

The results on graduates' expectations after graduation are presented in Table 2. The results reveal a significant disconnect between graduates' career expectations and their employability. A majority (63%) expected government employment, with SUMAIT leading at 71.4%, followed by SUZA (66%) and ZU (53.3%). This reliance on public sector jobs reflects a limited perception of alternative career pathways. It suggests that curricula may not adequately equip graduates with the versatile skills needed for emerging opportunities in the private sector or for entrepreneurship. Conversely, only 12.2% of the graduates anticipated private-sector employment, highlighting gaps in critical employability skills such as adaptability, communication, and digital literacy, as well as limited exposure to private-sector opportunities. On the other hand, during an interview with a director from the office of the head of NGOs, it was quoted;

The majority of recent graduates don't want to work in the private sector; they merely apply for employment to obtain experience. Graduates see positions in

the private sector as short-term opportunities to gain experience. Jobs in the public sector or chances abroad can be preferred (10 October 2024)

While graduates are unwilling to work in the private sector, employers are reluctant to hire them because they lack experience in speaking English fluently in the workplace, as quoted from NGO officers.

In the workplace, many recent graduates are uncomfortable speaking English, which frequently results in inadequate communication abilities. The most common causes of this hesitancy are a lack of confidence, a fear of making mistakes, or a lack of experience speaking English in real-world situations. Even though they may have taken English courses in college, they frequently lack the practice necessary to communicate effectively and professionally. (10 October 2024)

Self-employment, anticipated by 17.2% of graduates, emerged as the second most expected pathway, with ZU leading at 20.8% and SUMAIT lagging at 7.1%. This disparity indicates varying levels of entrepreneurial preparation across institutions, as well as systemic barriers such as limited access to capital and insufficient training. Furthermore, only 7.6% of the graduates envisioned creating employment opportunities, signalling a critical gap in fostering entrepreneurial mindsets and innovation. To address these challenges, higher education institutions must realign their curricula to emphasise transferable skills, entrepreneurial competencies, and private-sector readiness. Such reforms would enhance graduate employability, diversify career pathways, and reduce dependence on the constrained public sector.

These findings align with scholarly insights on employability and graduates' occupational choices. A majority of graduates (63%) reported expecting government employment, reflecting a limited perspective on career pathways and aligning with Pauceanu et al. (2018), who argued that graduates often prefer salaried positions over self-employment due to motivations, awareness, and perceived stability. This preference for public sector jobs may also stem from graduates' expectations of engaging in activities aligned with their professional development and technological adaptation, as highlighted by Işık (2022).

Self-employment, as anticipated by 17.2% of the graduates, mirrors findings from Abreu et al. (2019) and Fini et al. (2022), who identified financial constraints and a lack of business experience as key barriers preventing graduates from initiating their ventures. The low percentage of graduates (7.6%) who envision themselves as employment creators highlights a critical gap in fostering entrepreneurial mindsets and innovation, as emphasised by

Abualoush et al. (2022), who advocated equipping graduates with analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills. Additionally, Kurczewska et al. (2020) noted that graduates' career decisions, including their reluctance to start businesses, may be influenced by geographic and socioeconomic factors. Therefore, aligning the curricula to develop transferable skills, entrepreneurial competencies, and adaptability is vital for addressing these gaps and enhancing graduates' employability across diverse labour market sectors.

Table 2:
Graduates' Expectations from Higher Education

Expected employer	Graduates (%)			
	SUZA (n = 200)	ZU (n = 100)	SUMAIT (n = 42)	Total (N=342)
Government	66	53	71.4	63
Self-employed	17.5	21	7.1	17.3
Private organisation	8	18	19	12.3
Creation of employment	8.5	8	2.4	7.6

Graduates' Employment Trends

The results on the employment trend for the past five years (2018-2022) are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3. These results reveal a notable gap between the number of job applications and actual employment, which may indicate broader employability concerns, particularly in the government sector.

The findings on the employment trend for Bachelor of Science in ICT graduates (Figure 1) show a marked decline in the number of employed graduates, from 180 in 2018 to just 7 in 2022, with applications also decreasing significantly from 2020 onwards. A large number of ICT experts might not be absorbed by Zanzibar's very small economy and limited number of ICT enterprises, particularly if most opportunities are concentrated in mainland Tanzania or overseas. Potential graduates may lose interest in applying if employment prospects deteriorate, fearing a poor return on investment. Growing recognition of this mismatch may explain the decline in submissions after 2020.

For Bachelor of Accounting and Finance graduates (Figure 2), employment figures started low at 22 in 2018 and fell to zero by 2021, with applications showing a similar decline. The decline in employment and applications is due to the limited number of job opportunities in the government sector and, in part, to the inadequacy of graduates' skills in meeting industry expectations. Employment trends for Bachelor of Arts in Education graduates (Figure 3) show a consistently large gap between the number of job applications and the

number of employed graduates, except in 2021, when there were no employment opportunities. This discrepancy between job applications and the actual graduates employed reflects a decrease in demand for education graduates, while the supply side increases.

Taken together, these results suggest an important trend: graduates' expectations may not align with actual employment outcomes, signalling a potential gap between the skills graduates acquire and the opportunities available in the labour market for formal employment. This disconnection highlights a need for further research into how higher education institutions can better prepare graduates for a changing employment landscape. This result correlates with other findings in Africa. This is because, according to Daniel and Precious (2021), between 10 and 12 million young people enter the labour market each year, yet only 3 million formal jobs are available in African countries.

Figure 1:
Employment trends for the five years for Bachelor of Science in ICT

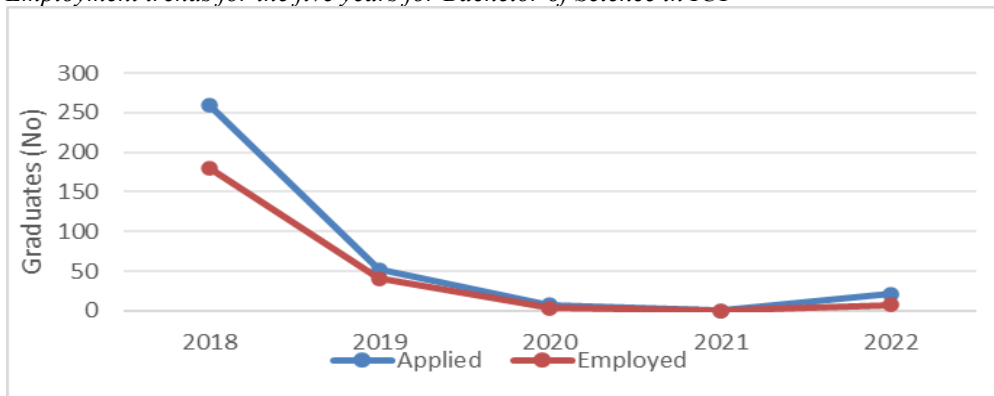


Figure 2:
Employment trends for the five years for Bachelor of Accounting and Finance

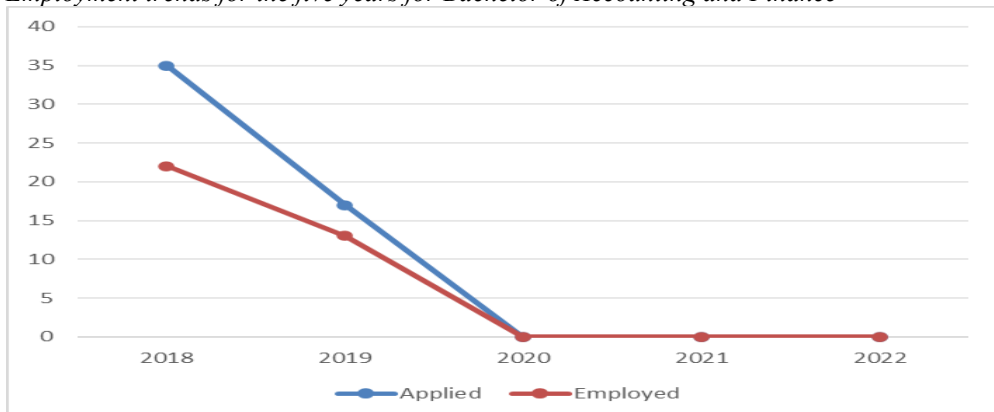
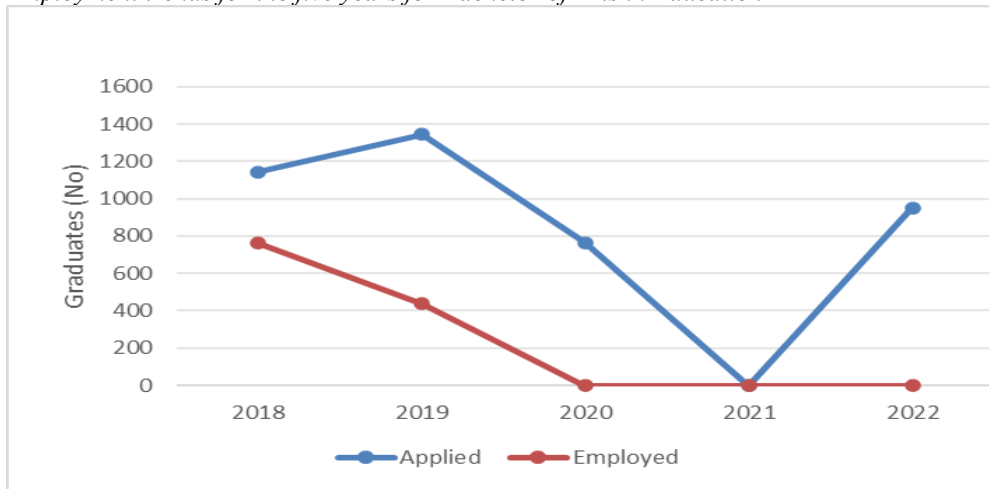


Figure 3:

Employment trends for the five years for Bachelor of Arts in Education



Gaps for Graduate Employability

The results demonstrate an employability gap across the three programmes, Bachelor of Science in Information and Communication Technology (BSCICT), Bachelor of Accounting and Finance (BAF), and Bachelor of Arts in Education (BAED), as reflected by the difference between the number of graduates applying for jobs and those successfully employed. For instance, in the BSCICT programme, about 270 graduates applied for employment in 2018, while only 180 secured jobs, leaving an employability gap of approximately 90 graduates. In 2019, the gap narrowed to about 20 graduates, with 80 applicants and 60 employed, and in 2020, the gap remained at around 10 graduates. This trend suggests a gradual improvement in employability outcomes among ICT graduates compared to the other programmes. Generally, graduate unemployment in Zanzibar is caused by a combination of inadequate job generation and skills mismatches. However, a sustainable way to increase graduate employability is to align university curricula with labour market demands through industry partnership, curriculum reform, and entrepreneurial support.

Employers provided valuable insights into employability gaps among graduates, highlighting specific areas of concern. These gaps are interconnected and reflect both personal and professional development challenges that hinder the graduates' readiness for the job market. The next sections present and discuss the gaps identified by employers.

Lack of Confidence

A recurring theme among employers was the lack of confidence graduates exhibited upon entering the workforce. In this regard, confidence plays a

critical role in working effectively and engaging with colleagues. In this regard, one employer remarked:

The current graduates seem hesitant to take initiatives. This affects their ability to contribute meaningfully to workplace projects. (10 October 2024)

This hesitation often limits the graduates' ability to take on responsibilities or showcase their potential in professional settings. Similarly, Fahim, Majumder, Faruk, and Sutrandhar (2018) found that many higher education graduates in Bangladesh remained unemployed due to a lack of confidence, overreliance on memorisation, and inadequate soft skills.

Poor Communication Skills

Another notable gap identified was poor communication skills, encompassing both verbal and written forms. Effective communication is essential for teamwork, problem-solving, and organisational success, yet many graduates struggle in this area. In connection with this, one employer explained,

Most graduates struggle to articulate their ideas clearly in presentations or meetings, limiting their effectiveness in team environments. (10 October 2024)

This deficiency in communication skills not only affects individual performance but also hinders overall organisational efficiency.

Limited Competence in the Use of ICT Technologies

In an era driven by technology, proficiency in ICT tools is a critical requirement for most job roles. Employers, however, observed that many graduates lacked adequate ICT skills, thus necessitating additional training. In this regard, one employer commented:

We expect new employees to be proficient in common ICT tools, but many graduates need additional training, which delays productivity gains. (11 October 2024)

This gap underscores the importance of integrating practical ICT training into the academic curricula to better prepare students for the demands of modern workplaces.

Limited Skills and Practical Experience

Employers also emphasised the gap between academic knowledge and practical application, noting that graduates often lack hands-on experience. This discrepancy is particularly concerning in roles requiring immediate problem-solving and technical expertise. Reacting to this, one employer noted,

Graduates often have theoretical knowledge but struggle to apply it in practice, creating a skills gap in the workplace. Most graduates may find it difficult to meet workplace expectations, reducing their employability and making the transition from education to employment more challenging. (11 October 2024)

We infer that enhancing experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and fieldwork, could help bridge this gap by enabling graduates to apply theoretical knowledge in the real world.

Reluctance to Work with NGOs

Employers raised a specific concern about the graduates' unwillingness to work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This reluctance may stem from misconceptions about the sector or preferences for more traditional career paths. On this, one employer put it,

Graduates tend to overlook the NGO sector, either due to misconceptions about the work environment or preference for more conventional career paths." (11 October 2024)

Therefore, encouraging exposure to diverse career opportunities during education could help address this issue.

High-Salary Expectations

Lastly, employers identified unrealistic salary expectations as a barrier to employability. While salary aspirations are natural, many graduates appear to have inflated expectations not aligned with entry-level roles or their skill levels. In connection to this, one employer stated,

Many fresh graduates have inflated salary expectations that are not aligned with their skills or the market reality. (10 October 2024).

This issue highlights the need for career counselling and market-oriented guidance for students before graduation.

The findings of this study support the observations by Ping Yong and Ling (2023), who conducted a study in Malaysia and concluded that for graduates not to meet the employers' expectations in the workforce is a complex issue, often rooted in a combination of factors related to education, skill development, and the changing needs of the job market. In addition, Ndyali (2016) noted that a mismatch between what university graduates are taught and the needs of the labour market hinders the employability of university graduates. This finding provides insight into how educational institutions can collaborate more closely with industry to ensure that curricula align with the skills needed in the job market.

Quality and relevance of higher education

The quality and relevance of higher education were assessed based on the learning environment, curricula, and delivery. The findings of this assessment are presented and discussed below.

Learning Environment

The learning environment was assessed based on class size adequacy and the quality of facilities, including tables, chairs, and presentation equipment. The assessment used a Likert scale where 5 = Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3 = Good, 2 = Poor, and 1 = Very Poor. The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that the overall learning environment was rated as good, with a mean score of 3.3. Class sizes were also rated as good, suggesting that students were generally satisfied with the available classroom space for learning. However, class size at SUMAIT was rated lower due to the relatively limited classroom space compared to the number of students, which affected comfort and active participation during lectures. The quality of furniture was rated as poor, with a mean score of 2.1 across all three universities, indicating the need for improvement. The low ratings for furniture quality, particularly at SUMAIT University, align with Agyapong and Glalah (2021), who highlight the importance of suitable furniture in enhancing student learning efficiency and academic outcomes.

Other facilities were ranked as good to very good, with few areas requiring improvement. No assessment was ranked excellent because of improvement requirements in each. For instance, although the internet and library services were ranked as good to very good, the discussion with the respondents indicated some occasional internet interruptions and limited access. These results align with the study by Lupyana et al. (2018) conducted in Tanzania, whose findings revealed that university students were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the library services and recommended certain improvements to enhance the efficiency of the learning process. State University of Zanzibar (SUZA) was generally ranked higher than other universities, thus indicating the government's efforts and investment made in education.

Table 3:
Quality of teaching and learning facilities

Item	Likert Scale rating (Score)			
	SUZA	ZU	SUMAIT	ALL
Classes sizes	3.9	3.4	2.6	3.3

Furniture Quality	2.7	2.4	1.2	2.1
Furniture Quantity	4.2	3.8	3.7	3.9
Presentation Facilities	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.5
Library Facilities	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.7
Internet Facilities	3.2	3.2	3.6	3.3
Overall	3.5	3.3	3.0	3.3

5 = Excellent; 4 = Very Good; 3 = Good; 2 = Poor; 1 = Very Poor

Curricula and mode of delivery

Curricula for higher education were assessed based on the clarity of the programme's learning outcomes, course contents, the modes of delivery, the link between theoretical knowledge and practical application, the relevance of skills to the job market, the applicability of knowledge to professional roles, and the overall level of skills acquired by graduates. The findings on this assessment are presented in Table 4. The results reveal that university education was generally perceived as relevant across all three institutions, with respondents rating several dimensions between "good" and "very good." The clarity of learning outcomes received scores between 3.8 and 4.3, reflecting strong satisfaction with how the learning goals were articulated and their support for students' academic and professional development. Programme course content and mode of delivery were rated between 3.7 and 3.9, indicating that while the material and teaching methods were viewed positively, there was room for improvement to better align with students' needs and market demands. The link between theory and practical application had an overall average of 3.6, with ZU slightly lower at 3.4, signalling a need to enhance practical components in curricula to bridge gaps in employability skills.

The relevance of skills to the job market was rated 3.5, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction, although stronger alignment with industry expectations would be necessary. Knowledge relevance scored slightly higher at 3.6, hence reflecting the perceived applicability of the academic learning to professional contexts, yet underscoring the need for further industry-focused curricula. Similarly, the level of skills acquired also averaged 3.6, thus highlighting the importance of continued efforts to develop job-ready graduates.

Table 4: Perceived relevance of higher education

Criteria	Likert Scale rating (Score)			
	SUZA (n = 200)	ZU (n = 100)	SUMAIT (n = 42)	Overall (n = 342)
Clarity of learning Outcome	3.9	3.8	4.3	4
Programme course content	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.8
Mode of delivery	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.7

Link between theory and practical	3.6	3.4	4.0	3.6
Relevance of skills to job market	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.5
Relevance of the knowledge to the job market	3.5	3.5	3.8	3.6
Level of skills acquired	3.5	3.6	3.9	3.6

5 = Excellent; 4 = Very Good; 3 = Good; 2 = Poor; 1 = Very Poor

The results from Table 4 indicate that the university education system is generally effective in preparing graduates for the employability path. However, challenges persist in other areas because the university education system fails to equip students with the mindset to apply knowledge acquired from their studies in other areas, although at the time of the study it was considering to maximise compliance by introducing quality assurance standards to gauge the quality of graduates in terms of their academic capabilities. The interview between the researcher and the TCU officer on the relevance of university education on employability revealed the following:

A marketing survey is an important step recommended by TCU before introducing any programme to ensure compliance with graduate employability. This is one of the efforts TCU has been making to ensure that all programmes offered by higher education institutions are relevant to graduates' social and economic development (10 October 2024).

Based on these perspectives, the study suggests that there should be a specific programme to align with the rapidly changing labour market by offering mandatory courses that foster a growth mindset and flexibility, since students feel prepared by believing that the educational system is generally effective in preparing them for an employable path. However, the labour market demands more than just academic credentials. There is a lack of alignment between labour market demands and educational output, and curriculum and delivery methods have not kept pace with technological and economic advancements.

The results on the clarity of learning outcomes: programme learning outcomes need to be clear to enable learners to achieve the intended goals, as suggested by Simper (2018), who conducted a study in the United States and observed that well-articulated cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and communication, are crucial in achieving learning goals. The gaps between theory and practice noted in the current study align with Clarke's (2018) study in Australia, which highlighted the limited emphasis on practical learning and interpersonal skill development in higher education, both of which are essential for graduate employability. Similarly, the mismatch between skills imparted by universities and labour market demands echoes Ndyali's (2016) findings from a study conducted in Tanzania, which showed that graduates often lack competitive skills aligned with job market needs.

Furthermore, the moderate ratings for skills and knowledge relevant to the job market reflect the concerns of Succi and Canovi (2020) in Italy, who argued that programmes in many universities, particularly in developing countries, are incompatible with industry requirements. The insufficient focus on entrepreneurship and digital innovation (Ngoasong, 2018; Rashid et al., 2019) may also contribute to these gaps. Based on Ntale et al. (2020) and Zimu-Biyela (2019), who conducted a study across the African continent for curriculum reform in African higher education, it was noted that higher education in low-income countries has been struggling to adapt to globalisation and that the curricula were contextualised to local environments, which was found to hinder the production of job-ready graduates. These findings underscore the importance of integrating practical experience, transferable skills, and industry collaboration into university curricula to better align with the evolving labour market.

Relationship between Job Match Theory and the study findings

According to the study's findings, there is a substantial skill gap between what graduates learn in school and what employers actually need. Graduates could, for example, have academic knowledge but lack practical skills such as English communication or job-specific technical competencies. The fundamental problem that Job Match Theory outlines is an inadequate fit between employee talents and job requirements, as reflected in this misalignment.

According to Job Match Theory, this mismatch may lead to poor employability conditions, in which graduates take positions below their level of education. Employability is negatively affected when a worker's preferences, credentials, and abilities do not align with the demands of open positions in the labour market. To address the mismatch, the theory proposes interventions to align education and employability by collaborating with industry to design curricula that reflect current and future labour market needs. Practical training, soft skills (like communication), and industry-specific competencies should be integrated into academic programmes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is a significant mismatch between graduates' career expectations and labour market realities, which contributes to graduate unemployment and limited employability. This reflects a significant disconnect between graduates' career expectations and the realities of the labour market, with many students overly reliant on the public sector and underprepared for private sector employment, self-employment, or entrepreneurial ventures. This mismatch emphasises the need for curriculum

reform that prioritises versatile, industry-relevant skills such as adaptability, communication, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship. The study further concludes that this mismatch is largely driven by deficiencies in graduate readiness, particularly in communication skills, ICT competence, and practical workplace experience. These gaps limit graduates' ability to meet modern employers' expectations and highlight the need for higher education institutions to strengthen experiential, hands-on learning approaches.

The study also concludes that, while the overall learning environment in the selected universities is generally satisfactory, particularly regarding class sizes, there are still significant infrastructural challenges that need attention.

Recommendations

Regarding the findings from this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the alignment between higher education curricula and employability:

Universities should review their curricula to ensure they align with dynamic labour market demands. This includes integrating knowledge with industry-relevant content, such as digital literacy, problem-solving and employability skills, alongside relevant practical skills. The curricula should be designed with input from industry stakeholders to ensure that graduates acquire the practical competencies needed for employability.

To better prepare graduates for dynamic workplaces, universities must adopt interactive and flexible strategies for delivering curricula. Methods such as problem-based learning, case studies, internships, and apprenticeships should be integrated into the curriculum to promote adaptability, teamwork, and real-world application of knowledge.

Disparities in learning environments must be addressed to ensure that all students have equal access to facilities and opportunities necessary for learning and skill development. Investment in laboratories, computers, internet facilities, and other learning resources should be prioritised.

Given the challenges related to the availability of formal employment, higher education institutions should promote entrepreneurial skills and self-employment opportunities. Programmes should include courses focused on business creation, financial literacy, and access to capital, thereby empowering graduates to pursue entrepreneurship as a viable career path.

Author Contributions

We confirm that all named authors have read and approved the manuscript. All authors contributed to Conceptualisation, writing, methodology design, literature review, data analysis, data interpretation, proofreading, and editing of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests regarding this manuscript.

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Accessing comprehensive curriculum information from selected universities, including programme content, delivery methods, learning activities, and programme lengths, was a major challenge for me during my studies. Despite numerous attempts, this data remained largely unavailable, making it difficult to gain a thorough grasp of how university curricula align with employability requirements.

However, I am grateful for the accessible information and perspectives that helped shape this study. To further examine the gap between higher education and the Zanzibar labour market, I expect future research to benefit from easier access to information about academic programmes.

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Manuscript Preparation - JIPE

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Page set-up of the manuscripts should be on A4 or 8.5" x 11 "paper, typed double-spaced (24-26 lines per page), with margins of top 25mm, bottom 25mm left 40mm and right 20mm.

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The font size of main text shall be 12 in Times New Roman

Manuscripts should be arranged in the order of: title page, abstract (structured summary) including up to five keywords, main text, acknowledgements (if applicable), references, tables, and figure.

Title Page

This page must include the following information:

- The title of the manuscript which should be concise, specific, informative, and clear.
- Should be in bold, using font 14.
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Abstract

The first page following the title page should contain an abstract. Abstract should contain up to 250 words mainly of the object and main findings of the paper. Three to five keywords representing concepts of the paper may be written at the end of the abstract. The Abstract shall be in *italics*.

Main Text

In the main text:

Introduction: Should describe the objective of the reported work and provide relevant background information.

Methodology (Where the study/research dictates): This part should identify the paradigms/approach, population, area of study, procedures employed and any other relevant input to the realization of the study.

Findings: This section should explain all the important findings and provide information about the reliability of the results. Here, the use

of tables and figures is allowed, but the use of text to emphasize important points is encouraged.

Discussion: It should describe the implications of the findings and any conclusions based on the findings. Abbreviations in the body of the paper should be used after having been initially explained. If statistical analysis is applicable, it is important that the procedure is carried out following appropriate methods.

Tables and Figures

Tables and figures should be as close as possible to the text explaining the concept. Tables should be numbered in the order in which they are mentioned in the text. A Table caption must be presented in upper case at the top and Figure caption should be typed in bold immediately below the Figure. Explain in footnotes all non-standard abbreviations used in each table.

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The page numbers should appear at the Centre of the bottom edge of the page.

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All references should adhere to the latest version of APA format.

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They should be kept to a minimum. Two or more consecutive references to the same source should, where possible, be grouped in the same note; the reader should be able to follow the article without referring to the notes.