No Lit Candles Under the Bed: The Importance of an Exhibition During Graduation Ceremony to Graduands, Parents, Future Employers, and the University

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This paper analyses how an exhibition of student's work during graduation ceremonies influences the perceptions of parents, lecturers, future employers, visitors, and graduands resulting into opportunities for graduates to be employed, and increasing visibility of the university. The objectives of the paper are: to find out how parents perceive the creativity and innovation of their children through the exhibited works, how the exhibition influences the would-be employers to select future employees, and to find out if the exhibition raises the visibility of the university in the public arena. Using a qualitative approach, the study purposively interviewed 15 participants that included five students, three parents, two would-be employers, two administrators, and three lecturers. The findings indicate that showcasing student's creativity and innovation triggers positive reactions among stakeholders, increases the confidence of the learner, increases the support of parents towards their children, influences the perceptions of the world of work about the fresh graduates, and promotes the values of the university.

Keywords: exhibition, creativity, innovation, graduates

Introduction

Graduation day is an important occasion where students who have worked hard are recognized because of their hard work, a time when the professors and lecturers see the results of good teaching, and a time when those who provided financial support towards students' education realize that their support was worthwhile (Wamjui, 2006). To the student graduands, graduation is their commissioning to face the world of work with confidence so as to make a contribution to society, earn an income, support their families, and plan for the future. The employers too, expect creative and innovative fresh minds with entrepreneur attitudes that would increase the competitiveness of their organizations. The literature indicates that during graduation days, university campuses and their neighborhoods are full of activities such as snack kiosks, flower and gift tables, and photo booths, all targeting the graduating students and their visitors who purchase many of the items. However, in most cases, parents never had a chance to see, hear, or experience what their sons and daughters have achieved during their time of study, yet this should be the time to celebrate the achievements of their children. Whereas a graduation

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day has remained an important celebration to both graduands, parents and family friends, and interest in graduation celebrations has burgeoned with increasing number of both public and private universities, these celebrations largely do not exhibit to the public which skills students have acquired during their studies.

When students graduate, many people who made a contribution in their educational journey have a lot of expectations for the graduates. Parents, guardians, or sponsors all believe that their sons or daughters would be absorbed in the labour market as soon as they finish their studies. Issues of unemployment notwithstanding, for example in Uganda where the overall unemployment rate (UR) was 9.2 percent in 2016/2017 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018), parents, guardians, sponsors, and the would-be employers in most cases do not know the skills acquired by the graduates yet; they expect much from them. Graduates are expected to have attained employable skills, and be enterprising with creative and innovative minds. Much as creativity and innovation are universally distinguishable variables that make up an entrepreneur and a skill that must be present in each entrepreneurship activity (Antonites, 2003), graduands miss a chance to show their acquired skills to many people during graduation. Similarly, creativity is the production of novel, useful ideas, or problem solutions that includes the process of generating the idea or problem solving and the actual idea or solution (Amabile, 1983; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Torrance, 1988; Okpara, 2007). Such ideas acquired during training need to be publically shown to the public and graduation is such a time.

However, the manner in which most graduation activities are organized does not allow the real celebration of the achievements by the different stakeholders who could have contributed in the student's education journey. Although university education is supposed to equip the learner with both theoretical and practical skills applicable to the world of work, the acquired skills should not be conceived of as a function of innate personality traits (Barron & Harrington, 1981; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2015), but rather, should be an academic, social, emotional, and psychological tools to better graduates and also improve the communities from which the graduates come from. As such, any graduation activity should endeavor to showcase what the students have achieved during their training such that "we do not keep the lit candle under the bed". Education is a perfect pathway for creating effective and sustainable social improvements that are built with empirical evidence hence it is important that during graduation student's achievement should be exposed to the public. Graduation is not in any way the end goal of the learner, but rather a launch pad for life's long journey, and in developing economies such as Uganda education compels one to visit several offices looking for what to do. Graduation serves as a precursor projecting graduates to wherever their future may take them. Students can employ themselves as entrepreneurs or could look for paid jobs. There must be a deliberate effort to reverse what Antonites (2003) observed that courses offered by training institutions in developing economies produce traditional managers but not entrepreneurs. We must change the thinking that developing economies do not have models which showcase and grow creativity and innovation by exhibiting what students have acquired during their training.

Creativity and Innovation: A Launch Pad for Student's Future Carrier

Different scholars have extensively dealt with the concept of creativity and innovation. Meakin (2012) reviewed several definitions and quotes several scholars such as Wycoff (1991), Csikszentmihalyi (1997), Karpf (1953), Treffinger (1996), and Torrance (1987) who gave detailed definitions of creativity. It is evident that in all the definitions, creativity is an attempt by an individual to move away from the known to the unknown. It is a

process for filling knowledge gaps, searching for solutions and answers, and also making hypotheses. Creativity is a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changing, where new and useful are developed, and an act of seeing different things around us, and makes new ideas and items which other people are not able to do; it is an act of venturing into the unknown (Okpara, 2007; Wyckoff, 1991). Okpara (2007) further argues that creativity is also an attitude and involves accepting the new ideas and playing with them for new possibilities and most importantly enjoy the outcomes. Creativity is a process whereby an individual applies his/her expertise, creative thinking, and motivation for a new product or outcome (Amabile, 1998). The created ideas or innovations need to be shown to the audience and an exhibition is one way of doing it. David and Alfred Smart of the Museum of Art posit that exhibitions provide contact with original works of art as an essential component of a liberal education and a key factor in understanding the world in which we live (Smithsonian Institution, 2002b). Similarly, an exhibition during graduation would enable all the stakeholders to link with the product and understand the capabilities of the students.

On the other hand, innovation is a process that brings out the best ideas into reality, and triggers creative ideas, resulting in a series of innovative events. Innovation is the creation of new value by combining ideas and knowledge. Amabile came up with a conceptual model (Figure 1) where she illustrated that when expertise meets creative thinking and the individuals are encouraged or motivated, the product becomes creativity.
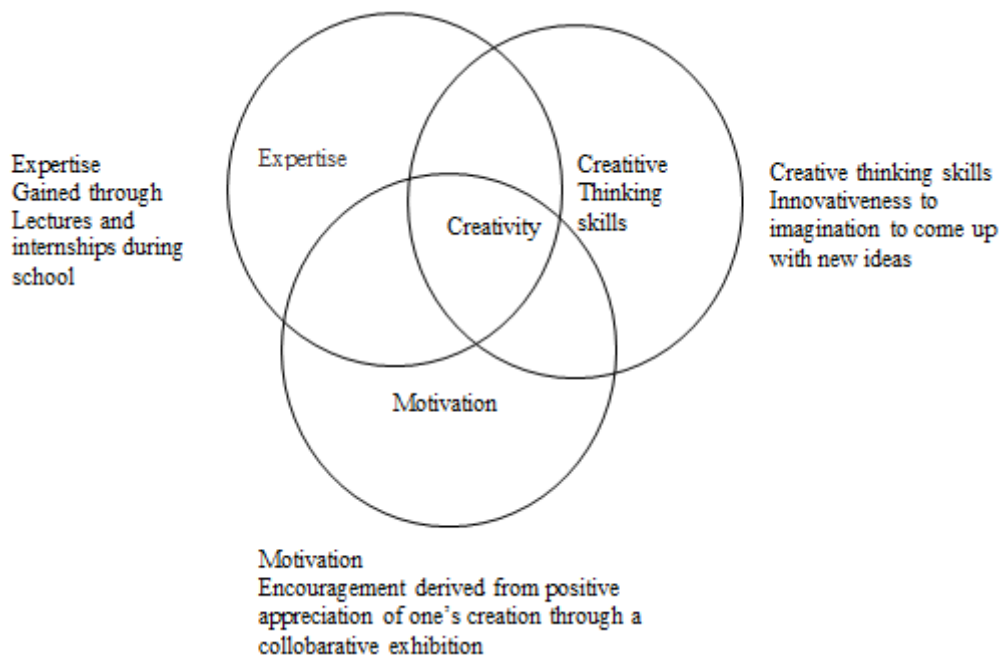

Figure 1. Amabile' conceptual model of creativity aligned with the importance of an exhibition during graduation.

Based on the Amabile' conceptual model of creativity, this paper argues that universities effectively fulfill two components of the model. In the first place, universities impart knowledge to learners. The knowledge imparted enable learners to be experts in their area of specialization whether in science or humanities. Through the knowledge and skills acquired, students develop a considerable level of critical thinking that enables them to be creative and innovative. Their ability to innovate and create is manifested through the class of award either first class, second class, or pass degree. The two components of creativity and innovation at this stage on

graduation are known to the student and the individual lecturers who were responsible for the students. In some cases, other members of the faculty may know, especially in those departments such as Art and Industrial Design of Kyambogo University where marking is in three categories. The student is marked by the lecturer who taught the subject, and then the work is looked at by a group of lecturers who either confirm the lecturer's mark or adjust it upwards or downwards according to their assessment and the external examiner who looks at the work and the two marks awarded. In such system, there are many people who will have seen the learner's product before graduation.

However, the other members of the university academic and administrative staff who approves the mark, manages, and markets the university and speaks for it in various important policy environments do not know or cannot explain the capabilities of their students. In other words, motivation which is the third component of creativity is neglected. The learner never gets a chance to tell the would-be employers his or her capacity beyond the certificate one presents during the interview. This paper argues that holding an exhibition during graduation ceremony is such an ideal space where students should showcase their innovation and creativity to a wide public who would market them or employ them.

Graduation ceremonies quite often are attended by government officials, members of diplomatic community, businessmen, politicians, and parents of the graduands. Even parents and sponsors of the students are also part of the world of work and therefore future employers of the graduates. In Uganda, until recently when education sector was liberalized, the president was the Chancellor to all public universities. He has since appointed Chancellors for each university, but still remains with an honorary title of a Visitor. This means that at any one time depending on his program he can attend the function. This means that graduations are indeed a launch pad of one's achievement and therefore important to go beyond mere reading the names but also to show the public the student's achievements. We cannot continue to allow employers to re-tool our graduates after hiring them such that they can become entrepreneurs. We need to show the public what they are capable of through the graduation exhibitions. Kyambogo University started graduation exhibitions in its 13th graduation ceremony in 2016 and the activity is becoming popular each year. The exhibition was started by the department of Art and Industrial Design hence having the bigger number of items to exhibit and more faculties and departments are joining. The paper therefore, intended to find out how parents perceive the creativity and innovation of their children, how the exhibition influences the would-be employers to determine future employees, and to find out if the exhibition raises the visibility of the university in the public arena.

Theory

This paper used the componential theory (Amabile, 1983). The componential theory of creativity maintains that creativity is a response to the creative process, influence on the process, and the outcome of that process (Amabile, 1983; 2012). Therefore, for a graduate to find a place in the world of work, one must have experienced the three components of the theory. After the university education, graduates should be able to exhibit competences that will compel employers to hire their expertise immediately. As the theory explains creativity as the production of ideas or outcomes that are both novel and appropriate to some goal, graduates should be able to find organizations where their skills are on demand. The theory has four components which are critical to the importance of a collaborative exhibition and the graduate's future work. The components are domain-relevant

skills, creativity-relevant processes, and intrinsic task motivation. The three are within the individual and the fourth one is the social environment which is outside the individual.

Amabile (2012) explains that domain-relevant skills include knowledge, expertise, technical skills, intelligence, and talent in the particular domain where an individual is working or is to work. These skills are responsible for the creative process and in a university setting; students get such skills through lectures, workshops, assignments, practices, and other methods of delivery. On the other hand, creative-relevant skills include cognitive style and personality characteristics which allow students to have an independent mind to make decisions, take up challenges, and be patient, research so as to come up with new ideas. Universities try to instill these values to the students, although the adaptation varies from individual to individual. The third component in the componential theory and directly relevant to the idea of the exhibition is the intrinsic motivation principle where people feel interested in what they do, where they get fully involved, and where they feel they want to solve challenges but not to be paid for their expertise. Creativity yields when people feel motivated primarily by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself other than by the extrinsic motivators. A graduation exhibition therefore, allows graduates, lecturers, management, and the world of work to have a dialogue which is informed by the actual creativity not the academic papers students get on the graduation day.

The fourth component of the theory that ushers the graduates to the job market is the social environment. Although the first three components are inherent, the social environment plays an important role in the success of a graduate. There are always so many external factors that would influence the creativity of an individual. Research suggests that factors that may hinder creativity include, among others failure to accept new ideas, and an emphasis on the status quo. On the other hand, graduates should be given positive challenges through talking about their work and competences, be encouraged to develop new ideas, and support their innovation through public display. The social factors are well addressed in an exhibition space where a dialogue between the parents, the lecturers, the administrators, the employers, and graduates can easily take place. Despite the fact that the theory assumes that the individual is responsible of the three components out of the four, the fourth component—social environment is critical for any graduate who intends to join the labour market. It is against this argument that the componential theory was found appropriate for this study.

Methodology

The study intended to get a snapshot of the stakeholder's perception of the exhibition held during graduation ceremony hence purposive in-depth interviews were found appropriate to gather the data. As Singleton, Straits, Straits, and McAllister (1988), Nachmias and Nachmias (1996), Singleton and Straits (1999), and Trochim (2006) posit, obtaining a snapshot of a sample captures the perceptions as result of that particular incidence and can easily influence the future actions. As a qualitative study design of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organizations, and communities (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008), asking parents, lecturers, future employers, visitors, and graduands was appropriate to the study. The study was carried among the attendees of the 14th and 15th graduation ceremonies of Kyambogo University in 2017 and 2018 respectively. The study population was the graduands, the parents, lecturers, and would-be employers. The sample size was 15 participants purposively selected because of their relevance to the study objectives. Using in-depth interviews, the participants were asked during the graduation ceremony or after. Data was analyzed

using content analysis where emerging patterns were isolated and thematically aligned to the study objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Using in-depth interviews, the 15 respondents shared their views on the how parents perceive the creativity and innovation of their children, how the exhibition influences the would-be employers to determine future employees, and how the exhibition raises the visibility of the university in the public arena. The respondents as well as the rest of the visitors were not sure what their children were capable of producing until the saw the exhibition. It was evident that the exhibition created excitement among the visitors because they never imagined that what was exhibited was the creativity and innovation of their children. One of the participants observed that:

> I cannot believe that this work is produced by our own children trained here in Uganda. I always thought such good works are imported from out. If we have such capacity to produce such wonderful work, then we can easily compete with the rest of the world. As a university what are you planning to make sure this talent is not lost? These young people need more support and marketing.

Other respondents were in agreement with this position and applauded the university administration for integrating exhibition of student's work in such great function. Another parent observed that:

> What Kyambogo University is doing should be done in all universities. I have attended graduation elsewhere but in most cases we are entertained by speeches and praises but never are we given a chance to see what we are celebrating. May be the only group we see are the music students who come with the Chancellor's entourage. This time we have experienced the real work of our students. I have a feeling this also helps the employers to identify some students to work with.

The students were so excited when they saw how many visitors were checking in the exhibition venue. Most of the students were seen taking their parents to the exhibition venue and explaining to them their works. Many of them were taking group photos with their parents and other visitors. Other students too, were using the exhibition tent as a studio backdrop. All the students believed that exposing their work to a bigger public was a good thing because many people start to realize that they have employable skills. A graduate student whose work was collected by the university and given as a gift to the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports said:

> The exhibition during graduation is so important because this is the only day in the university calendar where so many important people come together. Exhibiting student/s work on that day therefore increases the audience that appreciates the work. If students exhibit good work, they are likely to win commissions and this will give them income. Instead of roaming the streets looking for jobs, they will employ themselves or they will realize their worth and not be exploited. When my work was collected by the university to give out as a present, I was able to pay my tuition and that gave me courage to accomplish my masters. It is also good for the university because people start understanding its strength in teaching.

Another student was of the view that the university should make the exhibition one of the major events and encourage many students to exhibit. She observed that:

> The Public Relations Office should make a catalogue of all the exhibited works early enough and the catalogue should be part of the graduation package that is given to visitors and graduands. In that way the university will be advertising itself to thousands visitors who include future employers and policy makers.

She further says that the activity should be fully captured in the university newsletter and all participants should be give certificates that could be used to strengthen their academic achievements. All the student respondents were happy and wished that the university should make sure that all faculties should exhibit their products.

The lecturers were also supportive of the student's views because they believed that the exhibition is one way of creating confidence in the students. This is because during the exhibition students were able to personally explain to the public their creation from the inception, material selection, functionality to maintenance. One of the lecturers observed that the university administration can actually use the exhibition as an assessment tool which the Directorate of Human Resources can base to promote deserving lecturers. He observed that this can be achieved through a catalogue of the exhibition in which lecturers should publish critical reviews of the student's works. He further observed that lecturers can also exhibit their innovations and creativities alongside their students and this should contribute to their promotion.

Members from the Public Relations Office and the Ceremonies Committee were optimistic that the exhibition during graduation raises the university visibility. The Public Relations Officer observed that one of the interest corners during the three days of graduation at Kyambogo University is the exhibition venue because journalists rush to capture the exhibits before the entourage of the Chancellor. The Ceremonies Committee for the last three years has supported the exhibition by increasing its budget. The chairman of the committee posited that exhibition is important because it is by seeing what we are doing that people will start believing in us. Kyambogo University is unique because it is hands on. We offer programs that directly impact society.

Among the visitors both university invitees and parents, there are always future employers of our graduates. For long, they would go through the graduation program book to understand how many programs are offered and would keep imagining what the graduands are able to produce once in the field. The exhibition during graduation set to solve this puzzle. One of the would-be employer observed that if all faculties could exhibit what students have excelled in, it would be easy to match the graduates with specific jobs. He further observed that there would be no need to re-tool the students because employment would be based on real competences. Another future employer observed that exhibition is a good practice though the day is so busy and there is always little time to go through the entire exhibition. He suggested an open day whereby the stakeholders can have more than three days to understand and internalize the exhibition.

Discussion

Findings from the respondents indicated that the exhibition was very important to the students, parents, employers, and the university. All the respondents in the five categories were in agreement that the exhibition was one way of enabling the students to develop confidence once out of the university. The respondents indicated an exhibition triggers positive responses that enable the fresh graduates to be noticed in the world of work. An exhibition is such a powerful tool and captures people's attention more than any other non-visible item. For example, during the visit of the President of Uganda to Kyambogo University in one of the programs, the department of Art and Industrial Design exhibited live models among others (Figure 2). We printed fabric material, dressed our students as models and exhibited them. The models were motionless and as the president was admiring the fabric, one of the models extended her hand to greet the president. It was at that point that the

president noticed that the models were alive. The press picked the scene as a main news item and published in all local newspapers. It is that power of the exhibition which gives the students confidence, the parents hope, the future employers urgency to hire the students, and the university visibility. The visibility of Kyambogo can only be achieved if it meets its vision to be a centre of academic and professional excellence and advancing and promoting knowledge and development of skills (Kyambogo Strategic Plan 2012/13-2022/23, 2013:2).

Figure 2. President of Uganda H.E. Yoweri Museveni admiring Art and Industrial Design live model exhibits during the launch of the Student Loan Scheme at Kyambogo University, 24th April 2014. Photo source: New Vision News Paper.

The department of Art and Industrial Design advocated for an exhibition during graduation because during the graduation period, many people such as students, university administrators, media, parents, policy makers, interface. Graduation is a period when parent's expectations and appreciation are high because of their sons and daughters' achievement. How much more exciting would it be when the parents, the world of work, lecturers, and university administrators see the actual products of the people they invested in? The responses from all participants attest to this because everyone was interested in visiting the exhibition venue (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Stakeholders attending the exhibition during the 13th Graduation of Kyambogo University, December 14-16, 2016. Photo by a staff member.

The fact is that visual images have a lasting impact on an individual and visual images have "the ability to facilitate and enrich communication" (Pain, 2012, p. 303); the exhibition during the graduation was an ideal intervention to bring together the different stakeholders in understanding the skills acquired by students in different fields. Furthermore, Pain (2012) posits that visuals are important in facilitating people to express themselves as fully as possible, build rapport, facilitate communication and expression of tacit knowledge, and promote reflection of what one has seen. Amabile (1998) observes that expertise, creative thinking and motivation are precursors and important components of creativity. It was evident therefore that whereas the graduates gain expertise and develop creative thinking during the training process, the exhibition where several stakeholders would see their items would motivate them more and make them more resilient in the world of work. On the other hand, employers had a chance to physically see what students were capable of producing other than waiting to go through an interview where some would not pass because of other reasons. This was achieved in the exhibition because many visitors bought some items, or inquired how they can access them. For students, indeed an exhibition is a communication tool that reaches many people irrespective of their backgrounds. Buchanar (1989) explains that the aim of communication was to persuade the audience to believe in the past, understand the present, and anticipate with optimism the future; this paper argues that an exhibition during the graduation ceremony was a vital in realizing Buchanar's analysis. Graduation being a period where different stakeholders come together, students' innovations and creativity were disseminated to a wider community. It was also important that during the exhibition, the world of work was persuaded to believe in the knowledge and skills acquired by learners while at school. Tyler (1992) believes that the exhibition can also result in taking action by the world of work or educate the audience of the capabilities of graduates. It was clear that other departments expressed interest in exhibiting their products which I believe the exhibition will soon be a signature of university graduation ceremony.

Conclusion

In this article, I introduced the role of a graduation exhibition that links the graduates with different stakeholders. I provided a case example of an exhibition mounted by the department of Art and Industrial Design during the graduation of Kyambogo University. In this article, I demonstrate the importance of a collaborative exhibition in which the graduates, the lecturers, university administration, parents, policy makers, and employers interface in one exhibition space. I believe that an exhibition is particularly effective when attempting to inform the world of work of one's capabilities and skills. Cline (2012, p. 44) observes that exhibitions reflect the interests or concerns of society, exhibitions are reflections of societal interests and expectations, and exhibitions emotionally touch audiences and connect on a personal and human level, even a universal level. The exhibition was therefore important in telling the stakeholders what students are able to do and how Kyambogo meets its vision, mission, and core values. In this article I used the componential theory of creativity to show the relevancy of the exhibition to different stakeholders. Exhibitions during graduation ceremony generate public interest to more people than the anticipated ones (MacDonald, 2002). Many visitors came to the stall, students brought their parents and sponsors, and the world of work inquisitively interacted with students. The exhibition created an ideal space that provoked dialogue among the views and facilitated conversation about the future of the graduates. It enabled graduates to speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse (Kester, 2005); they brought their candles from under the bed. The article reveals that showcasing students' creativity and innovation triggers different reactions to different stakeholders, increases the confidence of the learner, impacts the attitudes of the parents, influences the perceptions of the world of work, and promotes the visibility of the university.

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