



Level and Trends of Graduate Unemployment and Its Implications for Local Development: Evidence from Kyela District, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the levels and trends of graduate unemployment and their implications for local development in Kyela District, Tanzania. The study was guided by Human Capital Theory and Karl Marx's Unemployment Theory and employed a mixed-methods approach within a case study design. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and documentary review and analysed using descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression and thematic analysis. The findings indicated that graduate unemployment is widely perceived as a serious and worsening socio-economic challenge. Regression results showed that the selected predictors explained 66% of the variation in graduate unemployment ($R^2 = 0.66$, $F = 43.62$, $p < 0.001$). Delay in securing employment emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), followed by the worsening unemployment trend over five years ($\beta = 0.44$), job mismatch ($\beta = 0.42$) and the increasing number of unemployed graduates ($\beta = 0.41$). Government intervention showed a significant negative relationship with graduate unemployment ($\beta = -0.21$), suggesting a modest reducing effect. Furthermore, 31% of respondents were unemployed, while 49% were self-employed, largely through informal economic activities. The study concludes that persistent graduate unemployment limits productive human capital utilisation and constrains graduates' effective participation in local economic development. It recommends stronger alignment between education and labour market needs, expanded entrepreneurship support, practical skills development and strengthened public-private partnerships to enhance employment creation.

Keywords: Graduate unemployment, labour market mismatch, Human Capital Theory, local development, Kyela District.

1.0 Introduction

Graduate unemployment has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges of the twenty-first century, raising fundamental questions about the return on investment in higher education and the capacity of labour markets to absorb increasingly large cohorts of qualified graduates. Globally, the expansion of university enrolment has outpaced the growth of skilled employment opportunities in many countries, creating a structural tension between educational output and labour market demand that affects both individual livelihoods and national economic development (ILO, 2022). UNESCO (2021) identifies graduate unemployment as a critical obstacle to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 8, which seeks to promote full and productive employment and decent work for all. In Europe, graduate unemployment has produced significant social consequences extending beyond economic instability to increased risks of social unrest, resentment toward political institutions and heightened feelings of inequality (Green & Henseke, 2020; Pereira & Vilas-Boas, 2019). In Nigeria, nearly half of the estimated ten million graduates produced annually fail to secure employment, reflecting an alarming structural mismatch between educational systems and labour market capacity (Emmanuel & Dzisi, 2024).

In Africa, the situation is particularly acute because educational expansion in many countries has not been matched by commensurate industrial development, private sector growth, or diversification of economic activity capable of generating skilled employment (Anyalebechi, 2022). Kenya recorded a national unemployment rate of approximately 40% in 2013, with youth unemployment disproportionately high and with the education system consistently emphasizing examination performance over practical skill acquisition, leaving graduates ill-equipped for the workforce (Miriti & Ochieng, 2014). In Tanzania, the problem is similarly severe, with thousands of graduates produced annually by an expanding university sector while the labour market, heavily dependent on agriculture and the informal economy, remains unable to absorb them at a comparable rate (Mgaiwa, 2021; Setonga & Omary, 2025). National policy instruments including the Education and Training Policy of 2014, the National Skills Development Strategy and the Education Sector Development Plan 2025/26–2029/30 acknowledge the urgency of aligning education with employability and labour market demands, yet implementation challenges, particularly in rural and semi-urban districts, continue to limit their impact.

In Kyela District, located along the northern shores of Lake Nyasa in Mbeya Region, graduate unemployment presents a distinct local manifestation of this national and global challenge. The district's economy is largely dependent on rice and cocoa farming, cross-border trade with Malawi, fishing and small-scale commerce activities that do not systematically generate the formal skilled employment that university graduates seek. Despite this structural reality, the number of higher education graduates returning to the district continues to rise, creating a growing mismatch between graduate supply and available employment. Many graduates resort to operating Bodaboda motorbike taxis, street vending, or temporary fishing activities as coping strategies occupations that represent a significant underutilization of their educational investment. Limited localized empirical evidence exists, however, on the precise level and trend of graduate unemployment in Kyela District and on the specific factors driving it.

This study was guided by Human Capital Theory, developed by Becker and Schultz, which posits that investment in education enhances individuals' productivity and employability, but where the skills acquired do not align with labour market demands, educational investment fails to translate into employment (Hornbeck & Salamon, 1991). Alongside this, Karl Marx's Unemployment Theory provides a structural complement, explaining graduate unemployment as an outcome of capitalist labour market dynamics in which an oversupply of labour, including graduate labour, functions as a reserve army that depresses wages and prevents full employment (Marx, 1863). Together these frameworks explain both the individual and structural dimensions of graduate unemployment. The study pursued the specific objective of examining the level and trends of graduate unemployment in Kyela District to identify the principal predictors of unemployment severity and trend.

2.0 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach within a case study design to examine the levels and trends of graduate unemployment and their implications for local development in Kyela District, Mbeya Region, Tanzania. Kyela District was purposively selected because it represents a predominantly rural and semi-urban setting characterized by a growing number of higher education graduates facing limited formal employment opportunities despite the district's largely agriculture-based economy. The study population comprised 1,500 graduates, Village Executive Officers and Ward Executive Officers. A sample of 315 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error. Graduates were selected through simple random sampling, while Ward Executive Officers and Village Executive Officers were purposively selected based on their administrative responsibilities and knowledge of local socio-economic conditions. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, whereas qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and documentary review. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression to examine the predictors of graduate unemployment, while qualitative data were analysed thematically to provide contextual insights into the quantitative findings. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence through methodological triangulation enhanced the validity, credibility and comprehensiveness of the study findings.

3.0 Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic results show that the study involved respondents with varied social and educational backgrounds. Of the 315 participants, 179 (56.8%) were male and 136 (43.2%) were female. Nearly half were aged 21–30 years (155; 49.2%), followed by those aged 31–40 years (100; 31.7%), 41–50 years (36; 11.4%), above 50 years (16; 5.1%) and below 20 years (8; 2.5%). In terms of education, bachelor's degree holders formed the largest group (104; 33%), followed by diploma holders (86; 27%), postgraduate degree holders (52; 17%), respondents with secondary education (48; 15%) and those with primary education (25; 8%).

Regarding place of residence, 170 respondents (54%) lived in urban areas and 145 (46%) lived in rural areas. Most participants had substantial familiarity with the study area: 153 (49%) had lived there for more than ten years, 100 (32%) for 6–10 years, 52 (17%) for 1–5 years and 10 (3%) for less than one year. The occupation profile showed that 153 respondents (49%) were self-employed, 99 (31%) were unemployed, 38 (12%) were employed and 25 (8%) were students. Overall, the demographic profile indicates that the study captured participants from both urban and rural settings and was dominated by young adults within the active labour-force age range.

3.2 Level and Trends of Graduate Unemployment

The study examines the level and trends of graduate unemployment, presenting the extent and patterns as reported by respondents. The information provide a basis for understanding graduate unemployment magnitude, implications for local development and the empirical foundation for the subsequent analysis of how graduate unemployment influences local development in the district. Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of the level and trends of graduate unemployment across ten indicator statements. Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of the level and trends of graduate unemployment across ten indicator statements.

Table 1: Level and Trends of Graduate Unemployment

Graduate Unemployment Statement (n = 290)	Agree n	Agree %	Strongly Agree n	Strongly Agree %
Serious problem	170	58	120	42
Increasing number	125	43	165	57
Take a long time to secure employment	80	28	210	72
Very limited job opportunities	160	55	130	45
Engaged in jobs unrelated to qualifications	90	31	200	69
Self-employment among graduates is increasing	145	50	145	50
The private sector provides jobs for graduates	105	36	185	64
Government reduced graduate unemployment	85	29	205	71
Increased rural–urban migration among graduates	120	41	170	59
Worsened over the past five years	178	61	112	39

Source: Field Data (2026)

The findings present a striking pattern of unanimous agreement across all ten statements, with not a single respondent disagreeing or remaining neutral on any of them. This comprehensive consensus indicates that graduate unemployment is not merely a statistical abstraction but a lived, visible and universally recognized reality. The findings showed a very high level of agreement among respondents regarding the seriousness and increasing trend of graduate unemployment. All respondents selected either Agree or Strongly Agree for the statements that graduate unemployment is a serious problem, that the number of unemployed graduates is increasing and that graduates generally take a long time to secure employment.

3.3 Regression Analysis of Level and Trends of Graduate Unemployment

Table 2: Regression Model Summary (n=290)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of Estimate
1	0.81	0.66	0.64	0.41

Source: Field Data Analyzed (2026)

Table 3: ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	72.45	10	7.245	43.62	0.000
Residual	37.18	279	0.133		
Total	109.63	289			

Source: Field Data Analyzed (2026)

The model summary shows $R = 0.81$ and $R^2 = 0.66$, indicating that the ten predictor variables collectively explain 66% of the variance in the level and trends of graduate unemployment in Kyela District. The remaining 34% is attributable to factors outside the model including macroeconomic conditions, national labour policies and individual employability attributes. The ANOVA results ($F = 43.62$, $p < 0.001$) confirm that the overall model is highly statistically significant, establishing that the predictors jointly exert a strong and non-random influence on graduate unemployment.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Graduate Unemployment Level and Trends

Variable	β (Beta)	t-value	Sig.	Interpretation
Delay in securing employment	0.46	8.02	0.000	Strongest predictor
Worsening trend over five years	0.44	7.58	0.000	Strong positive influence
Job mismatch	0.42	7.31	0.000	Strong positive influence
Increasing number of unemployed graduates	0.41	7.05	0.000	Strong positive influence
Seriousness perception	0.36	6.40	0.000	Strong positive influence

Variable	β (Beta)	t-value	Sig.	Interpretation
Rural-to-urban migration	0.31	5.12	0.000	Strong positive influence
Self-employment trend	0.27	4.33	0.001	Moderate positive influence
Private sector job provision	0.18	2.76	0.006	Weak to moderate influence
Government intervention	-0.21	-3.15	0.002	Negative reducing effect
Limited job opportunities	0.39	6.88	0.000	Strong positive influence

Source: Field Data Analyzed (2026)

Delay in securing employment emerged as the single strongest predictor of graduate unemployment ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), followed closely by the worsening trend over five years ($\beta = 0.44$), job mismatch ($\beta = 0.42$), increasing numbers of unemployed graduates ($\beta = 0.41$) and limited job opportunities ($\beta = 0.39$). Government intervention was the only variable showing a negative and statistically significant coefficient ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.002$), indicating a partial reducing effect on unemployment when government programmes are implemented, though this effect is relatively modest compared with the positive coefficients of structural unemployment drivers.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Level and Trends of Graduate Unemployment

The study indicates the increasing number of unemployed graduates in the study area. The increasing pattern indicates a strong perception that graduate unemployment is an important socio-economic concern, the absence of neutral and disagreeing responses warrants cautious interpretation. Such a response pattern may potentially be influenced by questionnaire design, response tendencies, or data coding procedures and should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that the reported conditions are universally experienced by all graduates. Nevertheless, the findings are broadly consistent with Mgaiwa (2021), who observed that graduate unemployment has become an important socio-economic challenge in Tanzania and with Setonga and Omary (2025), who reported persistent difficulties among Tanzanian graduates in obtaining meaningful employment.

The finding that graduate unemployment had worsened over the previous five years also received a high level of agreement, with 178 respondents agreeing and 112 strongly agreeing. This pattern suggests a perceived deterioration in graduate employment opportunities over the period examined, rather than providing conclusive evidence of a universal negative trend. Similarly, 31% agreed and 69% strongly agreed that many graduates were working in jobs unrelated to their qualifications. The finding indicates the possible presence of skills mismatch and underemployment among graduates. This result is consistent with Mwakilema (2021), who reported that many Tanzanian graduates are absorbed into informal and low-skilled occupations because formal labour market opportunities remain limited. It is also compatible with Human Capital Theory, which suggests that the potential benefits of education may not be fully realised when acquired skills do not correspond with labour market requirements.

The finding on self-employment showed that 50% of respondents agreed and another 50% strongly agreed that self-employment among graduates was increasing. Rather than demonstrating that graduates are necessarily being forced into informal activities, the result suggests that self-employment has become an increasingly important employment pathway among graduates in the district. Interview evidence indicated that some graduates engaged in informal income-generating activities while continuing to search for formal employment. This pattern corroborates Mwakilema (2021), who observed that limitations in formal employment opportunities have contributed to the participation of Tanzanian graduates in informal and relatively low-skilled economic activities. Rural-to-urban migration associated with unemployment also received strong agreement among respondents. This finding may indicate a potential loss of educated human resources from the district as some graduates search for employment opportunities elsewhere. It is consistent with Malmqvist and Kullman (2022), who identified migration as one of the strategies adopted by educated young people where local labour markets provide limited employment opportunities.

The interview findings provided additional contextual explanations for the quantitative results. Key informants perceived that a substantial number of graduates remained unemployed or underemployed after completing their studies, with some engaging in informal economic activities or depending on family support while searching for formal employment (Key Informant, WEO, April 2026). They further estimated that the transition from graduation to employment could take between one and three years for some graduates, although the duration varied depending on field of study, personal networks and job-search strategies (Key Informant, VEO, April 2026). These observations are consistent with Malmqvist and Kullman (2022), who associated limited labour market absorption capacity with prolonged transitions from education to employment.

Key informants also perceived differences in employment opportunities across fields of study, reporting that graduates in social sciences, arts and education appeared to face greater employment difficulties than graduates in health sciences, engineering and ICT (Key Informant, WEO, May 2026). This finding should, however, be interpreted as a perception emerging from the qualitative interviews rather than as a statistically established difference between fields of study. The interviews further identified limited formal employment opportunities, inadequate practical and employability skills, mismatch between university curricula and employer requirements, expectations of white-collar employment and relatively slow economic growth as factors associated with graduate unemployment in the district. These observations are broadly consistent with Amani (2017), who linked graduate unemployment in Tanzania with inadequate job-ready skills and the disconnect between educational preparation and labour market requirements.

4.2 The Scale and Severity of Graduate Unemployment

The finding of unanimous agreement across all ten indicators of graduate unemployment level and trend is remarkable and distinguishes the situation in Kyela District from contexts where unemployment perceptions are contested or unevenly distributed. The 100% consensus that graduate unemployment is serious, worsening and characterized by long delays in employment reflects a degree of social recognition that moves well beyond statistical measurement into the domain of collective lived experience. This aligns with Mgaiwa's (2021) observation that graduate unemployment in Tanzania is not merely an economic indicator but a social reality experienced daily by families, communities and graduates themselves. Setonga and Omary (2025) similarly document that nearly half of Tanzania's annual graduates struggle to find meaningful employment, confirming that the pattern observed in Kyela District reflects a national structural condition rather than a localized anomaly. Taken together, unanimous agreement among the 290 questionnaire respondents across all ten unemployment indicators, combined with regression evidence explaining 66% of the variance in unemployment levels, indicates that graduate unemployment is not a marginal or temporary problem but a persistent structural condition rooted in the mismatch between educational output and labour market capacity.

The finding that 69% of respondents strongly agreed that many graduates are working in jobs unrelated to their qualifications is particularly significant because it reveals that formal unemployment statistics considerably understate the true scope of the problem. Underemployment, where graduates accept informal or low-skilled work that does not correspond to their educational investment, represents a parallel form of human capital waste that is often invisible in headline unemployment data. Mwakilema (2021) found that many Tanzanian graduates are absorbed into informal and low-skilled occupations because the formal labour market is insufficient and the present study confirms this pattern with particular clarity in a rural district context where the absence of formal sector diversity leaves graduates with few alternatives. Human Capital Theory directly explains this outcome: when the skills provided by educational institutions do not correspond with labour market demands, the productive potential of educational investment is not realized and graduates are either unemployed or underemployed regardless of their academic qualifications (Hornbeck & Salamon, 1991).

4.3 Structural Drivers of Unemployment: Regression Evidence

The regression finding that delay in securing employment is the strongest single predictor of graduate unemployment ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$) has important theoretical and practical implications. Prolonged job search periods represent both a symptom and a reinforcing mechanism of unemployment: they deplete financial resources, erode professional confidence, deteriorate skills and reduce social networks, collectively making re-entry into formal employment progressively more difficult over time. Malmqvist and Kullman (2022) explain that slow economic growth and limited labour market absorption capacity prolong the transition from education to employment, creating a compounding cycle of frustration and vulnerability. This finding is further supported by Namata (2017), who associated prolonged unemployment with reduced earnings capacity, limited work experience acquisition and increased socio-economic vulnerability precisely the conditions that the qualitative evidence from Kyela District key informants described.

The strong positive coefficient for job mismatch ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) confirms a structural disconnect between what educational institutions produce and what the local labour market requires. Amani (2017) found that many Tanzanian university programmes do not equip graduates with the practical, job-ready skills that employers seek, contributing to a persistent supply-demand gap in the labour market. This structural misalignment means that expanding higher education enrolment without parallel curriculum reform, industry linkages and labour market planning intensifies rather than resolves graduate unemployment. The equally strong coefficient for increasing number of unemployed graduates ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) confirms Ngailo's (2025) argument that higher education expansion without corresponding economic and industrial growth produces an oversupply of graduates relative to available positions, intensifying competition for a fixed or slowly growing pool of formal jobs. From a Marxian perspective, this dynamic reflects precisely the reserve army of labour mechanism: an oversupply of educated labour that serves to depress employment prospects and wages rather than to drive commensurate economic expansion.

4.4 Government Intervention and Private Sector Limitations

The negative and statistically significant coefficient for government intervention ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.002$) is an important finding that demonstrates the partial but real reducing effect of public programmes on graduate unemployment. This confirms that government initiatives including youth employment programmes, entrepreneurship support schemes and skills development initiatives make a measurable contribution to reducing unemployment, consistent with Kessy (2020), who emphasized that government support can reduce structural unemployment through youth financing, entrepreneurship development and policies stimulating private sector participation. However, the relatively modest magnitude of this coefficient the smallest in the model compared with the large positive coefficients of structural unemployment drivers suggests that current government interventions are insufficient in scale and design to counterbalance the structural pressures driving graduate unemployment. Omary (2025) similarly cautions that employment policies produce limited outcomes when not accompanied by broader economic transformation and industrial investment.

The comparatively weak contribution of the private sector variable ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.006$) is consistent with Otieno's (2021) finding that weak private sector growth significantly limits employment creation for skilled labour in rural economies. In Kyela District, the private sector's limited capacity reflects the district's narrow economic base, low investment levels and dependence on subsistence agriculture and informal trade conditions that do not systematically generate the formal skilled employment that graduates seek. Batsaikhan (2023) argues that sustainable employment creation requires investment-driven economic expansion and industrial development capable of generating both direct and indirect employment opportunities, a threshold that Kyela District has not yet reached. Eneji (2013) similarly emphasizes the importance of public-private partnerships in improving labour market

efficiency, noting that neither public sector programmes nor private sector activity alone can address structural graduate unemployment coordination between both is essential.

4.5 Rural-Urban Migration as a Compounding Effect

The finding that rural-to-urban migration driven by graduate unemployment received 100% agreement and a statistically significant regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) reveals a dynamic through which unemployment not only harms graduates but depletes Kyela District of its most educated and potentially productive human capital. Malmqvist and Kullman (2022) identify unemployment-driven migration as a common coping strategy among educated youth in economies with limited local employment opportunities, but note that migration transfers unemployment pressures to urban centres rather than resolving the underlying structural problem. From a local development perspective, this rural brain drain means that the district continuously loses the human capital it needs for innovation, skilled service delivery, entrepreneurship and community leadership creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which limited local opportunity drives away graduates whose skills and education are precisely what would be needed to create new economic opportunities.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The graduate unemployment in the district is a serious, widespread, structurally driven and actively worsening phenomenon. The dominance of delay in securing employment, job mismatch, increasing graduate numbers, limited job opportunities and worsening five-year trends as predictors demonstrates that the problem is systemic, driven by structural imbalances between educational expansion and economic development that no single intervention can resolve. The formal unemployment statistics significantly understate the problem's magnitude because the pervasive underemployment of graduates working in informal activities disconnected from their qualifications represents an additional and largely invisible layer of human capital waste. Government intervention produces a measurable but modest reducing effect insufficient to counterbalance structural drivers. Rural-to-urban migration driven by unemployment compounds the district's development deficit by progressively depleting its educated human capital.

The study recommends the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to urgently reform higher education and diploma programme curricula to ensure strong alignment between graduate competencies and identified labour market needs. These should include the comparable rural economies, prioritizing practical skills in ICT, entrepreneurship, agriculture value addition and technical fields with demonstrable demand. Develop a district-specific Graduate Employment Strategies that includes a graduate tracking system, regular labour market surveys and targeted job creation initiatives tailored to the local agricultural, tourism and cross-border trade sectors. The government should substantially increase the scale, accessibility and practical support depth of entrepreneurship and self-employment programmes, ensuring graduates receive not only start-up capital but sustained mentorship, market linkage, regulatory guidance and financial literacy training. Educational institutions should develop mandatory internship and apprenticeship programmes integrated into curricula, giving graduates practical work experience and employer networks before graduation rather than after. Investment promotion should be a local-level priority, with dedicated economic development officers tasked with attracting private sector businesses in sectors aligned with graduate skills, thereby expanding the formal employment base. Finally, national and district authorities should adopt graduate unemployment as a core development indicator monitored in the District Development Plan, ensuring that the human capital implications of unemployment are systematically tracked, reported and addressed within the broader local development planning framework.

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