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# Graduate Work-Readiness in Mauritius: A multi-stakeholder approach

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## Abstract

Characterised by strong human capital dependency, Small Island Development States (SIDS) such as Mauritius depend largely on work-ready graduates to boost their economy. Yet, Graduate Work Readiness (GWR) and graduate unemployment feature prominently on the Mauritian government agenda. This paper investigates the previously unexplored issue of GWR in Mauritius through four key stakeholder lenses – those of the government, employers, universities, and undergraduates – before suggesting collaborative strategies to enhance graduate employability. The paper findings build on government and parastatal body interviews and qualitative survey responses from the Top 100 companies, higher education institution directors and final year undergraduates in Mauritius. Study results and recommendations are derived from a thematic content analysis of interview transcripts and qualitative survey data. Results indicate that there is a strong need to (1) strengthen stakeholder links, (2) enforce industry-centric university curricula, (4) improve graduate work experience, (4) hone graduate soft skills, and (5) their attitude to work. A Graduate Work Readiness Integrated Stakeholder Framework (GWRISF) supported by a National Work Integrated Learning Committee (NWILC) is then recommended. It is envisaged that proposed strategies will not only assist Mauritian stakeholders in better joining forces for GWR improvement but can also be useful to other comparable SIDS.

**Keywords:** graduate work-readiness, employability, graduate capital, Work Integrated Learning

## Introduction

There lies a stark paradox in the organisational challenge to recruit the right candidate when many university graduates remain unemployed. Globally, in countries ranging from the United States and the United Kingdom to Asia Pacific nations, the quality of graduates is questioned by prospective employers (Verma et al., 2018). In most cases, the problem appears to stem from the massive 'production' of graduates with little focus on employer skills requirements (Winterton & Turner, 2019). Firms rely strongly on the capabilities of graduates to remain globally competitive, and yet face difficulty hiring them due to serious shortcomings in their employability skills (McArthur,

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Kubacki, Pang, & Alcaraz, 2017). Changes in the labour market also raise concerns about the skills and mindset of graduates who are now increasingly expected to self-manage dynamic careers, and be sufficiently agile to transfer their employability skills across areas and industries (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Higher education students therefore need to be pro-active in their career focus and build their employability profile even before they graduate. More than ever, universities, government and companies among other stakeholders are thus required to collaborate to better guide students in enhancing their graduate employability (Belwal, Priyadarshi, & Al Fazari, 2017).

The situation is no different for the Small Island Development State (SIDS) of Mauritius. Constrained by its geographical isolation, dearth of natural resources and extreme vulnerability to climatic changes, the island is largely dependent on its people for its economic growth. Education is key, and young Mauritians wishing to pursue tertiary level studies are presented with a variety of options originating from the island's 10 publicly funded institutions and 45 private providers as well as overseas study (TEC, 2019). In 2018, tertiary education enrolment amounted to 47 398 (TEC, 2019) and, with the government policy of free tertiary education in publicly funded institutions announced in 2019 (Budget Speech 2019-2020, 2019), this number is expected to increase in the coming years. Nonetheless, Graduate Work Readiness (GWR) remains a problem. In the third quarter of 2019, 28% of the 39 300 unemployed Mauritians were graduates (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). From 49$^{th}$ in 2018 to 52$^{nd}$ in 2019, the island lost three places in the global competitiveness rank, as its inadequate human capital prominently features in the list of Mauritian business challenges (Shwab, 2019). Employers continue to face considerable difficulty in finding career-ready candidates locally (Verde Frontier, 2016), and frequently turn to other countries to find employees with the desired profile. For example, Indian professionals are often found working in the Mauritian Information Technology (IT) sector due to the lack of IT skills (such as business analytics and artificial intelligence) locally (Human Resource Development Council (HRDC), 2017). This not only adds to labour costs, but also greatly influences the employment opportunities of Mauritian graduates (Kisto, 2015). Both the quality and relevance of higher education curricula on the island are thus questioned (World Bank, 2015). The island's dominant Asian culture does not help. With more than 60% of its population having roots in Asia, Mauritians have inherited deeply ingrained Asian cultural traits which includes an uncompromising strive for academic excellence, often to the detriment of a well-rounded educational experience (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2015).

This research therefore aimed to explore the issue of GWR in Mauritius through four stakeholder lenses - government, employers, universities, and students - before proposing solutions to grow graduate capital in Mauritius. The paper sought to shed light on existing employability strategies from various Mauritian stakeholder perspectives and suggests practical recommendations for key stakeholders to consolidate forces in the realisation of a common goal – that of building Mauritian graduate capital to enhance national productivity.

## Graduate work-readiness and graduate capital

For university students preparing to join the labour force, GWR merges discipline expertise with a host of transferable skills termed as employability skills, which resonate with productivity at work. Viewed from a resource-based angle, Finch et al. (2016, p. 64) refer to these employability skills as a set of *valuable, rare, hard to imitate and to substitute* resources with employer-preferred ones being soft skills, problem-solving, and pre-graduate work experience. Chhinzer and Russo (2018) further highlight professional maturity (high quality of work, initiative and interest), continuous development, professional attitudes and willingness to work as important graduate recruitment considerations. Graduate qualifications are no longer enough, as employers look for work experience and prioritise generic and personality traits like communication skills, time management

and assiduousness when recruiting (McArthur et al., 2017). Graduate capital acquisition becomes even more important with the digital disruption arising from the fourth industrial revolution. As traditional careers and upward career movements give way to more protean careers, graduates are increasingly expected to take ownership of their career progression in line with their capabilities and aspirations (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Such emphasis on employability skills has resulted in a struggle to hire graduates, thus further catalysing the importance of GWR.

Realising their role in addressing this issue, many universities offer two main strategies believed to foster GWR outcomes: embedding employability skills within curricula in the form of graduate outcomes; and providing students with real-life work opportunities such as work placements and other work integrated learning (WIL) endeavours (Clarke, 2017). Nonetheless, GWR skills in themselves do not necessarily carry the promise of a job. Beyond the development of discipline and transferrable skills, graduates should be encouraged to understand their career possibilities, gain experience in these areas, and, through self-efficacy and self-awareness, work towards the achievement of their job aspirations (Bennett, 2016). Jackson (2016) referred to this wider view of GWR as pre-professional identity (PPI) which she explains as *an understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession* (p.926).

Tomlinson (2017, p. 340) extended this concept further to define GWR as the acquisition of graduate capital - a pool of five *dynamic and interactive forms of capital*. He suggested that honing **human capital** through employability skills acquired from authentic learning experiences works in pair with the development of meaningful connections with potential employers to better understand their expectations and identify job possibilities. Developing a deeper relationship with industry members will thus enable students to grow their **social capital** and this can be achieved via platforms such as professional group memberships, career fairs, social media (such as LinkedIn), industry placements and other WIL activities (Clarke, 2017). By engaging closely with companies, students also get to build their **cultural capital**, as they become more familiar with organisational values, accepted behaviours (Tomlinson, 2017) and professional attitudes (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). This, in turn, helps them develop and favourably articulate their **identity capital** through enhanced self-awareness and the ability to align their strengths with the expectations of their coveted employers (Holmes, 2013). Students also need to develop and nurture **psychological capital** through self-efficacy or adaptability to dynamic labour market conditions to nurture resilient behaviour when faced with new challenges (Donald, Baruch, & Ashleigh, 2017).

## Stakeholder initiatives in Mauritius

Building graduate capital on their own or with support from their universities alone could prove to be hard work for most higher education students. It is imperative that other stakeholders, including government and future employers, collaboratively support and complement the work-readiness initiatives of universities and students for the development of a skilled and sustainable graduate workforce. Ideally, governments should take ownership of the design, funding, regulation and evaluation of strategies and policies for the development of an appropriately skilled workforce; educational institutions should implement the strategies for employable graduates; and employers should attract and retain them (Cameron et al., 2015). Winterton and Turner (2019, p. 538) refer to this synergistic stakeholder relationship as the 'Triple Helix', which binds governments, universities and employers in the creation of graduate capital, and propose that students join the 'helix' as they are increasingly expected to take ownership of their career.

To build or reinforce such a 'Triple Helix' relationship, Mauritian GWR stakeholders have devised and implemented several strategies (indicated in Figure 1). The Mauritian government set the tone through several joint government-employer-university schemes including temporary government-

paid jobs at SMEs, government-subsidised internships, and apprenticeship programmes, as well as graduate training programmes. Besides government-led initiatives, many Mauritian employers deliver job-readiness training initiatives such as graduate training and participate in industry skill-based competitions where they join forces with universities. In addition, Mauritian universities often strive to blend graduate discipline expertise with soft skills and on-the-job learning. Such authentic experiences provide students and graduates with opportunities to build their human and psychological capital through real life, industry exposure, understand acceptable organisational behaviours (cultural capital), network with professionals (social capital), and build a portfolio to support their career interest (identity capital). Reflective reports also aim at enhancing student self-awareness and pre-professional identity building.

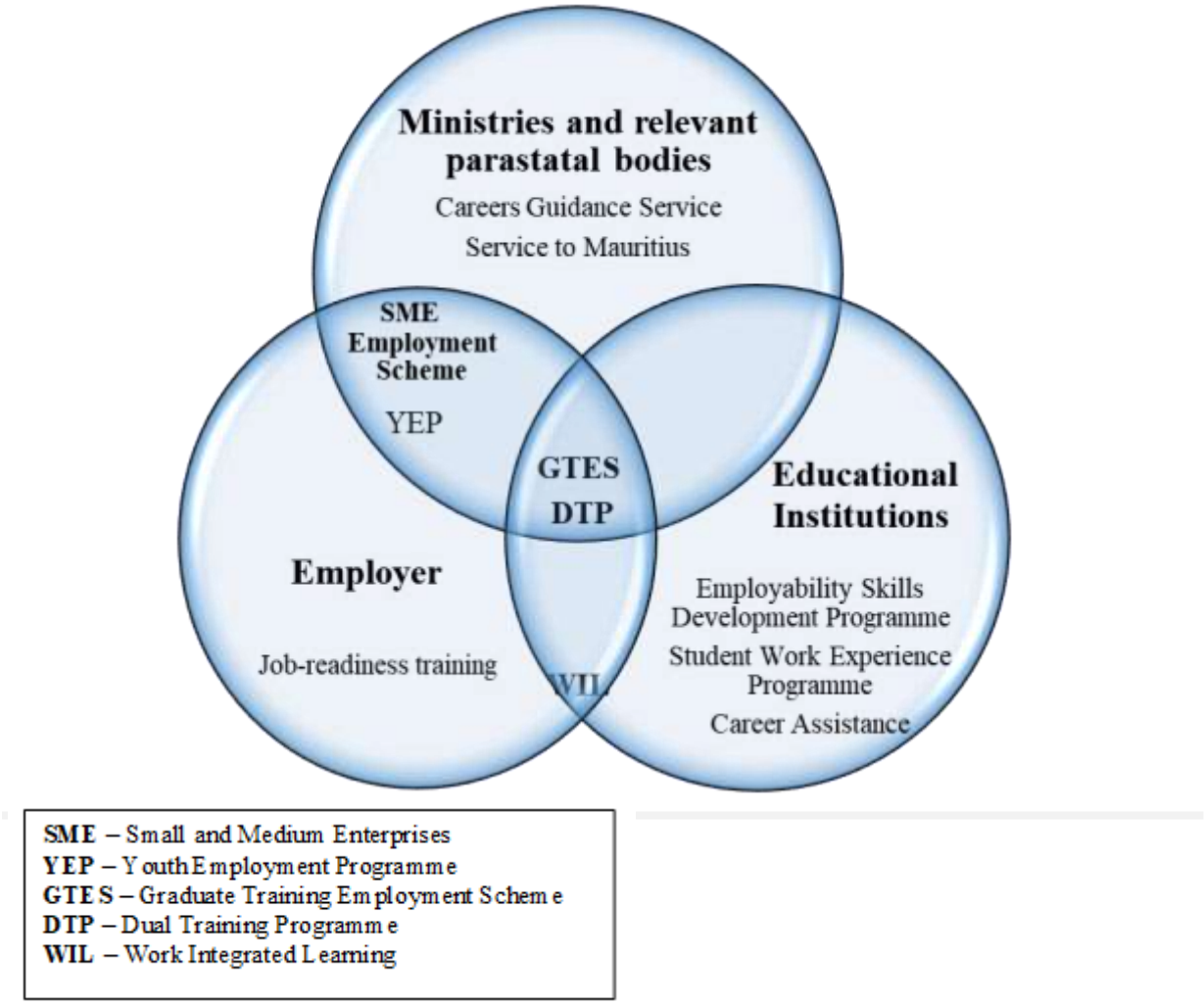


***Figure 1: Summary of Stakeholder Programmes for GWR Improvement in Mauritius, source: Authors.***

Despite the above-mentioned plethora of stakeholder initiatives for building work-readiness, graduate employability remains a perennial issue in Mauritius. Graduate unemployment ranks high on the government agenda (Budget speech 2018-2019, 2018), as employers continue to report difficulty in recruiting graduates with real-life skills (Verde Frontier, 2016). Although graduate work-readiness has been studied in different parts of the world, GWR literature remains scarce for Mauritius. As underlined by Winterton and Turner (2019), a one-size fits all global solution for GWR cannot exist due to varying country contexts. Given the specificities of Mauritius and its graduate

unemployment dilemma, an exploration of GWR in Mauritius is warranted. This research therefore sets out to capture the thoughts and perceptions of stakeholders on the issues surrounding GWR in Mauritius, before proposing recommendations to improve its graduate capital development. It is envisaged that, along with shedding more light on the insufficiently explored Mauritian GWR landscape, the suggested recommendations will encourage greater collaboration among universities, government and employers to facilitate the pro-active and continued career focus of higher education students. Universities could thus better structure their career learning strategies, employers could provide enhanced support in grooming work-ready graduates, and the government could further improve their GWR guidance.

The aims of this study were to examine what government, universities, employers, and students perceive are the issues surrounding GWR in Mauritius and to determine how stakeholders work better together to improve GWR in Mauritius.

## Methods

The study used an exploratory qualitative approach to source data from key stakeholders, namely government, employers, educational institution directors, and undergraduate students. The rationale behind this approach was to use the most appropriate tools for gathering data from diverse stakeholders, each with their own specificities.

First, representatives from relevant ministries and parastatal bodies were interviewed. Given that there were only three ministries and three parastatal bodies (see Table 1) concerned with addressing work-readiness development on the island, an interview was considered the best method to obtain rich insights into GWR challenges in Mauritius. As shown in Table 1, all six institutions concerned were willing to participate in the study, and both group and one-to-one interviews were conducted. Interviewees were purposively-selected high-level office bearers from each ministry and parastatal body, as they were deemed well-suited to provide an accurate picture of GWR in Mauritius. Their request for anonymity, however, prevented more details about them from being provided. Akin to Finch et al's (2016) research methodology, interviews were semi-structured and based on an open-ended interview protocol which favoured objectivity and spontaneous discussions for a deeper insight into the issue. Questions asked were therefore not directly based on the different forms of graduate capital identified, but instead encouraged a wider conversation on the extent and nature of GWR in Mauritius and employability challenges faced by stakeholders. Examples of questions include:

- *What is the extent and nature of work-readiness challenges facing employers, governments, and HE institutions in Mauritius?*
- *What are the causes of these challenges?*
- *Which stakeholders and institutions (governments, educational systems, employers) are most associated with these causes, and how are they responsible?*
- *What are the consequences of these work-readiness challenges?*

Following ethical clearance from the authors' institution and a pre-test of interview questions, interviews were conducted over a period of six months. Each interview lasted for an average of one hour and was transcribed immediately afterwards. For further objectivity, transcriptions were documented separately by two researchers before identifying and consolidating common themes.

*Table 1: Government and Parastatal Body Interviewees*

| Organisation | Number of interviewees |
|---|---|
| **Ministry of Labour, Human Resource Development and Training** | 2 |
| **Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology** | 2 |
| **Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development** | 4 |
| **Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)** | 2 |
| **Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA)** | 1 |
| **The Human Resource Development Council (HRDC)** | 1 |

Qualitative surveys then followed to gather the GWR perceptions of employers, educational institution administrators, and undergraduate students. Questionnaires were the preferred data collection method in these cases due to the number of people in the targeted population and the resource constraints faced by the researchers. The questionnaire used was comprised of open-ended questions, and like the interview questions, revolved around the nature and challenges of graduate employability.

Once designed, the questionnaire's ethics were approved, and a pilot test carried out prior to running the survey. The surveys were administered in two different ways. An electronic version of the questionnaire together with an information sheet and consent form were first emailed to human resource managers from all the Top 100 companies in Mauritius as well as directors from 11 public and private tertiary education institutions with over one thousand students (company and institution names could not be cited due to their request for anonymity). This mode was convenient for the respondents and aligned with the resource constraints of the researchers. Where required, follow up phone calls were made over a period of two months to boost questionnaire completion. The final response rate of 37 (37%) employers (details provided in Table 2) and six (55%) institutional directors aligned with acceptable figures for managers mentioned in literature; for example, Cycyota and Harrison (2006) considered 32% adequate, while Baruch and Holtom (2008) viewed 35% to 40% as being sufficient.

*Table 2: Employer Respondents*

| Industry | Number of companies |
|---|---|
| **Retail Trade** | 5 |
| **Accommodation & Food Services** | 2 |
| **Professional, Scientific & Technical Services** | 2 |
| **Financial & Insurance Services** | 4 |
| **Transport, Postal & Warehousing** | 1 |
| **Manufacturing** | 8 |
| **Information Media and Telecommunications** | 2 |
| **Other** | 13 |
| **TOTAL** | **37** |

For students, a hard copy of the questionnaire, the information sheet, and consent form were distributed in class to optimise the response rate and time. The student population comprised of undergraduates from three, purposively-selected large public and private higher education institutions in Mauritius. These institutions were deemed appropriate for the study as they not only consented to conducting the student surveys, but they also have student populations exceeding 2000 along with a strong drive for student employability. Given their request for anonymity, the institution names could not be mentioned. Questionnaires were distributed to final year students, as many of them would soon join the labour market and would have experienced internships and other WIL initiatives where applicable. Since there was no publicly available data on the number of final year enrolments, it was assumed that the total number of third year students in 2018 could not exceed the number of new enrolments in 2015. From the Tertiary Education Commission report (TEC, 2018), this figure was 11,979 and the sample size calculated to be 265 (margin error: 5%; confidence level: 90%). The 254 responses received, following data cleaning, were thus deemed adequate for further analysis.

## Analysis and results

To obtain the study results, a conventional thematic content analysis method was used where codes were identified directly from the transcribed interview text and questionnaire answers. Transcripts and compiled questionnaire responses were read multiple times, each time highlighting findings and annotating with codes. Similar codes were then grouped under four emerging themes related to the aims of the study. These are summarised in Table 3 and described with supporting quotes in the sub-sections which follow.

***Table 3: Codes and Themes Resulting from Content Analysis***

| Codes | Overarching theme |
|---|---|
| Stakeholder collaboration | Stakeholder linkages |
| Stakeholders working in isolation | |
| Need to consolidate stakeholder links | |
| Lack of awareness about stakeholder initiatives | |
| Poor response for stakeholder initiatives | |
| Difficulty in capturing stakeholder-related data | |
| Strong academic focus of university programmes | University curricula |
| Insufficient student preparation for workplace | |
| Academics insufficiently exposed to the workplace | |
| Industry insufficiently interacts with students | |
| Mismatch between university curricula and industry requirements | |
| Traditional teaching does not encourage GWR skills development | |
| Graduates lack work experience | Work experience and adaptability |
| Internships insufficiently structured by university and industry | |
| Internships insufficiently mentored by industry | |

| | |
|---|---|
| On-the-job learning opportunities insufficiently seized by students | |
| Long and hard graduate work adaption periods | |
| Unreasonable graduate work expectations | Graduate attitude |
| Graduates lack agility | |
| Need for positive work attitude | |

## Stakeholder linkages

One of the main findings, which resulted from stakeholder interviews, was their agreement on the need to improve collaboration in addressing the GWR problem. The following comment from a high-level government official is an example of responses received:

> *There is a strong sense of wanting to contribute to addressing the issue. Collectively, all stakeholders understand that there is a challenge and that they have to work together to come up with better solutions.*

Yet, irrespective of this general understanding, it seems that in practice, the various stakeholders often work in silos.

> *We can do much better in terms of building linkages between, for example, universities and enterprises. There is a big problem of mismatch between what enterprises need and what universities in general are providing for GWR.*

Other respondents emphasized the need to reinforce the linkage between providers of GWR initiatives and students. Much was said about the poor response received from students to the rich panoply of GWR opportunities offered by the Mauritian government. As indicated by the following comments from industry and students respectively, reasons voiced for this situation were two-fold: poor communication about what is on offer and lack of awareness about the need to be proactive among students:

> *People seem to be either unaware or else un-receptive. There is a communication problem somewhere, so ways must be found to reach people with the right kind of information.*

> *Industry and students should be more involved and look for the different programmes that are available instead of waiting for the information to come to them.*

> *Students are not sufficiently aware of existing employability programmes.*

Employability-related data capture, sharing and access for improved monitoring and control of GWR were also described as being issues. While some Mauritian governmental regulatory bodies strive to collect data for a better understanding of the current and future requirements of industry, response rates remain low and organisational human resource support considered insufficient.

> *Employer employability surveys are the hardest because of the low response rate. On one hand, industry seeks readily employable people, but on the other, they do not provide sufficient input.*

> *Enterprises do not always know what skills they require in the near future and the government is unable to make accurate forecasts.*

As a result, career counselling, whether by the government or at educational institutions, is not as effective and is an impediment to graduates' understanding of the skill requirements of the labour market. A Human Resource (HR) Director offered the following recommendation:

> *We need to review our career counselling in Mauritius in terms of what should be done at primary, secondary, and tertiary level. We need to also train counsellors and teachers.*

## University curricula

The second GWR issue identified by the four stakeholders referred to the structure and delivery of the undergraduate curriculum. Respondents were critical of the current curricula used, describing them as too academic, and insufficiently focused on the preparation of graduates for the workplace. This is reflected in the following comments from two government representatives.

> *University curriculum is very theoretical and the delivery approach so academic that when students graduate, they do not often have the skills that employers want.*

> *The feedback from industry has never been that the graduate's academic knowledge is poor, it is more to do with the graduates' difficulty in adapting to the workplace.*

As mentioned by a university respondent cited below, there is a need for academics to be more exposed to the workplace, and for industry professionals to occasionally share their knowledge with students for them to experience more current and industry-specific learning.

> *Use of industry guest lecturers or even staff exchange is lacking; for example an academic can go and work in a firm for six months and someone from industry can lecture for some time or even work on a joint research project with students and lecturers.*

Employers further supported the need for more industry-centric curricula for graduates to better align with the requirements of the workplace and for them to be productive as early as possible.

> *It is felt that education programs focus too much on academia while limiting the student from becoming a ready professional for the world of work. Thus, the employer, having, at times no choice than to select from what is available on the local market, needs to accompany the fresher for longer periods of time to grasp and get familiarised with work requirements.*

Similarly, for students, the mismatch between what universities teach them and industry expectations remains a strong cause for concern as their hard work for good grades does not seem to always be useful to industry:

> *Theory learnt at university is very different from real life situations in the business world. We study to get good grades but are not taught to put this knowledge into practice.*

Ineffective learning and teaching methods have also been identified as a major obstacle to GWR. Many educational institutions are criticised for failing to implement a student-centred approach and putting little emphasis on innovative pedagogies to prepare students for the world of work. This opinion, voiced by a representative of one of the regulatory bodies, clearly shows the importance of using contemporary teaching strategies to develop GWR capabilities.

> *In many institutions, there is only one way of teaching. Students come to class and take notes while the lecturer talks. There is no case study, group work, or other delivery methods for the development of necessary skills such as communication.*

## Work experience and adaptability

Graduates' general lack of on-the-job experience was unanimously highlighted by all stakeholder respondents. While it is acknowledged that universities and companies are collaborating to provide students and young graduates with work placement opportunities, stakeholder representatives interviewed believe that universities, employers and students need to invest more effort in preparing for and structuring the internship/ industry project experience. As indicated by the following comment from a government official, universities do not always structure their internship programmes. Student interns are sometimes left unsupervised and unsure of how to best derive value from the work experience.

> *The aspect of work placement is very crucial, and it should be very structured, but some universities have the tendency of leaving student interns on their own.*

While employers also have a critical role to play in supporting interns, this is not always the case as companies often lack the resources required to work on an internship programme and mentor students closely. This is apparent from the two employer comments below:

> *The competitive nature of business makes it difficult for industry to plan long-term and invest in its future labour force.*

> *On GWR programmes, there is a need for a dedicated company resource to coordinate all the activities and issues arising throughout the programme. This is not always feasible.*

> *There are times when managers are too busy to accompany the trainees thus leaving them to learn from subordinates or on their own. Had managers set programs and targets for the graduates, the experience would have been more structured and helpful to the incumbents but with work pressure, this is not always possible.*

In addition, despite realising the importance of work experience for improved GWR, students do not always seize the on-the-job learning opportunities offered. As mentioned by two university representatives:

> *Students do not always understand that a job demands personal work to meet its needs and requirements before applying. Very often, they claim that they will learn on the job and do not seem to understand that industry wants qualified people and is not necessarily ready to train.*

> *Students often ignore opportunities to learn job skills claiming the following: 'It does not count for my exam and anyway I'll get my degree without the work experience'.*

As a result, graduates join the workplace with little understanding of organisational cultures, values, and expectations. This could explain why employers reported long and sometimes difficult graduate work adaptation periods as being a major issue:

> *From an employer perspective, the pool of candidates is restricted. When these candidates are employed, they are often completely lost and have difficulties to adapt to the workplace. They are theory- oriented and experience difficulties in relating to the market realities.*

Students also raised the issue of long work adaptation times due to their insufficient exposure to the workplace and their lack of preparation for a smooth transition into the new work environment. As mentioned by a student: *We fear the unknown.* Students also expect their employers to understand this and induct them gradually to the organisational culture and job requirements. Such concern is raised in the two student comments below:

*Employers believe that graduates are 'finished products' and are expected to know everything in detail. Instead, they should invest in the training and development of new recruits.*

*The competitive industry landscape makes employers impatient and there are no induction/introductory sessions.*

## Graduate attitude

Another recurrent theme emerging from this study is the graduates' attitude. Graduates were often viewed as insufficiently motivated to learn on the job and of having unreasonable expectations. The following comment from a government official encapsulates this recurrent complaint:

*Graduates often have an attitude problem. They often display fixed, very narrow, and self-centred mind-sets.*

As cited below, many employers surveyed also support this perception, as graduate attitude problems appear repeatedly in their responses. For many of them, graduates seem to want too much, too quickly and without putting in too much effort. Unfortunately, a degree is often falsely associated with the guarantee of a highly paid job.

*Graduates are often unwilling to work odd or long hours, are impatient to climb the corporate ladder and not always receptive to learning from seniors.*
*Graduates have high level of expectations (e.g. salary, work conditions and hours of work) which sometimes do not measure with their lack of experience.*

*Graduates often expect managerial positions before even learning the basics.*

*There is a perception that a degree automatically results in high level jobs and high salary.*

Responses from institution directors also highlighted the problem further by not only mentioning the sometimes-unreasonable graduate expectations, but also the fact that graduates are not always flexible enough to adapt to changing workplace requirements.

*Expectations of graduates are too high in terms of salaries and working conditions as compared to what the market is prepared to offer them.*

*Graduates do not always seem to realise that the major changes taking place in the business world are so fast that they are the ones who need to adapt to these changes if they want to maintain their position in the work place.*

In contrast, many students emphasised the need for a positive work attitude as being an important employability skill. As stated by a student*:*

*We need to have a good attitude towards work and be eager to learn. No work is too 'small'.*

Nonetheless, when asked about the challenges associated with workplace productivity, some students expressed concerns about working hours, which did not reflect too well on their attitude:

*At university, we get a lot of 'free' time. It takes time to adapt to long hours required at work.*

*We are not used to working constantly from 8:30 to 17:00*

*Working too much can lead to extreme fatigue.*

Based on the four clusters of challenges, it was deduced that stakeholders can do more to collaboratively boost graduate capital on the island. University curricula do not always align with industry expectations, and there is a need to focus more on employability skills to develop graduate human capital. Universities, industry, and government should work more closely together to provide students with ample opportunities to build their human capital and encourage them to envisage and work towards a career path (identity capital). Findings indicated that the world of work often remains a mystery to students leading to longer adaptation times in the work environment. While, on one hand, graduates often step into unknown territory when they join the workplace, on the other hand, employers expect freshly employed graduates to be productive right from day one. This issue coupled with the graduate attitude problem experienced by several employers indicate the need for higher education students to develop a deeper understanding of accepted organisational behaviours through improved social and cultural capital, as well as stronger resilience and adaptability (psychological capital). Industries, universities, and governments should therefore team up to identify and implement valuable actions for graduate capital-building. The next section proposes recommendations to better cement stakeholder links for improved GWR.

## Recommendations

To address the GWR challenges identified, this study proposes the implementation of a Graduate Work Readiness Integrated Stakeholder Framework (GWRISF) supported by a National Work Integrated Learning Committee. As shown in Figure 2, the GWRISF has graduate capital building at its heart and consists of three main legs linking stakeholder pairs and suggesting actions for stronger partnership, improved university curricula and more valuable work experiences, as well as positive graduate attitudes. Measures to reinforce each stakeholder relationship pair are discussed in more details following Figure 2.

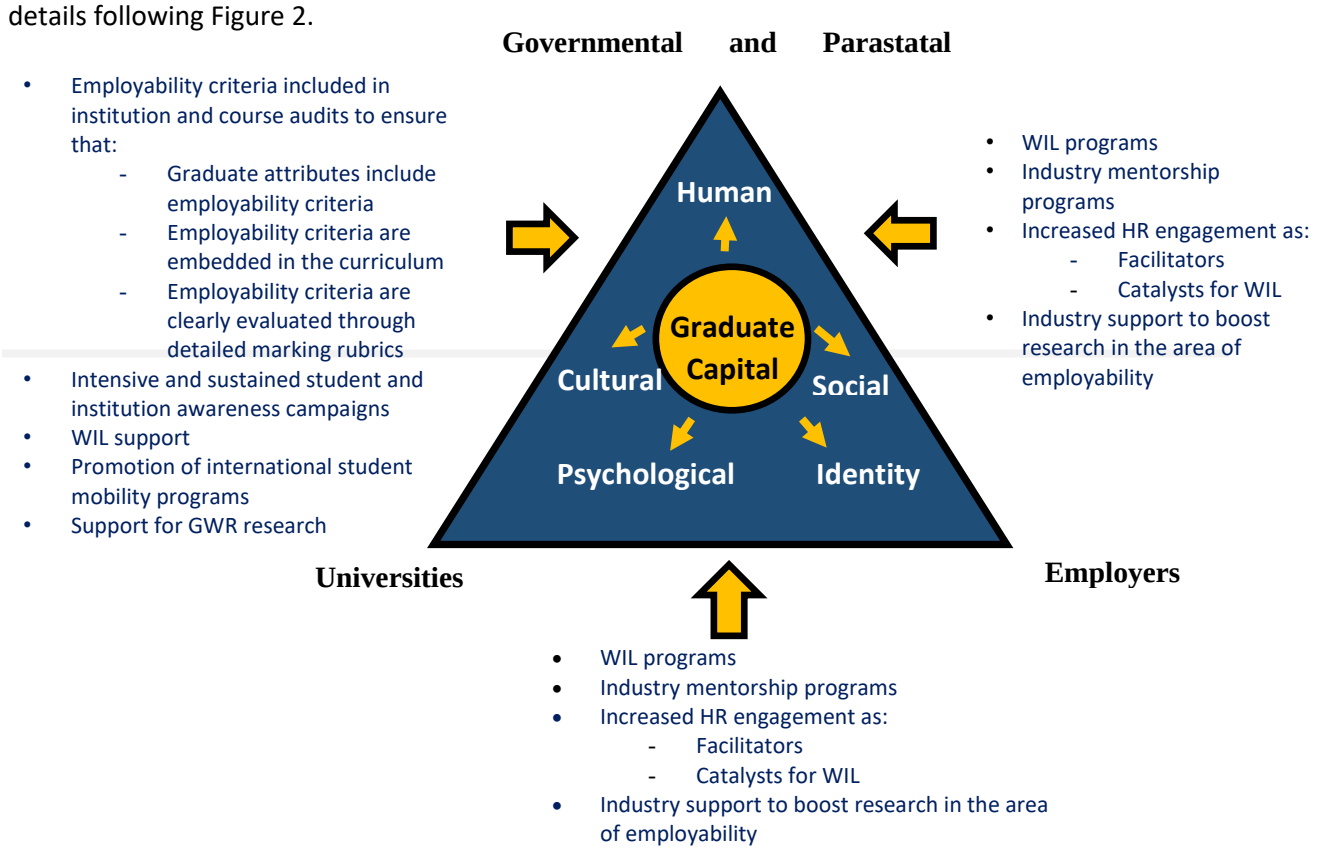


***Figure 2: The GWR Integrated Stakeholder Framework***

## Relationship between universities and government/parastatal bodies

The first action suggested to enforce government/parastatal bodies and university collaboration is the co-development of a set of graduate attributes to be embedded within the curriculum of each university course. These attributes need to be taught, developed and assessed throughout each programme (Halibas et al., 2020). Several universities on the island cater for a separate credit-based module to 'teach' employability skills deemed essential. While this is a good start, a standalone 'work-readiness unit' does not necessarily show the relevance of employability skills and graduate capital building to what is taught in discipline-specific units, and to the workplace. Instead, Chavan and Carter (2018) recommend that employability skills be embedded in the curriculum right from first year to promote industry interface and engagement. Clearer marking rubrics to evaluate and provide specific feedback on the development of employability skills are also required for students to understand GWR and its importance in the workplace (Cavanagh, Burston, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2015). If reinforced through mandatory tertiary education accreditation and audit bodies, such measures could assist Mauritian universities in better entrenching graduate capital building in their core values.

Despite government efforts to advertise their graduate employability skills development programmes on various media, awareness of these schemes still appears to be an issue. Universities and government/parastatal bodies are therefore recommended to work more closely for intensive and sustained promotion of the various programmes available. Universities and the government could also collaborate in the active promotion of WIL to provide students with a more industry-centric tertiary education experience. In addition to the traditional student internship, WIL endeavours encompass authentic industry projects, service-learning activities, industry events, guest lectures, and even research tasks (Ferns & Lilly, 2016; Xia, Caulfield, & Ferns, 2015) for students to build their graduate capital. Such early immersion in the world of work also creates opportunities for students to improve their understanding of organisational expectations and foster a more positive attitude. The government could further support such activities through enhanced WIL awareness, capacity building, and even the design of set templates for WIL activity recording and evaluation. To further boost WIL buy-in, the government could provide performance-related incentives for academics, and financial assistance to enhance student WIL experiences. It could also work with universities to support student mobility experiences (Tran, 2016) such as student exchange programmes, and international WIL projects which could even be organised virtually. Such opportunities would be invaluable for students wanting to be more work-ready, particularly as work becomes increasingly characterised by global job mobility (Jackson, 2016). For accurate evaluation of these GWR initiatives, the government could team up with universities to encourage research about the impact of GWR projects on graduate capital building, workplace productivity, and even graduate attitudes.

## Relationship between employers and government/parastatal bodies

Employer participation is vital to the success of GWR government programmes. While the Mauritian government offers some incentives to employers such as trainees' stipends and training fees, further encouragement could motivate employers to increase their engagement. This could include company tax rebates on GWR programmes or other WIL initiatives such as internships and students' industry projects. Such incentives could encourage employers to provide dedicated resources to support graduate training. Government could also guide employers on how to better contribute to the development of employable graduates. Support from government could range from clear guidelines on WIL project scope definitions and selection of industry mentors to student evaluation templates and sharing of best practice.

Human resource (HR) professionals have a critical role in cementing a mutually beneficial relationship with government for the development of graduate capital. Verma et al. (2018) proposed an 'inside out' paradigm for HR specialists to facilitate collaborative stakeholder strategies. As 'policy influencers', HR professionals could assist government in graduate employability policy-making and the implementation of quality assurance measures for GWR programmes. As facilitators, they could act as liaison between the government and industry to provide valuable information on the state of GWR from an employer perspective, as well as represent industry on government educational panels, and employability skills development programmes. Verma et al. (2018) further contended that HR professionals could act as catalysts to assist the government in promoting employability programmes and WIL activities.

## Relationship between employers and universities

Smith et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of WIL as an ideal opportunity for students to understand professional roles, experience organisational culture, and build their social capital through networking and mentoring programmes. Universities could also collaborate with industry for valuable career advice and mock interviews as part of their WIL initiatives. To prevent engaged students from exclusively capitalising on WIL opportunities, universities are encouraged to include mandatory WIL programmes in their curricula (Donald et al., 2017). Such experiences should be followed by reflective sessions (such as presentations to faculty and employer representatives) for students to be mindful of their strengths and areas of improvement (Xia et al., 2015), and reflect on their attitude. More employers could support mentoring programmes by acting as role models to students and giving them insights into work requirements and career progressions. In addition to human, cultural, social and identity capital building, industry mentors could share their experiences to help students understand the importance of self-efficacy, adaptability, and resilience in growing their psychological capital for successful career pathways.

Extending Verma et al.'s (2018) 'inside out' HR professionals' paradigm to the employer-university relationship, company HR representatives can act as 'catalysts' and 'facilitators' to strengthen their links with higher education institutions. For example, they could catalyse WIL opportunities by engaging with university representatives to define industry projects, creating meaningful internship opportunities and channel guest lecture requests to the appropriate industry expert. They could also play a facilitating role through clear articulation of industry GWR expectations that universities should focus on, and encouragement of industry input in curriculum design, course delivery, as well as GWR research.

## National Work Integrated Learning Committee

To support WIL activities proposed in the GWRSIF, the establishment of a National Work Integrated Learning Committee (NWILC) is suggested. The committee could be set up under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology and include representatives from industry, tertiary education institutions, and other ministries. Its primary mandate would be to develop and continuously review a national WIL strategy, which would serve as encouragement, guide, and support to all WIL stakeholders. The committee would also be responsible for WIL success measurement in line with graduate capital building. Instead of evaluating graduate employability on the ability to secure a job within six months from graduation, GWR measures could be extended to include the time taken for new graduates to secure a job, the job type, and the period over which graduates stay in their first job (Clarke, 2017).

## Conclusion, limitations, and future work

Despite individual and collaborative projects by government representatives, employers, and universities, the challenge of producing employable graduates in Mauritius persists. University curricula remain too academic, and students appear to have insufficient industry experience upon which to build their graduate capital. Internships are not always valuable or properly mentored and employers do not always have the time or resources to train fresh graduates. The latter are often accused of having an attitude problem, which is a barrier to their work-readiness. More than ever, universities, employers and government are required to collaborate to help students grow their graduate capital.

Through its GWRISF and National WIL committee, this research proposes recommendations to bring together key GWR stakeholders of Mauritius and suggest actions to reinforce their collaboration in forging industry-focused university curricula, valuable employer and government support, as well as the right graduate attitude. Shaping graduate capital needs to start early in the life of the undergraduate student with government, universities, and employers providing ample opportunities for graduates to build industry-centric skills, networks, and expected behaviours for strong career foundations. Unless Mauritian GWR stakeholders work together for a common understanding of their needs and collaborative actions to meet them, the wedge between graduate capabilities and employer expectations cannot be filled. While it is understood that all SIDS have their own specificities, the Mauritian context could be comparable to some other small island states with common stakeholder issues and implications. Recommendations provided could thus also be useful to these islands.

The main limitation of this study lies in the stakeholder groups explored. Only the Top 100 companies and final year undergraduate students were surveyed. The tertiary education perspective came from few Mauritian universities and excluded the vocational education sector. Future research could include a wider range of companies, the vocational sector, as well as university alumni for a deeper insight into their degree of preparation for the world of work. Further exploration could also consider other stakeholder dimensions such as the role of the undergraduate's family, both in the development of professional networks (Smith et al., 2017), and in the encouragement of graduate capital building. A quantitative slant would also be useful for objective verification of findings.

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