

The Role of Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs) in Bridging the Gap Between University Education and the Labour Market in a Regional Ugandan Public University

MUHAMADI KAWEESI^{1*}, GEORGE KINTU², CHARLES MUWEESE³

¹*Senior Lecturer and Head, Department of Education, Faculty of Science and Education, Busitema University, Tororo, Uganda*

^{2,3}*Department of Education, Faculty of Science and Education, Busitema University*

**Corresponding author email: mkaweesi.sci@busitema.ac.ug/
ahmedkaweesi98@gmail.com*

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4799-3807>

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Abstract

As universities worldwide shift their focus towards graduate work readiness, the role of Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs) in preparing students for the labour market is gaining prominence. This study explored the role of SAPs in enhancing graduate employability at Busitema University. Specifically, the study investigated the perceived roles of SAPs and the extent to which they fulfil these roles in preparing students for successful transitions into the workforce. A mixed-methods case study design that combined student surveys with in-depth interviews of key SAP staff was employed to gather data, which was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis. The results indicate that whereas SAPs are recognised for their roles in career guidance, labour market preparation, and support services, their contributions to soft skills development and psychosocial support remain underappreciated or misunderstood by students. The study concludes that SAPs have the potential to influence employability more significantly if their functions are strategically integrated into institutional planning and career development programming. The study recommends a rethinking of SAP engagement, not just as providers of logistical and welfare support, but as partners in shaping students' long-term personal and professional growth. Policy reform, visibility enhancement, and capacity-building for SAPs are also recommended to enhance their impact.

Keywords: *Student affairs professionals; Employability; Labour market readiness; Career development; Human capital.*

Introduction

Graduate employability has become a pressing concern for higher education institutions worldwide. Universities are increasingly expected to produce graduates who are academically competent and possess the skills necessary to thrive in the labour market

(Tomlinson, 2017b). In Uganda, the transition from university to employment remains challenging, with many graduates facing challenges in securing relevant jobs due to a mismatch between acquired skills and labour market demands (Namuliira et al., 2025). To reduce this mismatch, universities are embracing more holistic strategies that incorporate employability-boosting services alongside academic instruction. These initiatives frequently function through support systems outside of academics, especially within student affairs divisions, which are specifically equipped to prepare students for their careers, such as SAPs (Bridgstock et al., 2019).

SAPs offer career guidance, internship placement assistance, mentorship opportunities, and training in soft skills that boost students' job readiness. These programmes help connect university learning with industry demands by ensuring that graduates develop both technical expertise and essential transferable skills, including effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). At Busitema University, the student affairs team comprises career guidance counsellors, wardens, internship facilitators, and student welfare officers. These professionals operate under the Office of the Dean of Students and are tasked with organising career fairs, overseeing industrial training, addressing students' psychosocial needs, and promoting leadership skills through student guilds and clubs. Because of their diverse responsibilities, they become crucial players in preparing students with the practical skills and connections needed for the labour market (Ntale et al., 2020).

Research (Heo & Xiaohui, 2019; **Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021**; Bennet et al., 2020; Knight & Yorke, 2003) indicates that universities that integrate employability-focused programmes within student affairs services tend to produce graduates who are more competitive in the labour market. Employability frameworks such as the Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs, and Metacognition (USEM) model emphasise the importance of holistic development, wherein students are equipped with practical and reflective skills essential for career success (Yorke, 2006). Thus, leveraging SAPs as mediators between academic training and labour market requirements can significantly enhance graduate employability outcomes. This study examined the role of SAPs at Busitema University in bridging the gap between university education and the labour market. By exploring their contributions to career development initiatives, industry linkages, and employability skill-building, the study provides insights into best practices and policy recommendations for enhancing graduate employability.

Studies (Chen et. al., 2025; Mainga et. al., 2025; Al Shanfari, 2024; Kir et. al., 2021) have extensively explored factors influencing graduate employability, including skills acquisition, employer expectations, and institutional strategies. However, limited research has examined the specific role of SAPs in facilitating employability, particularly in the context of sub-Saharan African public universities. Existing literature on graduate employability has primarily focused on pedagogical innovations, internship programmes, and employer-university collaborations (Tran, 2016; Ferns et al., 2014). While the above studies highlight structural challenges and curriculum inadequacies, they often overlook the non-academic interventions and support systems provided by SAPs, such as career guidance, soft skills training, and mentorship programmes (Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Furthermore, most research (Sophia & Onen, 2024; Bagonza et al., 2021; Kaguhangire-Barifaijo & Nkata, 2024; Musisi & Sessanga, 2019) on employability in Uganda has not focused on the practical contributions of student affairs departments in shaping career readiness. While global perspectives on employability emphasise work-integrated learning and competency-based education (Bennett et al., 2020), there is insufficient empirical evidence on how SAPs at universities like Busitema adapt such approaches within resource-constrained environments. This research sought to fill this gap by exploring how and whether student affairs initiatives contribute to bridging the divide between university education and the labour market in Uganda. This was accomplished by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceived roles of SAPs in preparing students for the labour market at Busitema University?

RQ2: To what extent do SAPs fulfil the aforementioned perceived roles while preparing Busitema University students for labour market readiness?

Literature Review

Theoretical perspective

This study was informed by the Human Capital Theory and the Graduate Capital Model, both of which clarify how higher education, and specifically Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs), contribute to graduate employability. According to the Human Capital Theory that was developed by Becker (1964), investment in education, training, and skill development boosts a person's productivity and potential value in the labour market (OECD, 2014). The theory contends that knowledge and skills are a form of capital that yield economic returns through higher employability, improved job performance, and increased income (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In the context of this study, this theory justified examining the role of SAPs. Through workshops, leadership training, career mentorship, and internship facilitation, SAPs are expected to equip students with hands-on skills, work-related competencies, and behavioural attributes that augment their employability. Accordingly, SAPs should play a role in expanding students' stock of human capital beyond academic instruction.

Because the Human Capital Theory does not fully capture the changing nature of employability, especially in under-resourced environments such as Uganda, this study also drew on the Graduate Capital Model. Originally proposed by Kinman and Kinman but further developed by Tomlinson (2017b), the model shifts its focus from linear skill acquisition to a more multifaceted understanding of graduate development. It proposes that employability is shaped by the acquisition of five interrelated forms of capital. These are: human capital (technical skills, academic knowledge, and cognitive abilities); social capital (access to professional networks, mentoring relationships, and peer support); cultural capital (understanding of workplace norms, communication styles, and the "soft" skills expected in professional settings); identity capital (self-awareness, authenticity, and clarity about personal career goals and values); and psychological capital (emotional resilience, confidence, and the capacity to manage uncertainty).

In this study, the Graduate Capital Model helped to understand how SAPs contribute not just to skill development but also to the holistic preparation of students for work readiness. For example, SAPs help build social capital by linking students to industry actors through exhibitions and alumni talks; foster identity and cultural capital through student mentorship, and offering guidance for leadership roles; and build psychological capital by providing psychosocial counselling and safe spaces that build confidence and emotional well-being. In summary, taken together, the Human Capital Theory clarifies what graduates need (knowledge, skills, and training), while the Graduate Capital Model describes how and why various forms of personal and contextual capital impact labour market readiness. Their integration allows for a deeper appreciation of the diverse roles that SAPs play, not just as support staff, but as developmental agents who shape students' work readiness through planned, somewhat ignored, non-academic interventions.

Perceived roles of Student Affairs Professionals in universities

The roles of SAPs extend beyond administrative tasks to include the facilitation of personal development, career readiness, and psychosocial support for students (Wildschut & Luescher, 2023). De Vos et al. (2011) emphasise that employability is fostered through continuous learning and acquisition of new competencies, many of which are imparted through student affairs initiatives. Career services, soft skills training, leadership programmes, and mentorship are central to this evolving role (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Empirical studies (e.g., Pavlin, 2019; Nakimuli et.al., 2023; Suleman, 2016; Bennet, 2002) underscore the growing expectation that universities equip graduates with transferable skills that align with employer needs. SAPs are uniquely positioned to meet this demand by providing access to experiential learning opportunities and fostering student engagement in non-formal educational contexts (Ferns & Lilly, 2015).

Nonetheless, disparities in access to SAP support often mirror broader social inequalities. Socio-economic background, gender, and race influence how students engage with SAP initiatives and how their employability is perceived by employers (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). For instance, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack the emotional confidence and cultural capital required for full participation in career development activities (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). Therefore, universities must adopt inclusive policies that empower SAPs to tailor support for underrepresented groups (Filippou et al., 2025). Such responsiveness would contribute to more equitable employability outcomes and greater alignment with labour market expectations.

While literature emphasises the importance of SAPs in improving graduate employability through soft skills, mentorship, and career advising, the majority of studies focus on well-funded Western contexts (e.g., Wildschut & Luescher, 2023; Succi & Canovi, 2020). There is a notable scarcity of empirical research on how SAPs work in resource-constrained public universities in sub-Saharan Africa, where staffing, infrastructure, and financial constraints may hinder their effectiveness. Moreover, few studies capture students' perspectives on the efficacy of SAPs' interventions in these contexts. This study filled this gap by investigating the perceived roles of SAPs at Busitema University in preparing students for the labour market.

Student Affairs Professionals' roles and students' successful transition into the labour market

The transition from university to employment is becoming non-linear and uncertain, requiring institutional interventions that extend beyond the classroom. SAPs are instrumental in helping students navigate this transition by offering services such as internship coordination, career counselling, and employer engagement (Bennett et al., 2020). These interventions enhance students' confidence, self-efficacy, and preparedness for the workplace. Empirical studies (e.g., Mason et al., 2022; Stea et al., 2024) indicate that structured non-academic interventions significantly improve employment outcomes, especially when linked to industry expectations (Tomlinson, 2017a). Activities such as counselling clinics, career days, and job fairs, typically organised by SAPs, equip students with real-world insights into the labour market (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

However, not all students are equally positioned to benefit from SAP interventions due to structural factors such as limited social networks, insufficient cultural exposure, or financial constraints, which may limit their ability to fully participate in employability-building opportunities (Okolie et al., 2019; Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020). To close these disparities, SAPs must embrace context-sensitive and inclusive tactics such as personalised career support, alumni mentorship, and targeted employer outreach (Burnett & Taylor, 2023). SAPs at institutions like Busitema University can use these efforts to improve fair access to job preparation and strengthen the transition from university to the labour market. Nonetheless, little is known about how this calibre of students perceives the performance of SAPs. This study filled this gap by investigating students' perceptions of the extent to which SAPs at Busitema University carry out their mandated obligations in ways that promote equal labour market preparation.

Methodology

This study utilised a mixed-methods paradigm, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of student affairs professionals (SAPs) in enhancing graduate employability at Busitema University. Mixed methods enabled the triangulation of data sources, enhancing the reliability and validity of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative component captured students' perceptions through structured questionnaires, while the qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with key persons to generate rich contextual insights. To explore context-specific phenomena within real-life settings, the case study design was preferred (Yin, 2018).

The study population comprised 823 individuals across three campuses, Nagongera, Pallisa, and the Busitema Main Campus, including 814 students and nine student affairs administrators. The three campuses were chosen due to their accessibility, longevity, and historical engagement in employability initiatives. The student sample size ($n = 463$) was determined following Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for sample size determination. Simple random sampling, through the lottery method, was used to ensure that each member of the student population category had an equal chance of being selected (Noor et al., 2022). SAPs were selected using purposive sampling to target information-rich cases, based on their strategic roles in student affairs. Saturation was applied in qualitative sampling to determine when no new themes emerged (Charmaz, 2008).

Quantitative data from students was collected using the structured questionnaire guide to quantify students' perceptions across multiple dimensions. A five-point Likert scale was used to enhance interpretability and consistency (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative data from SAPs was collected through semi-structured interviews to elicit deeper explanations of programme implementation, institutional support structures, and barriers to employability support. This approach allowed for probing and flexibility while maintaining thematic focus (Kallio et al., 2016).

The Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed to assess the instrument's relevance, yielding a value of 0.851, which exceeds the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Polit & Beck, 2012). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which returned a value of 0.813 for the entire scale, indicating strong internal consistency (Taber, 2018). Subscale alphas ranged from 0.785 to 0.881 across the measured constructs, confirming the robustness of the scale.

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed to determine the level of students' perceptions regarding SAPs' roles in preparing them for the labour market and the extent to which these roles are fulfilled. In a 5-point Likert scale, mean scores were interpreted following Al Njadat (2024) as follows: 1.0–1.80 (very low), 1.81–2.60 (low), 2.61–3.40 (moderate), 3.41–4.20 (high), and 4.21–5.00 (very high). Qualitative data was analysed thematically using content analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and generate explanatory themes related to the perceived roles of SAPs and the extent to which they fulfil those roles. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, we assigned each SAP a pseudonym. Based on the university campus, SAPNC denotes Student Affairs Professional, Nagongera Campus; SAPMC represents Student Affairs Professional, Main Campus; and SAPPC signifies Student Affairs Professional, Pallisa Campus.

Findings

This section presents both quantitative and qualitative results on how SAPs contribute to students' preparation for the labour market. The survey results in sub-sections 6.1 and 6.2 below illustrate students' perceptions of SAPs' roles and how effectively SAPs accomplish their mandated roles while preparing students for the labour market. Interviews with SAPs give more insight into their practices, challenges, and impact. Combined, these results reveal how SAPs bridge the gap between university education and employment readiness at Busitema University.

Research Question 1: What are the perceived roles of SAPs in preparing students for the labour market?

In this sub-section, we present the perspectives of both students and SAPs to understand how the functions of SAPs are perceived. Survey findings are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Perceived roles of Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs)

Perceived Roles of SAPs	N	Min	Max	M	SD
1. Student training in entrepreneurial skills	463	1.0	5.0	3.46	1.17
2. Providing information about labour market requirements	463	1.0	5.0	3.51	1.17
3. Knowledge and skills for job creation	463	1.0	5.0	3.4	1.07
4. Career counselling	463	1.0	5.0	3.69	1.14
5. Moral development is an essential aspect of the world of work	463	1.0	5.0	3.35	1.17
6. Safety and security on campus	463	1.0	5.0	3.42	1.15
7. Enforcement of the student code of conduct	463	1.0	5.0	3.48	1.16
8. Orientation and integration of new students	463	1.0	5.0	3.46	1.15
9. Workshops for soft skills training	463	1.0	5.0	3.38	1.18
10. Promotion of lifelong learning and critical thinking	463	1.0	5.0	3.4	1.15

Source: Primary data (2023)

Table 1 presents students' perceptions of the roles played by SAPs in preparing them for the labour market. Using the 5-point Likert scale interpretation, roles with a mean score of 3.41 to 4.20 were rated high, whereas those with a mean score between 2.61 to 3.40 were rated moderate. The standard deviation (SD) values indicate the level of agreement among students, with lower SDs indicating more consistent responses. The roles with a high mean score were career counselling (Mean = 3.69, SD = 1.14), followed by labour market information provision (Mean = 3.51, SD = 1.17), student training in entrepreneurial skills (Mean = 3.46, SD = 1.17), and enforcement of the student code of conduct (Mean = 3.48, SD = 1.16).

The above findings show that students appreciate services that offer practical direction, employability knowledge, and structured behaviour, all critical for successful transitions into the workforce. Related to the above, **SAPMC** explained:

Our office provides career guidance and support for students in choosing the right courses and internships that align with their career goals. Additionally, we organise career fairs and job placement services to connect students with employers and help them secure employment opportunities after graduation. This way, we are able to prepare students for the demands of the labour market and ensure their success in their chosen professions.

Likewise, entrepreneurial training and orientation programmes for new students (Mean = 3.46, SD = 1.17 and 1.15, respectively) were perceived positively. These results suggest that students appreciate SAP support in areas closely tied to practical preparation for the labour market, promotion of innovation, and smooth integration into university life. In support of the survey results, **SAPPC** added: "We organise entrepreneurship seminars and practical sessions where students learn how to start and manage small businesses. This equips them with the skills to either seek employment or create their own jobs." Similarly, **SAPNC** divulged:

Our office offers various workshops and seminars to help students develop their business ideas and learn practical skills for starting their ventures. In addition, we provide mentorship programmes and networking opportunities for students to connect with successful entrepreneurs and industry professionals. The goal is to empower students with the knowledge and resources they need to become successful entrepreneurs to positively impact society.

Another well-regarded role was guaranteeing campus safety and security (Mean = 3.42, SD = 1.15), seen as foundational for a productive learning environment. The importance of maintaining peace and order on campus was echoed by **SAPMC**, who shared:

We work hand-in-hand with top management, the university counsellor, the university doctor, students, staff, and parents to maintain a peaceful campus. This helps students to stay focused and builds character traits employers value, like discipline, responsibility, and emotional control. We take a proactive approach to preventing conflicts and promoting open dialogue, fostering a campus community focused on growth and success after campus.

On the other hand, the remaining roles were rated moderate, with mean scores ranging from 3.35 to 3.40. These were: promotion of lifelong learning and critical thinking (Mean = 3.40, SD = 1.15); soft skills training workshops (Mean = 3.38, SD = 1.18); moral development (Mean = 3.35, SD = 1.17); and job creation knowledge (Mean = 3.40, SD = 1.07). Although rated moderately, these results show that students still recognised these services, but did not find them as hugely impactful, such as those rated with high mean scores. Hence, whereas SAPs' intervention exists in these areas, it lacks consistency and depth. That is why SAPNC reflected, "We encourage students to participate in mentoring, debating, and public speaking forums. But we know we need more structured soft skills programmes if we are to meet labour market expectations fully." In summary, students perceived SAPs as playing a strong role in areas directly related to employability and student adjustment. However, efforts in fostering creativity, critical thinking, and deeper personal development may require further enhancement to rise to the same level of perceived value.

Research Question 2: To what extent do SAPs at Busitema University fulfil their mandated roles while preparing students for the labour market?

While SAPs are largely recognised for their support of student welfare, their partnerships with academic and professional entities are also essential. This section explores how effectively they accomplish their mandated roles at Busitema University while preparing students for the labour market. Survey results are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Students' responses about fulfilment of mandated roles of SAPs

Statement to explain the fulfilment	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Educating students regarding the university's expectations of good behaviour	463	1.00	5.00	3.53	1.13
Protection of students' rights, and ensure fairness and due process	463	1.00	5.00	3.46	1.13
Advising university leadership and faculty on curriculum-related issues	463	1.00	5.00	3.57	1.12

Providing accommodation facilities to students	463	1.00	5.00	3.49	1.09
Providing recreation facilities to students	463	1.00	5.00	3.72	1.05
Providing appropriate catering services to students	463	1.00	5.00	3.70	0.94
Acting as a liaison between student departments and institution administrators	463	1.00	5.00	3.30	1.19
Providing proactive leadership to support students' academic achievement and career prospects	463	1.00	5.00	3.19	1.26
Working cooperatively with top management, for a positive university climate that is devoid of strikes	463	1.00	5.00	3.51	1.27
Ensuring that fresh students are oriented and prospective employers are invited to speak to the students about labour market realities	463	1.00	5.00	3.40	1.24

Source: Primary data (2023)

The findings in Table 2 indicate that students at Busitema University rated SAPs to be moderately to highly effective in carrying out their prescribed tasks. Recreation facilities obtained the highest rating (Mean = 3.72, SD = 1.05), followed by catering services (Mean = 3.70, SD = 0.94). These high ratings reveal that students are generally satisfied with the services that promote their well-being and social life. SAPPC explained:

These recreation facilities not only promote physical well-being but also serve as a platform for students to socialise, bond, and develop strong relationships with their peers. We organise various extracurricular activities and events that cater for different interests and help students grow personally. Whether it's joining a music group or volunteering for a local cause, we encourage them to explore their passions outside academics.

The role of advising university leadership and faculty on curriculum-related matters was also highly rated (M = 3.57, SD = 1.12), showing that students appreciate SAPs' involvement in shaping academic programmes that are linked to employment needs. Confirming this, SAPMC shared:

We work closely with academic leaders like the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic Affairs and faculty deans to ensure that the courses offered reflect the needs of employers. Although we are not part of the formal curriculum discussions, we always remind them to revise the curriculum to match what the job market requires so that students are better prepared for life after graduation.

SAPs also performed well in roles related to student discipline and governance. Students gave high scores to educating them about expected behaviour (M = 3.53, SD = 1.13) and working with university leadership to keep peace and avoid strikes (M = 3.51, SD = 1.27). This highlights the SAPs' efforts to create a safe and focused learning environment. In the words of SAPMC:

We understand the importance of a peaceful university environment. We work with university leaders, students, counsellors, and parents to maintain harmony. We focus on open communication and preventing conflicts. This helps students to stay focused on their goals and prepares them to behave professionally in the workplace.

The provision of accommodation services (M = 3.49, SD = 1.09) and the protection of students' rights and fairness (M = 3.46, SD = 1.13) were also positively rated. These results

suggest that most students trust SAPs to provide essential services and support their welfare. Still, the SD values show that some students may have had different experiences depending on campus or situation.

On the other hand, some roles were rated moderately, meaning they need improvement. For instance, acting as a connection between students and the university administration scored ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.19$), and providing academic and career guidance had the lowest rating ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.26$). These findings indicate that students do not perceive SAPs as being very effective in supporting their academic progress or career goals. Reflecting on this, SAPNC explained:

We work with student leaders to make sure their voices are heard. We organise orientation programmes for new students and invite university officials to help them adjust to campus life. We also organise events that promote unity and belonging among students. But we know there is still more to be done to better support students in academic planning and career readiness.

Finally, the role of orienting students and organising employer talks scored ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.24$), which is considered moderate. This shows that although such activities were taking place, they seemed to be irregular, exclusive, or less impactful. More effort may be needed to improve the quality and consistency of career-related events. In summary, SAPs were seen to be doing well in areas like student welfare, campus discipline, and curriculum advising. However, their roles in career development, academic mentorship, and communication with top university management were seen as less effective and need more attention.

Discussion

This study examined the roles and effectiveness of SAPs in enhancing graduate employability at Busitema University, drawing upon the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017b). Data from quantitative and qualitative findings confirm that SAPs play a pivotal, although uneven, role in preparing students for the labour market. Two key themes emerged: perceived roles of SAPs in student career preparedness; and the extent to which SAPs fulfil their mandated roles while preparing students for the labour market. The results, combining student perceptions and the voices of SAPs, offer a clear understanding of what SAPs do, how they are perceived, and where gaps remain.

Perceived roles of SAPs in labour market preparation

Quantitative findings suggest that students perceive SAPs as playing crucial roles in career-related support, especially in **career counselling**, **labour market information dissemination**, and **entrepreneurial training**. These roles are consistent with the **human and social capital components** of the Graduate Capital Model, as they equip students with the technical know-how and networks necessary for labour market entry (Tomlinson, 2017b; Suleman, 2016). The strong scores in these aspects agree with earlier findings by **Mason et al. (2022)**, who claim that structured career interventions by non-academic professionals, such as job fairs, counselling, and employer-led workshops, improve students' confidence and transition readiness. In the case of Busitema University, SAPPC

noted that partnerships with employers through alumni networks have helped bridge the gap between campus and career, further affirming the model's emphasis on **social capital**.

Despite SAPs' efforts to support soft skills development, moral growth, and lifelong learning, students rated these areas only moderately. For example, ratings for soft skills workshops and the promotion of lifelong learning suggest that students may not clearly recognise the connection between these interventions and their career readiness. This misalignment is not unique to Busitema University. Burnett and Taylor (2023) similarly observed that students often overlook the career relevance of non-academic programmes unless these are explicitly linked to employability outcomes. This disconnect echoes a bigger challenge in how students perceive the value of non-academic interventions.

Whereas the **Human Capital Theory** highlights the importance of acquiring marketable skills and knowledge for employment, its sufficiency is contested because it overlooks the intangible dimensions of student development that also inform graduate outcomes, such as confidence, psychological strengths, social networks, resilience, self-awareness, and cultural adaptability. These findings affirm the utility of complementing the Human Capital Theory with the **Graduate Capital Model**, which provides a broader and more complete framework for understanding how diverse forms of capital jointly shape graduate employability. Combined, these frameworks proffer a holistic lens for interpreting the roles of SAPs in boosting graduate employability.

The need for a holistic approach was echoed by Yorke and Knight (2006), who argued that employability is a complex concept involving not just skills and knowledge, but also personal attributes, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition that empower graduates to navigate volatile labour markets. As SAPNC noted, many students arrive with low self-confidence and vague career aspirations. In such cases, SAPs must deliver soft skills and personal development programmes and clearly communicate their relevance to enable student to appreciate how these interventions support their employability and long-term career growth.

Fulfilment of mandated SAP roles

Students rated SAPs' performance favourably in fulfilling traditionally mandated roles such as recreational services, counselling and catering, and contribution to curriculum development. These findings cohere with those of Wildschut and Luescher (2023), who noted that SAPs in African universities are increasingly acknowledged for their practical and psychosocial contributions to students' academic experience. Such results also strengthen the value of institutional human capital investments. When SAPs support student well-being and logistics, they cultivate a more stable and enabling environment for academic exploits, an idea well-rooted in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964). However, in line with the Graduate Capital Model, there is a need to interrogate whether these services also promote long-term career confidence and cultural competence.

However, students rated SAPs less strongly in liaison with university leadership and proactive academic and career leadership. These findings suggest a need for SAPs to be better integrated into institutional planning processes. As Filippou et al. (2025) argue, inclusive employability approaches must recognise SAPs both as implementers and as contributors to policy and strategic dialogue. SAPMC's remark that SAPs are often left out

of formal curriculum discussions supports this concern. Students' limited recognition of SAPs as agents of academic transformation may stem from role ambiguity or fragmented collaboration with academic units, a concern previously highlighted in employability literature (Tran, 2020; Clarke, 2018).

Also, the moderate perception of employer engagement is worth noting. This indicates that while some outreach exists, it may not be institutionalised or visible enough to students. Previous studies (e.g., Pavlin, 2019; Stea et al., 2024) highlight that sustained, structured engagement with employers, through job surveillance, internships, and sector-led workshops, is central to improving graduate employment outcomes. Without this, students may leave university with qualifications but with limited awareness of the evolving demands of the job market.

Conclusions

Based on student perceptions and SAP narratives, we affirm that although SAPs are seen as significant contributors to students' career preparation, their impact is not fully optimised across all functional areas. Although students appreciate SAPs' efforts in career guidance and labour market preparation, there seems to be less clarity around the significance of interventions related to soft skills, identity development, and psychosocial support. As such, SAPs should be recognised as playing a dual role, both as builders of practical skills and as enablers of the deeper personal and social transformations that equip students for meaningful and sustainable engagement with the world of work.

Recommendations

To boost SAPs' performance, institutional policy should reposition them as strategic partners in curriculum and employability programming rather than relegating their work to peripheral support. Their inclusion in academic planning and review processes may guarantee that student development is tackled holistically. SAPs would also benefit from structured professional development in employer engagement, outcomes-based guidance, and inclusive support strategies. The visibility of their job must be increased by effective communication with students and faculty, thereby bridging the awareness gap that now limits the uptake and recognition of their services. Furthermore, universities should invest in strong monitoring systems that regularly examine the impact of SAP initiatives on student outcomes, allowing for data-driven changes.

Limitations

The findings of our study should be viewed in light of a few limitations. First, the study was done at a single public university, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, while the mixed-methods strategy added depth, the number of qualitative interviews was small and may not adequately capture the diversity of experiences among SAPs. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study did not allow for tracking perceptions over time. These limitations, however, provide major opportunities for future research that could broaden and deepen understanding of SAPs' role in higher education. Future research should examine the role of SAPs across many

universities, utilising longitudinal designs to see how their influence evolves and impacts post-graduate achievement.

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