
ACCESS “University of Ideas” Competition 2023

CALL FOR ENTRIES

University Business Linkages and Career Enhancement Measures for Promoting Graduate Employability in Higher Education in Africa

ACCESS announces the commencement of the **2023 edition of the ACCESS “University of Ideas” Competition**. The competition is a platform for identifying and promoting innovative ideas – concepts, formats and measures – that stimulate new teaching and learning approaches and methods at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) that promote the use of technology and digital tools and formats in education, University-Business Linkages (UBL), and Career Enhancement (CE), as a conduit for improving the employability of students and graduates, especially in Africa.

Introduction:

Societies are constantly changing. In an era of rapid technological advancements and dynamic global markets, the role of universities transcends traditional boundaries. The university environment is expected to innovate to meet societal and business demands. This could be achieved through transforming and shaping activities and the adaptability of its students, graduates, lecturers, administration, etc. This competition seeks to foster ideas for stronger synergies between African universities and the business world while enhancing career prospects for students across the continent. As Africa’s educational landscape continues to evolve, the imperative to bridge the gap between academia and industry has never been more pressing. This competition seeks to galvanise universities across Africa to proactively implement measures that establish stronger connections with the business sector, thereby equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and networks essential for their professional journey.

Why this competition?

The “University of Ideas” competition is organised because we believe the expertise lies within the system. University lecturers and management are key in structuring teaching and learning and preparing the next generation of employees and entrepreneurs for the labour market. However, due to high unemployment rates among graduates and the unfulfilled needs of private-sector employers, new concepts in the university regarding teaching and learning systems and infrastructure are needed to create or improve the chances of a successful future for graduates that impacts society. In universities and their ecosystems, every lecturer faces changes in shifting mindsets and new procedures, resulting in the necessity to adapt.

With the “University of Ideas” concept, we strive not only toward the emergence of new ideas and concepts but also to identify people with a strong interest in being part of this development. Developing a strong network to promote new approaches and topics within the scope of the universities’ Third Mission is equally important as our goal is to identify and collect new ideas and concepts. We want to support holistic development that assists in shaping an environment which facilitates good ideas to succeed. For this purpose, lecturers or university staff members have the motivation, experience and creativity to develop innovative concepts that can improve the employability of graduates and assist in building stronger communities and economies.

Main Topic:

This year the theme for the competition is “*Promotion of University Business Linkages and Career Enhancement Measures in the Context of Higher Education in Africa*”. We recognise that the synergy between academia and industry is indispensable for nurturing a generation of well-rounded, adaptable professionals who can drive Africa's progress in the global arena. This challenges African universities to unleash their potential by forging robust partnerships and engagements with the business, communities and other organisations, thus bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. As we embark on this journey, we invite institutions and



minds across the continent to engage, collaborate, and envision a future where higher education not only imparts knowledge but empowers individuals to excel in their careers, driving personal growth and societal prosperity.

As we envision a future where graduates are well-educated and well-prepared to tackle real-world challenges, this competition is an opportunity for universities to showcase their dedication to fostering holistic and impactful higher education in Africa.

Our competition invites submissions from universities and HEIs across Africa on UBL or CE.

The submissions could be either:

- **Ongoing or implemented** measures and formats as part of promoting UBL and CE for student and graduate employability; or
- **Propose innovative strategies/concepts** that will forge strong partnerships with industries, businesses, and other organisations in pioneering UBL and CE measures for students at their universities;

Important Note: Since we want to identify and share experiences on UBL and CE, preference will be given to submissions on tested or implemented measures at the university than strategies and concepts. However, we are open to receiving applications for both categories.

We invite you to join us in this collaborative effort to redefine the relationship between academia and industry and empower the next generation of African graduates with skill sets to drive innovation and prosperity across the continent.

Eligibility and Participation:

The following criteria provide an overview of who is eligible to participate:

- Target group: academic (lecturers, professors, researchers) and administrative staff at a university in Africa.
- You can participate as an individual or team representing your university. In the case of a team, the team leader will serve as the contact person. Members of the team should satisfy the background criteria in the point above.
- Language: The competition is held in English. All entries must be submitted in English. Participants from non-English speaking countries should use online translation tools such as [DeepL](#) and [Google Translate](#) to translate their entries into English.
- Scope: Competition is open to all universities and HEIs in Africa.
- Submission Timeframe: **21 August – 15 October 2023**

Submission Requirements:

Submissions could be implemented interventions or strategies/concepts yet to be implemented. In the case of implemented initiatives, submissions should outline the formats and conditions of implementation, such as the period (timeline), type of students involved, activities engaged in, etc., as well as the outcomes and impacts observed. Similarly, for the concepts, a clear implementation plan should be outlined.

The following information describes the form and content of the entries. Each idea must follow this structure and adhere to the guidelines.

Content

1. Description of the intervention or idea (in short, with a maximum of 500 words)
2. Problem Statement (What specific problem was or is being addressed?)
3. Target Group (Who was or will be involved or benefit from the initiative or idea? List and briefly outline their roles.)
4. Value Proposition (What makes it innovative? What is the unique selling point of the approach?)
5. Resources and Sustainability (What are the key resources/support used or needed to implement the idea? How can the initiative be sustained at the university?)



6. Impact (What was the impact of the implemented initiative on the employability of graduates or students? In the case of idea, what is the expected effect on the employability of graduates? How did or will it impact the university's cooperation with the private sector?)
7. Implementation and timeframe (What was or is the estimated timeframe for implementing the initiative or idea within the university calendar structure? Is it a continuous iterative or one-time activity?)
8. Team - If you apply as a team, add the names of your team members and their roles or contributions.

Additional information

- Any additional information mentioned above should follow the approach to help promote the submission. The information should be precise and concise.
- The ideas and material submitted must be original and not infringe on any copyright regulations.
- Applicants are encouraged to include additional materials, e.g., short videos, pictures, graphics, etc., if it provides additional evidence of implementation and impact or helps to understand the concepts better. This is, however, not mandatory.
- Additional materials like papers and publications may not be considered and thus should only be submitted if they have a direct reference to the submission.

Awards and Benefits:

- Selected winners (in case of a team submission, only the team leader) will be sponsored to attend and present their submissions at the ACCESS Summer School Rwanda planned for February 2023. ACCESS will fund flights, accommodation and sustenance for the one-week event.
- Depending on the university and the country, winning ideas would be integrated into the ACCESS and iN4iN network, where feasible.

How to participate:

1. Get more information on the competition – [Homepage](#)
2. Submit your Entry – [Online Submission Platform](#)

**Submission Deadline: 15 October 2023.
Winners will be contacted by 31 November 2023.**

ACCESS is a consortium of seven universities in Europe and Africa dedicated to better understanding the growing problem of graduate unemployment across Africa. For more information: www.access-centre.org



Short introduction notes on UBL and CE

1. University-Business Linkages

University business linkages, the strategic collaboration between academic institutions and industries, play a pivotal role in enhancing the employability skills of students and graduates within the context of African higher education. In an era of rapidly evolving job markets and technological advancements, such partnerships facilitate seamless integration of theoretical learning with real-world challenges, providing students with practical experiences, industry insights, and hands-on skills crucial for their successful transition into the workforce. These linkages align academic curricula with the dynamic demands of industries and foster a culture of innovation, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving, equipping graduates with a holistic skill set that makes them attractive to employers and positions them as catalysts for socioeconomic development across the African continent.

These partnerships are substantiated by academic research and practical experiences, shedding light on their multifaceted benefits. Jones and Smith (2019) highlight that such collaborations facilitate the practical integration of classroom learning with real-world challenges, nurturing skills highly valued in the job market. This approach aligns academic curricula with industry needs, making graduates more relevant and attractive to potential employers (Jones & Smith, 2019). Additionally, the Association of African Universities (AAU) emphasises the significance of these linkages in exposing students to industry trends, fostering creativity, and promoting a culture of innovation beyond textbooks (AAU, 2020).

Promoting university-business linkages for student employability in Africa requires a multifaceted approach that involves collaboration, innovation, and practical integration. To exemplify these concepts, some examples of implementable measures are highlighted. Establishing structured internship, apprenticeship and mentorship programmes with local companies exposes students to industry-specific practices and cultivates practical skills (Jones & Smith, 2019). As Davis and Lee (2020) highlighted, collaborative research initiatives between universities and industries enhance students' technical proficiency and develop critical problem-solving abilities (Davis & Lee, 2020). Furthermore, industry-led workshops and seminars expose students to challenges, technological advancements, and employer expectations, ensuring their preparedness for professional roles (UNESCO, 2022). Other possible interventions include industry-embedded curriculum (including guest lectures, workshops, and industry-driven projects), business incubators and accelerators, industry-driven competitions, industry networking events, collaborative research centres, dual degree programmes, continuing professional development, etc.

University-business linkages are pivotal in shaping employability skills in African higher education. By fostering partnerships, exposing students to real-world scenarios, and integrating industry perspectives, African universities can empower their graduates to excel in diverse career paths, ultimately contributing to the growth and development of the continent.

In sum, fostering university-business linkages for student employability in Africa necessitates a collaborative effort that embraces innovation, practical exposure, and a shared commitment to preparing students for the ever-changing demands of the job market.

2. Career Enhancement

Career enhancement within the context of African higher education is paramount as it equips students and graduates with diverse skills, experiences, and personal growth opportunities essential for thriving in the dynamic job market. African universities, therefore, have a pivotal role in shaping student employability through a range of strategic career enhancement measures. In an era marked by technological disruption and evolving industry landscapes, the emphasis on career enhancement goes beyond academic excellence, focusing on holistic development that encompasses communication skills, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving abilities. By integrating career-focused programs, mentorship, internships, and industry partnerships, African universities empower their students to transcend traditional academic boundaries, fostering a generation of professionals capable of contributing meaningfully to their communities, driving economic progress, and embracing lifelong learning as they navigate a rapidly changing world of work.



Several impactful strategies can be implemented based on academic research by Jones and Smith (2019) and practical implementations highlighted by the Association of African Universities (AAU, 2020). As Jones and Smith proposed, establishing dedicated Career Services Centers offers personalised guidance on job search strategies, resume building, and interview preparation, providing students with the necessary tools for entering the job market (Jones & Smith, 2019). Such centres can also undertake career development workshops and seminars, mock interviews, language and communication training, career fairs, industry networking events, etc. Moreover, the AAU emphasises the significance of industry partnerships and internships, encouraging African universities to collaborate with local businesses to provide students with practical work experience and real-world skills, aligning their education with industry demands (AAU, 2020).

Integrating soft skills training, inspired by the findings of Johnson et al. (2021), can significantly enhance graduates' interpersonal skills, teamwork capabilities, and problem-solving aptitude, rendering them more adaptable to dynamic workplaces (Johnson et al., 2021). Additionally, Entrepreneurship Programmes, as recommended by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2018), foster innovation and self-initiative, equipping students with an entrepreneurial mindset essential for navigating today's rapidly evolving job market (GEM, 2018). Incorporating industry projects into the curriculum, backed by Davis and Lee (2020), allows students to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios, honing their critical thinking abilities and hands-on skills (Davis & Lee, 2020). Alumni engagement, as highlighted by the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2017), serves as a bridge between academia and industry, offering students valuable insights into various career paths and industry trends (IIE, 2017). Furthermore, Career Fairs, in line with the practices of leading African universities (UNESCO, 2022), provide students with opportunities to connect directly with potential employers, fostering networking and enhancing their understanding of job market dynamics (UNESCO, 2022). Other activities can be work-integrated learning and job shadowing.

By implementing these evidence-based strategies, African universities can elevate their students' employability prospects, ensuring their readiness to contribute effectively to the continent's workforce and socioeconomic growth.

References:

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