

# University graduates are just beginning...

Wednesday last week was graduation day at Nairobi University when graduands received their degrees after the troubles and interruptions of the recent past.

It was good to see people in caps and gowns celebrating their success, surrounded by the relatives who in many cases had made that success possible by giving help in one form or another.

University graduates are a very small percentage of the population of Kenya and they carry a correspondingly heavy burden of responsibility when it comes to implementing development whether in education, medicine, agriculture or engineering. The nation makes an inconsiderable investment in producing graduates and expects some return on that investment.

After the euphoria of graduation has worn off though, the graduates will in many cases begin to find that their troubles are just beginning: graduation is a beginning not an end.

Some people consider their degree to be a passport to a good job and security for life, and indeed it can be exactly that. It is not, however, a free ticket.

The graduates are on their own now and they have to face the dreary world of reality. First they have to find themselves a job and this may turn out to be more difficult than they thought unless their degree is a specialised one.

Graduates often complain that they can't find jobs, or at least not the kind of job they had hoped for. What they lose sight of is the fact that we no longer live in the days when a degree-holder was rare. The expansion of further education since independence has seen to that. Graduates can therefore no longer expect to

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walk into a job in a senior capacity — they have to compete on the jobs market with a host of other graduates, some of whom may have actual work experience.

They must also take into account the strained financial and economic circumstances of today's world. In the 60s and 70s we went through a period of economic expansion. Firms were making good profits and they could afford to take on more staff than were strictly speaking necessary.

Times have changed. Kenyan firms, like their counterparts throughout the world, are going through a tough time. Retrenchment is the order of the day if companies are going to weather the economic storm and recruitment is one of the easiest areas in which to make cut-backs.

Employers are also finding that in many fields except the most specialised ones the employment of graduates is not always the best policy. They argue that they get better results if they employ promising Form 4 or Form 6 leavers and give them intensive on-the-job training.

They say that graduates starting work expect too much in the way of salary and fringe benefits and are too conscious of their status as graduates — they want to start not at the bottom of the ladder but at least half-way up, before they are really aware of what the job entails.

Which leads us to the question: what is a degree and how much is it really worth?

The answers are of course not straightforward and clear-cut.

Obviously not all degree-holders are proficient in their chosen fields of study — there is a wide gulf between the student who passes with flying colours and the one who scraps through on the wings of a prayer.

In any case, all a degree tells us is that its holder has mastered a certain body of academic knowledge. This knowledge may or may not be directly useful and useable in itself. The knowledge acquired studying medicine, architecture or engineering, to take just three examples, can be used directly.

In other disciplines like history, literature and so on — the so-called "arts" subjects — the knowledge acquired is unlikely to be of any immediate usefulness unless the graduate opts for a career in teaching, which many are reluctant to do because of the relatively low salaries and difficult work conditions.

This does not however mean that arts degrees are useless. Of course they are not. An arts graduate has shown by getting his degree that he has certain mental powers and the ability to assimilate and control a large body of knowledge.

He will also have the ability to manipulate words and ideas and the ability and skills are in demand. However, such graduates should be aware that when they start work they will be new boys among the big boys of commerce and industry.

They have a lot to learn and should go about learning it as quickly and conscientiously as possible instead of looking at their degree certificate framed on the wall and thinking that they already know everything which is worth knowing.