Quality in Learning in Rwandan Higher Education

Different stakeholders' perceptions of students' learning and employability

Penelope B. Mbabazi

I dedicate this thesis to my husband Edwin Roland Bamwesiga and our lovely children: Alvin Peter Bamwesiga, Alvis Mathew Bamwesiga and Avin James Bamwesiga.
With Love.

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List of articles

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II. Mbabazi, P.B. (Accepted). A conceptual understanding of employability: The employers' view in Rwanda. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education.*

III. Mbabazi, P.B., Fejes, A. & Dahlgren, L-O. (Accepted). A phenomenographic study of students' conceptions of quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda. *Studies in Continuing Education*.

IV. Mbabazi, P.B. (Submitted). Graduate employability: Students' perceptions of their preparedness for future work.

1. Introduction

This study concerns quality in learning in Rwandan higher education. Specifically, the focus is students' learning and employability. The policy and public debates on higher education in Rwanda continue to construct the students as the change agents of the future (Ministry of Education-MINEDUC, 2010). Today, the power of young people to inspire and be the change agents of the world is beyond measure. University graduates are at the centre of attraction in the political, business and academic worlds (Johnson & Hirt, 2011; Tomlinson, 2007; Mohanty, 2003; AIESEC, 2010). They are considered as responsible for addressing the challenges that face the constantly changing world. The contemporary knowledge society and the knowledge economy place cognitive resources at the centre of human activity and social dynamics, and this has critical implications for a country's knowledge base. According to UNESCO (2005), a knowledge society is a society that is nurtured by its diversity and capacities. The knowledge asset that each society owns is strongly emphasised. According to UNESCO's world report, the knowledge assets should be recognised and protected to link and mesh with the new variants promoted by the knowledge economy.

Relatedly, education and training have recently been reconceptualised as primarily economic devices and essential to participation in the global economy. For example, it has been increasingly argued that the overall economic performance of western countries is ever more directly related to their knowledge stock and learning capabilities (Foray & Lundvall, 1996). A similar notion is noted in Africa, as connections are increasingly drawn between the importance of education, competitiveness and economic development (cf. Materu, 2007). Accordingly, higher education is viewed as central to economic and political development and vital to competitiveness in an increasingly globalising knowledge society. There is a strong move towards expanding tertiary education as a solution to promote faster technological developments and improve a country's ability to maximise its economic output (Bloom, Canning & Chan, 2006). In its 'rolling strategic plan 2011-2016' (2011, p. 14), the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) put forward a claim that,

In the sense of the African, education is a critical sector whose performance directly affects and even determines the quality and magnitude of Africa's development. It is the most important means in order to develop human resources and to impart appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude; forms the basis for developing innovation, science and technology in order to harness our resources, industrialise, and participate in the global knowledge economy, and for Africa to take its rightful place in the global community.

The government of Rwanda, in its Vision 2020, sets out ambitious plans to create a growing knowledge economy based on a skilled workforce that can compete in the region and the wider international arena (MINEDUC, 2010). It is strongly emphasised that only a highly skilled workforce will operate in an increasingly sophisticated environment and allow Rwanda to become the competitive and diversified economy that it aspires to be.

Based on the above, there seems to be a growing awareness of the importance of education in the development of a knowledge-based economy/society. Providing education and training to a larger number of citizens to create a sufficient highly educated workforce is posed as a priority for the new goal of building a knowledge-based society. There is a shift in focus from the natural resources as the basis for development to human resources as central to the economic success of nations. Linking economic success to the academic quality of the workforce has, irrespective of geographic locations and the economic development levels of nations/states, become important. In other words, higher education is increasingly considered as a priority for people to be effective and fulfilled citizens who are capable of facing the novel challenges imposed by the transition to knowledge-based societies/economies (Wegner, 2008; Openjuru, 2011).

According to Knight and Yorke (2003), governments, employers and other stakeholders expect higher education to contribute to the development of a variety of complex 'skills', which enhances the stock of human capital and creates national economic well-being. For example, arguments state that to promote innovation and creativity for the development of a knowledge-based society/economy, higher education must experience wider participation and improved retention, enhance employability and foster lifelong learning (Harvey, 2000).

Although the above concerns were presented in the context of the UK, similar or closely related concerns are noted in other areas of the world. For example, the European Union (EU) policies prioritise lifelong learning to promote four broad and mutually supporting objectives (personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability) as vital for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society (EC, 2001). Concerns of employability and adaptability are strongly implied as connected with lifelong learning. A similar focus on increased output from higher education and increased citizen participation as solutions to economic challenges is found in Africa. Higher learning institutions in Africa are challenged to adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods to adapt to a new range of demands, such as technological developments, adaptability, teamwork, communication skills and the motivation for continual learning (Materu, 2007). Higher education is posed as a priority for Rwanda to meet the required competences to transform the economy into a knowledge-based economy. Thus, expansion of higher education is viewed as central to Rwanda. One expansion strategy has been to continuously increase student enrolment in higher education. There is increased access to education, particularly at the basic level, through free Nine-Year Basic Education and improvements in completion and transition rates and reductions in drop-out and repetition (MINEDUC, 2010, p.5).

Globally, the expansion of higher education has been at the top of many government agendas, as evidenced in the arguments above. However, recent serious concerns have been expressed about the quality of the education and the ability of graduates to meet the needs of work (Teicher, 2003; Elias & Purcell, 2004; MINEDUC, 2010). Although there is growing recognition of the potentially powerful role of higher education in growth, there is also a public perception that educational quality is compromised in the effort to expand enrolment, growing complaints by employers that graduates are poorly prepared for the workplace, and increasing competition in the higher education market place as numerous private and transnational providers enter the scene (Materu, 2007). According to the IUCEA, as the demand for higher education has increased due to increases in human population and socio-economic growth in the East African Community (EAC) partner states, corresponding needs for well-trained human resources to

satisfy the labour market in the region have emerged (Nkunya, 2011). Moreover, EAC's current focus on regional integration and the implementation of the Common Market Protocol have set in motion the desire to enhance the quality of higher education (Nkunya, 2011).

Within the above-mentioned discussions, the quality of higher education, especially the competences of graduates, is the focus of attention in meeting the challenges of today. When the number of enrolled higher education students increases and new demands are placed on graduates, the quality in learning within higher education and the employability of students become central issues to scrutinise.

Why quality in learning in higher education is important in Rwanda

Considering the effects of the 1994 Genocide, destruction of development and infrastructures, and the nation robbed of a generation's trained workforce, Rwanda's governance, including the management of public resources, remains insufficient due to the lack of a competent workforce. In the midst of such challenges, higher education is viewed as a priority that requires critical attention to recover from the devastating situation surrounding the country and its population. In turn, there have been great developments in ensuring quality education. Such developments include, for example, closer integration of curriculum development, quality assurance and assessment, improved learning resources, reforms in teaching and learning system, development of relational links between education and work life, equity within all fields and throughout all levels of education and training, and strengthened science and technology education (cf. MINEDUC, 2010).

Importantly, higher education is stressed as having the role of fulfilling manpower needs by transforming the citizen into skilled human capital for the socio-economic development of the country. In other words, higher education is viewed as the source for citizens to develop the higher-level competencies needed to rehabilitate the threatening situation that exists in all sectors of the economy and eventually take the country to its aspired state (MINEDUC, 2010).

Accordingly, higher education is associated with meeting the nation's needs, which relates to the notion of quality as fit for purpose in Rwandan higher education (National Council for Higher Education -

NCHE, 2007, p. 2) and bridging the gap between higher education and working life. The graduates' relevance to the labour market is presently a concern of the government, employers and those involved in higher education provision (MINEDUC, 2010). This view on the role of higher education is evident in the recent shift to the Bologna modular system as a means to increase the quality in learning. Here, the aims are for students to engage in independent learning and critical thinking and empower themselves by taking responsibility for their own learning (NCHE, 2007).

As shown above, learning processes and learning outcomes, as linked to the government's contemporary development agenda of transforming Rwanda into a knowledge-based economy, are important aspects in understanding the Rwandan discussion on quality in learning in higher education. Indeed, quality in learning linked with employability of graduates informs the Rwandan higher education policy (MINEDUC, 2010), as employability is considered as a key quality aspect of higher education in Rwanda. However, regardless of the significant progress towards ensuring quality in learning and tireless efforts to promote higher education responsiveness to labour market needs, the most important challenge of Rwandan higher education is handling graduates who are not adequate to serve the economy's needs. Noticeable skill gaps exist between the present graduates' competences and the competences required to meet the aspirations of Vision 2020, and only a minority of the graduates can work in jobs that are directly related to their level of education or specific training. Furthermore, many graduates lack the competence and lifelong learning skills needed to be successful in the workforce and do not have the skills that fit the employers' needs (MINEDUC, 2010; Human Resource Development Agency -HIDA, 2009). Yet, according to a report by International Youth Foundation (2011), employability skills remain the key determinant for a decent job regardless of the sector targeted or positions held, including entry-level positions. Additionally, the Rwanda higher education graduates increasingly face high competition from the other member countries of the East African Community.

Based on the arguments centred on higher education policies in Rwanda, it is evident that higher learning institutions are challenged to significantly influence the achievement of the country's ambitious goals of transforming into a knowledge-based economy. In turn, the

students might experience high expectations from their teachers and the government. For example, according to Rwanda's national qualifications framework, higher education institutions are under pressure to publically prove that their programs can satisfy the government's needs (NCHE, 2007).

Additionally, the business sector, especially the private sector, must prove its capacity to drive the economy by focusing on transforming it into an industrialised-based economy rather than an agricultural-based economy. Thus, the business world faces the challenge of recruiting a highly skilled labour force. As such, businesses search for graduates with the right skills and knowledge to evolve their organisations and increase their competitiveness. Therefore, students experience high expectations from the business sector and grow tension. Presumably, students may be in a challenging situation, especially due to the various and varying rising expectations from different sources such as the government, teachers and employers. Moreover, there could be differing expectations concerning students' learning outcomes. Indeed within market-oriented discourse on higher education and employability, there is a need to listen to students' perceptions about themselves in relation to such discourses. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on the subjective perception of students in higher education in Rwanda. This thesis aims to contribute to the field by focusing on students in terms of learning and employability.

Aim and scope of the study

The aim of the thesis is to investigate quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda by focusing on students' learning and employability. The former focus aids in understanding key challenges regarding the students' learning within Rwandan higher education at a time when an increasing number of students enrol, and the latter focus aids in understanding the challenges of student preparedness for work life at a time when higher education is being rebuilt after the genocide. More concretely, the research questions are as follows:

- What are teachers' notions of the most important problems when it comes to students' learning and the way they approach learning? (article one)

- What are the employers' views of the employability of graduates from higher education in Rwanda? (article two)

- What are the different ways that university students conceptualise quality in learning? (article three)

- What are students' perceptions of their preparedness for future work? (article four)

Research on quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda may be of central contribution to the current policy and public debates on higher education that continue to position students as change agents for the future. There are limited empirical evidences on students' perspectives on such debates. Thus, this thesis aims to provide the student voice and results that can contribute to further debate and development of higher education in Rwanda.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of six chapters and four articles as appendices. In the next chapter, perspectives on quality in learning are introduced to position the thesis and provide valuable perspectives for interpreting the empirical material (chapter two). A description of the context of Rwandan higher education is then provided (chapter three). Then, in chapter four, the research approach and methods are elaborated, including an overview of the study design and analyses. Chapter five contains a summary of the four articles on which the thesis is based. Finally, a discussion of the findings and the contribution of the study are presented in chapter six. The four articles on which this thesis is based are presented as follows:

Article 1: Mbabazi, P.B., Dahlgren L.O. & Fejes, A. (2012). Students as learners through the eyes of their teachers in Rwandan higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong education*, 31(4), 503–521.

Article 2: Mbabazi, P.B. (Accepted). A conceptual understanding of employability: The employers' view in Rwanda. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education.*

Article 3: Mbabazi, P.B., Fejes, A. & Dahlgren, L-O. (Accepted). A phenomenographic study of students' conceptions of quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda. *Studies in Continuing Education.*

Article 4: Mbabazi, P.B. (Submitted). Graduate employability: Students' conceptions of their preparedness for future work.

2. Perspectives on quality in learning

The focus of this thesis is quality in learning, specifically, students' learning and employability. The issue of quality in learning is related to the more general debate about quality in higher education. There are widely different conceptualisations of quality in education and learning. Furthermore, what counts as quality is contested or relative (Harvey & Green, 1993; Barnett, 1994); it acquires different meanings for various stakeholders in higher education (students, academics, government and its funding agencies and employers). For example, quality can be viewed as exceptional, as perfection (or consistency), as fitness for purpose, as value for money and/or as transformative (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Harvey and Knight (1996) conclude that the five definitions of quality are not mutually exclusive; rather, transformation is a meta-quality concept and the other aspects of quality are possible operationalisations of the transformative process.

Further, a number of studies, both theoretical and empirical, have focused on quality in higher education as multi-dimensional in terms of the institutional inputs, outputs and process (Johnes & Taylor, 1990, Biggs, 1993; West, Noden & Gosling, 2000; Chua, 2004). The input concerns the university context (in the form of students, faculty, support staff and infrastructure), the process concerns the teaching and learning and the output concerns the outcomes of the educational process (e.g. educational gain, retention and employability) (Biggs, 1993; West et al., 2000; Chua, 2004; Sahney, Banwet & Karunes, 2004).

The aim of the study is to investigate quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda by focusing on students' learning and employability. Thereby, this study investigates the learning process and learning output, specifically, employability. Students are the focus of this thesis and are positioned as the change agents of the future in considering the policy and public debates on higher education in Rwanda (MINEDUC, 2010).

This chapter outlines various perspectives on quality in learning based on policy and research that will be used to develop a deeper understanding of and interpret the empirical material. Various perspectives on students learning will be discussed followed by a

discussion on quality in terms of student employability. The chapter ends with a reflection on the implications of the perspectives on quality in learning for the present study.

Students' learning

Extensive research has been conducted on student learning, and various perspectives on students' learning have been raised. Some studies have argued that learning is an on going process of transformation (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Chua, 2004; Gibbs, 2010). Other studies have emphasised understanding as a quality aspect of student learning (Biggs & Collis, 1982). According to Biggs and Collis (1982), developing competence as the overall aim of learning could be achieved through a gradual process whereby the learners continuously improve their understanding by shifting from one level to another level. In this perspective, the learning outcomes are structured into 5 levels of understanding, pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational, and extended abstract (Biggs & Collis, 1982).

Phenomenography is another perspective of understanding learning and how learning can be improved (Marton, 1981). Within a phenomenographic perspective, the focus is directed to the experiences and the learning of individuals within a pedagogical context (Marton & Booth, 1997). Learning is constructed as coming to view a phenomenon in a new way, whether more in line with the curricular goals or a more powerful way for future practice (c.f. Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997; Marton & Booth, 1997). Learning occurs when a person views a phenomenon in a qualitatively different way than he/she previously viewed it. In this respect, 'how students understand the content of learning', 'how students approach their learning' and 'how students conceptualise the motive force of learning' are emphasised as central to the transition from one way of thinking to a qualitatively different way of thinking about a phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, 1986).

Quality in learning as transformation and students' approaches to learning are of interest and relevance to the present study. I aim to address the interrelationship between academia and society through the agency of the student; thus, transformation and the way that students approach learning are relevant. The focus on student transformation might aids in understanding how learning could support the

development of useful individuals or change agents who can meaningfully contribute to the wider society and economy. The current study's focus on students and their approach to learning could enhance understanding of students' educational gains. Such knowledge may be helpful in understanding the current study's empirical results on student learning.

Quality in learning in terms of transformation

Policies have continued to construct education and training as the primary means to develop individuals who can effectively and efficiently address the challenges that face today's constantly changing world (UNESCO, 2004; MINEDUC, 2010; OECD, 1998). A similar idea is noted in prior research, especially when higher education is argued to be a transformative process that supports the development of graduates who can meaningfully contribute to the wider society, local communities and economy (Gibbs, 2010; Harvey & Knight, 1996). At the core of such arguments, transformation is the target and higher education should provide a transformative experience so that students can take a leading role in transforming society (Harvey & Knight, 1996). In this respect, transformation is argued as not simply about adding to a student's stock of knowledge or set of skills and abilities but also as the evolution of the way students approach the development of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Such arguments are of interest to the present study because the policy and public debates on higher education in Rwanda have positioned students as the change agents of the future who are expected to take the country to its aspired state (MINEDUC, 2010).

Becoming transformed

The transformative view is embedded in the two main quality aspects of enhancing and empowering students (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Gibbs, 2010). At the core of transformation, students are considered participants to be enhanced and empowered. The definition of quality as transformation, as discussed by Harvey and Green (1993), is rooted in the notion of personal change or development. At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the development

of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context (Harvey & Knight, 1996). According to Biggs (2001), quality learning transforms students' perception of the world and the way that they apply their knowledge to real-world problems.

Concerning the two key aspects of enhancement and empowerment, enhancement is argued as being concerned with the provision of an educational experience that enables the development and continued improvement of students' knowledge, abilities and skills (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Green, 1993). A similar argument is noted in policies, especially those that stress learning skills as central for students to manage their future development and success in the modern workplace (NCHE, 2007). On the other hand, the aspect of empowerment focuses on giving power to students to influence their own transformation. Empowerment through the development of students' critical ability is crucial for transformative learning. According to Harvey and Knight (1996), when students develop critical ability, they have the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than serving as passive recipients. It is further argued that an approach that encourages critical ability transforms learning into an active process of coming to understand and attempts to empower students not solely as 'customers' in the education process, but for life (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Learning should be a participatory process that fosters students' involvement as active participants in the activities that aim to develop/transform them. Furthermore, students should view themselves as intellectual performers rather than passive recipients (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

In brief, transformation as a quality aspect of learning extends beyond preparing students as customers in education to preparing them for future life challenges. According to the above arguments, the more students are empowered and equipped with specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes and the more the critical ability of the students is transformed so that they are able to live and work in the knowledge society, the better the quality in learning. Thus, higher education assumes the pivotal role of providing the change agents for the future in such a way that students become responsible for creating and managing the development of the society, among other things. According to Roper (1992), self-confidence, ability to make quick, accurate judgments of situations and critical awareness are key transformative outcomes.

Students' approaches to learning

An understanding of the students' approaches to learning is necessary in the current study in order to interpret the empirical material on students' learning. In this study, students' learning and employability are key aspects of investigation in understanding quality in students' learning. Especially from a phenomenographic perspective, how students approach learning is a key issue in examining qualitative change in students' learning (Marton & Säljö, 1997; Marton et al., 1997; Marton & Booth, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Marton, 1986; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). The variations in students' approaches to learning are often argued as explanations to certain types of learning outcomes or quality. A remarkable amount of phenomenographic research on student learning has successfully demonstrated the students' approaches to learning as deep and surface approaches (Marton & Säljö, 1997; Marton et al., 1997). Thus, I now turn to a more detailed discussion on research findings on deep and surface approaches to learning.

Deep approach and surface approach to learning

According to Bowden and Marton (1998), differences between approaches to learning concern the differences in what learners are focusing on, what they are trying to achieve and how they are going about it. In the deep approach, students intend to extract meaning and, thus, engage in an active process of learning that involves relating ideas and searching for patterns and principles (Entwistle, 2000). Furthermore, the deep approach is argued to promote understanding and long-term retention of ideas that could result in long-term and meaningful outcomes of higher education (Gibbs, Margon & Taylor, 1982; Marton et al., 1997; Marton et. al., 1993; Purdie & Hattie, 2002).

On the other hand, in the surface approach, the students intend to simply cope with the task; thus, they engage in a much more restricted learning process, particularly routine memorisation (Entwistle, 2000). The students engage in a process of learning that involves accepting new facts and ideas uncritically and attempting to store them as isolated, unconnected items (Entwistle, Mccune & Walker 2001; Ramsden, 2003). A surface approach does not promote understanding and has limited and short-term consequences, even in terms of memory of facts (Gibbs et al., 1982; Marton et al., 1997).

To a large extent, an approach to learning is a context-dependent response; thus, students should not be identified as 'surface students' or 'deep students' (Entwistle, 2000). The relevance to the dimension of quality is that it is possible to identify the features of courses that foster a surface or deep approach (Entwistle, 2000). In addition, learning is argued as an activity that combines the aspects of 'what' and 'how' and, most importantly, how the two aspects are integrated during the learning process. The 'what' aspect concerns the activity of learning, and the 'how' aspect concerns the structure of a learning task (how learning is done). How the two aspects are merged inform whether students employ a deep approach or a surface approach to learning (Ramsden, 2003). Thus, if learning is focused on the content, e.g. when a text in itself is the object of learning, and the learning task is approached by dividing/organising it into smaller separate parts, a surface approach to learning is adopted. By contrast, if learning is focused on the content, extraction of meaning is the object of learning, and the learning task is approached or managed as a whole, a deep approach to learning is adopted.

Quality in learning in terms of students' employability

Employability is a key component in the current discourses on higher education provision. The issue of employability has been linked with the ability of graduates to tackle graduate jobs and the expectations and requirements of individuals to be and remain competitive in the labour market. Questions are raised about the role of higher education in preparing students for future work. Thus, employability is an important issue when discussing the aim of higher education (if higher education should prepare graduates for work) and quality in learning in higher education (does learning in higher education prepare graduates for future work?).

Perspectives on employability

The quality of education is becoming important, particularly in higher education, where the output of the system can have a direct impact on the quality of the employer organisations (Sahney, Banwet & Karunes,

2004). There is a shift to more contemporary notions and studies dominated by employability, with a focus on skills formation to develop a highly educated workforce that is equipped for greater occupational mobility and flexible work patterns (Kruss, 2004). Consequently, employability has become a central discourse, replacing the previous way of describing individuals as employed or unemployed to speaking about them as employable or not employable (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Kruss, 2004).

However, what constitutes employability skills is a debated issue. One question is as follows: what do employable graduates have that others do not? Previous definitions focused strongly on skills, variously framed as 'personal transferable skills', 'key skills', 'core skills', 'generic skills' and 'employability skills'; however, recently, this focus has been critiqued on the grounds that 'skills' is a limited concept that does not embrace what employability comprises (Bennett et al., 2000; Holmes, 2001; Knight & Yorke, 2003; 2004). It is argued that employability is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experiences (Yorke, 2006). The current alternative formulation that has been more widely accepted is the USEM model by Knight and Yorke (2004), in which employability is viewed as a more inclusive construct of capability and influenced by the four broad and inter-related components of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs and metacognition. The current study focuses on understanding, skilful practices and metacognition, as these appear more relevant and could aid in developing a deeper understanding of the results of the study.

Understanding

The idea of understanding is associated with aspects of remembering facts, understanding concepts, applying the understandings to relatively routine problems that do not call for innovative thinking, and analysing situations and bring critical evaluative skills to bear on, for example, the literature (Knight & Yorke, 2004). This parallels with Stephenson's ideas of capability. Stephenson (1998) describes capability as a necessary part of specialist expertise that extends beyond knowing about the specialisms to having the confidence to

apply the knowledge and skills within varied and changing situations. According to Stephenson (1998), subject-specific understanding (or specialist expertise) is necessary for people to become confident and capable of applying and using their understanding appropriately and effectively within both familiar and new and changing circumstances/contexts. Relevant disciplinary understanding may not be sufficient for graduates to succeed in their future work endeavours. They must also be able to deploy it to the optimal effect that their particular workplaces will require.

Skilful practices

According to Knight and Yorke (2004), skilful practices encompass both the practices needed for the deployment of disciplinary expertise and the generic practices that enable disciplinary expertise to be applied effectively in the employment arena. Generic practices include, for example, self-management, capacity to work productively with others, awareness of internal politics of organisation, the ability to manage divergent points of view and the ability to determine what is possible in a given situation. Both practices are commonly viewed as procedural knowledge that students are expected to develop. Individuals' ability to extend beyond academic understanding of how organisations work and what is expected in a particular position to understanding the 'know how' of success in a particular practice is considered important for maximising skilful practices.

Related understandings are found in other studies, especially when the skills are strongly associated with promoting the flexibility and adaptability of employees in terms of integrating into, participating, sustaining positions, and mobility within the labour market, which is in constant flux (cf. Lowden, Hall, Elliot & Lewin, 2011; Tomlinson, 2007; Williams, 2005; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). As work life increasingly demands movement between jobs, organisations, contexts and cultures due to the popularity of short-term employment contracts and increased mobility of business, graduates' need to demonstrate a range of competences that will equip them to work in a global environment, in different countries, and in multi-cultural teams escalates (Lowden et al., 2011; Hermans, 2007). Accordingly, graduates are required to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes such as teamwork, communication,

leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, managerial abilities, creativity, (Lowden et al., 2011; Yorke & Knight, 2006), and global awareness in terms of international experiences and language skills (Crossman & Clarke 2010; Yorke & Knight, 2006; Kehm, 2005; AIESEC, 2010).

Metacognition

According to Knight and Yorke (2004), metacognition focuses on awareness of what one knows and can do and how one learns more. In an educational context, good learning is conceived as when students can develop the capacity for self-regulation such that they are capable of recognising and responding appropriately to the demands of the situation confronting them. As employability becomes constructed as lifelong achievement and as a subset of and fundamentally contingent on transformative lifelong learning, people must take responsibility to become constant learners. The lack of such responsibility positions individuals as non-desirable and non-employable (Stephenson 1998; Harvey, 2000; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Simmons, 2009). Strongly emphasised is that competence is developable and that the trajectory continues upwards and individuals can adapt to changing circumstances and contexts in such a way that they can be productive in and derive satisfaction from the different circumstances in which they find themselves and remain employable (Simmons, 2009).

The sharp focus on the importance of lifelong learning brings with it increased demand on higher education in terms of enabling students to develop skills that will serve as a foundation and basis for future learning and development. Students increasingly demand a type of education that allows them to update their knowledge when necessary and to continue to do so throughout their working lives (McIntosh, & Varoglu, 2005; Tomlinson, 2007). The debates on lifelong learning and learning skills continue to emphasise independent and self-directed learning as a central need (Strivens & Grant, 2000). The ability to engage in critical self-assessment is viewed as a meta-skill that would aid students in managing their employability and general life both during and after university (Knight & Yorke, 2002). Based on this view, suggestions are raised to educational institutions concerning learning cultures that help students know what they are learning and

why and how to develop the claims to achievement that make them more employable. Teachers are expected to design promising learning environments and help students discover what they afford, what might be learned, how and why (Knight & Yorke, 2003). According to Strivens and Grant (2000), if learners have an accurate awareness of their levels of achievement in employability skills, in conjunction with a desirable skill profile for a job or a range of jobs, they will be able to recognise when and where they need to improve their level of skill.

It has also been suggested that educational systems should aim to create opportunities for students to actively participate in and contribute to the learning process such that they become responsible for creating and evaluating their developments, among other things (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Importantly, students must develop the qualities of self-awareness, self-evaluation, controlling their developments, and planning for their improvement, especially by maximising continuous learning.

Implications for the present study

The focus of this thesis is quality in learning, specifically, students' learning and employability. Various perspectives on quality in learning were reviewed from both the policy and research perspectives, especially concerning students' transformation, approaches to learning, and employability. The implications for the present study are discussed below.

One important implication of the various perspectives introduced in this chapter is the question of responsibility in terms of learning and employability. University education is expected to empower students to become responsible for their continuous transformation or development and to remain productive in society. Quality in learning can be claimed if university provision empowers students not solely as education customers but also for life. The phenomenographic perspective emphasises approaches to learning that position the student at the centre. Being in the centre, students actively become involved and empowered to take control of, evaluate and plan for the improvement of competences. A similar emphasis is noted under the employability-oriented perspectives. For example, students are expected to develop metacognition skills that will provide a foundation for career management in the future.

Continuous learning is argued as the key solution to work challenges, especially because work patterns are in constant flux. In this case, quality learning could be that which orients students to further learning by building learning skills. Competence or capability has become a lifelong achievement, and individuals must become constant learners to live and work in the contemporary world.

Furthermore, in relation to quality in learning, understanding not only concerns experiencing qualitative change in ways of viewing phenomena but also demands the capability to transfer the developed knowledge to other scenarios. Universities are expected to prepare students to develop an understanding of their fields of study and to become capable of effectively applying the knowledge to both familiar and unfamiliar work life situations.

Another implication is that the scope of education must extend beyond professional training to include knowledge that is not specific to the profession to better prepare students for life after university. Quality in learning could be viewed in terms of developing the skills that support students to practice their professional knowledge and be flexible, adaptable and mobile in work environments. Accordingly, the employability perspectives indicate skilful practices as central learning outcomes.

3. Higher education in Rwanda

To contextualise the present study, this section describes higher education in Rwanda. Reforms and developments aimed at re-establishing the higher education system after the genocide in 1994 are elaborated. The higher education expansion, the reforms in teaching and learning system, and education-work relationship are the key aspects of focus. However, firstly, the question of what is higher education in Rwanda is discussed.

Rwanda's national council for higher education describes higher education as education provision that leads to an award that is beyond the certificate from secondary school. Thus, an institution of higher education is defined as an institution that offers programs leading to awards beyond the school leaving examination as its main or only activity (NCHE, 2012). The institutions may have qualification awarding powers or offer the qualification of other higher education institutions that they are affiliated to or have a formal memorandum of understanding with.

Post-genocide reforms

The 1994 genocide eroded physical assets and, more importantly, human capital, leaving a depleted skilled population. In the midst of the devastating situation, education was among the government's public service priorities to be immediately re-established. Indeed, through a highly pragmatic approach, Rwanda's system of higher education has expanded and diversified rapidly during the 18-year post-genocide period. The system's expansion has been fuelled by a strong demand for higher education, which has been stimulated by the widespread scarcity (in the aftermath of the genocide) of qualified labour in all economic sectors. The substantial reforms and developments are hereby discussed under the themes of expansion and access to higher education, teaching and learning systems, and education-work relationship.

Expansion and access to higher education

In particular, there has been dramatic improvement in citizens' access to higher education. Before 1994, access to higher education was based on status and ethnicity. Higher education was a priority to children of the officials, especially government officials and the Hutu ethnic group, whereas the Tutsi and Twa ethnic groups were denied access to higher education. However, in 1994, policies changed and education became a right of every Rwandan citizen. Higher education, once dominated by one university (National University of Rwanda), now encompasses 31 higher education institutions (seventeen public and fourteen private) (NCHE, 2011). The implication has been an increase in higher education enrolment. The increased expansion of higher education could be attributed to the increased political influence through the declaration of education as every citizen's right and the new policy of free Nine-Year Basic Education. The result has been the continuously increased access of Rwandans to education at all levels and continuously increased inflow of students from high school to higher education. An illustration of enrolment developments in higher education in Rwanda over the last six years is presented in Table 1.

Table1. Higher education students from 2006-2011

Status	Gender	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Public	Male	10,351	12,901	14,241	17,695	21,188	25,023
	% Male	68.1%	68.0%	67.9%	67.3%	67.1%	66.0%
	Female	4,850	6,071	6,725	8,609	10,376	12,879
	% Female	31.9%	32.0%	32.1%	32.7%	32.9%	34.0%
S/Total		**15,201**	**18,972**	**20,966**	**26,304**	**31,564**	**37,902**
Private	Male	11,333	11,087	12,978	13,479	14,054	16,852
	% Male	51.6%	50.3%	49.1%	46.6%	45.1%	47.1%
	Female	10,615	10,954	13,462	15,430	17,116	18,920
	% Female	48.4%	49.7%	50.9%	53.4%	54.9%	52.9%
S/Total		**21,948**	**22,041**	**26,440**	**28,909**	**31,170**	**35,772**
Public and private	Male	21,684	23,988	27,219	31,174	35,242	41,875
	% Male	58.4%	58.5%	57.4%	56.5%	56.2%	56.8%
	Female	15,465	17,025	20,187	24,039	27,492	31,799
	% Female	41.6%	41.5%	42.6%	43.5%	43.8%	43.2%
TOTAL		**37,149**	**41,013**	**47,406**	**55,213**	**62,734**	**73,674**

Source: MINEDUC (2012)

Teaching and learning system

The higher education institutions in Rwanda are challenged to adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods to adapt to a new range of demands, such as quality, to increase the employability of graduates. There have also been large reforms within the teaching and learning system. The major reforms were the adoption of the Bologna system and legalisation of English as the language of instruction, which have strengthened the higher education in several respects.

Since 2008, the Bologna modular system has been implemented in the teaching and learning practices of all higher learning institutions. The rationale of adopting the Bologna system was to improve the quality of education by emphasising a student-centred approach rather than the teacher-centred approach that had previously monopolised the teaching and learning system (NCHE, 2007). The student-centred approach has been argued to increase students' active engagement in their learning processes and active participation in influencing their transformation or development. Additionally, the rationale of adopting the Bologna system could be understood in terms of globalisation and internationalisation goals. Especially with the present national ambitions, such as increased promotion of regional and international partnership, it was considered imperative to reform Rwanda's education system to facilitate the citizens to maximally benefit from the international relations. In 2006, Rwanda joined the East African Community (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania). According to Mihirwe (2012), the need to promote sub-regional credit transfer (to promote student mobility) and East African Quality Assurance Framework could be linked with the adoption of the Bologna process. Thus, harmonisation of the Rwandan education system with the regional system could partially explain the adoption of the Bologna system in Rwanda's education system. The education system was previously characterised by the challenges of the limited transferability of students from one institution to another, failure to permit multiple entries and exits for students, and difficulties in program comparability with other institutions. By contrast, within the new system, all awards are credit-based, with different levels of credit accumulation that award the students. According to the national qualification framework (NCHE, 2007), a student can be awarded a certificate of higher education with 120 credit points, a diploma in higher education with 240 credit points, an advanced diploma in education with 300 credit points, and a bachelor's degree with 360 credit points.

Another key change in the education system has been the adoption of English as the language of instruction. Particularly since 1994, the Rwanda community can be described as a multi-lingual society. The return of Rwandans to their home country from various countries resulted in an inflow of various language backgrounds into the country. Consequently, the official language of communication proved to be a substantial challenge to all systems. Until 2000, the following three

languages were officially operating in the education system: Kinyarwanda (mother-tongue language), French and English (MINEDUC, 2010). In higher education, French and English were the languages of instruction. Thus, all programs offered at higher education were carried out in parallel sessions of English and French. One could say that there were two universities (English and French) in one. The institutions of learning were forced to hire visiting lecturers to meet the demand for Anglophone teachers and Francophone teachers from 1994 to 2007. However, this proved quite challenging financially. Therefore, since 2001, the higher education institutions were obliged to offer language training as a compulsory course in the first year of higher education and train students in both English and French. By 2007, the university student population was considered as bilingual and able to use both English and French in academic endeavours. English as the medium of instruction throughout the education system was adopted in 2008 and implemented in 2009. This led to a new configuration of roles and relations among the three languages. Kinyarwanda became the bedrock of initial literacy and learning, English as the new medium of instruction and French as an additional language (MINEDUC, 2010, p. 14).

The rationale of adopting English as the official language of communication in all sectors of economy might be attributed to Rwanda's increasing regional and international relations. There could be social, economic and political implications of these relations/integrations. For example, English is viewed as an important tool for trade and socio-economic development and as a gateway to the global knowledge economy (MINEDUC, 2010). According to Muhirwe (2012), the rationale of adopting the new English policy in Rwanda can be illustrated by the language's status, function and role in the context of globalisation and internationalisation, as English has become a global academic lingua franca.

The education-work relationship

The other significant development in the higher education system in Rwanda concerns the education-work relationship. In Rwanda, the discourses on the fundamental importance of education in the improvement of social and economic development strongly link with the labour market. Higher education is charged with the responsibility

of transforming students into individuals who are consistent with the labour market (employable). Thus, the overarching mission of the Rwanda higher education sub-sector is 'to provide quality higher education programs that match the labour market and development needs of Rwanda for graduates who are capable of contributing to national economic and social needs and who can compete on the international labour market' (MINEDUC, 2010, p. 33). In addition, quality education is defined as 'fit for purpose', whereby education provision should enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes (NCHE, 2007). The intended outcomes should be designed to meet the needs of Rwanda and the student. In this respect, the Rwandan higher education policies have increasingly emphasised the employability of graduates.

One approach to facilitate higher education in Rwanda to transform the citizens into an employable workforce has been to develop a closer collaboration between the academic sector and the industry sector to enhance higher education's responsiveness to the labour market needs. Consequently, it is a necessity rather than an option for a higher education institution to involve private sector representatives on its board of directors and curriculum review panels (MINEDUC, 2010). According to MINEDUC (2010), to remain demand-driven and allow graduates to drive innovation in the private sector, higher learning institutions must respond to changes in technology and innovations in industry.

4. Research approach and methods

This chapter describes the research approach and methods employed in this thesis. The chapter begins with a general introduction of the research design, including the participants and data collection and analytical methods employed. Then, a more detailed discussion of each of these aspects is presented. The chapter ends with a discussion on the ethical and quality aspects of the present study.

Research design

The aim of the present thesis is to investigate quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda by focusing on students' learning and employability. The former focus aids in understanding key challenges regarding the students' learning within Rwandan higher education at a time when an increasing number of students enrol, and the latter focus aids in understanding the challenges of student preparedness for work life at a time when higher education is being rebuilt after the genocide. As mentioned previously, different stakeholders have different views on these issues; thus, it is important to take into account various stakeholders, such as the students, teachers and employers, in this study.

Students are the focus of this thesis, as they are positioned as the change agents of the future in the policy and public debates on higher education in Rwanda. Their voices have not been included to a large extent in research on higher education in Rwanda; thus, they were included as key stakeholders in the present study. Furthermore, it was presumed that teachers are significant actors in the students' life and would, thus, provide important views about students' learning. As a third group, employers were included because they are gatekeepers for students after graduation. Their views concerning what graduates must know are important for understanding issues about employability in Rwanda.

In terms of the three groups of stakeholders, students, teachers and employers, representatives from different programs and areas of work life were included to increase variation in the results and promote the

generalisability potential of the study through the maximisation of variation and context similarity (Larsson, 2009).

To approach the question about different stakeholders' views on quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda, interviews were conducted. Interviews allow the interviewees the opportunity to express their personal experiences or views in their own words, which in turn allows the interviewer to gain the interviewee's perspective (Patton, 2002). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using several methods of analysis. A phenomenographic approach was presumed relevant for analysing the data on maximising variations of conceptions within learning (Marton, 1981) and thematic analysis was presumed relevant for maximising variety by establishing detailed descriptive categories of different understandings within and between groups of participants. In addition, the concern for fullness, flexibility and compatibility motivated the choice of thematic analysis in this study. Thematic analysis is essentially independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). The distribution of the participants and methods is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of study design

Articles	No. of participants	Program/institution	Data collection method	Analytical method/approach
Article one	25 Teachers	Education, Economics & Management, Medicine, Agriculture, Arts and Humanities and Applied Sciences.	Focus group interviews	Thematic
Article two	9 Employers	RRA, CHK, King Faisal Hospital, ISAR, FAWE, Kagarama sec.	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic
Articles three & four	40 students	Accounting, Medicine, Agriculture, Education,	Semi-structured interviews	Phenomenography and Thematic

Context of the study

To achieve the objective of maximising diversity, several professional groups were emphasised in this study. The description of the context focuses on the institution and professional programs considered in the

present study. Specifically, the National University of Rwanda (NUR) and the professional programs of agriculture, education, accounting and medicine were considered for the study. These areas provided a wide coverage of natural sciences, social sciences and faculty of medicine.

The concern for diversity motivated the selection of NUR for the present study. NUR is the largest university in Rwanda in terms of student population and fields of education offered (NCHE, 2011). NUR was established in 1963 with 49 students. By 1994, 31 years after establishment, the institution had expanded its student population to 2,735. As illustrated in the table below, in 1995 (after the genocide), the student enrolment was 3,261. In the current year 2012, the student population stands as 11,036. Thus, the university evidenced an increase of 70.5% (7,775 students) within 17 years. Table 3 summarises the university's expansion in regards to student enrolment.

Table 3. NUR student population from 1994 to 2012

Academic year	Male	Female	Total enrolment
1994-1995	2,472	789	3,261
1995-1996	2,860	1,098	3,958
1996-1997	3,018	1,177	4,195
1997-1998	3,349	1,203	4,552
1999-2000	3,475	1,060	4,535
2000-2001	3,705	1,135	4,840
2001-2002	4,641	1,282	5,923
2002-2003	5,347	1,893	7,240
2004	5,638	1,973	7,611
2005	5,560	1,997	7,557
2006	5,885	2,206	8,091
2007	5,258	1,790	7,048
2008	5,795	2,555	8,350
2009	7,021	2,927	9,948
2010	8,088	3,400	11,488
2011	8,595	3,723	12,318
2012	7,685	3,351	11,036

Source: National University of Rwanda (2012)

According to the national qualification framework for higher education in Rwanda (NCHE, 2007), a student studies for a minimum of three years and a maximum of four years full-time for a bachelor's degree and a minimum of four years and a maximum of five years full-time for a bachelor's degree with honours. However, there are exceptions to these rules. For example, the bachelor of medicine and surgery can take six years due to two extra years for clinical placements. A part-time student typically studies for a minimum of four years and a maximum of five years for a bachelor's degree and a minimum of six years and a maximum of seven years for a bachelor's degree with honours.

For the current study, only full-time students participated. Thus, the medicine program covers six years, of which two years are for clinical placements, and the exit award is bachelor's degree in General Medicine. The agriculture program covers four years and the exit award is a bachelor's degree with honours. The accounting program covers three years and the exit award is bachelor's of Science in Accounting (Bsc. Accounting). Finally, the education program covers four years with an exit award of bachelor's degree with honours. In each of these programs except medicine, students have four weeks of internship to practice their professional knowledge.

Participants

The empirical data in this thesis were gathered through interviews with three groups of participants totalling 74. The participants included 40 university students (sixteen females and 24 males), 25 university teachers (three females and 22 males) and nine employers (one female and eight males).

It was presumed that the professional groups have different experiences and needs and require access to different types of services and support in relation to learning, work and employability. Thus, the samples were deliberately selected to maximise the diversity, obtain a fuller understanding of quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda, and enhance the generalisability of the study (Larsson 2009).

The student group included 40 university students in either of the last two years of their programs. It was presumed that such students have sufficient understanding of the learning at university and could attempt to link it with their future work life. The 40 students included

ten from accounting, ten from medicine, ten from education, and ten from agriculture. Students were invited to participate in the research interviews through the department heads. The aim of the study was specified in the invitation letter. The students were selected on a 'first come first serve' basis such that the first ten students from each profession were considered for interviews.

The 25 university teachers comprised five from education, five from economics and management, four from medicine, four from agriculture, six from arts and humanities and one from the faculty of sciences. Data collection occurred in conjunction with a workshop on teaching and learning in higher education that was organised for the teachers at the National University of Rwanda. During the workshop, the aims and purpose of the project were presented to the workshop participants. The teachers were then invited to participate in interviews following the workshop. Of the 27 participants in the workshop, 25 volunteered for the interviews.

The nine employers were from the four institutions that are the largest employers of the graduates from the professional groups of medicine, accounting, education and agricultures in Rwanda. The interviewees included two from King Fisal Hospital and CHUK-Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Kigali (department heads), three from RRA (Rwanda Revenue Authority), two from FAWE girls school and Kagarama secondary school (deans of students) and two from ISAR (Rwanda Agriculture Research Institute - Butare). An official application to conduct the interviews with these institutions was obtained from my employer (National University of Rwanda), which was then sent to the specific institutions. The application letter clearly indicated the aim of the research. A suggestion of staff members responsible for employee recruitment and appraisal was made in the application along with a request for the institution to suggest individuals who would be appropriate for the interview. The institutions responded positively to the application by suggesting specific individuals to interview and interview schedules.

Interviews

To penetrate further into the participants' conceptions or experiences, qualitative interviews were preferred to engage the participants to verbally express their perceptions about the object of study. Interviews

are a viable means of learning about peoples' views within qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). This parallels with Patton's (2002) idea that the purpose of interviews is to allow one to enter into the interviewee's perspective. Such advantages motivated the selection of the interview method in the present study. A pilot study was conducted before the main interviews. The aim was to test the interview guide, clarity of the questions, whether the questions captured the research interest, whether the domains of interest were covered, and the length of the interview (Bryman, 2012; Patton, 2002). Changes to the guide were made based on the feedback information from the pilot study. In this study, both focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the empirical data. All interviews were conducted in English and later subjected to qualitative analysis.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were preferred in article one due to their powerful advantage of allowing the interviewees to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view through interaction (Bryman, 2012; Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), group interviews of people with similar backgrounds can encourage active interaction that facilitates the collection of rich responses and a variety of perspectives. The teachers were randomly but equally distributed (in terms of group size) into five focus groups. As a strategy to allow increased chance for all group members to contribute, the group size was limited to five members (e.g. Patton, 2002).

Each group discussed the questions under the leadership of the moderators, who were doctoral students. A line of questioning was prepared and given to the moderators to guide and control the discussion. The domains of inquiry concerned students' important learning-related problems and approaches to learning. The data were collected in the form of the moderators' notes. The notes were collective views of a group rather than individuals' ways of expressing themselves. To control the risks of incompleteness and misunderstandings, each moderator presented the focus groups' views before closing the interviews. This made it possible to countercheck and confirm the correctness and completeness of the gathered data and allow further clarification and additions from group members.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data pertaining to employers' views regarding the employability of graduates from higher education programs in Rwanda (article two) and students' dimensions of learning (article three) and employability (article four). Semi-structured interview were preferred because this interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in the direction that appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from the interviewee during the conversation (Patton, 2002). Thus, in the present study, the interview guide comprised only the entry questions, and the interviews developed to a large extent based on the input of the participants. For employers, nine semi-structured interviews that focused on the employability of graduates from Rwanda higher education were conducted. The domains of inquiry covered issues of preparedness for work, application of knowledge in the work context, involvement and participation in work commitments, learning at work and social responsibility. The interviews lasted 45-60 minutes.

Forty semi-structured interviews that focused on the dimensions of learning and employability were conducted with students. The domains of inquiry focused on general university experience, study experience, and preparedness for future work. Interview schedules were arranged with the selected students, and interviews were conducted in the evenings after their daily classes (17 o'clock or later). All semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded, transcribed, and subjected to a qualitative analysis.

Analysis

The empirical data were qualitatively analysed. The aim of the analysis was to provide a full, rich description of the participants' views and utilise the different data groups for different articles and later combine them into a 'whole' in the thesis. Therefore, thematic analysis was considered suitable. This method is highly flexible in terms of application and compatibility with other methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, at a later stage of the data analyses, I found it imperative to provide variations in experiences; thus, a phenemenographic approach was employed. In sum, both thematic and phenemenographic analyses were employed in this study. An overview

of the application of each analysis technique in this study is presented below.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that is characterised as flexible. It is essentially independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool that can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data and possibly interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998).

In this thesis, the analysis aimed primarily to identify patterns within the data set. The responses to several specific questions of interest, rather than the entire data, were thematically analysed. These questions included the following: *what are the most important problems when it comes to students' learning and the way they approach learning? (*article one*), how do you find the ability of graduates to handle problems at work?* (article two) and *what do you have to say about your ability to work in various workplaces after graduation?* (article four).

Categorisation

Based on the phases of familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an inductive analysis was conducted to identify existing patterns. Firstly, the audio recordings were transferred into written form (transcribed). To ensure the complete representation of the data set, I repeatedly listened to each specific interviewee's words before listening to another interviewee. Eventually, a complete data set in text was produced. Then, I searched for possible underlying meanings and patterns across the data set. Through the activity of transcribing and revising the transcribed texts, I continually made notes of important ideas that were identified in the data set. Later, all of the identified data extracts were coded, and I grouped the extracts under common codes. The groupings

were thoroughly revised and counterchecked against the entire data set (raw data) to ensure that the correct meanings were sustained. To obtain a clear image of the groupings, I generated a brief description of each grouping along with supported data extracts. This helped me to clearly see the critical features or aspects of each grouping and the commonalities and differences between the different groupings. I then made a condensed version of categories that combined the former groupings with commonalities together to generate a common meaning. The underlying central meaning was used as a basis to name the categories.

For example, in article one, the grouping of failure to participate in learning, teacher dependent, knowledge comes from teacher, power relation, and teacher time most effective were combined to form the category of dependence. The other categories included physical and economic resources, experience of a deep approach to learning, reading culture, and previous preparation for higher education. In article three, aspects of theoretical knowledge and practical understanding were combined to form the category of professional understanding; issues related to readiness to change, flexibility and adaptability to changes were combined into the category of changeable/formable; and aspects that focused on facilitating practice of professional knowledge at work were categorised as skilful practices. In article four, the aspects focused on developing knowledge outside professional fields such as understandings from other disciplines, language skills, especially international languages, and computer skills, were combined into the category of knowledge not specific to the profession; aspects linked with developing experience, understanding, confidence, and perfection were combined to form the experience of professional practice; and issues connected with diversity in experience, flexibility and adaptability, and competence to handle job assignments with international components were combined into the international experience category.

Finally, a detailed description of the new categories that aimed to present the specific features of each category and how it related to the aim of the study was generated. Although the identified themes are strongly linked to the data rather than theories (Patton, 2002), I acknowledge that I could not completely free myself of the existing pre-understandings. Rather, I attempted to minimise the influence by focusing on a detailed reading of the empirical data so that new

meanings were discovered. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum.

Phenomenographic analysis

A specific interest was how students responded to the following question: *What do you understand by quality in learning?* To understand the different ways that university students conceptualise quality in learning, a phenomenographic approach was preferred because it focuses on describing key aspects of variations in ways of experiencing a phenomenon (Trigwell, 2006). This implies that the ways of experiencing a phenomenon that are common across the data set may not be included. According to Trigwell (2006), the approach emphasises the description of the variations in the collective experience of phenomena rather than the individual experience. Therefore, this approach may lead to a limited number of qualitatively distinct categories of description. Phenomenographically established conceptions adopt a second-order rather than first-order approach, whereby the experience of the phenomenon as described by others forms the basis of the researcher's description (Trigwell, 2006).

In this thesis, a phenomenographic approach was employed to determine the key aspects of the variation in how students understand quality in learning and help interpret the students' conceptions (article three). Of the 40 interviewees (students), 20 interviews (five randomly selected from each of the professional groups of accounting medicine, agriculture and education) were considered for article three. This was based on the understanding that in phenomenographic research, a participant group size between fifteen and twenty is considered to be sufficiently large to reveal most of the possible variations and allow for a defensible interpretation (Trigwell, 2000). A second-order perspective was adopted such that the meanings that the students ascribed to quality in learning, as expressed in the interviews, were used as the basis of the analysis.

Categorisation

The analytical process was based on the seven steps of familiarisation, condensation, comparison, grouping, articulation, labelling, and contrasting (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991). Insight into the analytical process and the four qualitatively different (but related) ways that

students conceptualise quality in learning generated in article three is presented below.

To become familiar with the data, sufficient time was allocated to carefully read and re-read the transcribed texts. Through the process of several readings, I was able to understand the excerpts more and more clearly and more easily identify the significant statements that students used to express their meaning of quality in learning. I later compiled all of the identified significant statements into another version of the empirical data that summarised the entire dialogue. I carefully counterchecked the new version against the original to ensure that the condensed version was complete. Through repeated reading, I carefully reviewed the summarised version and aimed to identify the critical aspects within the selected answers. Eventually, the common aspects across the texts were excluded and a smaller version of only key different aspects was generated. These aspects were further scrutinised through comparison. Then, I arranged four categories of similarities. To identify the sources of variation, I described each category, clearly showing the existing relations between the elements/answers within a category and how they linked together to build a given meaning as a category. Four qualitative categories labelled as transformation, practice, knowledge durability, and employability were generated. Finally, I contrasted the four categories with the aim of establishing the logical internal relations. Thus, an outcome space of themes of knowledge and transferability was generated and aided in placing the categories into a logical relationship.

Ethical consideration

In carrying out the empirical studies, I used the general guidelines of research ethics put forward by the American Psychological Association-APA (2010) as a benchmark. I adhered to the principles of integrity and respect for rights and dignity; the ethical standard of informed consent to research and informed consent for recording voices were emphasised throughout.

Supportive documents were obtained. I utilised recommendation letters, one from my supervisors and one from my employer. The letters clearly indicated my position as a researcher, the purpose of the

data as purely for my doctorate research project, and a request for cooperation in facilitating the data collection.

During every interview, I briefed the prospective participants about the aim of the research, the possible benefits of the research, and the planned schedule for data collection. I also clearly stated that the interviews would be audio recorded and that participants had the right to decline to participate and withdraw from the study irrespective of the extent of data collected. I clearly informed the participants that they were free to request clarification at any moment and would receive answers. I further clarified that their true names were not necessary in handling the data, with the aim of promoting privacy and confidentiality. Each participant was assigned a code at the beginning of the interview. All registered participants remained involved through the end of the data collection.

The prospective participants asked various questions before confirming participation in the data collection. For example, the student participants asked who would conduct the interviews, their teachers or someone else and whether the project would involve all university students or some students. The employers and teachers asked whether they would obtain a copy of the thesis. I clarified the raised questions.

Although the use of audio recording helped to save time, some of the participants, especially the employees, were not interested in this method. The participants first sought authorisation for audio recording from their superiors. This postponed the interviews, and I was invited to meet the human resource director to discuss the interview guide and integrity of the participants. There were no aspects or issues that were considered as sensitive or threats to personal integrity. Finally, the authorisation was granted and I was asked to provide a copy of my research to the employers.

Quality aspects of the study

As this is a qualitative study, issues of quality in terms of dependability, credibility and generalisability warrant discussion. The qualitative methodology was selected to provide a wide range of perceptions about quality in learning and create a starting point to discuss changes in higher education in Rwanda. A discussion of the

concepts of dependability, credibility and generalisability as quality aspects follows.

The quality aspect of dependability is focused on the internal consistency of the research process. If carefully performed, it could lead to findings that will likely apply in additional circumstances (Larsson, 2005; Bryman, 2012). In this study, I present an explicit description of the research perspectives, methods and analytical process. Thereby, the aim is to allow openness in the research process so that the reader can evaluate the quality of the research. Continual discussions of findings and interpretations with supervisors significantly contributed to the dependability of the research.

The credibility of the study concerns whether the results and conclusions are reasonable in relation to the empirical data (Bryman, 2012). In this study, credibility was emphasised through a critical analysis. The analytical process was benchmarked on recommended principles. For example, the thematic analysis was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommended steps and the phenomenographic analysis was based on Dahlgren and Fallsberg's (1991) recommended steps. Additionally, the issue of negotiated consensus was emphasised throughout the research. Articles one and three are multi-author articles. Thus, the findings are a product of shared knowledge and interpretations.

Generalisability is another quality factor. According to Larsson (2009), generalisation in qualitative studies can be claimed along the three lines of generalisation by maximising variation, generalisation through context similarity and generalisation through recognition of patterns.

I argue that the present study allows generalisation by maximising variation and generalisation through context similarity. Larsson (2009) clearly shows that enhancing the generalisation potential by maximising variation in qualitative research is relevant in studies in which a number of cases constitute the empirical basis. This view prioritises the sample components rather than sample size. In the current study, variation was maximised through mixed samples in terms of stakeholders (students, teachers and employers) and a variety of professions/faculties (medicine, accounting, education, and agriculture). These heterogeneous samples (of mixed professional experience) helped to provide a wide range of perceptions of the students' learning and employability. These perceptions were later

linked as a whole set, which helped to paint a broad picture of quality in learning in Rwandan higher education.

It is expected that the findings covered the variation relatively well in terms of quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda. Additionally, I argue that the diverse groups of participants and professions enhance generalisability through context familiarity, as the interpretations of this study could be transferred to a similar context. I suggest that the findings could be successfully transferred to other professions and higher education institutions in Rwanda.

5. Summaries of articles

This thesis is based on four articles. The articles are presented in an order that hopefully contributes to the larger picture of quality in students' learning and employability in Rwandan higher education following the genocide. In this chapter, I will first present my 'journey' through the four articles. I will then summarise the articles individually.

Inspired by the loud call to Rwanda higher education for quality improvement and employability of graduates (MINEDUC, 2010), I conducted a study on students' learning-related problems. Thus, article one concerns teachers' notions of students' most prevalent learning-related problems. Drawing on the experience from article one, it was necessary to take into consideration the voices of other stakeholders, especially the students and the employers, to enrich my understanding. Thus, article two concerns the employers' views on graduate employability. The first two articles provided insight into the interesting position that students occupied in worlds of education and work. Due to the high expectations that teachers and the employers place on students to meet the institutional/organisational needs, it was important and necessary to understand the students' dimensions of learning and employability. These dimensions are covered in article three and four, respectively. An extended overview of the four articles follows.

Article one: Students as learners through the eyes of their teachers in Rwandan higher education

In this study, we explored and analysed higher education teachers' notions about the most important problems related to students' learning, including notions about students' approaches to learning. Five group interviews were conducted with 25 university teachers. Responses to the question 'what are the most important problems when it comes to students' learning and the way they approach learning?'

were thematically analysed. The qualitative analyses generated five themes, which are reviewed below.

One important problem was the way that students perceived learning and the identity of their teachers. Teachers stated that the students believed that the teachers know everything needed for their learning and are unchallengeable. The teachers revealed that the students understood learning as studying their teachers' classroom notes. Due to the way students positioned their teachers (identity), minimum interaction was experienced between the students and teachers. Consequently, teachers argued that such beliefs affected students' learning by limiting students' participation in learning.

Poor physical and economic resources was another factor that was reported as a threat to student learning. The learning environment was considered as important for good learning. This environment encompasses aspects of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and accommodation-hostels. The teachers reported that the conditions that students live in and operate from significantly influenced students' understanding of learning and approaches to learning. However, the financial implications of developing a supportive learning environment were a challenge to the learning institutions, for example, the National University of Rwanda. One interpretation was that for learning institutions to become academically healthy, there are financial implications, which in turn demand institutions to be financially healthy.

The findings also showed that missing experience of deep approaches to learning resulted in an important gap in students' learning and learning outcomes. The teachers strongly argued that prior learning experience can influence the meaning that students construct for learning, which in turn impacts how students approached learning and the quality of their learning outcome. In this article, the teachers argued that the students' prior learning experiences did not enhance a deep approach to learning, with continued effects on their learning at university. One important argument was that the earlier that children are exposed to deep approaches to learning, the earlier they develop a more elaborate meaning of learning and learning skills and, thus, the better they are prepared for higher education.

Teachers also emphasised that reading culture is an important for student to benefit from a deep approach to learning and become independent learners and explorers. The teachers argued that a culture

of reading is one effective way for students to become exposed to various phenomena and discover various ways of handling situations. However, in this article, the teachers reported that the students lacked a culture of reading due to prior learning experience through a teacher-centred approach. The teachers stated that a poor learning culture among students was a threat to the quality in learning and outcomes.

The findings further revealed that students were not prepared for higher education. The teachers reported that students lacked an understanding on how learning takes place in higher education, assuming that the experience is similar to that in high school. According to the teachers, the students tended to experience the relevance of courses, lectures and learning extrinsically as one aspect of a new learning experience at university. The teachers argued that the different learning experience that students met when they joined university, which required the students to take responsibility for their learning and to be independent learners to some extent, appeared as a threat to the students' motivation to learn. The teachers argued that students must be introduced to how learning takes place in higher education prior to enrolment in higher education.

Importantly, the study concluded by drawing on the need to understand the interdependence of educational levels to enhance quality learning among the students. This is contrary to educators' assumption that the levels are independent of one another. The reforms to promote quality education in Rwanda could yield more positive results if a quality foundation is laid at the early levels of education, especially given that the education levels are interdependent.

Article two: A conceptual understanding of employability: The employers' view in Rwanda

To gain a deep understanding of quality in learning and in recognition of the increasing call for educational responsiveness to the labour market needs as an important challenge to higher education in Rwanda, it was necessary to listen to the employers' voices. Thus, article two aimed to understand employers' view of the employability of graduates from higher education in Rwanda.

Nine individual interviews were conducted with key persons in the institutions that are the largest employers of the four professional groups of medicine, accounting, agriculture, and education. Responses to the question 'how do you find the ability of graduates to handle problems at work?' were of interest in this article. A brief description of the themes of professional understanding, being changeable/formable and skilful practices follows.

The theme of professional understanding encompassed both the theoretical knowledge and the practical know-how of a specific profession. Confidence in integrating theory into practice was strongly emphasised. Confidence was considered as a good way of illustrating understanding and the ability to function in a given profession. In line with previous studies, professional understanding (also named as disciplinary understanding) was reported to help graduates effectively function in a job, sustain a position, and easily switch jobs within a given profession (when need arises) in the knowledge world. Importantly, lifelong learning was implicated as basic for the continual development of one's specialist knowledge and skills to remain employable (Stephenson, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2004).

The theme of changeable/formable focuses on flexibility and adaptability and shared a similar view with the findings of previous studies. Importantly, it implied graduates' readiness to learn and readiness to change as situations may demand. Graduates were expected to be flexible and adaptable to both internal and external influences. The former concerned organisational-oriented needs. Here, employers' interest in 'fit for purpose' (training employees according to organisational needs) was evident. The latter concerned other changes such as new innovations on the market, location-based changes etc. Of note, higher education institutions were explicitly implicated as primarily responsible for preparing the students for work (Yorke, 2006; Cranmer, 2006).

The theme of skilful practices encompassed practices that support the deployment of professional competence to effective use, adaptability to the work environment and mobility of staff. Skills such as IT and communication, especially language skills, were emphasised as necessary for preparing graduates for work and, in turn, increasing the opportunities for employability in the knowledge society. One argument raised is that students must extend their computer skills beyond general application to include profession-specific applications.

It was evident that students are expected to communicate in English at work. One interesting finding is that foreign language acquisition is crucial for one to be employable in the home country (e.g. Rwanda), which contradicts the previous view of foreign language for global employability (cf. Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Hermans, 2007).

In this article, lifelong learning and responsiveness to employability were important implications. Lifelong learning can enhance the relevance of professional/disciplinary understanding over time and space and enable graduates to positively respond and adapt to evolutions in the labour market. Higher education was implicated as responsible for forming graduates into directly employable individuals so that meaningful engagement can proceed when they arrive at the workplace. One important contribution of the article concerned the question of the 'possibility of borrowing employability-related policies or capabilities from one context to another'. Although the themes may appear general across professions, it was evident that significant differences exist concerning what a particular theme encompasses or the conceptual meaning of a given theme across the professions. Thus, the understanding of a specific profession may not guarantee full applicability to another profession. Further evident is that a repertoire of skills and competences may have a general value but also prove insufficient for some specific situations/contexts. For example, proficiency in foreign language proved essential for one's employability in the home country.

Article three: A phenomenographic study of students' conceptions of quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda

Article three concerns students' conceptions of quality in leaning. The aim was to understand the different ways that university students conceptualise quality in learning by drawing on a phenomenographic approach. To maximise variation, the sample was composed of twenty university students from the medicine, agriculture, accounting and education disciplines. The empirical data to the question 'what do you understand by quality in learning?' which was part of the domain of inquiry concerning study were phenomenographically analysed. An

overview of four qualitatively different (but related) ways of conceptualising quality in learning follows.

Quality in learning as transformation: This conception is linked to personal development. The value of learning is associated with the experience of an improvement in understanding or knowing. In this study, personal development was strongly associated with the evolution of one's ways of thinking, seeing and doing things. In turn, such evolution was described as becoming intellectual and knowledgeable. Further discussion revealed that transformation embraced improvement in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and becoming empowered as the self-manager of one's development and that these explained quality in learning (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). Importantly, learning is expected to empower students not solely as customers in the education process, but for life through the ability to live and work in the knowledge society.

Practice was another way that students conceptualised quality in learning. The ability to confidently practice in the world of work was understood as an important aspect of quality in learning. One important expectation was that one can transfer the theoretical understandings into practical solutions to work problems. A similar view was noted in prior studies, especially when education was argued as requiring students to be able to analytically apply a body of knowledge in real-life situations (Harvey & Green, 1993; Kemenade, Pupius, & Hardjono, 2008). However, from a phenomenographic perspective, the conception of practice has been criticised as acquisition- and reproduction-oriented rather than understanding-oriented (Marton et. al., 1993).

Another conception was quality in learning as durability of knowledge. The argument raised here was that the relevance of knowledge should extend beyond the academic context and obtaining academic credentials to encompass the needs of the world of work. One's ability to remain effective at work was strongly implied. Students explicitly claimed that the ability to practice is not adequate to become successful in their profession, as developing relevant knowledge was crucial to face the challenges of society. In this respect, the relevance aspect is illustrated as the lasting usefulness of knowledge.

The fourth conception was quality in learning as employability. This conception focused on learning as enabling students to develop

the capability to compete and win on the labour market, perform well on the job and work in various locations. It was strongly implied that the world of work was highly competitive and the students looked forward to learning in higher education as preparation (to increase the opportunity) to obtain a better position in a competitive labour market.

Beyond the different ways of conceptualising quality in learning, the findings also generated internal relationships among the conceptions. For example, knowledge was a relational bond among the conceptions of transformation, practice, durability and employability. The type of knowledge that students developed in their learning becomes an important factor in how students become transformed (experience personal development), how effectively they could function in their professions, the extent to which the relevance to the market needs could be achieved (durability) and the level of employability that could be promoted. Transferability was another relational bond among the conceptions of practice, durability and employability. It is commonly emphasised in these conceptions that one could change contexts (both space and time) and remain successful in her/his work life endeavours. Thus, the aspect of knowledge transferability, which in turn promotes individuals' flexibility with changes in context and over the course of time, becomes a quality aspect of learning.

The main contribution of this article was the exploration of the relationship between education and work, especially when students conceptualise quality in learning in terms of being successful in work life. Students were considered as primarily responsible for their own success by becoming constant learners to promote the lasting usefulness of their knowledge and skills and sustain their employability. Universities were considered as having a crucial role of laying a strong foundation of what students must understand for their entire life.

The study contributed the new conceptions of knowledge durability and employability to the field of phenomenographic research on learning in higher education. Adding the aspect of quality to the analysis of learning allowed students to extend beyond conceptualising learning as increasing one's knowledge, reproduction, understanding, self-development and goal fulfilment to viewing learning in terms of knowledge durability and employability.

Article four: Graduate employability: students' perceptions on their preparedness for future work

The aim of this article was to analyse students' perceptions of their preparedness for future work, i.e., how employable they view themselves being after graduation. Forty university students from the disciplines of accounting, agriculture, education, and medicine participated in the semi-structured interviews. In this article, a specific interest was the responses to the following question: *What do you have to say about your ability to work in various workplaces after graduation*? These responses were thematically analysed. A summary of the findings follows.

Across the professional groups, students acknowledged the university credentials as relevant for their future work life, but such credentials do not serve as a badge of employability. There was clear evidence of a need to enhance credentials to achieve a positional advantage in the labour market. Emphasis was placed on the importance of developing knowledge that is not specific to the profession, experience of professional practice and international experience to succeed in the world of work.

Students perceived knowledge not specific to the profession in terms of broad knowledge to prepare for work. Developing knowledge not specific to the profession was viewed as extra value added in terms of personal development that could increase their employability. However, this was a rather complex theme because the targeted aspects beyond the disciplinary knowledge and the targeted benefits varied across the professional groups. The medical and agricultural students appreciated the aspect of developing some notion of understanding from other disciplines to promote their usefulness at work. Increasing participation at the workplace was viewed as fundamental for one to become employable. The student teachers valued proficiency in international languages and computer skills as additional competence to professional understanding. The objective was to achieve flexibility and adaptability to varying work environments, which they viewed as an important employability requirement. The accounting group valued skills such as Information Technology-IT and proficiency in English as the occupational language. The objective was to obtain skills that can

support the deployment of the disciplinary expertise into work experiences and effectively communicate at work. Additionally, lifelong learning was implicated as imperative to meet the above objectives of integration into, effective functioning and mobility on the labour market.

The notion of experience of professional practice concerned developing the capability to work. In this article, capability was defined as the appropriate and effective use of knowledge, skills and understanding for familiar and unfamiliar problems in familiar and unfamiliar contexts (Stephenson, 1998). The focus was developing confidence and understanding, which were viewed as central in building the capability to effectively function in one's profession. Continuous learning as primary to the development of the specialist knowledge and skills and maintenance of the capability was emphasised both in this article and previous studies (Stephenson, 1998; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008).

International experience concerned developing competences that could support graduates' work on the global labour market. Diversity management, flexibility and adaptability and competence to handle job assignments with international components are key employability requirements that are associated with international experience. However, what constitutes the international experience and the way it is promoted varied across the professional groups.

The medical and agricultural students valued learning placements beyond the home country to promote diversity in experience and understanding. Diversity in experience has become essential in the contemporary work environments because diversity management at work is no longer only relevant for large multinational companies; it is now also important for all institutions (AIESEC, 2010). The accounting students discussed the issue of handling job assignments with international components. With the increasing levels of economic migration and as diversity becomes relevant for all institutions, the ability to handle international applications becomes an essential employability requirement (cf. Hermans, 2007; AIESEC, 2010). Thus, program design that encompasses international considerations was emphasised. The education students valued proficiency in international languages as an aspect of international experience that is relevant for promoting flexibility and adaptability and global mobility of the workforce. This is in line with previous research findings, especially

when foreign language proficiency was viewed as enabling individuals to work in different countries and multi-cultural teams (cf. Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Kehm, 2005).

Lifelong learning, responsibilisation of employability and employability as a contextual concept were key implications in this article. Continuous learning was often put forward as the solution to work and employability challenges. The universities were positioned as enablers that must provide opportunities that can empower students not only to be employable within the home country but also globally. The students were positioned as responsible for maintaining their employability by becoming constant learners. The significant differences between the professional groups regarding what constitutes a given theme illustrate the contextual aspect of employability. In Rwanda, there is an increasing call for curriculum responsiveness to labour market needs (MINEDUC, 2010). It was evident in this article that a further step to explore connections between individual professions and the labour market demands could enhance graduate employability.

One key contribution of this article was international experience. Higher education was called upon to promote communication skills, problem-solving, teamwork, creative and critical thinking, understanding of businesses, knowledge and understanding, practice, ICT and numeracy skills (NHEC, 2007; MINEDUC, 2010). However, it was evident that the international experience was viewed as a crucial requirement on the labour market. Proficiency in international languages, understanding international applications and diversity in experience were key aspects that were associated with international experience and argued as essential for promoting the employability of graduates in the contemporary work world. One interesting finding was that foreign language acquisition is crucial for one's employability in the home country. In this study, English as a second language was argued as needed to be employable, not only in the international arena but also in Rwanda. By contrast, previous studies have argued that foreign language acquisition is necessary for global employability (cf. Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Hermans, 2007).

6. Discussion

The aim of the thesis is to investigate quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda by focusing on students' learning and employability. The former focus aids in understanding key challenges regarding the students' learning within Rwandan higher education at a time when more and more students enrol, and the latter focus aids in understanding the challenges of student preparedness for work life at a time when higher education is being rebuilt after the genocide. Thus, this thesis points to the main issue of the education-work relationship. In this chapter, I begin with a short review of the central findings and use these to construct a figure that illustrates the interconnectedness of the findings from the different articles. Then, an overview of the meta-ethnography of the figure is presented and the central themes are discussed. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the research process and future research.

Meta-ethnography

To synthesise the findings of the four articles, inspiration was borrowed from a meta-ethnographic approach. This approach is helpful in identifying relationships in terms of both similarities and differences between different research texts (Bryman, 2012). The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate quality in learning in higher education in Rwanda by focusing on students' learning and employability. The former focus aids in understanding key challenges regarding the students' learning within Rwandan higher education at a time when more and more students enrol, and the latter focus aids in understanding the challenges of student preparedness for work life at a time when higher education is being rebuilt after the genocide. Article one explored and analysed university teachers' notions about the most important problems in students' learning and the ways they approached their learning. The findings indicate five important problems, dependence, physical and economic resources, experience of a deep approach to learning, reading culture and previous preparation for higher education. Importantly, these problems are interrelated and

point to the need to understand study levels in education systems as interdependent.

Article two aimed to understand the employers' views regarding the employability of graduates from Rwandan higher education. The employers reported that professional understanding, changeable/formable practices and skilful practices were key aspects in the employability of graduates. The findings point to how employability can be viewed as a contextual concept, especially in terms of professions and national context. One central issue in this article is how proficiency in foreign language can be influential to home-county employability rather than global employability. Proficiency in English is a central employability requirement for graduates in Rwanda. Additionally, lifelong learning and responsiveness to employability are important implications in this article.

From the students' perspective, dimensions of quality in learning and employability were considered. Article three focused on the students' conceptions of quality in learning. The aim was to understand the different ways that students conceptualise quality in learning by drawing on a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenographic categories of quality in learning, transformation, practice, knowledge durability and employability, were generated. It was evident that the relationship between education and work significantly informed the students' conceptions of quality in learning. The addition of an aspect of quality to learning provided a basis for a broader understanding of learning in which the meaning extended beyond increasing one's knowledge, reproduction, understanding, self-development and goal fulfilment to encompass new ideas of knowledge durability (or lasting usefulness of knowledge) and employability. The fourth article focused on students' perceptions of employability. The article analysed students' notions about their preparedness for future work, i.e., how employable they view themselves being after graduation. In their arguments, students perceived university credentials as 'entrance requirement' to enter the labour market but insufficient to serve as a badge of employability. Students argued that knowledge that is not specific to the profession, experience of professional practice and international experience were central achievements for success in future work endeavours and employability. Importantly, the findings

point to proficiency in English language and international experience as key contributions to the Rwandan context.

A figure that was constructed from the findings from the four articles is presented below. The figure establishes the interconnectedness of the findings from the different articles to generate meaningful ideas in relation to the overall aim of the thesis.
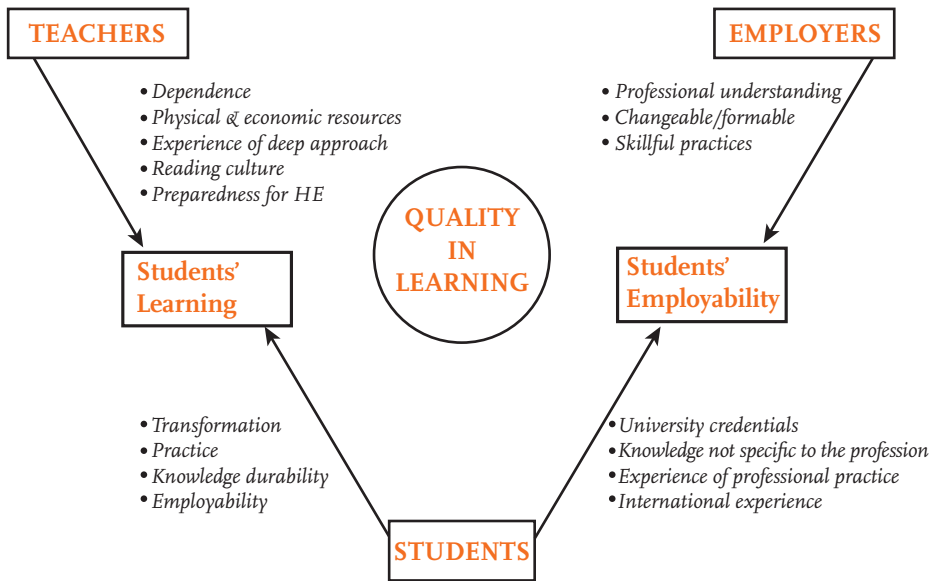

Figure 1. Learning and employability

The figure above shows the perceptions of the various groups of participants concerning aspects of quality in learning. The overall theme for these categories is quality in learning. The teachers' notions on students' learning-related problems are shown at the top left, the employers' views on the employability of graduates at the top right, the students' conceptions about quality in learning at the bottom left and students' perceptions on their employability at the bottom right. The figures further show how teachers' and students' views meet on students' learning (to the left) and employers' and students' views meet on students' employability (to the right). Inspired by the phases recommended by Bryman (2012), the meta-ethnographic approach generated five meta-categories, becoming professional, skilful

practices, becoming a learner, becoming responsible and international experience. In brief, the synthesis process involved searching for relationships between the four articles, interpreting the meaning of the findings from the four articles in relation to one another, grouping the established meanings based on similarities and naming the meta-categories. Below, these five meta-categories are discussed in connection to the literature.

Becoming professional

The meta-category of becoming professional focuses on developing understanding and confidence. This category groups together the interpretations offered by the categories experience of professional practice (article four), quality in learning as practice (article three), professional understanding (article two) and experience of a deep approach to learning (article one). This study argues that understanding and confidence are central in building professional competence. Although the issue of understanding appears of interest to all groups of participants, its importance is rather complex. The overarching idea of the relationship between education and work is common to the employers and students. In both groups, understanding and confidence could imply capability to appropriately and effectively use professional knowledge in familiar and unfamiliar situations. The employers argue for professional understanding, as they consider employable graduates as those who understand the theoretical knowledge of their profession and have the confidence to practice it in their work life experiences. The students have a similar idea, as they argue that professional practice experience is valuable for promoting understanding, confidence and ability to function at work.

By contrast, the teachers' views about understanding are academic-oriented and aimed at promoting personal development, and the connection to work is not reflected upon. Teachers emphasise understanding, as they argue that students should become active participants in learning and stress a deep approach to learning experience. The teachers' learning-oriented view of understanding might be due to the recent shift to the student-centred approach. In 2008, Rwanda's higher education adopted the Bologna system as a strategy to enhance quality education by emphasising student-centred learning. This was a shift from the teacher-centred approach that had

previously monopolised the education system in Rwanda. Due to the political pressure to improve students' learning, the teachers might be more focused on new system's successful implementation.

By contrast, the students' interest is more oriented to success in future work endeavours, likely for social and economic reasons. Due to the economic and social destruction in Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide, and with the loud political call to the youth as the key people to participate in building the economy, students might be concerned about improving the styles of living in their country. In their arguments, students show high expectations of higher education as the means to develop the competences that lead to good jobs so that they can rebuild the economy and improve their lifestyles.

Drawing on the findings from previous research, professional understanding has been emphasised as an essential aspect of quality learning and capability in terms of the ability to handle work when graduates enter the world of work. Knight and Yorke (2004) illustrate the aspect of understanding as remembering facts, understanding concepts, and applying the understandings to relatively routine problems. Stephenson (1998) associates understanding with developing capability, which requires extending beyond knowing about the specialisms to having confidence to apply and use understanding appropriately and effectively within both familiar and unfamiliar situations. The ability of students to construct meaning and generalise and transfer it to other scenarios illustrates understanding and quality learning (Biggs & Collis, 1982). The argument lines with the perspective of deep approach to learning as fostering understanding and transfer of knowledge to other scenarios (Gibbs et al., 1982; Purdie & Hattie, 2002).

Within the above arguments, it is evident that becoming a professional heavily demands developing the capability to transfer knowledge to real-life experiences. The education-work relationship becomes a key quality aspect of learning. This suggests that the discourse of curriculum design should encompass the work values/demands (what is to be learned and how it is learned). Importantly, it is ideal that learning transforms learners' capabilities not solely as customers in the education process, but for life so that they can live and work in the knowledge society. This parallels with Knight and Yorke's (2003) idea that good learning and employability are highly compatible.

Skilful practices

The process of synthesising the relationships between the parts of the study further generated a key category of skilful practice. Although the theme of skilful practices is explicitly indicated in article two, the meaning of skilful practices and examples are also implicitly visible in other articles. Skilful practice is visible in the explanations and interpretations given for knowledge not specific to the profession (article four). Skilful practices encompass practices needed for the deployment of disciplinary expertise and the generic practices that enable disciplinary expertise to be applied effectively in the employment arena (Knight and Yorke, 2004). In this thesis, the employers and students share the idea that skilful practices such as IT skills and communication, specifically language skill, are central for one's employability in the Rwandan context. The employers find graduates inept with the IT applications within their professions, and they argue that IT knowledge must extend beyond general applications to include profession-specialised applications. Students share a similar understanding, as they argue for the relevance of knowledge that is not specific to the profession. In students' view, IT skills were essential to support them to practice their professional knowledge and become adaptable to the IT-oriented work environment.

The strong emphasis on IT might be an influence of the political move in Rwanda to advance technology capacity as a device to quickly transition from a largely agriculture-based economy to an economy that increasingly depends on more sophisticated manufacturing and service sectors. There are arguments that the newly industrialised countries have had to master the use of imported and indigenous technology to achieve economic development at par with the developed countries (MINEDUC, 2010). In spite of high political ambition to advance the country's technology capacity, the existing under-developed learning environments in higher education institutions have limited resources in terms of the teachers' IT skills and the physical infrastructures (see article one). This might explain why the students are inept with the IT applications. Many challenges must be overcome to generate and disseminate technological knowledge and information.

Similar to previous studies, technological skill is discussed as an employability skill. The arguments suggest that the increasing

developments in technologies continuously influence changes in work patterns and the emergence of new forms of work; thus, individuals must continuously replenish their IT skills to live and work in the knowledge society (Nilsson, 2010). According to the higher education policies in Rwanda, technological knowledge and information are imperative to integrate technical education with commerce, industry and the private sector (MINEDUC, 2010).

Proficiency in foreign language, especially English, is another central aspect of skilful practices in this study. Both the employers and students argue for the relevance of proficiency in occupational language, i.e., English, in terms of integration, adaptation to work environment, active participation in teamwork, and effective communication. English is a new language within the context of Rwanda (since 1994) and was recently legalised as the official language of communication (in 2007). Therefore, students and employers argue that it is necessary for citizens to effectively communicate in English at the workplace. However, the students further present the relevance of language as a way to promote mobility in the world of work. The students argue that language skills, specifically international languages such as English, are central in facilitating flexibility and adaptability to various workplaces. In the students' view, proficiency in English is important to secure a job in Rwanda, but they also raise the argument of English as a key device to secure jobs beyond the home country.

It is possible that the accelerated demand for English in Rwanda as a means to facilitate the citizen to educate and competitively secure graduate jobs is linked with Rwanda's active involvement in regional and international partnerships. Until 2008, a trilingual policy was adopted such that Kinyarwanda, French and English were recognised for official communication. However, with Rwanda's new membership into the East African Community (EAC) since 2006 and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) since 2009 and the increasing development of international partnerships, the use of English has become more prominent. One implication of these partnerships has been the increasing flow of people and investments in and out of Rwanda. Consequently, communication, particularly in the English language, is viewed as central in preparing the country and its citizens to maximally benefit from the new changes influenced by Rwanda's regional and international partnerships. The adoption of

English as the official means of communication is considered as a key requirement to develop a favourable environment for trade and socio-economic development and as a gateway to the global knowledge economy (MINEDUC, 2010). Muhirwe (2012) attributes the heightened demand for English in Rwanda to the present status, function and role of English in the globalisation and internationalisation era. He argues that English continues to be constructed as a global lingua franca and Rwanda is presently struggling to cope with the requirements to use foreign language in its academic and business worlds.

The present finding concerning language skill differs from that of previous research. The accelerating demand for English as a foreign language in Rwanda is contrary to the suggestions of previous studies. In Rwanda, proficiency in foreign language, i.e., English, has become a key home-based employability skill. As strongly emphasised by both the students and employers in this study, ability to effectively communicate in English is a key consideration for graduates to secure and sustain good jobs in Rwanda. By contrast, the literature review shows language skills as an issue of interest for global employability. There are arguments that with increasing levels of economic migration, employees are often expected to take expatriate status and/or travel extensively in the course of their work (cf. Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Hermans, 2007). It is evident that language skill is emphasised for global employability such that multi-lingualism is argued as the means to promote the international mobility of skills and expertise. However, as a secondary benefit, English might be beneficial for employability across Rwanda's national border, especially under the new agreements that the citizens of the EAC member countries have a right to live, educate and work in any of the member countries. This might influence regional mobility and, in the long run, motivate international mobility.

In sum, skilful practices are essential for individuals' effective participation and mobility in the knowledge society. Based on the above discussion, learning is expected to empower the learners with the capabilities to positively react and adapt to evolutions in the job market. In addition to intellectual capabilities, language skills and IT capacity are central to preparing graduates for work.

Becoming a learner

The meta-category of becoming a learner focuses on the willingness and commitment to learn and is of interest to all groups of participants (teachers, employers and students). This category is visible in the explanations and interpretations offered by the following categories: graduates becoming changeable/formable (article two), dependency and experience of a deep approach to learning (article one), knowledge not specific to the profession, experience of professional practice (article four) and quality in learning as transformation (article three). However, becoming a learner is a rather complex category due to the differing expectations of the groups of participants. For example, both the teachers and employers emphasise learning in terms of shaping the students according to curriculum and organisational needs, respectively. Students' adaptability to the teacher's and employer's needs becomes the central focus. By contrast, the students have a broader view of learning that learning extends beyond meeting the immediate organisational needs to sustaining transformation/development and promoting employability. The students' arguments on becoming a learner explicitly focus on preparation for working life, aimed at continuous capacity building and progression in the labour market. For example, the students emphasise that learning does not end at the university and that opportunities for capability improvement to promote employability continue after university. Interestingly, the students regard success in maintaining the capability to function as dependent on individual efforts and commitment. The students expect to take advantage of the learning opportunities available at the workplace, including learning from graduates.

The students' view in terms of continuous learning may be attributed to the network that exists between the students and the graduates at workplaces. The students build networks with the graduates at work and these networks help the students to assess what they can afford, what they cannot and how to fill the competence gaps. Thus, the students position continuous learning as a key solution to challenges related to the capability to function at workplaces and continuous capability transformation.

Similar arguments are evident in previous studies. For example, it is argued that transformative lifelong learning has become increasingly

imperative, especially for people who live and work in the world of knowledge (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; Simmons, 2009). Simmons (2009) argues that an individual must continuously develop skills, competences and refine behaviours and adapt to changing circumstances and contexts in such a way that s/he can be productive in and derive satisfaction from the various surrounding situations.

One important implication is that such contemporary attention gives way to an emphasis on self-directed learning, the need for universities to foster the ability and readiness to learn and the idea that learning takes place throughout one's entire life. In this regard deep approach to learning was emphasised from a phenomenographic perspective as an approach that promotes understanding, discovery and independent learning (Gibbs et al., 1982; Purdie & Hattie, 2002). As employability becomes constructed as a life of learning and as individuals are viewed as constant learners, educational systems are assumed to enable individuals to develop skills that will provide a foundation and basis for future learning and development (Simmons, 2009; Knight & Yorke, 2004). This reminds us of the old saying: 'Give someone a fish, and they will be fed for a day; give them the skills of fishing, and they will be fed for life' (Skilbeck & Connell, 1996). There are also arguments that such a positive step must be buttressed by having proper quality assurance mechanisms in place early in the school system. This places individuals in a better position to quickly learn and easily adapt to changes when the need arises in future (Woldetensea, 2008).

Becoming responsible

The analysis of the findings from the different parts of the study also generated the meta-category of becoming responsible. This category is centred on preparing students to become useful citizens. One central question becomes 'who is responsible for transforming students into useful citizens?' In this thesis, it is evident that responsibilisation is a central issue to the groups of participants, although positions on who is responsible for developing the useful citizens varies across stakeholders. The employers view the responsible student as an employable student. The explanations and interpretations to the theme of changeable/formable raise the responsibilisation issue (article two). The employers argue that graduate employability is essentially the

responsibility of higher education and that they expect the graduates to enter the world of work when they are prepared so that meaningful engagement can proceed. Additionally, this meta-category is based on the explanations and interpretations of the themes of experience of professional practice and international experience (article four). The students view employability as a shared responsibility between the universities, the students and the employers. The students expect the universities to provide opportunities that lay a strong foundation of capabilities and promote success in their future work endeavours. The students position themselves as essentially responsible for maintaining their employability through commitment to continuous learning and expect to receive supportive opportunities that continuously enhance their capabilities at the workplace. The teachers view a responsible student in terms of an independent learner. The explanations and interpretations of the themes of experience of deep approach to learning and reading culture (article one) position the students as essentially responsible for their personal development. The teachers argue that the students should be committed to learn and discover independently to achieve personal development. In the teachers' view, the students are hesitant to consider learning as their responsibility. Rather, they are dependent on teachers for their learning. By contrast, the employers' and students' arguments acknowledge the students' commitment and readiness to learn with the aim of improvement.

The teachers' notion of students' ineptness with independent learning may be in line with high expectations on students to easily shift from the teacher-centred approaches to student-centred learning. As recent as 2008, the higher learning institutions in Rwanda adopted the Bologna system. Students and some teachers have experienced challenges in shifting from their previous teachers-centred learning and teaching experiences to the new learner-centred teaching and learning system (see article one). This study shows that, at some point, the new expectations on students in terms of learning extrinsically influenced the students' motives and attitudes towards learning.

In relation to the prior studies, it is possible to see that responsibilisation is operating in different practices, although it is positioning subjects and entities differently in terms of who is responsible for developing employable citizens (cf. Fejes, 2010). In a first line of argument, employability is essentially regarded as the responsibility of higher education. Although earlier debates tended to

focus on liberal concerns that higher education should seek to enable individuals to better fulfil their role in society, recent discussions have focused on the notion that all academic courses should include employability-enhancing content. It is argued that work placements during a higher education program may make a significant contribution, especially given that there are some aspects of employability-related capability that can only be developed in the employment context (Yorke, 2006; Cranmer, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2003). According to Cranmer (2006), redirecting some of university resources from classroom-based initiatives to increasing employment-based training and experience could positively affect immediate graduate prospects in the labour market and support them in transitioning into employment.

In a second line of argument, employability is regarded as a shared responsibility between employers and academic institutions, especially in regards to the development of skills and competence-based curricula. Higher education institutions are expected to develop closer links with the world of work through work attachments and involve employers in course design and review when appropriate (MINEDUC, 2010). Although the curricular provision may facilitate the development of prerequisites that are appropriate for employment, it is not an assurance of employability; rather, employability is argued as a lifelong accomplishment (Yorke, 2006). Many authors maintain that employability is better and more easily developed outside of the formal curriculum (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ng & Feldman, 2009; Yorke, 2004). Such an understanding often positions employers or entities as responsible for providing graduates with opportunities to enhance their employability. Clarke and Partickson (2008) suggest that employers must offer developmental opportunities to help employees understand what it means to be employable, develop both specific and transferable skills and greatly focus on assisting employees in developing competencies in self-evaluation and self-promotion.

Findings from previous studies show that the participation of employers is rather complex. Employers preferred to focus on organisational-specific training that benefits their own needs rather than to offer training and development linked to strengthening individual employability (Baruch, 2001).

In a third line of argument, responsibility for employability primarily rests with the individual. Higher education can take the

students to a point, but then they must manage the challenges of employment. It is argued that employability is not merely an attribute of the new graduate; rather, it must be continuously refreshed throughout a person's work life (Yorke, 2006). Employability is a lifelong process that is a subset of and fundamentally contingent on transformative lifelong learning (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; Simmons, 2009). In these arguments, competence and skills are of strategic value to individuals but are quite perishable goods and, thus, must be maintained through continuous learning. Such an understanding invites individuals to take primary responsibility by becoming constant learners.

In sum, it is evident that the higher education institutions, employers, and individuals all have a fundamental role to play in creating responsible citizens. Employability is strongly associated with students becoming useful citizens, as well as an aspect of quality in learning. Importantly, as learning becomes constructed as lifelong and as employability becomes a lifelong accomplishment, different needs could arise at different times and different responsibilisation may arise depending on the situation at hand. Fejes (2010) argues that the responsibilisation of individuals is complex, as different types of concerns produce different types of positioning. He clarifies this by exemplifying that the concerns centred on the labour market and lifelong learning regard the responsibility for employability as shared between the employer, the state and the individual, whereas concerns centred on adaptability and flexibility often position individuals as responsible for their employability.

International experience

International experience is another key meta-category and a central contribution of the study. In this study, only the students are concerned with the issue of international experience; the teachers and the employers raise no thought about international experience. The students' arguments about the aspects of proficiency in international languages, the understanding of international applications and diversity in experience are grouped under the theme of international experience. The students claim that proficiency in international languages such as English could significantly contribute to their employability, not only in the international arena but also in Rwanda. Student strongly link

ability to communicate in international languages with advantages of flexibility and adaptability to various work environments.

The idea of international experience is also argued in terms of the understanding of international applications. In students' view, the study programs that take into account international applications can help them handle job-related tasks irrespective of the job's location on the globe. The students regard the ability to handle job assignments with international components as a competitive power to obtain graduate jobs inside and outside their home country.

In addition, students view diversity in experience as central for developing international awareness about their professions and a broad understanding of the labour market demands and employability. In this study, students were able to assess themselves in terms of professional development and employability through international networking. They were able to learn what they can afford, what they cannot and what to improve.

In general, the rationale that students attribute to international experience might be connected with Rwanda's integration into regional communities such as the EAC and COMESA. Because English is the official language of communication in these communities, the students view communication in English as a key tool for integrating and maximally benefitting from such partnerships. Moreover, citizens of the EAC member countries are free to live and work in any of the EAC countries. In addition, reforms are in process to enhance student and staff exchange programs among universities in the EAC, establish joint postgraduate programs in diverse academic disciplines, establish an endowment fund to expand the students' exchange program between public universities to involve all member institutions of IUCEA etc. (Nkunya, 2011). Such opportunities could have influenced the students' strong demand for international experience as preparation for success in their future endeavours.

The above arguments on international experience are centred on students' successful preparation for international mobility in their professional life and ability to handle job assignments with international components both in the home country and abroad. Related arguments are found in previous studies. For example, in the contemporary era of globalisation, technological transformation has increased the volume and speed of the global flow of people, information and images, investments, policies, and knowledge at an

unprecedented pace and scale. Thus, broadening and deepening the international experience and global connectivity/mindset of employees has become a necessity (Appadurai, 1996; Friedman, 2005; Rizvis, 2008). Lunn (2008) argues that it is in the economic, social and cultural interests of nations to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared to function as global citizens who are internationally savvy and equipped with the appropriate skills. Employers increasingly require graduates to demonstrate a range of competences that will equip them to work in a global environment, in different countries, and in multi-cultural teams (Lowden et al., 2011).

Based on the literature review, foreign language skill is an international experience-related requirement. The acquisition of foreign language is often presented from a cultural perspective when language is valued for intercultural adaptability and global competency (cf. Bird, 2008). Language skill becomes a central tool for people to penetrate, integrate and work within different cultural systems. Chan and Dimmock (2008) argue that globalisation has accelerated the need for a common language and that English has become the 'lingua franca' of the business world. Recruiters tend to view graduates with foreign language skills as interesting candidates; therefore, these students are more likely to be noticed in the initial recruitment process (Teichler & Jahr, 2001).

Previous studies further show that international experience impacts global mindset, proactive learning, cultural sensitivity, personal and professional development and employability (Bird, 2008; Cowen, 2007; Koskinen & Tossavainen, 2003; AIESEC, 2010). According to the AIESEC Global Competency Model (2010), international experience impacted awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, ability to capitalise on own strengths, seeking feedback to identify key areas for own development, putting acquired knowledge or skill to practical use, taking an active role and contributing to the development of others.

The current study shows that international experience could be an opportunity to 'put students into spaces' where they are 'exposed to that global thinking', which in turn could enhance the graduates' attractiveness in national and international labour markets. International study is not solely concerned with experiencing the culture and excitement of a new place, but is now increasingly

important in positioning graduates for future success (Molony, Sowter & Potts, 2011).

Implications of the study

In this thesis, the voices of students, teachers and employers as education stakeholders were taken into account. Connections were drawn between the different views of participants, whereby points of similarity and variation were established. The quality in learning is an issue of concern and interest to various stakeholders but is a complex issue, especially given that different stakeholders hold different views.

One main conclusion is that, to some extent, the students' views differ from those of the employers and teachers. Students are the target of higher education and construed as the future of Rwanda. Thus, policymakers and teachers should listen to the students when designing policy and curriculum. Furthermore, the analysis suggests the need for a closer relationship between education and work. Some ways to manage this might be to have more practicums in the educational programs, to promote strong collaboration between universities and employers etc. There is a range of research on curricular design (e.g. work-integrated learning) that might be useful when further developing the links between higher education and the labour market and further developing the curriculum.

Another implication is the need to support the development of English language and IT skills. In addition, students should obtain international experience through teachers from other countries, study practicums in other countries, literature from other countries etc. Higher education is constructed as the driving force for the advancement and competitiveness of Rwanda's economy in the global market. Therefore, higher education institutions are charged with the pivotal role of understanding global trends and providing teaching and learning opportunities that are responsive to global market demand. According to Molony, Sowter & Potts (2011), the timely tracking of the employment trends of the graduate cohort could greatly assist in the optimisation of policy. The above mentioned ideas could be of importance in the process of rebuilding Rwanda and its higher education system after the genocide and the development into a knowledge economy in the global world.

Despite Rwanda's growing orientation towards internationalisation, actual practices in higher education institutions to enhance integration of the international dimension seem to be minimal. Broadening and deepening the regional (and international if feasible) connectivity of universities could significantly promote students' international experience. The study findings position international experience as a central requirement of the labour market and a key element of higher education. Especially due to Rwanda's integration into regional communities (EAC, COMESA) and the move to promote a free trade market, the volume and flow of both people and investments to/out of Rwanda have significantly increased. Due to the present situation in Rwanda, citizens are exposed to the challenges of high employment competition, multi-cultural issues, diversity management, handling assignments with international elements and increased mobility of workforce in the region etc. According to the study findings, the promotion of international education opportunities that are responsive to global market demand in higher education in Rwanda might successfully prepare the students to manage the above challenges/risks.

The Rwanda higher education policies view the imported bologna process from Europe as the solution to enhance quality learning and harmonise the education systems to allow the credit transferability and mobility of students and staff (NCHE, 2007). Although it might seem and sound positive to create such harmonisation, further critical scrutiny is needed. What does it mean? What happens when a European system is imported to a country such as Rwanda? For example, critical empirical research has illustrated that one aspect of the Bologna system, the multi-step grading scale, may compromise the quality of students' learning (Dahlgren, Fejes, Abrandt Dahlgren & Trowald, 2009). It is argued that multi-step grading systems generate assessment tasks and judgment criteria that force students to adopt approaches to learning that jeopardise a deeper understanding of the course content. There is an existing debate on quality in learning in Europe/Sweden linked to the Bologna system. Therefore, the following question is posed: on what grounds or facts is the Bologna system considered to enhance quality in Rwanda?

Reflections on the research process

It is of interest to reflect upon the research project as a whole. One of the strengths of this study is the multi-stakeholder design. The study took into consideration the voices of various education stakeholders (teachers, employers and students), and this painted a larger and clearer image of the education-work relationship, specifically in terms of the key challenges to quality in students' learning and employability while Rwandan higher education is being rebuilt after the genocide. This type of design generates extensive empirical data that is both liberating and constraining. It is liberating in the sense of supporting extensive analysis and constraining in terms of the complexity to reconcile the views of groups, which could be interest-oriented.

On the other hand, a possible weakness of the study is the ad hoc collection of data. I did not conduct the focus group interviews; rather, moderators conducted these interviews. This was due to the opportunity available to interview the teachers. Additionally, the data were collected in the form the moderators' notes. This might raise questions about the reliability of the findings because I did not collect the data. However, each moderator presented the focus groups' views before closing the interviews. This made it possible to countercheck and confirm the correctness and completeness of the gathered data (in form of notes) and allow further clarification and additions from group members. For future research, I will elect to conduct the interviews.

I also later noted that the research question to article 1, concerning students' learning-related problems, was rather 'leading in nature' and, hence, denied the participants (teachers) adequate space to explore their understandings/experiences. This might have influenced the findings in article 1, which portray a negative image of the students' learning. The temptation to focus on problems could have been influenced by my experience of the study context. I am a teacher in the university where the interviews were conducted.

The other limitation is that the sample size of some of the groups, such as the employers, can be criticised as small; thus, the generalisability of the findings may be questioned. Measures were taken to carefully select the sample to promote the quality of the findings. A mixed sample was emphasised to maximise variation. The largest employers of graduates from various professional groups were selected for data collection. In addition, key persons in the departments

of recruitment and staff appraisal from the selected organisations/institutions were a priority for the interviews. Such selection helped to provide a variety of understandings and fuller understanding of quality in learning in Rwanda. If a wide selection of diverse persons or cases has been made, one can expect to have sufficient variation and generalisation is possible (Larsson, 2009; Kennedy, 1979).

The thesis can also be criticised for using limited previous research on the context of the study. Such research would have supported a greater understanding of the findings. This lack of inclusion was heavily because limited research on quality in students' learning and employability has been conducted in Rwanda. The findings of this study may inform practitioners and future research on the education-work relationship.

Future research

The writing of this thesis has aroused curiosity and several research questions. I plan to continue to problematise the issue of international experience in Rwandan higher education. Will the students be internationally mobile and employable? What might be done to broaden and deepen the international experience in Rwandan higher education?

The issue of continuous learning as a necessity rather than a choice triggers the following questions: To what extent are the various education stakeholders in Rwanda involved in promoting continuous learning? What roles are played to promote continuous learning? Will students be change agents? These questions are of interest in developing responsible citizens in the contemporary society.

Due to the existing quality debates associated with the Bologna system in Europe, the feasibility of the system in Rwanda or EAC is questionable. How has the imported system benefited quality in higher education in Rwanda?

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