

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Reclaiming the educative power of vocational placements: Experiences from agriculture education practice in Uganda

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## Abstract

Amidst the global pressure on education systems to harness youth employability and transition to the world of work, there is increased interest in vocational placements. It is evident that Uganda's tertiary education sector, like others in similar context, is struggling to optimise vocational placements for better students' learning and labour market outcomes. This article explores the "educative" potential of vocational placements offered as a component of study programmes by a public tertiary agricultural training institution in Uganda. It draws on data generated from a qualitative case study that engaged 70 stakeholders namely students, graduates, lecturers, administrators and workplace supervisors. Undertaken between 2016 and 2019, the study reveals the complexities and prospects associated with the design and delivery of vocational placements in stressed education and labour market contexts. From a social constructivist perspective, we make contextual pedagogical propositions for unleashing the educative power of vocational placements in Uganda and similar contexts.

## KEYWORDS

agricultural education, vocational placements, workplace learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Agriculture education-based response to Africa's share of the global challenge of limited youth transition from education to work (Elder & Koné, 2014; Filmer & Fox, 2014; O'higgins, 2001) is significantly constrained by the difficulties to connect the teaching of theory and practice (Diise et al., 2018). There are claims of a huge mismatch between agriculture education and the skills demands of Africa's agricultural work, which is attributed to poor teaching methods characterized by excessive theory, less practice, traditional lectures and classroom instructions (Chakeredza et al., 2008; Haggblade et al., 2015; Vandenbosch, 2006). Besides, it is widely accepted that workplace learning in its diverse forms such as vocational placements can contribute to bridging the gap between education provision and the human resource needs of the world of work (Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Mikkonen et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2012).

However, amidst the claimed value of workplace learning, there are critical voices about its potential to deliver deep and meaningful learning (Nieuwenhuis & Van Woerkom, 2007). Such arguments can easily gain credence on the evidence of negligence and poor design and delivery of education experience within the workplace contexts (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). As correctly observed by (Onstenk, 2017), vocational placement is one of those taken-for-granted educational strategies in many countries. In Uganda and elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, the intensity of the downside of vocational placements is vivid owing to the twin burden of stressed tertiary education and labour markets (Collins & Rhoads, 2008; Jjuuko et al., 2017; Mamdani, 2008; Tukundane et al., 2015).

Reclaiming the educative potential of vocational placements is to take a holistic approach to ensure the required enabling environment for actors to optimize workplaces as learning spaces. While related local and global research largely focus on institutional and policy arrangements, we explore the pedagogical dimensions of vocational placements at the micro level. Our search for better ways of delivering vocational placements complements related research and policy studies on governance, quality, partnerships and financing as success factors of effective vocational placements and related workplace learning strategies (Billett, 2019; Mikkonen et al., 2017).

In the following sections, we set the scene with a brief description of Uganda's tertiary education system and the position of vocational placements. We point out our conceptualization of workplace learning while topicalizing vocational placements. We proceed to articulate the social constructivist conceptual framework and the qualitative methodological basis of the article. We present and discuss the findings on vocational placements delivered as components of agricultural study programmes by the case study public tertiary institution. We highlight the key elements from current practice to contextualize the conditions and possibilities for fostering the educative power of vocational placements.

## VOCATIONAL PLACEMENTS IN UGANDA'S TERTIARY EDUCATION

Uganda's system of education has a structure of 7 years of primary education, 4 years of lower secondary and 2 years of upper secondary. Secondary education completers pursue either vocational education & training (VET) for 2 years or university education study programmes of 3–5 years duration. The provision of tertiary education in Uganda is governed by two main laws namely the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act of 2001 and the Business Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTJET) Act of 2008 (GoU, 2001, 2008).

While the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) is directly responsible for vocational education and training (VET) in accordance with the BTJET Act, direct policy mandate over the provision of tertiary education is vested with the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). State

institutions exercise considerable authority over VET curriculum design, assessment and certification though non-state actors dominate direct service provision. All certificate and diploma courses offered within the framework of the BTVET Act are accredited and assessed by different public examination boards such as the Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB). Public and private providers of tertiary education programmes that fall within the mandate of NCHE operate their own internal academic committees or boards for assessment and certification. The case study AET institution is in this category of tertiary education institutions. Both BTVET and NCHE accredited programmes often require students to undertake vocational placements to merit the award of particular qualifications.

For decades, academic and policy studies continue to challenge the quality and relevance of Uganda's tertiary education in the face of old and new socio-economic realities. In 1989, the Education Policy Review Commission observed that the country's education at all levels had become too academic and theoretically oriented (UNATCOM, 1992). In its 2006 report on the state of higher education delivery, NCHE observed that:

The relevance of programmes offered is still questionable and too often, they are theoretical. Memorisation rather than problem solving was the preferred and widespread method of education delivery in 2006. A serious effort to have internships with the labour market and practical training in the world of work will have to be made immediately.

(NCHE, 2007, p. 1)

In 2011, the Ministry of Education conceded that a major challenge across the BTVET system is the lack of practical competencies of graduates (MoES, 2011). Relatedly, the World Bank reported that feedback from Ugandan employers indicated that current training programmes were failing to equip trainees with practical skills and job-relevant competencies (World Bank, 2012). It is equally evident that tertiary AET institutions most times teach agriculture theoretically with negligible students' exposure to practice (Jjuuko et al., 2019).

Several public policies and plans reflect the pressure on tertiary education to deliver on Uganda's workforce development agenda and to harness young people's transition to work. For instance, the country's education sector strategic plan (2017–2020) aims to harness practical training components of all BTVET study programmes through institutionalizing internships and apprenticeships in partnership with industry actors (MoES, 2017). Relatedly, NCHE implores providers of education and training programmes to emphasize on practical training through industrial training and internships (NCHE, 2019). There are however huge challenges to institutionalize vocational placements given the sporadic expansion and massification of higher education in the last 20 years. There are fewer opportunities for thousands of placement-seeking students from over 500 BTVET institutions and more than 30 universities. The situation is not helped by limited growth of jobs and work opportunities owing to a stressed economy, which in turn influence the availability of quality work placements.

Many students struggle to find placement positions in small medium enterprises (SMEs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The majority of the SMEs are located within the volatile informal sector; and they are constantly struggling to break-even to survive the harsh effects of a struggling economy (PwC Uganda, 2017; World Bank Group, 2019). Students who find their way into NGOs often find reasonable work activities but of course within the known deadline-chasing character of donor funded projects. Those who access placements from government departments encounter a set of challenges including inactivity because of the known fiscal constraints coupled with some degree of laxity within Uganda's public sector (Office of the Prime Minister, 2012). Indeed the majority of

students find themselves in workplaces that require intentional pedagogical interventions and direct guidance to make them educative (Billett, 2002; Mikkonen et al., 2017).

The performance of vocational placements is constrained by a complex interplay of institutional, governance and financing challenges. The scattered pieces of guidelines such as the internship placements statutory instrument (Ministry of Public Service, 2011) and the industrial training guidelines (UBTEB, 2015) are too inadequate to offer the required enabling policy environment. The NCHE in its 2006 report observes that “business and industry were not fully participating in training because current laws are believed not [to] favour those who host internship students” (NCHE, 2007). The role of an enabling legal framework in facilitating the actors to optimize the educative potential of placements cannot be overemphasized.

## **WORKPLACE LEARNING FROM A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE**

We conceptualize workplace learning from a social constructivist perspective and draw relevant conceptual tools to support our analysis and arguments. We choose not to reproduce the wide literature on the subject and the ambivalence across the usage of workplace learning and related terms such as work-related learning, work-integrated learning or work-based learning (Kirby et al., 2003; Streumer & Kho, 2006). As (Hager, 1999) puts it, workplace learning is an interdisciplinary applied field that attracts a range of multiple perspectives from sociology, economics, management theory and cognitive psychology to learning theory. Workplace learning, in the context of this article, denotes planned educational undertakings in work settings for participants to learn directly from work experience (Boud et al., 2000). Vocational placements, one of the workplace learning strategies, are periods of planned curriculum activities within work settings that have a clear relevance to the study programme of individuals who carry a student identity, which defines the terms for their participation (Frison et al., 2016).

This article focuses on the pedagogical dimension of vocational placements; and argues for empowering supervision and support to ensure young people's meaningful engagement and participation in work experiences for better outcomes. Drawing from the work of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, we glean a couple of social learning concepts to structure our proposition to optimize the educative potential of vocational placements.

In Dewey's theory of experience, one recognizes the value of workplaces in bridging theory and practice, a major concern in the education-to-work transitions interventions for young people. Dewey's standpoint against assuming that mere doing or participation in social experience is in itself educative, strengthens our argument for guided participation through empowering supervision, support and guidance (Baker et al., 2012; Dewey, 1963; Sweet, 2013). Influencing, acting and reflecting on experiences for optimal learning is central in Dewey's education philosophy; and as Baker and others put, it should involve “providing feedback on the effectiveness of students' learning efforts” (Baker et al., 2012). The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from Vygotsky's variant of social constructivism helps to structure the needed guidance or scaffolding for learners to proceed to the next levels of understanding and performance (Fernández et al., 2001; Trif, 2015).

Lave and Wengers' work on communities of practice and layers of participation further justifies the critical role of support and guidance by experienced practitioners and professionals (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). From a social constructivist perspective, learning through work ought to be an active process; and it should be an experience of deep learning to facilitate young people's identity

formation as they journey their way to becoming members of a community of practitioners (Colley et al., 2003).

## STUDY BACKGROUND AND METHOD

This article bases on data from a qualitative study on Ugandan young people's education and employment transitions implemented from 2016 until 2019. We specifically draw on the lived experiences of 70 stakeholders in the categories of students, graduates, lecturers, administrators and workplace supervisors who are connected to case study AET institution. We use data generated in answering one of the research questions about how to transform the agricultural education processes to enhance young people's education and labour market outcomes.

The case study institution mirrors similar institutions under the jurisdiction of the two laws namely the Universities, other Tertiary Institutions Act, and the BTVET Act. The college has a long tradition of more than 80 years with an annual turnout of more than 1000 certificate and diploma graduates as by 2019. While its physical infrastructure and staffing status is generally above average, the AET institution is constrained and struggling to deliver to the expectations of stakeholders.

In line with the qualitative research tradition of interactive relationships with social actors, we engaged the local stakeholders to understand the AET institution's agricultural education practice (Cohen et al., 2007). We also explored possibilities of transforming the practice in line with our methodological standpoint to understand social reality while attempting to contribute to solving practical social problems (Flyvbjerg & Sampson, 2001).

We generated data through interactive meetings and workshops; in-depth interview sessions, observations and document reviews. We managed data following an iterative qualitative data analysis procedure that allowed us the opportunity to furthering data collection as prompted by clues and insights from analysis of indicative gathered data (Hennink et al., 2011). We undertook data coding using Atlas.ti (Friese, 2014) yielding 137 codes that we organized into 19 themes including *stakeholders' experiences of curriculum and content*, which is the basis of this article.

## FINDINGS

Industrial Training (IT) is the official label for the AET institution's vocational placement component. It is part of the mandatory curricula for certificate and diploma agriculture study programmes. The institution attaches students to commercial farms, local government departments, factories, farm supply shops and health facilities. We present the findings that elucidate direct pedagogical dimensions of vocational placements under six headings namely preparation of students for placements; students work engagement; tracking students' performance; supervision and support approach; and assessment of performance. We also present findings on how stakeholders value vocational placements to illustrate the prospects.

### Preparation of students for vocational placements

The institution conducts briefing sessions to prepare students for placements. From the account of college stakeholders, it is apparent that the briefings take place once in a session of about four hours for

close to 400 placement-bound students. A second-year crop production student shares his experience about the duration, focus and nature of the briefing sessions.

It was a one-day meeting...it took us like three hours. There were two lecturers. They briefed us how it should be conducted, how it should be run, and they also gave us the logbooks to ease our noting. They also prepared us on how to come up with report after the work.

In agreement with other stakeholders, one of the administrators shares his thoughts about how the institution prepares students for the placements while pointing out that:

Our practice, I must say personally is not good enough in that we do not have a culture of attaching students to mentors or several students to supervisors much earlier...early enough before students prepare to go for internships. We do not have a culture of having a rigorous preparation before we release students to get internships. Somehow, we hold a briefing ... which is a short assembly but that is not adequate though.

Workplace supervisors induct and orient students during the initial stages of the placements; and this often takes place through group meetings involving interns from other education institutions. A livestock workplace supervisor explains:

Reaching the centres, they find the senior farm manager who then does orientation, on that very day, ... you talk about the organisation, the establishment of the farm, and you look at the operational units, sit and group them, then draft working plans, on a weekly basis.

His crop production counterpart explains that his farm undertakes regular orientation of at least 2 days during which they create opportunities for the students to express their expectations:

It is usually two to three days, and we do presentations, and do farm tours. Day one, they are reporting, and when they set in you provide and organise dormitories, give them the necessary working gears, and they register in the data forms, because we need to have registered students, and then we do orientations. We also share expectations, where they tell us their expectations as we also tell them what our expectations ... rules and regulations are.

Overall, the findings indicate that while the institution conducts short briefing sessions to prepare the students for placements, different host organizations have their own orientation procedures. The AET institution actors and workplace supervisors converge in their opinion about poor coordination and communication amongst the parties involved which to a great extent undermines efforts to prepare students for optimum utilization of placement opportunities for learning purposes.

## Students work engagement

The host organizations determine work activities and tasks for students. The majority of work activities are within the routine production schedules of host organizations. Two of workplace supervisors share their experiences of how they determine what activities to assign students:

I just equally distribute them to different sections in the agriculture department. Students do not usually come with particular learning needs...when the students come I have to make a schedule and then dispatch them to the various sections ... but I make sure they rotate. (Agro-industry supervisor)

Being a practical training, we have where we say this is where you have to start from; and we have to start with the preparation of the soil. I have all the departments: soil preparation, irrigation, crop protection. We look at where it is most important depending on academic background. (Floriculture supervisor)

All the workplace supervisors who participated in the study acknowledge the lack of a formal mechanism for coordinating with the lecturers in determining work activities and tasks for students. One of the agro-industry supervisor talks about his discretionary practice of making occasional consultations with lecturers for the case of agricultural mechanization students. He explains that “We go into some understanding with some institutions; and they indicate the tasks, which they want their students to engage in”.

At some workplaces, students attend routine classroom lectures. The practice by such host institutions is to operate curriculum with course titles and content similar to those offered at the AET institution. A mixed agriculture workplace explains

Our system we use here is intensive integrated sustainable agriculture. So our curriculum is in that line. So we train them animal husbandry, crop husbandry, how we manage those simple ailments, the appropriate technology, how can you do it as business, so that at least there is hands on.

Lecturers and administrators generally expect the workplace supervisors to determine and assign work tasks to students. One of the animal production lecturers emphatically states that “industry actors have a role to provide students with what to do”. All the participating lecturers corroborate the workplace supervisors about the lack of a mechanism for a shared responsibility to determine work activities for students. Quite a number of students share experiences of engagement in peripheral or insufficient work routines owing to a number of challenges including inadequate supply of resource materials, fluctuating weather conditions that disrupt the known rainfall-dependent farming seasons. It is evident that the AET institution's internship calendar is not responsive to agricultural seasons; and sometimes students find the main farm activities are off-season.

There was too much sunshine that some of the activities could not go on well. (Student)

Industrial training is normally done during dry periods (seasons), which limits [us] from having wide experiences. (Student)

## Tracking students' workplace performance

Students are required to maintain a log of their daily work activities. This constitutes the basis and evidence for which they use to compile weekly logs as well as the final placement report. Students have to follow a particular template of worksheets, which the stakeholders commonly refer to as a logbook. It contains four mandatory sections namely activities done & purpose; lessons & skills learnt from the activities done; relevance of the work activities to their professional growth; and workplace supervisor's comments.

The AET institution expects its supervisors to coordinate with their workplace counterparts to ensure that students maintain a logbook. The students are required to bring the logs to the attention of workplace supervisors for comment and guidance once every week. The lecturers have a duty to inspect the logbooks during their supervision visits. One of the lecturers explains that the "student fills in a logbook on a daily basis, which the supervisor reviews when he or she visits the student". Some workplace supervisors devise their alternative ways of tracking students' work engagements. The agro-industry workplace supervisor explains that:

The student fills what has been learning for the whole week. Then at the end of the week, it is taken to the immediate supervisor for review and then students themselves bring them here to my office every Monday.

The effective use of logbooks is highly constrained. First, as indicated in the next section on supervision and support, the lecturers are always not able to visit the students to provide prompt supervision, guidance and feedback. Second, the majority of the experienced workplace supervisors are too busy to offer direct and instant feedback to individual students.

## Supervision and support approach

While workplace supervisors are expected to offer daily and constant guidance to the students, their AET counterparts are required to make occasional supervisory visits to provide on-site support and guidance. They are required to visit the student twice though on many occasions it happens once; and there are instances of no visits at all. The stakeholders converge in their observation that the supervisory visits by lecturers often delay. When the lecturers visit the students, they provide support through individual or group meetings that often last a maximum of 2 hours.

The AET institution administrators assign supervisory roles to lecturers based on logistical convenience other than professional qualifications. They often assign more than 15 students to a single lecturer. Some of the stakeholders argue that this leads to a mismatch in terms of the required technical capacity and appropriate guidance. At workplaces, students are organized into work groups or teams to ease supervision owing to the big numbers. A livestock workplace supervisor shares his experience:

Students are given schedules according to the groups. The schedule is determined at the beginning of the training. When there is an officer that is absent, I make sure that I supervise. In the poultry areas, all the time there have to do the tasks with a supervisor because there is daily observation of the birds. For dairy, you can do it; and once they get used for example breeding, feeding, since they are just routines.

In the majority of cases, workplace supervisors assign their junior staff to work directly with the student teams. In some other instances, they organize students to work in groups on their own. Some students say that such supervisors turn to their regular workstations in offices or elsewhere outside the premises of the host organization. This is common for crop and animal production where majority workplace supervisors do not physically work in the fields.

Generally, the stakeholders are not satisfied with the quality of supervision and guidance. The majority of students converge in their complaint about inadequate supervision. One student claims that “problems always happen in industry training organisations to students and no one follows-up”. Another argues that “most of the workers who are employed by the host organisation are not educated”. The workplace supervisors just like their AET counterparts acknowledge the challenge of limited resources against the huge number of eligible placement students across the country.

## **Assessment of vocational placements**

Findings on the assessment of vocational placements reveal three key aspects. First is the purpose of assessment, which, according to institution stakeholders, is mainly to meet certification and grading requirements for the award of final qualifications. The majority of the workplace supervisors take assessment as a mere routine that involves filling of an evaluation form at the end of the placement. One exception is the practice of an agro-industry workplace supervisor who undertakes initial assessment of students to determine their learning needs and required support.

The second aspect is the structure of assessment comprising placement report, supervisors’ visitation report and workplace supervisors’ evaluation form. There is an assessment checklist, which according to all the stakeholders, focuses on attendance, logbook completeness, students’ ability to articulate undertaken work tasks during the placement period. Evidently, there is limited use of assessment and evaluation outcomes to inform follow-up support and guidance. The students’ placement report is increasingly becoming the only basis for assessing performance and learning achievement from vocational placements. The guide for writing the placement report prescribes four mandatory sections or headings namely description of the host organization, activities undertaken, skills attained and recommendations.

The third aspect is about stakeholders’ role in the assessment process. The AET institution expects the workplace supervisors to administer the evaluations forms; and to involve the students in the assessment. The AET stakeholders claim that the workplace supervisors submit the outcome of assessment exercise under sealed envelopes to the lecturers. Students are required to compile and submit the placement reports to the staff in charge of IT who in turn distributes 5–10 reports to individual lecturers for marking and grading. Most of the AET stakeholders are concerned about the poor assessment strategy. One of the lecturers, for instance, observes that the ‘students duplicate and reproduce report of those students who finished long time ago’.

## **Value of vocational placements**

With varying reasons, all the stakeholders acknowledge and appreciate the value of vocational placements. From their personal perspectives but also as position holders, workplace supervisors share their experiences and perceptions about the value of vocational placements. To illustrate how he personally feels motivated and satisfied to support students even if it is not part of his job description, an agro-industry workplace supervisor said:

And you see there is no extra pay. They [my bosses] do not assess me in regards to how many students I catered for in the internship program. It is about how many workers I have trained. To me I just do it because I am a Ugandan and I do it out of heart.

He even argues for a policy to institutionalize vocational placements because according to him some of the institutions are ‘ill-facilitating the students and that they just give them a lot of theory, so internship is a platform to practice theories’. His counterpart from the livestock sector gives a detailed description of how the negative attitudes of his workmates does not deter him from offering his support to students on placement:

But some staff are not cooperative maybe because of lack of incentives or something else; so they are not interested, because there are two people; there is that oriented person, and that money minded person. But the good thing with me, that is not my practice. I actually am happy when I produce results, when I produce someone like me.

Some workplace supervisors argue that placements are useful opportunities for their organizations to not only promote their products but also to deliver on social corporate responsibility mandates. A mixed farming supervisor, for instance, says that offering placements to students “is marketing of course; we make ourselves known very much”. Three of the workplace supervisors testify that placements serve as a strategy for identifying talent and obtaining labour:

It is also one of the ways of identifying our potential future employees...because if we see someone behaving professionally; being organised, then we take note. When we wish to recruit, those are the people we first give attention. When those students are here, they provide some labour. (Floriculture supervisor)

Because for us we have a list of those students that we identify as “cream”. If I want a doctor, I go to our list and we make calls. (Livestock supervisor)

Being a business, we need cheap Labour; that is why on our staff, educated staff is limited. So we thought that when we do internship, these are learned people, and when they come here for three months, first, you get labour, and we thought that at least we would be saving some money. In fact being a business entity, in other places they pay interns a fee, but here we do not pay them instead they pay us. (Mixed farming supervisor)

Similarly, the lecturers and administrators justify the usefulness of vocational placements. In one of the research meetings, they collectively argued that vocational placements bridge the gap between theory and practice. They argued that vocational placements help students to gain experience and confidence; and give students a broader look at agriculture, which helps to facilitate mind-set change. A number of lecturers are convinced that vocational placements not only supplement the meagre training resources at the AET institution but also enable the students to establish connections and relationships with prospective employers.

Students and graduates concur in justifying vocational placements as valuable opportunities to deepen understanding; and to link theory and practice.

Industrial training is good to appreciate and internalise what is taught in theory especially in animal diseases (Graduate).

I acquired more skills and knowledge about many cases in animals and how to handle them successfully; it also enabled me to be confident. (Student)

## **FOSTERING THE EDUCATIVE POWER OF VOCATIONAL PLACEMENTS**

While the findings reveal that stakeholders are making attempts and indeed value vocational placements, they are grappling with a couple of challenges. Challenges relating to students' preparation, supervision, guidance and assessment stand in the way to educative work experiences. The findings are in congruent with related studies on factors that hinder effective guidance in vocational placements; and more so the delineation by Mikkonen and others in their extensive literature review of workplace learning in VET (Mikkonen et al., 2017). We derive insights from the findings to make pedagogical propositions towards educative vocational placements in Uganda and similar contexts. While we focus on aspects with direct pedagogical dimensions, we are fully aware of the need for institutional enabling conditions.

### **Students learning plans precede placements**

Preparing and stimulating students' imagination of what kind of learning to draw from work experiences is one of the weakest elements of the current practice. The scanty briefing sessions by the AET institution and the discretionary inductions by some workplace supervisors ought to be anchored within a coherent pedagogical framework that enhances active learning. Developing learning plans with clear goals and expectations stimulates students to assemble the necessary intellectual, social and physiological tools for deep learning (Biggs, 2003; Warburton, 2003). As social constructivist scholars may argue, it promotes inquisitive attitude, curiosity, interest, self-directedness, sense of discovery, and urgency to connect possessed and anticipated knowledge (Entwistle, 2000; Wells et al., 2015; Witt et al., 2014).

Owing to the centrality of purposeful and goal-oriented learning, supervisors at both ends through the collaborative mechanisms of communities of practice can already begin to guide the students to develop their own placement learning plans well in advance. This can prepare students for meaning making from work experiences rather than being passive workplace actors but active participants who construct understanding from workplace routines (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Helping students to develop learning plans can be a gradual process whereby supervisors know their assigned student (s) in good time to support them to develop placement-learning plans. The AET institution supervisors can engage the students to generate their learning plans by guiding them to answer, for instance, three basic questions namely (i) what do you want to learn?, (ii) what activities would you like to engage in to help you learn? and what kind of information will show that you learnt during the placement?

Supervisors at both ends ought to support the students to describe what they want to know and be able to do at the end of the placements. The AET supervisors should guide students to think and imagine about the kind of professional habits or vocational conduct that they desire to develop through exposure to work experience. Dealing with the question on desired activities would help the students to imagine the connection between theory and practice in the workplace; and this can be "work in progress" as the students get more acquainted with host organizations. The question on what evidence

to support attained learning can prompt the students to reflect on their learning goals. It makes them feel a sense of responsibility and commitment; and feeling accountable for the time and other resources invested in vocational placements.

## **Optimize work logs as learning and reflection journals**

*Logbooks* of work activities is the most significant tool for monitoring and assessment of the students' performance at host institutions. While the findings indicate that the intended use of logbooks is highly constrained; it is possible and justifiable to optimize the practice of supporting students to record facts, observations and tasks as drawn from their participation at workplaces. This enables them to develop reflective attitudes and abilities; and to become agents of their own learning (Baldock & Murphrey, 2020; Meals & Washburn, 2015).

Optimizing work logs to deliver desired workplace learning outcomes is to consider and promote their use as tools for reflection rather than mere repetitive rituals of filling daily and weekly sheets. The supervisors ought to guide the students to use logs more as learning journals. For instance, they can guide students to undertake periodic journal creation tasks through a flexible approach that allows the use of diverse thinking tools including open-ended questions such as:

Do my internship responsibilities relate anything I have been reading or hearing in my classes? What theories or principles from classes am I using in my internship assignments? Are there differences between what I observed in the field and what I learned in class? What could account for those differences?

(Alm, 1996, pp. 2–3)

Supervisors may even consider supporting students to use diagrams, drawings, photography or videography to create meaningful learning journals in a way that appeals to their learning styles (Billett, 2003; Wormeli, 2004). Learning journals can serve a dual purpose as reflection and assessment tools. Indeed, they can yield greater benefits when students receive and share feedback through interactive encounters with supervisors, peers and other actors including the less educated but experienced workers.

## **Blend a work and education-oriented supervision approach**

The lecturers' intermittent visits to host institutions and the divergent discretionary guidance strategies of workplace supervisors constitute a supervision approach, which the majority of the stakeholders consider ineffective. There is an apparent tension between serving the profit ends of host institutions and the AET institution's core mission of educating agricultural professionals. To imagine a contextual learning supervision approach that is distinct from the routine workplace management supervision is to think of an integrated design that draws from workplace learning techniques including mentoring, coaching, scaffolding and modelling (Blokhuys & Nijhof, 2008; Hampton et al., 2004). Students need to take advantage of work activities to learn by watching, imitating, practising and even chatting with peers and supervisors.

Supporting students from peripheral to full participation in the production of goods and services at workplaces ought to be informed by a careful consideration of five related elements. These are occupation, work type or tasks, standard competence, student competence levels, as well as health and safety concerns. The assessment and balancing of these elements helps to determine the appropriate

levels of support and guidance as informed by a deeper appreciation of the notion of ZPD. Being aware of the students' current and next level of competence and understanding helps the supervisors to assign students with relevant work tasks and to offer appropriate scaffolding (Palincsar, 1998). The work tasks and scaffolding should be neither too low nor too high to ensure the required motivation that comes with the positive challenge to move to the next level. The group supervision strategies at some of the workplaces as revealed by the findings can be nurtured to serve as scaffolding activities to optimize work and learning outcomes (Panselinas & Komis, 2009). Furthermore, work tasks that are haphazardly assigned to students in groups can easily be organized and supervised as group learning projects which, as (Poell & Van der Krogt, 1997) imply, they are a legitimate method of organizing work-related learning.

## **Nurturing communities of practice for supervisors**

Drawing on Wenger's theory of communities of practice (CoP), we argue that enhanced relationships and interactions amongst placement supervisors lead to quality guidance and support. Apparently, as research from elsewhere reveals, supervisors at both ends neither meet regularly nor communicate in any way to share about the placement process and outcome (Onstenk & Blokhuis, 2007). They do not even have a platform to negotiate and determine work activities for students, which greatly limits the required connection of workplace and AET institution experiences. However, in some way, they have a social practice in common whether by nature of their routine work or otherwise; and, they are engaging in a shared pursuit over time though not articulated in their respective institutional policy documents (Wenger, 1998). Indeed the findings are indicative of some implicit relations and shared worldview of agricultural skills development for young people.

Moreover, the goodwill and motivation of some of the stakeholders signal possibilities for vibrant CoP that can generate the required knowledge to effectively deal with some of the pedagogical bottlenecks to educative vocational placements. Vibrant communities of supervisors, can for instance, easily build the mentorship capacity of the less educated but experienced workplace staff, which according to the findings are playing an important role. As Bailey (2014) observes CoPs have been identified as "an appropriate type of network for capacity building" (p. 434). They can serve a value-addition role as depositories and triggers of good practices that are responsive to local realities of inadequate human, financial and material resources. Stakeholders can optimize the unlimited interactive potential of CoP to nurture a communicative space and regular interfaces for students, lecturers and supervisors at both ends—AET institution and industry.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Reclaiming the educative power of vocational placements presupposes a holistic and comprehensive enabling environment with adequate governance, institutional and logistical arrangements. The findings reveal that the stakeholders are, to some extent, making a significant contribution to optimize vocational placements amidst a constraining operating environment. Our analysis identifies positive elements from the current practice, which if nurtured, can potentially address some of the pedagogical weaknesses of vocational placements in Uganda and similar contexts.

Based on the findings that confirm empirical and literature-based claims of weak supervision and guidance of workplace learning, we make contextual pedagogical propositions to foster the educative power of vocational placements in bridging agriculture theory and practice. The propositions include

building stakeholders' CoP to generate the required knowledge, time, energy, motivation and free will for better preparation, supervision, support and guidance of students. Enhanced partnerships, solidarity and social relations through established CoP can offer the platforms to deal with the challenges that arise from combining unconnected aspects of education and work contexts. Empowering support and guidance can potentially raise the required students' motivation and effort to develop and pursue valuable learning goals. To embed social constructivist ideals in the practise of vocational placements is to espouse a practical teaching–learning approach within a wider perspective of connecting young peoples' education and work aspirations.

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