Perceived Relevance of the National University of Lesotho's Programmes: Views of Some of Former Students of the National University of Lesotho.

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Abstract:

An attempt has been made to assess the relevance of the National University of Lesotho (NUL)'s programmes to the needs of the society. The NUL is expected to prepare graduates for the place of work and the competitive world. The employers want graduates with high level skills who are capable of facilitating change in the world of work. The NUL, through its graduates, is meant to serve the society, support the economy and promote the quality of lifestyle of all citizens. In this study, therefore, the following question is asked: Does the NUL offer learning programmes that contribute to the effectiveness of its first degree graduates at the workplaces? A total of 68 graduates from the seven faculties already employed in different government departments and private sector responded to a two - format questionnaire comprising of closed and open–ended questions. The selected respondents completed their studies between the years 2002 and 2006. The questionnaire revolved around the following four categories of information: Programme quality, programme application, addressing the needs of the nation and the responsibilities of the graduates at the work places. Simple frequency tables and percentages were used to depict the relationship between the NUL programmes and graduates' output at work. Furthermore, the collected transcripts from an open–ended question were grouped together to identify common patterns that indicate the ways that could be taken to ensure that the NUL programmes prepare students for the world of work.

The Findings of the study revealed that in some instances, there are a number of positive outcomes attributable to the relevance of the NUL programmes. On the other hand, the study indicates that the programmes have areas of concern that require further attention. As a result, there is need to embark on curriculum reform that would equip all NUL's graduates with knowledge and skills that would facilitate the achievement of the stipulated NUL's vision and mission statement.

Introduction

Research on the relevance of institutions of higher education programmes is carried out world - wide. The National University of Lesotho (NUL) as an institution of higher learning is no exception to this. That is, whether the programmes the NUL offers fulfil the occupational realities in order to achieve the goal of the 2002 vision and mission statements provided hereunder is a subject of investigation.

The NUL Vision 2020:

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> *Our vision is to be a leading African tertiary institution for lifelong learning and relevant research in order to provide innovative solutions to societal needs.*

The NUL Mission statement:

> *The National University of Lesotho will employ innovative teaching and learning methods, research and professional services to continually develop human resources capable of leading and managing development processes in a world increasingly driven by knowledge and by science and technology (Strategic Plan Policy Programme, 2002-2007).*

The NUL vision and mission statement were established with the view to respond to a need to translate theory into practice for the twenty first century. The objective of the vision and mission statement, it can be deduced is to provide relevant programmes that would address the challenges the country faces. According to the mission statement, NUL seeks ways of getting solutions to multifarious problems faced by society. Generally, the communities expect that the university can contribute in many ways to address problems such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, crime, and food insecurity.

Edwards and Knight (1995:18) attempted to highlight the importance of relevance of programmes in higher education in which the institutions must: (i) reflect on institutional mission statements and in the ambiguity of fitness for purpose; (ii) reflect on the techniques for aligning course design and assessment to institutional mission; and (iii) to reflect on relevance to the concerns of the stakeholders. Thus, the question of relevance seems to determine the behaviours of the stakeholders who are the consumers of the products of higher education. According to Edwards and Knight (1995:18) relevance is frequently measured in terms of current national economic needs.

In discussing relevance in the context of higher education programmes, Veney and Kaluzny (1991:172) raised two questions as to whether there is a problem that a particular programme should confront and how well defined the problem is? Austin as cited in Osborne and House (1995:2) states that "in relevance we must define our excellence, not only in resources and in reputation, but also changes in our students and the impacts they have on communities." This is meant to emphasise that higher educational institutions must have the capacity to identify and address the needs of the communities they are supposed to serve. Thus, in addressing the needs of the community, universities should be in a position to answer questions such as: (i) Is the programme needed? (ii) Does it solve the problem for which it was intended?

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that the institutions of higher learning can no longer play the ostrich or look the other way under

the pretext of being an "ivory tower" of knowledge (Kemp and Foster, 1995:26). Today's socio-economic needs and challenges demand that universities address practical problems confronting the societies they serve. In fact, to a large extent, the funding of institutions of higher learning is currently determined by the relevance of their programmes in terms of solving practical problems faced by society. No longer can institutions of higher learning, particularly in developing countries (including NUL) pursue knowledge for its own sake.

Apparently, there are no studies at the NUL on evaluation of programme relevance that could be referred to for the purposes of this study. It has therefore, been necessary to undertake a study in an attempt to fill in this gap. The most important question to be answered is: are the programmes offered by the NUL relevant to the nation's needs and those of the graduates in the field? To address these concerns, this study therefore intends to find out the perceptions of the NUL graduates about their programmes of study and the impact of these programmes at the work places. Specifically, the study is aimed at finding the extent to which the programmes the NUL offer are relevant to the challenges that the nation faces and to the needs of the graduates at their workplaces. This is with a view of providing:

- A better understanding of the quality and relevance of the NUL programmes.
- A basis on which NUL could revise its programmes to enable graduates participate more meaningfully in their jobs.
- A basis for further research and review of NUL programmes.

In pursuing these goals, the following research questions addressed in this study are:

- Do programmes at the NUL prepare students for the world of work?
- What could be done to ensure that the NUL programmes prepare students for the world of work?

In terms of organizational structure, the next part of this paper focuses on the methodological framework for the study. This is then followed by a presentation of findings and the discussions thereof. Finally, the paper presented it concluding remarks and recommendations.

Methodology

Research design

The research design is simply the descriptive survey type using opinionated response format eliciting participants' responses. Descriptive survey design is important as there is need to describe, interpret, and make judgments about the nature of the NUL programmes from the perspectives of the NUL

graduates in the world of work. In addition, certain data derived from closed ended questions have been analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics with simple frequency counts and percentages. This was a way of making informed decisions on programme relevance.

Population and sample

All the 2002–2006 graduates who have obtained their first degrees, within four years of study, at the National University of Lesotho, regardless of their faculty and programme of study and are now at various work places, formed the entire population for the study. The importance of using the period 2002 – 2006 is that the NUL's vision and mission statement were developed in this period. A total sample of 70 respondents, with 10 from each of the seven NUL faculties spanning the study period was used. The 10 graduates from each faculty spread through the period 2002 – 2006 was a way of detecting if each of the graduates from different programmes and, at different times of programme completion, would have similar and/or differing responses.

Instrumentation

One set of questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire included closed ended questions and one open ended question. All closed ended questions were adopted from Maliyamkono *et al.* (1982). But some of them were modified to suit the purposes of this study. This is the model that was deemed appropriate to assess the quality and relevance of university programmes. According to Seotsanyana (2003), evaluating university programmes with an appropriate model yields results that could be used to design programmes that would make students attain knowledge and skills and be ready to take employment functions. As indicated earlier, the close ended questions revolved around four categories of information. This being: the relevance of NUL programmes in terms of course content, programme application, addressing the needs of the nation, and work responsibility of the graduates in the field. Items in the closed ended questions included rating scale using a 3 point scale (i.e., dissatisfied, satisfied, and highly satisfied). The graduates were further asked one open ended question to suggest ways that could ensure that the NUL programmes prepare students for the work-places.

The conduct of the study

A self administered questionnaire, with closed ended questions and one open ended question, was distributed to the 68 graduates at their work places in the government ministries, private sector/departments and institutions of higher learning. The respondents were given four days to complete the questionnaire. On the fourth day the questionnaires were collected. However, at a later date, it was found necessary to hold interviews with the

NUL graduates. This was done to solicit more information on the ways of improving the programmes' relevance. This was the information that could not be attained through the use of closed ended questions.

Results

The rated items were analysed statistically using simple frequency tables and percentages. According to Patton (2002: 292), a frequency table is another "approach on making comparisons to generate explanations and making systematic case comparisons across a number of cases to enhance understanding of specific cases." Therefore, frequency tables were employed in this study to depict the relationships between NUL programmes and graduates' output at work.

Through the survey, the attitudes and perceptions of NUL graduates about the relevance of the NUL programmes were captured. The number of graduates that responded to the closed ended questionnaire was 68. In each of the seven faculties, 10 questionnaires were administered which were all duly completed and returned except in the faculty of Agriculture where only eight duly completed questionnaires were returned and used. This gave an overall total of useable questionnaires of 68. Various aspects of the NUL programmes were rated by the respondents on a three-point scale (dissatisfied, satisfied and highly satisfied) from which their perceptions and attitudes were described. In this study, the relevance of the programmes was depicted by considering four items which include: course content, practical application addressing the needs of the nation, and responsibilities of the graduates in the field. These were presented in frequency tables from which interpretation and discussion of emerging issues from the data were made as presented in the subsequent pages.

From Table 1, three important issues as pertaining course content emerged. Basically most of the graduates (47) appreciated the relevance of the programmes in terms of course content, as appropriate for the preparation of the students for the world of work. Another issue was that the about 24% of the graduates (16) perceived the NUL programmes as highly creditable in terms of course content. However, seven percent of the NUL graduates (5) did not view the course content as relevant to the world of work. From this table, it can be inferred that all the respondents in the Faculties of Law, Health science, Education, and Agriculture were satisfied with the relevance of their programmes course content. Nevertheless, the faculties of Humanities, Social Science, and Science had respondents that were dissatisfied with the relevance as far as course content of their programmes is concerned. Given the results from Table 1, it is clear that the majority of the respondents appreciated the relevance of the course contents which seem to match with their responsibilities in the world of work. This,

therefore, implies that the respondents were fully aware that the programmes have provided them with relevant education to meet the needs of the nation.

Table 1: Frequency table and the relevance of programmes in terms of course content

Faculty	Quality of courses in your field of specialization in terms of theory			
	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Highly Satisfied	Total
Agriculture Count		7	1	8
% Within Faculty		87.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Health Sciences Count		8	2	10
% Within Faculty		80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Education Count		6	4	10
% Within Faculty		60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
Humanities Count	2	5	3	10
% Within Faculty	20.0%	50.0%	30.0%	100.0%
Science Count	1	7	2	10
% Within Faculty	10.0%	70.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Social Sciences Count	2	4	4	10
%Within Faculty	20.0%	40.0%	40.0%	100.0%
Law Count		10		10
% Within Faculty		100.0%		100.0%
TOTAL Count	5	47	16	68
% Within University	7.4%	69.1%	23.5%	100%

The response options in Table 2 reveal that most of the graduates (36) favoured the relevance of the programmes in terms of practical application (columns 3 and 4). It is also evident from Table 2 that there is some dissatisfaction with the way the programmes are in promoting practical application that would necessitate graduates handling different work responsibilities in the field. Dissatisfaction is more in Agriculture, Humanities, Law, Science and Social Sciences. With a total of 31 graduates dissatisfied, there seems to be some problems here, though unobservable by some of the faculties. Certainly a situation in which close to half of the respondents are dissatisfied, is worthy of closer attention.

There is need to expose the graduates to the general practical application and work responsibilities during preparation in order to make programmes more effective and relevant to the university graduates. In Table2, it is important to note that all the ten respondents in the Faculty of Health Sciences were satisfied with the relevance of the programmes in terms of practical application.

Table 2: Frequency table and the relevance of programmes in terms of practical application

Faculty	Quality of courses in your field of specialization in terms of practical application				
	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Highly Satisfied	Not Applicable	Total
Agriculture Count	4	4			8
% Within Faculty	50.0%	50.0%			100.0%
Health Sciences Count		10			10
% Within Faculty		100.0%			100.0%
Education Count	3	3	4		10
% Within Faculty	30.0%	30.0%	40.0%		100.0%
Humanities Count	4	3	2	1	10
% Within Faculty	40.0%	30.0%	20.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Science Count	8	1	1		10
% Within Faculty	80.0%	10.0%	10.0%		100.0%
Social Sciences Count	7	3			10
%Within Faculty	70.0%	30.0%			100.0%
Law Count	5	5			10
% Within Faculty	50.0%	50.0%			100.0%
TOTAL Count	31	29	7	1	68
% Within University	45.6%	42.6%	10.3%	1.5%	100.0%

Majority of respondents in Table 3, viewed NUL programmes as relevant in addressing the needs of the nation. For example, a total of 36 graduates were either satisfied or highly satisfied that the programmes made them aware of what they were expected to learn as far as addressing the needs of the nation is concerned. A remarkable 100 percent satisfaction was recorded among graduates of the Faculty of Health Sciences. This positive attitude from the Faculty of Health sciences towards their programme probably made the graduates realise their responsibility to the nation. Although most of the graduates had positive assessment towards the effectiveness of the programmes to national needs, about 43 percent of the graduates were dissatisfied with the programmes' relevance as far as addressing the nation's needs are concerned. Perhaps the main reason for dissatisfaction is that the programmes did not strongly focus on addressing the nation's needs. As a result, graduates could not realise the relevance of what was taught in class and the day to day on-the-job life expectations.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of relevance of courses in terms of nation's needs

Faculty	Quality of courses in your field of specialization and the way they address the needs of the nation				
	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Highly Satisfied	Not Applicable	Total
Agriculture Count	5	3			8
% Within Faculty	62.5%	37.5%			100.0%
Health Sciences Count		10			10
% Within Faculty		100.0%			100.0%
Education Count	1	6	3		10
% Within Faculty	10.0%	60.0%	30.0%		100.0%
Humanities Count	5	1	3	1	10
% Within Faculty	50.0%	10.0%	30.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Science Count	6	4			10
% Within Faculty	60.0%	40.0%			100.0%
Social Sciences Count	5	2	1	2	10
%Within Faculty	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%	20.0%	100.0%
Law Count	7	3			10
% Within Faculty	70.0%	30.0%			100.0%
TOTAL Count	29	29	7	3	68
% Within University	42.6%	42.6%	10.3%	4.4%	100.0%

Furthermore, if there is still a huge number such as 29 dissatisfied with the way programmes address the nation's needs, it may mean that the faculties (other than the Health Sciences) have not yet achieved the intended goal of building competent workforce in their preparation. On the other hand, it may be reflective of the genuine gap between course content and practice in the workplace which can only be filled overtime. A graduate who is not well prepared to address the nation's needs cannot be expected to work confidently in a way that would result in the achievement of desirable outcomes as mentioned in the University vision and mission statement. On the whole, only three graduates could not rate the issue of addressing the needs of the nation.

In Table 4, most of the respondents (72 percent) were either satisfied or highly satisfied with programme relevance at workplaces. In particular, the rating satisfied in terms of the responsibilities of graduates at workplaces had 40 respondents. However, shortcomings were also perceived in the preparation in terms of work responsibilities. About one-quarter (18) graduates felt that the programmes had not prepared them adequately enough to cultivate enough confidence to face the world of work. Probably, it is against these perceptions that the call for revision of the programmes exposing the graduates to the responsibilities of the work place is warranted.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents according to the relevance of programmes in terms of workplace responsibilities

Faculty	Quality of courses in your field of specialization and in terms of work responsibility you are facing				
	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Highly Satisfied	Not Applicable	Total
Agriculture Count	5	2	1		8
% Within Faculty	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%		100.0%
Health Sciences Count		10			10
% Within Faculty		100.0%			100.0%
Education Count	2	5	3		10
% Within Faculty	20.0%	50.0%	30.0%		100.0%
Humanities Count	2	3	4	1	10
% Within Faculty	20.0%	30.0%	40.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Science Count	5	5			10
% Within Faculty	50.0%	50.0%			100.0%
Social Sciences Count	4	5	1		10
%Within Faculty	40.0%	50.0%	10.0%		100.0%
Law Count		10			10
% Within Faculty		100.0%			100.0%
TOTAL Count	18	40	9	1	68
% Within University	26.5%	58.8%	13.2%	1.5%	100.0%

It should be noted that all respondents from the faculties of Health Sciences and Law show satisfaction. On the other hand, 18 respondents from the faculties of Education, Humanities, Science and Social Sciences demonstrated dissatisfaction with the relevance of the programmes in relation to the responsibilities of graduates at workplaces. It can be argued that perhaps the 18 may be part of the respondents that have demonstrated that practical applications in their faculties are not met. Only one graduate failed to respond to the issue of work responsibility among all respondents.

Discussions

The analysis reported in this study provides certain insights regarding the status of the relevance of NUL programmes in preparing graduates for the world of work. Two research questions were answered. This being: Do the programmes at NUL prepare students for the world of work? and What could be done to ensure that the NUL programmes prepare students for the world of work? On one hand, the analysis shows that there are a number of positive outcomes attributable to the relevance of the NUL programmes. The positive outcomes are realized in each of the elements rated i.e., NUL programmes in terms of course content, practical application, addressing the nation's needs and the responsibilities of the graduate in the field. On the other hand, the analysis of the study indicates that the programmes have areas of concern warranting a closer attention especially with relevance of the programme in terms of practical application and addressing the nation's needs. The discussion on the analysis of this study follows in the next paragraphs.

In relation to the relevance of NUL programmes in terms of course content, almost three quarters of the graduates perceived the issue positively. With this positiveness, therefore, it can be deduced that programme relevance in terms of course content plays an important role in preparing graduates for growth and development for the future roles in the field. This means that a well designed programme with appropriate course content has a particular place in the University vision and mission statement. From the results of this study, better decision making and improved strategies could be put in place to modify the faculties' programmes relevance especially where there are problems as far as course content is concerned. The modification of the NUL programmes would probably contribute to the attainment of NUL's vision and mission.

The NUL programmes, in terms of practical application received positive perceptions of virtually most of the graduates. However, other graduates expressed their concern in the way programmes do not expose them to practical application. For those that were dissatisfied with the idea of practical application, what is needed is that the faculties explore various instructional approaches that would promote students' ability to be fully involved in practical application. The danger of the absence of practical application in the programmes is the failure to contribute to the students' human development in the intended area of specialization. Those aspects of practice are expected to equip the graduates with information useful for the future life in solving problems and making decisions. However, without equipping graduates with ideas on practical application, interpretation of the situations outside the classroom would not be possible.

Despite the dissatisfaction of some of the graduates as far as the relevance of the programmes in addressing the needs of the nation, others were positively impacted. For example, most of the graduates (53 percent) accepted the idea and rated it satisfied and highly satisfied. These graduates gave the impression that the programmes were well designed to prepare the graduates realize the importance of serving the needs of the nation. Of particular interest were the Faculties of Health Sciences and Law, which actually deal with people and have had the impact as they study through the four years.

While there was a consensus among the graduates about the relevance of the programmes in terms of nation's needs, certainly the issue of programme relevance is worthy of consideration in the future studies. It does not appear that all the graduates have been prepared to attain sufficient confidence in the workplace. Probably the programme relevance was affected by the manner in which the classroom instruction was conducted-making the teaching of the course content quite theoretical and fails to relate

it to the day to day situation. Perhaps this is the reason they are unable to communicate effectively at work.

In response to whether the NUL programmes address the responsibility of graduates at the work place, there was also a conflict of opinions. It seems valuable that some of the NUL programmes encourage and help graduates get acquainted to work place responsibilities which tend to make it an enjoyable exercise. However, due to one reason or the other, some graduates did not report the idea that NUL programmes make them confident and competent at work. In view of this, it is necessary for the faculties to implement instructional strategies to which the graduates can be exposed to the activities of the work place. Probably the type of teaching-learning that was observed did not enable students to relate the University experience to work responsibilities. However, the need for integration should be the focal point of NUL teaching and learning i.e., preparing graduates to apply knowledge gained from the University in solving societal problems. The hope is that ultimately the synergy between the two experiences would ultimately equip graduates well enough for the challenges that they would face later as they make attempts to contribute to the welfare and development of their society.

From the study, it is evident that the relevance of NUL programmes has strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the strengths, the suggestion would be to reinforce things that seem to be working. But in relation to programme weaknesses, definitely some steps have to be taken to correct the anomalies. Probably the implementation of the graduates recommendations for programmes improvement would reduce some of the weaknesses and contribute to the overall relevance of the programmes to achieve the intended University vision and mission statement.

Attempts at improving programme relevance can be successful through stakeholder involvement such as programme graduates at workplaces. The graduates were further requested to suggest ways that could be taken to improve the relevance of NUL programmes to produce better graduates for the world-of-work. There was a general consensus from the graduates that in the future, the graduates' preparation should focus attention on organization and management of the programmes in terms of giving students adequate time for practical and internship attachment. With this corrective measure in place, the programmes at NUL could become valuable and contribute to the needs of the nation and consequently the attainment of better performance of graduates at workplaces.

A few frequently occurring excerpts that were picked up from the study to buttress this position are reported here as follows:

"The NUL should offer practical courses that can help one to participate in nation's development and not those that are theoretical";

"Have variety of courses that prepare one to address the needs of its society".

"Enhance the strategy of hands on and practically based training – at least 60% on practice and 40% on course content".

"NUL should seek what the world of work requires and prepare the students on the existing needs of the nation. It should further get feedback from the government departments and private sector on its graduates' performance".

From these excerpts, graduates seem to have developed interest in the programmes although certain aspects of the programme were reported inadequate. Despite certain shortcomings, the programmes seem to have a great promise in preparing the graduates for their careers in their profession.

Conclusion

In relation to research questions which asked whether the programmes at the NUL prepare students for the world of work, the evidence form the study suggests that the NUL programmes are generally construed as relevant for graduates' preparation. This is reflected in some of the graduates' positive perceptions of the programmes. However, some graduates indicated that in some areas of the programmes, there is need for improvement, revision, and modification before they become relevant programmes that could respond to the needs of graduates and society at large.

Another conclusion drawn in this exercise is that faculties differ in nature and character. So the responses of graduates in these faculties at times differ. Glaring examples are in the faculty of Health Sciences whose responses are all the time either positive or negative. Another example noted arises from the fact that by nature some faculties are people - oriented so they score positive responses in relation to questions relating to relations with people, for example, Education, Social sciences, Health Sciences and Law. Generally, majority of the faculties also revealed that the courses lack practice which graduates believe they would benefit from. They argue that these courses have, at times, become too theoretical. It can, therefore, be concluded that NUL courses do not have an inbuilt practical mechanisms, and even those courses which maybe regarded as practical have become theoretical.

The findings have also revealed that almost half to total number of respondents indicate that the courses do very little to help them bring together knowledge of local conditions to the place of work. This makes one

to draw a conclusion that NUL courses are too academic, to an extend that they never focus on use of local knowledge and resources to advance education in a conducive manner which indeed, would also embrace graduates' positive attitudes toward local knowledge and environment. Furthermore, a conclusion can be made that the NUL courses need to make or develop some creativity in the students, so that they can invent, develop and design new things appropriate for Lesotho. In the end, it is noted that there is almost a balance between positive and negative responses in some of the instances of programme relevance.

On the second question pertaining to what could be done to ensure that the NUL programmes prepare students for the world of work it can be concluded that there are deficiencies identified in relation to the preparation of graduates. Some graduates admitted that for one reason or the other the NUL programmes have not fully prepared them to handle all aspects of the work place. The graduates referred specifically for relevance of programmes in terms of practical application and addressing the nation's needs. As a result, the graduates required the NUL programmes to furnish them with knowledge and appropriate skills that would make them handle responsibilities at work. This would be a way of ensuring competence and development for beginners at the work place.

Recommendations

The study's main research questions revolved around whether NUL programmes prepare graduates for the world of work and what more NUL could do to equip graduates for their workplaces. The data was collected through close-ended questions and one open ended question. The analysis focused on the relevance of programmes under the following descriptors:

- The relevance of course content.
- The relevance of the programmes in terms of practical application
- The relevance of the programmes in terms of addressing nation' needs
- The relevance of the programmes in terms of the responsibilities of graduates at workplaces.

The general trend is that the programmes NUL offers have tried to equip graduates with knowledge to address societal needs. However the study revealed that these programmes should be improved given the experiences of graduates in the field of work.

The following are the recommendations based on the findings and conclusions raised earlier that:

- The programmes should balance course content and practice, and time should be managed fairly for both. Balancing course content and practice will equip graduates with appropriate skills to handle different situations at the work place.

- The NUL faculties should identify and involve relevant stakeholders' views and ideas in the course content development, so that the programmes fit well with workplace activities.

- The views and experiences of students on practicum and attachments be considered and be incorporated in the review and revision of programme courses.

- The NUL course outline development for programmes be a joint and open venture between the NUL teaching staff and stakeholders from the government and private sectors, either in an evaluation or needs assessment workshop. This togetherness would allow inputs from workplaces to strengthen the NUL programmes.

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