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Structuring Graduate Employment Support in Higher Education in Benin: A Sequential Analysis of the National School of Administration's Actions

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Abstract

Graduate employment has become an increasingly important concern for higher education institutions, raising questions about how support initiatives are organized and embedded in institutional practice. This study examines the degree of structuring of graduate employment support implemented by the National School of Administration in Benin through five analytical dimensions: problem identification, formulation, implementation, evaluation, and termination. To address this question, a qualitatively driven mixed-method design combined a questionnaire administered to 128 professional bachelor's graduates with 22 semi-structured interviews involving internal and external institutional actors. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis before the resulting categories were related to the five dimensions. The findings indicate that graduate employment difficulties are widely recognized and that several support activities are effectively implemented. However, no formal institutional diagnosis or explicit programmatic framework was identified, implementation relies on staff whose formal responsibilities do not include this mission, and evaluation remains largely informal without organized monitoring mechanisms. In addition, proposals to suspend or redirect existing activities reflect possible future adjustments rather than formal termination decisions. Overall, the study shows that the components of a single institutional intervention can display different degrees of structuring. Graduate employment support should therefore be considered in terms of its organizational anchoring, coordination, and articulation with training pathways and changing professional environments.

Keywords: educational governance; employability; institutionalization; policy cycle; professionalization

Introduction

For several decades, higher education has undergone major transformations driven by the massification of university studies. This shift has redefined the role of higher education in young people's career trajectories and generated new expectations for academic institutions, particularly regarding student success, professionalization, and entrepreneurship (Millet, 2023). These changes fit into broader reconfigurations affecting the organization, governance, and academic offerings of higher education institutions (Guyon, 2023). Concurrently, shifts in the labor market and heightened competition among job candidates have made the relationship between academic degrees and employment access far more complex (Bataille et al., 2024; Tomlinson, 2012).

Consequently, universities face growing pressure to prepare graduates for entering the workforce. Yet, this trend has not led to uniform consensus on whether employability should be a prima-

ry university mission. Sin *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that while employability-oriented practices are increasingly integrated into curricula, their acceptance varies significantly across academic disciplines and institution types. Rather than replacing traditional academic missions, employability initiatives represent a gradual restructuring of higher education.

This evolution manifests in interventions that go beyond delivering disciplinary knowledge. Gayraud *et al.* (2011) highlight how professionalizing universities has led to a wider variety of programs connecting education to employment. Building on this, Crozet & Morgand (2022) argue that graduate employment support has become a core university management challenge capable of transforming institutional structures and practices. However, it also sparks friction when responsibilities, resources, and leadership mechanisms are misaligned. In African contexts, Pitan & Muller (2023) identify similar institutional career-readiness strategies, such as experiential learning and career guidance activities, though they note that student exposure to these opportunities remains uneven.

Recent literature on graduate employability spans several dimensions. Eimer & Bohndick (2023) reveal the variety of models used in higher education to conceptualize and foster employability. Other research examines institutional strategies and their perceived impact (Pitan & Muller, 2023), or analyzes skill gaps between employer expectations and graduate capabilities. In Ghana, for instance, employers surveyed by Damoah *et al.* (2021) reported significant gaps between the skills they prioritize and those demonstrated by recent hires. While these studies offer valuable insights into skills, programs, and outcomes, they often overlook the internal processes by which an institution identifies workforce integration challenges, formulates a strategy, organizes its implementation, and evaluates results.

This gap underscores the need to examine the institutional conditions framing career support, treating it through the lens of public policy and action. Duran (2010) frames public policy analysis around how collective problems are defined and managed through configurations of stakeholders, resources, and coordination. Offering graduate support activities is not enough, on its own, to signal a structured institutional approach. A comprehensive evaluation must also consider problem definition, strategy formulation, resource allocation, division of labor, and tracking mechanisms.

In this study, *structuring* refers to the alignment of core components that give an initiative organization and coherence, specifically its objectives, roles, procedures, and coordination mechanisms (Mintzberg, 1979; Pugh et al., 1968). *Formalization* represents a specific facet of this process, defined as the explicit codification of rules, procedures, and responsibilities governing action (Pugh et al., 1968). *Institutionalization*, meanwhile, denotes embedding these arrangements into standard organizational operations beyond ad hoc efforts (Olsen, 2009; Selznick, 1957).

To operationalize this analytical framework, this study uses Jones's sequential policy cycle model (Jones, 1970), structured around five dimensions: problem identification, program formulation/development, implementation, evaluation and termination. Rather than viewing this framework as a strictly linear progression, since policy cycles often involve overlapping stages, interactions, and feedback loops (Jann & Wegrich, 2007), we adopt these five sequences as analytical dimensions to evaluate an institution's level of structuring.

This issue holds particular importance in Benin. Ahouandjinou (2014) analyzed employment challenges among University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) graduates, focusing on youth strategies in response to job scarcity. Analyzing the case of Benin's National School of Administration (ENA-Benin) shifts the focus to the institutional response. Given limited public sector hiring capacity and a broad shortage of formal jobs relative to demand, ENA-Benin launched various workforce transition initiatives (Ministère des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises et de la Promotion de l'Emploi, 2020).

This study evaluates the degree of structuring behind ENA-Benin's employment support actions using Jones's five dimensions (1970). The central research question asks: To what extent do the graduate employment support actions implemented by ENA-Benin demonstrate the features of structured institutional action across Jones's five policy cycle sequences (1970)?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitatively driven mixed-method approach, combining quantitative graduate surveys with qualitative interviews of institutional stakeholders. Both datasets were collected concurrently and analyzed independently before being synthesized across the five policy cycle dimensions. Qualitative data forms the core analytical foundation, supplemented by quantitative findings where they directly clarify specific dimensions.

Participants

The quantitative component surveyed professional bachelor's degree graduates from ENA-Benin across the 2016-2021 graduating classes. Civil servants enrolled under state training contracts were excluded, as they were already employed prior to enrollment. The 2016 cohort marks the introduction of the LMD (Bachelor-Master-Doctorate) system, while 2021 represented the most recent cohort available when data collection began.

Standard sample size calculations for large populations, considering 95% confidence interval, $p = 0.50$, 5% margin of error (Rodríguez Del Águila & González-Ramírez, 2014) targeted a sample size of 385. However, due to incomplete contact records and outreach challenges, the final surveyed sample reached 128 graduates. A simple random sample was drawn from accessible alumni records, a constraint factored into the quantitative interpretation.

The qualitative component involved 22 key informants selected via purposive sampling based on their roles in institutional career support actions. There were 12 internal stakeholders (leadership team members, academic department heads, faculty, and administrative staff) and 10 external stakeholders (university officials, ENA-Benin alumni association representatives, and public employment agency officers).

Data Collection Tools

Data collection used two primary instruments: a structured questionnaire for graduates and semi-structured interview guides tailored to each stakeholder group. The graduate questionnaire assessed perceptions of institutional responsibility for career support, awareness of formal mandates, recognition of job-market challenges, and participation in support activities. The interview guides explored problem identification, institutional mandates, active initiatives, target objectives, resource allocation, organizational setups, tracking and evaluation routines, and proposed adjustments.

Instruments were field-tested during a pre-test phase in December 2022 to confirm question clarity and alignment with research goals. Feedback led to refined phrasing and formatting to ensure tool reliability prior to main data collection.

Data Collection

Fieldwork took place between January and June 2023. Graduate surveys were administered electronically using KoboToolbox. Stakeholder interviews were conducted using tailored interview guides, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) to generate descriptive frequency distributions and percentages.

Qualitative transcripts underwent thematic analysis. First-pass open coding identified core meaning units and emerged categories organically. These thematic categories were then mapped onto Jones's five policy cycle dimensions. Text segments relevant to multiple categories were assigned based on their primary emphasis, guided by empirical criteria (Table 1). Initial coding was led by the primary author, followed by peer review and refinement among co-authors to establish consensus. Selected verbatim quotes were chosen to represent recurring interview themes.

Table 1. Mapping Jones's Policy Cycle Sequences to Empirical Analytical Criteria

Sequence	Empirical Classification Criteria
Problem Identification	Recognition of job transition issues; existence of formal diagnoses; target groups and root causes; incorporation into institutional priorities.
Formulation/Development	Target goals; intended beneficiaries; strategy design; assignment of roles and responsibilities; resource planning; procedural guidelines.
Implementation	Executed activities; staff involved; alignment between duties and job descriptions; staff training; operational coordination; execution hurdles.
Evaluation	Tracking mechanisms; performance indicators; outcome assessment; formal reviews; feedback and adjustments.
Termination	Program exit, suspension, phase out, or redesign; distinguishing formal termination decisions from proposed adjustments.

Note. Criteria summarize empirical indicators used to align thematic codes with Jones's framework (1970).

Quantitative findings were integrated alongside qualitative insights when addressing shared dimensions. This mixed synthesis provides contextual depth regarding program rollout without forcing artificial convergence. Structuring levels were evaluated based on formalization, operational organization, and structural integration.

For the termination sequence, a clear distinction was maintained between formal institutional decisions and stakeholder proposals for program changes, treating the latter as prospective evolution rather than active program termination. Institutionalization was evaluated as a cross-cutting dimension examining how deeply initiatives are embedded within everyday institutional operations.

Ethical Considerations

While formal institutional ethics committee review was not required for this study type, standard ethical safeguards were followed. Participants were briefed on research goals, voluntary involvement, data usage, and withdrawal rights. Informed consent was secured prior to data collection, and all interview records were anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Results

The results are presented across the five policy cycle dimensions, integrating quantitative findings with interview analysis.

Recognized Employment Challenges Without Formal Institutional Diagnoses

Quantitative survey data (Table 2) reveal that 94.53% of surveyed graduates believe ENA-Benin should actively support their entry into the workforce. However, 96.77% reported being unaware of any official regulatory mandate assigning this responsibility to the institution. Furthermore, 75.78% felt that policy-makers have never adequately addressed graduate employment difficulties.

Table 2. Graduate Perceptions of ENA-Benin's Career Support Role (n = 128)

Categories	Percentage
Perceived relevance of institutional support for workforce entry	
No	5.47
Yes	94.53
Awareness of formal mandate assigning career support to ENA-Benin	
No	96.77
Yes	3.23
Perception of political attention given to graduate employment issues	
Never	75.78
Sometimes	21.88
Often	2.34

Note. Field data, June 2023.

Qualitative interviews confirm that while leadership acknowledges graduate employment challenges, interventions were not preceded by formal diagnostic studies. When asked whether formal assessments were conducted before launching activities, one internal stakeholder noted:

To us, the difficulties our graduates face when entering the workforce are obvious; public civil service entrance exams have become rare. So, there is no need for extensive study before doing the little we can do. (Internal Stakeholder 12)

Interviews revealed no formal diagnostic reports, baseline studies, or systematically documented analyses regarding the scope or demographics of graduate unemployment. As another administrator explained:

As things stand, we do not yet have a strategic plan that treats graduate workforce entry as a major institutional priority. (Internal Stakeholder 08)

These findings point to a shared recognition of the need for employment support alongside an absence of formal institutional diagnosis or strategic planning.

Program Formulation Lacking an Explicit Framework

Interviews demonstrate that while various support actions occur, they lack an overarching framework specifying goals, target populations, or organizational workflows. One administrator summarized this gap:

We do what we can to support graduates, but there isn't really a framework defining how far we should go or what exact outcomes are expected. (Internal Stakeholder 08)

No formal documentation was found outlining operational goals, expected metrics, resource allocations, or standardized procedures. Annual operational plans dedicated to career support were similarly absent. Another respondent remarked:

At present, we lack a coherent graduate employment policy at ENA-Benin; there are only isolated actions. What we need is a well-structured policy with assigned responsibilities and an annual work plan. (Internal Stakeholder 02)

An external stakeholder shared a similar observation:

You hear that ENA-Benin tries to help its graduates, but looking in from the outside, you don't see a clear policy. It is mostly ad hoc initiatives driven by immediate opportunities. (External Stakeholder 06)

Overall, respondents agreed that career support actions operate without formal guidelines, structured targeting, or integrated program planning.

Implementation without Formal Role Assignments

In practice, ENA-Benin's support actions center on circulating jobs/internship postings, organizing employability workshops, and leveraging informal partnerships for professional placements. However, these tasks are carried out by personnel whose official job descriptions do not include career support duties. An internal staff member explained:

The tasks we are asked to carry out for graduate support are not listed in our job descriptions or duty sheets. Consequently, executing these activities, for which we received no specialized training, is not formally recognized anywhere. (Internal Stakeholder 12)

Staff members also reported operational hurdles during execution, particularly in maintaining contact with alumni to share job openings. As one staff member noted:

Graduates are often unreachable when we try to share spontaneous job or internship offers. Afterwards, they mention having changed phone numbers. (Internal Stakeholder 10)

In summary, activities take place without formal duty assignments, specialized staff training, or reliable systems for tracking and contacting alumni.

Informal Evaluation without Structured Monitoring

Interview data reveal a complete absence of structured evaluation mechanisms for career support initiatives. When asked about evaluation routines, an administrator stated:

Evaluating our actions would be ideal! But for now, we have not established an evaluation mechanism for graduate employment support. Still, when we see low attendance at workshops, we get the feeling adjustments are needed. (Internal Stakeholder 07)

Relying on low event turnout as an informal signal for course correction replaces formal review processes. The study found no designated performance metrics, periodic reporting, or structured feedback systems. Assessment remains ad hoc and observational.

Proposed Adjustments vs. Formal Termination Decisions

Data analysis yielded no evidence of formal institutional decisions to end, phase out, or officially replace career support activities. However, respondents frequently proposed temporary pauses or structural realignments. An internal stakeholder suggested:

Perhaps the time has come to pause our current efforts to design a better-organized system and restart on clearer foundations. (Internal Stakeholder 11)

This perspective reflects an informal proposal for structural pause rather than an official institutional directive. Externally, respondents advocated shifting toward work-study models:

Instead of relying on isolated, ad hoc actions, ENA would do better to move toward a work-study model integrated into the curriculum and organized alongside businesses. (External Stakeholder 06)

These proposals indicate a desire for program evolution rather than documented policy termination.

Discussion

This research analyzed the degree to which graduate employment support initiatives implemented by the National School of Administration in Benin are structured, using five analytical di-

mensions: problem identification, formulation, implementation, evaluation, and termination. Following the presentation of the findings, this section analyzes and discusses them across three main themes, followed by an outline of the study's limitations.

Institutional Anchoring as an Organizational Structuring Challenge

The findings at ENA-Benin highlight the challenge higher education institutions face when embedding new societal expectations into established administrative structures (Millet, 2023). While universities are increasingly called upon to foster employability, these responsibilities do not automatically translate into structured institutional practices (Guyon, 2023). As noted by the author (*ibid.*), expanding institutional mandates can strain operational capacity when responsibilities and resources are ill-defined.

To move from *ad hoc* activities to a permanent institutional function, an organization must establish clear coordination mechanisms, assigned roles, and formal procedures (Mintzberg, 1979; Pugh et al., 1968). Grounded in institutional theory (Olsen, 2009; Selznick, 1957), long-term institutionalization requires embedding career support into standard administrative workflows rather than relying on informal staff goodwill.

Crozet & Morgand (2022) emphasize that embedding employability into university governance requires structural adjustments to management routines and resource allocation. Rather than viewing structuring as a binary choice between "structured" and "unstructured," it is more accurate to view it as a continuum of organizational anchoring. An institution can run active programs while leaving its operational guidelines, staffing roles, and evaluation routines relatively uncodified.

Beyond Linear Sequencing: Institutional Dynamics in Practice

Using Jones's five-stage framework (1970) as an analytical tool, rather than a rigid linear model, helps explain how institutional actions develop unevenly. As Jann and Wegrich (2007) point out, real-world policy cycles rarely follow neat chronological stages; sequences routinely overlap and interact.

Public action research demonstrates that policies are continuously reshaped during implementation by staff adapting to operational realities (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2018). Divergences between formal mandates and daily practices are not necessarily implementation failures; they often reflect how policy is pragmatically constructed on the ground. This insight helps explain how ENA-Benin staff successfully execute career support activities despite lacking formal job descriptions or programmatic frameworks.

Furthermore, distinguishing between stakeholder proposals and official administrative choices avoids misinterpreting calls for reform as formal program terminations. Applying Jones's framework (1970) alongside public action literature (Jann & Wegrich, 2007; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2018) provides a diagnostic framework to evaluate relative levels of structuring across program components without forcing a rigid maturity scale.

Career Support and Reconfigurations in Education-to-Work Transitions

Connecting institutional career support to evolving labor market dynamics reinforces that university-to-work transitions cannot rely on a single, isolated intervention (Gayraud et al., 2011; Pitan & Muller, 2023). Effective career support must be integrated across curriculum design, experiential learning, and employer partnerships.

However, institutional structuring should not assume a direct, linear link between higher education and immediate job placement. As Tomlinson (2012) and Bataille *et al.* (2024) argue, graduate labor market transitions are increasingly non-linear, with single degree tracks leading to

diverse career outcomes. Strengthening career support infrastructure provides better guidance, but it does not guarantee a job placement in competitive labor markets (*ibid.*).

Building stronger connections with economic stakeholders and designing integrated work-study opportunities, as suggested by interviewees, offers a practical way to align academic training with changing employment conditions. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates that institutional initiatives can exhibit varying degrees of formalization, coordination, and structural integration across their subcomponents.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. Findings reflect the specific context of ENA-Benin and cannot be automatically generalized to other institutions. The quantitative sample (n = 128) fell short of the initial 385-respondent target due to incomplete alumni tracking databases, limiting statistical generalization beyond the surveyed group. Labor market trends and employer demand were not independently surveyed, serving instead as contextual background for discussion.

Conclusion

This study shows that graduate employment support at ENA-Benin exhibits varying degrees of structuring across Jones's five policy cycle dimensions (1970). While stakeholder recognition of job-search difficulties is high and support activities are actively delivered, program formulation, staff assignment, and performance monitoring remain largely informal. Proposed program pauses or adjustments reflect prospective ideas for reform rather than documented termination decisions.

These findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between running isolated support activities and achieving full institutionalization. Using a flexible, multidimensional policy cycle model allows researchers to assess specific organizational strengths and gaps rather than labeling an institution's efforts as simply "structured" or "unstructured".

To enhance program coherence, higher education institutions should clarify strategic goals, formally assign staff responsibilities, establish tracking metrics, and integrate career preparation directly into academic curricula. Future research could apply comparative or longitudinal designs across multiple institutions to track how career support frameworks evolve over time.

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