# **Employment Opportunities for African Language and Literature Experts in Kenyan Employment Sectors.**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Kenya has an estimate of 42 ethnic communities displaying different languages, dialects and cultures yet no clear picture exists in regard to either existence of employment opportunities or required qualifications for both language and literature graduates of this fields. Kiswahili is both national and official language as stated in the Kenyan constitution. However still it rates low in the employment sector, though better than the other languages. Foreign languages such as French, German and Arabic are considered as an added advantage in employment sectors such as business, tourism, and other government and parastatal sectors. The low rating of Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages emanates from various factors ranging from colonial language policies that elevated the English language as the official language and the language planning process that elevated Kiswahili to be the national language of Kenya. The low levels of employment rates and poor attitude towards advancement in African languages has a drastic effect on admission of students in the African languages and literature departments in Kenyan universities. A sample of 20 employment sectors carried out in Kenya in 2009, show that Kenyan languages only secure 10% employment opportunities, Kiswahili has 30% while English has 50%. The Teachers Service Commission is the leading employer in the government sector. Kenyan language component is not an independent variable in the employment requirement. Lack of employment opportunities, stigmatization and low motivation are major challenges facing teaching, learning and research in African languages. The article proposes a collaborative and networking curriculum to improve the situation.

Key Words: African languages, language policies, graduates, employment, curriculum

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Kenya is a multi-lingual country with over 42 ethnic communities displaying different languages, dialects and cultures. Ironically 40 years after independence both English and other foreign languages such as French, German and Arabic have an upper hand when it comes to employment opportunities in various sectors including, business, tourism, and government and parastatal sectors. Although development is usually associated with economic growth and is commonly measured by success indicators such as Gross National Product, per capita incomes, industrial and infrastructural growth in general, it also includes social development (Ogechi, 2002:1). According to the World Summit on the Information Society held in 2003, an Information Society is one in which "everyone can create, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and people to achieve their full potential in promoting sustainable development and improving their quality of life..." (World Summit Information Society, 2003). Our diverse indigenous language heritage is an important enabling resource for developing communities to actively participate in the knowledge economy and to create wealth through the generation of knowledge. The perception that our indigenous languages are not fit for this purpose is preposterous. Language economic activities entail the following industries: education, electronic media, creative writing, journalism, television, film, social sciences, medicine, translation, interpretation etc. in which information is used productively or in innovative ways to create wealth.

As noted by Schwarz (2000:222), a number of researches have speculated on the impact of the higher education programs on the professional lives of the graduates (Cooper 1986, Grace and Fife 1986). Few have conducted research on the impact of the skills learned in higher education programs on graduates work as researchers and administrators. Huisman and Bartelse (2000) note that the labour Market situation in the Netherlands forced universities to change their research trainees' financial support system. Their research based on the future prospects of the young researchers in the labor market indicates that

the academic labour market was seen as being unable to absorb the growing number of young doctoral degree holders who wished to pursue an academic career. They note that doctoral candidates tend to refer themselves as a "lost generation". However they note that the picture is not negative though the employment conditions in terms of salaries and job security are generally less favorable for PhD holders. In conclusion they indicate that the job prospects for young doctorates in the academic world are limited.

Elsewhere in Europe as discussed by Amini (2002:315) a number of surveys on graduate employment and work has increased substantially. One of the main reasons of such surveys is the overall structural changes that have taken place and are still taking place in universities abroad. These changes give rise to the assumption that the discrepancy between competences acquired in education and those in "real life" has grown to a larger extent. Noted by Amin, Kellermann & Sagmeister (162/2000) point out three possible origins for this discrepancy. First the education system might be so far removed from the work place that educators are unable to anticipate the competencies graduates will need for a productive life. Second, may be graduate skills cannot be used efficiently (underutilization) and finally the graduates might be overqualified.

The article makes a survey of the existing job opportunities for African Language graduates. The research was undertaken in 2009 drawing its data from advertised job positions posted on the web sites, Kenyan local dailies and also interviews with former African language graduates of Maseno University. The News papers were sampled randomly taking into account the current year (2009), Bachelor of Social Sciences and language proficiency as important variables. Face to face interviews with former Maseno University students and African Language lecturers was done.

#### SITUATION ANALYSIS: Language Policy in Kenya

Following the colonial rule Kenya adopted English as its official language, Kiswahili as the National language while the indigenous languages are spoken mostly in rural settings and in homes where all members belong to the same ethnic group. Though Kenya has approximately 42 ethnic languages the most dominant of the indigenous languages are

Kikuyu, Dholuo and Luhyia and Kalenjin. As noted by Mbaabu (1996) ex-colonial languages are the most dominant in Africa. English is used in such countries as Sierra Leone, Gambia, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland as well as South Africa. French which is the second most widespread colonial language is spoken in such countries as Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire. The third language of the colonizer is Portuguese which is spoken in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bisau (Lusophone-Portuguese speaking countries). Lusophone, Anglophone or Francophone implies social, cultural, linguistic, economic as well as political ties with former colonizers (Mbaabu pp 5). Education policies of various colonial governments also varied significantly in the area of language policy the French and the Portuguese generally favored the use of the colonial language as the only medium of instruction. The British on the other hand were more inclined to use local languages especially at lower education levels (Akol:1999:106). This is the policy that was adapted in the Kenyan system of education during and after independence. However as noted by Ongarora (2002:68), the language policy respecting local languages in Kenya is completely silent after lower Primary school level, this implicates that beyond this level, these languages are left to fend for themselves.

The languages of the former colonial masters continue to perpetuate linguistics, social, cultural and to some extent economic dependency (Mbaabu 1996:3-5). The cultural imperialism that alienated the mind of Africans from their own culture and identity made them have negative feelings towards their own languages and indeed were not ready to advance them. As expressed by Van der Rheede Christo

(<a href="http://www.africafiles.org/printableversion.asp?id=21683">http://www.africafiles.org/printableversion.asp?id=21683</a>), David Mutasa, (2003: 6) in his research on the language policy of South Africa claims that the people do not see much value in African languages since authorities seem to be reluctant to ensure that African languages, by appropriate legal provisions, assume their rightful role as official communication in public affairs, administrative and educational domains. Learning a foreign language includes learning new values, religious practices and, education system. It is important to note that through mother tongue children are exposed to the cultural

values and traditional wisdom of their people. Through their language children are exposed to the communities' world views through folktales, songs and poetry (Indede 2002:101). Definitely these values are denied in the strange language.

During the the first pan-African conference on the training of translators, conference interpreters and public service interpreters in Africa held on 23–24 February 2009 in Nairobi, Mr. Kilemi Mwiria Assistant Minister of Higher Education, Kenya on behalf of Ms. Sally Kosgey, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology of Kenya said that the major role of language, including interpretation and translation, could not be overemphasized. As a country with 42 ethnic and language communities, Kenya appreciated the role of local languages in forging cultural and traditional ties for identity, and for communications between family members and local populations, among others. Language was part of every individual's cultural heritage and was key to shaping opinions and character, and enhancing respect, understanding and cooperation between communities and individuals. He expressed the opinion that in a world that had become a global village, Kenyan universities were sufficient to the task of contributing to the development of language services on the continent.

The current scenario has also boosted the economic value of the English language since employment in major sectors in the country is restricted to knowledge of English After Many years of colonial rule most of the Kenyan languages have not been given preference in both economic and social status. All the constitutions in Kenya including the current constitution state that the state shall respect promote and protect the diversity of language of the people of Kenya and shall promote the development and use of indigenous languages and sign language. Thus the Kenyan government has a very specific constitutional obligation to create an enabling environment for all languages in the country to fulfill their rightful roles; to spearhead community development, bring about modernization and assist in overcoming the prejudices and injustices of the past. On this setting it is therefore important to note the instrumental role indigenous languages play in terms of cultural, educational and economic empowerment of its users, hence the overall goal in terms of nation building.

### African Languages and their Employment Possibilities

### **Research Methodology**

#### Methodology 1

The data in this section is an analysis from a survey of job advertisement in 2009 from daily newspapers and internet. A sample of 20 advertisements made in the daily newspapers and the internet was extracted. The main variables that were considered in sampling this data included the Bachelor's degree in social sciences and the language requirements. Non - Governmental Organizations and private sectors with employment opportunities sampled out included UNICEF, Consortium for National Health Research (CNHR), Futures Group International Kenya, FHI Family Health International, Canadian International Dev. Agency Canadian International Dev. Agency USAID APHAI II, The Japan Center for Conflict Prevention, (JCCP), World Vision Kenva Jobs. Advisor, Organization Development & Change, East Africa, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) HR Job, Basco Paints, while the government sectors included Recruitment of Census, Constituencies Development Fund Board (CDF), Kenya Year Book Editorial Board, Constitutional Review, Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation, Ministry of public Health. Recruitment in census was the only advertisement that clearly indicated knowledge of main local language or dialect while JCCP had a requirement of fluency in spoken and written Somali and English. The other organizations legibility was pegged on Masters or Bachelor of Social Science in the relevant discipline, for example public health, public administration, human resource, business, population studies, economics and population and project management. Most of the advertisements required the candidates to have fluency in oral and written presentations both in English and Kiswahili. Generally a good command of communication skills in the two top languages of Kenya was a prerequisite. Information gathered from this data indicates that the language requirement is not an independent variable in the employment sector but a complement to the degree pursued in the relevant field of advertisement.

Table 2 below shows the variables of the Bachelor of social sciences, English, Kiswahili and other African languages as a requirement of employment opportunities in the sampled advertisements. The table computes the percentage of the specific variables as specified by the sectors.

<u>Table 1: Variables of the Bachelor of social sciences, English, Kiswahili and other</u>
<u>African languages</u>

	Degree	Degree	English	Kiswahili	Other African
					Languages
	Social Sc.	Not specified			
NGO	5= 25%	3=15%	7=35%	3=15%	1=5%
Private	1=5%	-	3=15%	-	-
Government	4=20%	2=10%	3=15%	3=15%	1=5%
Total	10=50%	5=25%	13=65%	6=30%	2=10%

As shown above, apart from Kiswahili, other Kenyan languages do not appear conspicuously as a requirement to secure employment in government, NGO or even private sectors. The results in the above table indicate that apart from Kiswahili gaining a chance of 30% in the employment opportunities, both the NGO and government have 10% job opportunities for other African Languages, while English is leading with 65%. However, though not specified most of the sectors have opportunities for graduates of Bachelor of Social Sciences where African language graduates could benefit. This also includes sectors that have not specified the required degree. To draw a conclusion from these results, we realize that English gives Kiswahili and other African languages very stiff competition in the job Market.

The figure below gives a summary of Government and private sectors in Kenya that have employment opportunities that may consider knowledge of language as an added advantage.

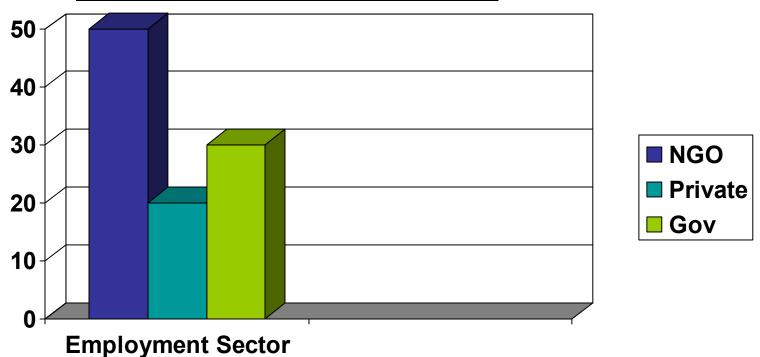
Table 2: Employment Category and Percentage

Employment Category	Sample out of 20	Percentage%
NGO	10	50
Private	4	20

Government	6	30

The figure shows that the NGO sector has the largest number of advertisement of job opportunities at 50%, followed by Government at 30% and private sector at 20%.

**Graph 1: Overall Picture of Employment Results from table 1** 



Agencies keep changing strategies of hiring employees. Job advertisement is becoming a tricky affair every day because many organizations no longer advertise vacancies in News Papers or websites. Other alternatives as noted by Murigi Macharia in the section of Job and Career recruitment and selection (The Standard, May 8 2009 page 37) indicate that other alternatives include internship programs, industrial attachment, use of referrals, by word of mouth, use of employment agencies, consultants, bureaus and walk in method. This implies that there exist employment opportunities that may not be on advertisement.

#### **Methodology 2: Tracer Study**

A tracer study of the former graduates of African Language department from Maseno University was done between the month of March and June 2009. Through discussions and enquires from former lecturers of the African Language department, 4 respondents who are alumni of the African Language program were traced. Some of the graduates were pursuing their Masters program at Maseno University. Through them, I was able to reach their former colleagues by phone. Among other questions employed included information on the degree attained, the level reached while pursuing African language courses, if the student completed the African language course or not, the relevance of the course to current employment and how the African language programs can be improved on to attract more students.

## Results of the interview held with former graduates of African languages from Maseno university

The first respondent pursued a degree of bachelor of education in English and literature and dholuo, predominantly spoken from Nyanza Province. He pursued the African language up to the second year. He cited some of the reasons for dropping the course to lack of employment opportunities from the Teachers Service Commission (TSC). So he had to continue with the English and Literature course which had promising chances of future employment by TSC. He also expressed that during the course; most of his colleagues teased him for pursuing a course in a native language, this implied primitivity and lack of focus. Through pressure and stigmatization, he was forced to drop the course at his second year of study. Currently he is employed by TSC in a teacher training college. The knowledge of African language course partially contributed to his employment since the teacher training college runs a syllabus that enhances knowledge of mother tongue skills for the purposes of lower level instruction.

The second respondent pursued a Bachelor of education in History and Special education. He also pursued a course in dholuo which he carried on till graduation. He complained about the course not being popular and having limited future prospects.

Currently he is a high school teacher. He expressed that African language transcripts partially contributed to his employment opportunity as it implied that he was well equipped with adequate language skills to handle language courses. This was an added advantage to his interview responses.

The third respondent pursued a degree of Bachelor of education in English, literature and African languages majoring in dholuo. He dropped out after his first year of study because of lack of marketability of the course and limited future prospects. Currently he is working with a local bank. He expressed that the language skills gained is instrumental in planning communications with customers and customer relationship. The skills are relevant in marketing bank products. The information given by the 3rd respondent was confirmed in an interview with the Barclays bank Managing Director of Kisumu branch. He revealed that graduates of African Languages are employed just like any other irrespective of their training at the university. The requirement ranges from Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education and Masters of Arts. Currently there are no PhD holders in the bank. Initially the bank employed graduates to carry out clerical duties. Latter on the bank sponsors their training on job in areas of their interests. He related that African Languages and Literatures are not basic requirements to the bank per se, however when employed, they will be trained in other relevant areas of Marketing, communication or business administration.

The fouth respondent was a Masters student of English. She did not take an African language course during undergraduate but was pursuing a research topic on internal structure of the Lutsostso Noun Phrase. Lutsostso is a dialect of the luhyia language, one of the Kenyan languages spoken in the Western region of Kenya. Being a primary teacher, she was motivated to undertake this research because she experienced the limitations of the instructional materials and relevant books for the purposes of instructing children at lower levels. She highly recommends that the ministry of education should look for ways of training teachers who can qualify to handle the lower level classes in their mother tongue

#### Views and Opinions gathered from the Respondents and Employers

The respondents who were within the teaching profession encouraged the teaching and research of African language programs at higher levels of learning so as to respond to the Ministry of Education policy on instruction of the lower level in mother tongue. They also indicated that the Teacher Training College Syllabus is in agreement with the mother tongue instruction policy at the lower levels of learning. They strongly recommended that the use of mother tongues enables the students to understand the concepts, makes the teachers more confident in their expression. Furthermore knowledge in mother tongue builds up the listening and speaking skills of both the teacher and the learner. Both the creativity ability of the child and the teacher are enhanced through storytelling and songs. Frequent use of mother tongue makes the children more proud of their culture and background; they identify and develop a feeling of belonging. Some graduates deal with special needs of students and apply the language knowledge to guide and counsel students in language performance; reading, writing, communication and enhancement of the reading culture. Trained teachers in African Languages appreciate the existence of this resource, and need to explore it thus discourage the trend of punishment of students in schools whenever they speak their mother tongue. The first respondent was motivated to pursue further research in dholuo tongue twisters which bonders between cultural and linguistic aspects of Language.

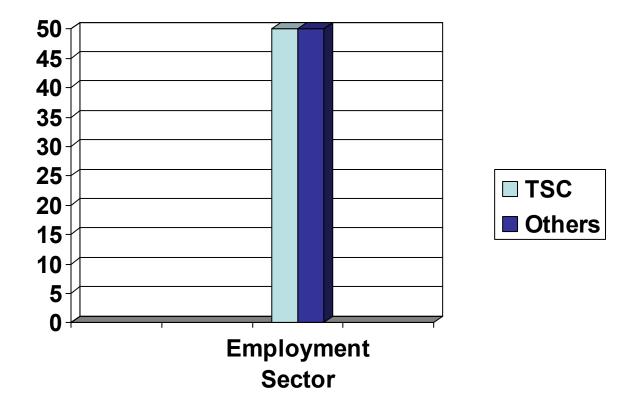
Respondent 3 who works with a bank employs language skills to plan communication with customers; enhance customer relationship and marketing bank products. Further research revealed that one of the alumni of the African Language department works with a publishing house which deals with publishing books in local languages, especially hymn books and prayer books. Another graduate is employed by a Bible translation and Literacy College. Availability of employment opportunities at translation firms was further confirmed by the Managing Director of Mvule Afrika, a former employee of East African Literature bureau that his firm has both BA graduates of Kiswahili and English. The Publishing house has an opportunity to employ African language graduates. They work on summaries, editorial and publication of books, interpretation and translation. It was further revealed that most of the graduates work with local radio stations. An interview with a former employee of Kenya Broadcasting cooperation and Nation Media

revealed that some of his responsibility entailed translation, reporting and editing stories in both print and electronic forms. This requires a lot of knowledge on the events and creativity of the editor to make the story real and interesting. He confirmed that formerly Kenya Broad Casting Corporation vernacular stations attracted employees who were not highly trained in the languages but were proficient in the native languages. The trend has since changed. Practically most media houses employ people who are native speakers of the language. Their qualifications range from having a diploma or degree certificates in Mass communication and Journalism.

As a way forward, all the respondents emphasized the need to revive the African language department and intensify research and teaching in African languages. That there was need for the language experts to exploit the language resources available through visiting the communities, engage resource persons in the field of linguistics, and literature, through community outreach programs.

In conclusion this research reveals that though most of students who registered in the African language program did not sustain the course to the end. The majority were attached to English and Literature programs where they were absorbed by TSC. TSC and especially the Teacher Training College is the largest employment sector of graduates from languages. Language teaching and training at the TTC is a complicated responsibility that requires language competencies in multi- knowledge skills. Those teaching a foreign language need a near-native ability in that language, while knowledge of other languages can be useful when teaching the native language as informed by respondent 1. Despite the 2nd respondent pursuing the African Language course to the end, all the respondents expressed that lack of employment opportunities, teasing and stigmatization were factors that contributed heavily for non-completion of the program. The same was expressed by the former lecturers of the departments. It is noted that the competencies acquired during the study of African Languages course was a partial requirement of employment and especially for graduates who secured their employment with the Teacher Training Colleges. However the employment sectors relay so much on the acquisition of the 1st degree.

Graph 2: Summary of African Languages Alumni Employment Opportunities



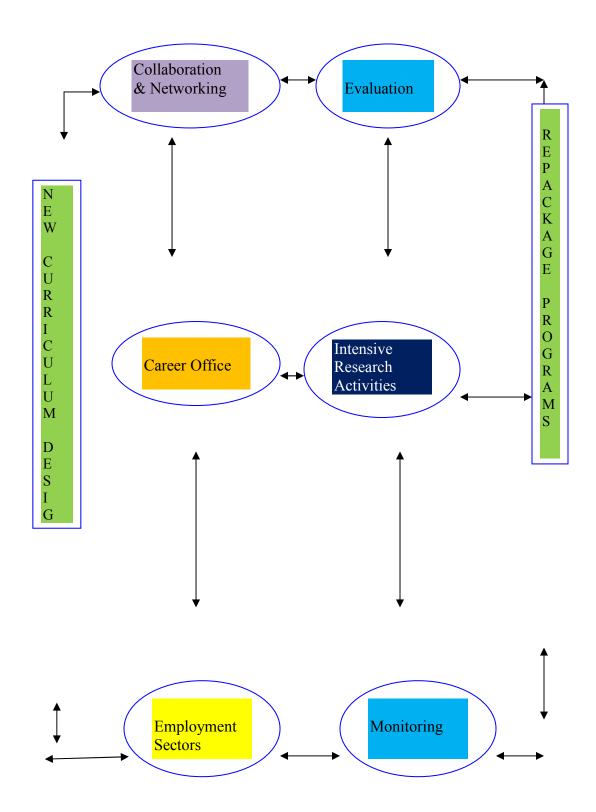
### **Curriculum Proposal**

From the research findings above, we realize that there is need to repackage the African language curriculum so as to attract many students. The need arises not only for academic purposes but also for employment market which is the focus of this research. This section therefore addresses means and ways of how Kenyan universities can create an enabling environment in which African languages can be nurtured and fully developed, not only for purpose of social and cultural interaction, but for academic and economic value.

1. Repackaging of the curriculum so as to include the social aspects that are on the market for example human resource aspects, projects; monitory and evaluation skills which can be taken especially during the research methodology.

- 2. The curriculum proposed focuses on relevant competencies not only geared towards "learning to know" but "learning to do", "learning to be" and eventually "learning to live together". Such an inclusive curriculum would be suitable for language students since they would relate and learn from others. We realize that universities abroad have taken initiatives to research adversely on African languages while Kenyan universities have lagged behind. Collaborative research and networking on African languages and literatures would benefit Kenyan universities. The collaborative approach would strengthen the programs in terms of sharing knowledge, facilities, human resource and revamping academic programs through academic exchange programs.
- 3. The curriculum would take cognizance of an office of career opportunities for the graduates. To copy from Kehm's (1999) research, all higher education institutions in Germany have special commissions which include representatives of industry that organize the transition of graduates to the world of employment. Students are informed about the job, the work tasks, and other aspects of the future employment.
- 4. The research on African languages gains momentum during the MA and PhD or postdoctoral research. A general survey indicates that most of the lecturers who teach English or other foreign languages do their research on other areas related to African languages. This interest can be sustained and intensified in the curriculum of the departments.
- 5. It is believed that university experts understand the advantages involved in the usage and preservation of natural resources such as indigenous languages, it is expected that the curriculum would intensify scientific research in this areas.
- 6. Establish linkage with the employment sectors such as publishing industries, translation and interpretation houses, and media houses through attachments would facilitate job access by the graduates.

# FIGURE 1: A Summary of the New Proposed Curriculum for the African Language Programs



#### Conclusion

Centrality of language and communication issues in both private and public sectors can not be underscored. The advertisements posted in the daily papers and websites shows that language skills traverse both social and science skills. As realized in this research, language skills are essential for many jobs in global businesses such as human resource, medical, constitution, computing, marketing, finance and matters relating to information technology. However as discovered the stress on English is overemphasized in most of the job advertisement, against African languages. Knowledge of other Kenyan Languages is also limited in most of the advertisements and mostly applies to NGOs and other private sectors.

Kenya has a challenge to promote and enhance its languages not only for primary education but also for the general development of the society. Kenyan languages have a role of strengthening the basis of the society for the cultural heritage and social develop. Since teaching stands out as the favorable career option, the Teachers Service commission would rethink its employment policies by creating vacancies for African language specialists. This would go along side with the mother tongue instruction policy at the lower levels of education. As expressed by the alumni of the African Language department of Maseno University.

One of the greatest dilemmas faced in Kenya is precisely, the negative attitudes towards the indigenous languages amongst the speakers themselves, absence of language activists and the lack of insistence on the use of African languages in higher domains of language usage. The negative attitude has been brought about as a resultant of historical and imperialism injustices of the past colonial rules, carried forward in the current language policies. This trend can be corrected by Kenyans themselves. Kenyan job vacancies have shown a positive indication by putting English and Kiswahili on the same footing, however there shouldn't be signs of discrimination when it comes to actual interviews and subsequent employment. Local languages should no longer be seen as useless as they

are also becoming resourceful owing to the outside world's growing interests in the fields of theology, history, both written and oral literature of certain African communities. Therefore in the current globalized sphere the importance of the African languages cannot be ignored. Africa remains and will continue to be an integral part of the world map economically, socially and politically where most of the foreigners are enthusiastic about learning African languages; the technology is realized through translations and interpreters activities. These reflections indicate that the experts of African languages are not a lost generation, but resourceful experts whose expertise is highly required. It is encouraging to note that despite their fears all the respondents referred to in this research secured employment and even attested that the African language competencies partially contributed to their current employment

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