

Beyond the Degree: Navigating Career Paths in Zimbabwe's Evolving Economy

As a Chartered Accountant and managing director of a professional education academy, I have spent years at the intersection of education and employment, watching thousands of young Zimbabweans make critical choices that shape their futures. The release of the 2025 O-Level results, with a national pass rate of **35.26%**, has once again placed these decisions—and the vigorous debate surrounding them—into sharp focus. For every student celebrating five subjects, there are many more facing uncertainties. In a nation where the formal job market is shrinking, a new wave of technological disruption from Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging globally, and the vibrant informal economy employs the vast majority, what is the "right" path?

The traditional question of "university or bust" is no longer sufficient. Today, students and their guardians must navigate a more complex landscape. This article aims to move beyond the noise of social media debates and provide a balanced, data-informed perspective on the academic and vocational pathways, placing them within the stark realities of Zimbabwe's economy and the unstoppable tide of global technological change.

The Fork in the Road: Understanding the Two Pathways

Before diving into the analysis, it's crucial to define the two primary pathways facing our school leavers. The choice is not merely about different subjects but about fundamentally different approaches to education and career building.

Aspect	The Traditional Academic Pathway	The Skills-Based Vocational Pathway
Core Focus	Theoretical knowledge, critical thinking, and specialization in a field (e.g., humanities, sciences, law).	Practical, hands-on skills for a specific trade or profession (e.g., carpentry, IT support, agriculture).
Typical Culmination	University degree (certificate, diploma, bachelor's).	Trade certification, polytechnic diploma, or mastery gained through apprenticeship.
Primary Objective	Preparation for professional roles, often within structured, formal organizations.	Preparation for direct entry into skilled work or self-employment, often within trades or technical fields.
Link to Zimbabwe's Market	Targets a shrinking formal sector . A mismatch often leaves graduates underemployed in the informal economy.	Directly links to high-demand trades in both the informal sector (e.g., construction, repairs) and essential formal services.

Weighing the Evidence: Zimbabwe's Economic Reality

The romanticized ideal of a university degree leading directly to a stable, white-collar job has fractured in Zimbabwe. Research from the University of Edinburgh notes that for many young people, "education has partly lost its social mobility function," leading them to question its value entirely. This sentiment is echoed in the streets and in popular culture, from the viral images of graduates vending in their gowns to the lyrics of Zimdancehall artists lamenting unfulfilled promises.

The data explains this disillusionment:

- **The Informal Economy is Dominant:** It is estimated to contribute nearly two-thirds of the country's economic output and employs over 80% of the workforce.
- **The Formal Sector is Contracting:** Reports consistently show companies exiting or downsizing, triggering job losses in the very sector degree-holders traditionally target.
- **The Skills Mismatch:** Many degrees do not align with the economy's needs. As one graduate working informally stated, "most jobs are not related to the degrees that we went to school for".

In this environment, vocational skills are not a consolation prize; they are a direct ticket to participation in the nation's dominant economic engine. The informal sector itself is a "rich hub" for learning crucial vocational, soft, and entrepreneurial skills. A builder who mastered construction through informal work, for example, can manage large projects despite having no formal tertiary training. This pathway offers immediate relevance and the potential for self-reliance.

The Global Disruptor: The Advent of AI

While we grapple with our local economic structure, a global force is reshaping the future of work everywhere: Artificial Intelligence. The narrative that AI only threatens manual labour is dangerously outdated. Evidence shows AI is beginning to impact "knowledge worker" jobs.

- **White-Collar Disruption:** A Goldman Sachs report lists occupations at high risk of displacement, including **accountants and auditors, legal assistants, and customer service representatives**. JP Morgan research notes rising unemployment among college graduates in AI-exposed majors like computer engineering and graphic design.
- **A Tsunami of Change:** The Managing Director of the IMF recently stated that AI is "hitting the labour market like a tsunami," a sentiment dominating global forums like the World Economic Forum.
- **The Resilience of Hands-On Work:** Conversely, AI is far less capable of replicating the complex, physical, and situational problem-solving of many skilled trades. The electrician wiring a house, the tailor fitting a garment, or the agronomist tending to crops operates in a domain that AI cannot easily enter.

This global trend forces us to reconsider what "future-proof" skills are. It is no longer just about "academic vs. vocational," but about "automatable vs. irreplaceable." Critical thinking, creativity,

and advanced technical skills that complement AI (like AI oversight, data interpretation, and cybersecurity) will be prized, whether gained through university or advanced vocational training.

Crafting a Personal Pathway: Guidance for Students and Parents

So, with these powerful local and global currents, how does a student choose? The answer is not a binary one but a strategic, personalized approach.

1. Diagnose Your Strengths and Passions Honestly.

- Are you drawn to abstract ideas, deep research, and theoretical frameworks? The academic path may be your natural home.
- Do you learn best by doing, enjoy creating tangible things, and feel energized by solving practical problems? Your aptitude may lean strongly toward vocational training.

2. Conduct Ruthless Market Research.

- Before choosing a degree, investigate: What is the employment rate for this specific qualification *in Zimbabwe*? What are graduates actually doing?
- For a vocational trade: Is there consistent demand for this skill? Who are the leading employers or what is the potential for setting up your own venture? Look at the bustling sectors in your own community.

3. Think in Skills Stacks, Not Just Certificates.

The most resilient professionals will blend competencies. The future belongs to hybrids:

- **The Accountant who understands AI** and can oversee automated systems.
- **The Engineer with project management and entrepreneurial skills** to start a contracting firm.
- **The Agriculturist with digital marketing skills** to sell produce online. This is where institutions like ours, offering professional accounting alongside short courses in AI, Data Science, and Cybersecurity, are pioneering a crucial model.

4. Recognize the Dignity and Opportunity in All Work.

The stigma that values a white-collar job over a blue-collar one is economically illiterate and socially damaging. A master welder, a certified IT network specialist, or a successful horticulturist builds the nation, earns a dignified living, and is less vulnerable to the whims of a shrinking corporate sector or AI displacement.

5. Embrace Lifelong Learning.

Whether you start with a degree or a diploma, your first certificate is just the beginning. The informal sector teaches this daily through necessity. The formal economy will demand it through technological change. Commit to continuously upgrading your skills.

Conclusion: Building a Portfolio of Capabilities

The raging debate is framed incorrectly. It is not "University vs. Vocational Training." The real question for today's O and A Level graduate is: **"How do I build a unique portfolio of knowledge, skills, and adaptability that will allow me to create value and earn a living in a dynamic, challenging, and opportunity-rich economy?"**

For some, the foundation of that portfolio will be a university degree, later supplemented with practical skills. For others, it will be a vocational qualification, later enhanced with business management or digital literacy. For all, it must include resilience, entrepreneurial thinking, and the agility to learn and relearn.

Zimbabwe's economy and the global technological landscape are sending clear signals. It is time we move beyond outdated hierarchies and empower our youth to make informed, confident choices. Let them build careers not on prestige alone, but on purpose, practicality, and the proven ability to thrive amid change. That is the true foundation of success for them, and for our nation's future.

About the Author

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