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Utility of university curricula in contemporary times: Perspectives of employers in the Cape Coast Metropolis

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ABSTRACT

The majority of studies and reports on university education in Africa have focused mainly on issues related to access, quality, teaching and learning environment, and so on. Although these issues are undoubtedly critical, even more germane to the discourse is the desired utility of university education to society. The authors present the perspective of employers on their expectations from university graduates. The authors employed the qualitative research approach. Four financial institutions from the Cape Coast Metropolis were purposively sampled. An in-depth interview guide was employed for data collection, which was analyzed using thematic content analysis. The authors found that graduates are strong in theory but deficient in application of knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Competencies; employability; graduates; higher education; skills; utility

The recent shifts in education and labor market policies have resulted in universities being placed under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates. This has led to a reconceptualization of education and training through human capital theory as basic economic devices essential for partaking in the global economy (Bridgstock, 2009). Thus, there is a policy shift from job security and structural workforce interventions to a position of employability security (Opengart & Short, 2002). This trend requires an understanding of how individual workers continually adapt to the rapidly changing work environments and requirements, for example emerging technologies (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006, as cited in Bridgstock, 2009).

Governments around the world have drawn on Berker's (1975) human capital theory in the formulation of policies that revolve around higher education (Knight & Yorke, 2001). Several governmental interventions in Europe and Canada through the availability of public funds for universities are contingent to train graduates who are work ready and competent within their disciplinary fields and possesses the abilities necessary to maneuver a world of work that is in constant flux (Barrie, 2006; Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2000).

Yet, to date the majority of studies and reports on university education in Africa have focused mainly on issues related to access, quality, harmonization of curricula, teaching and learning environment, and so on. Although these issues are undoubtedly critical to the discourse,

even more germane to the debate is the issue of the desired relevance that university curricula should have on the contemporary society. Recent discussions in Ghana point to ongoing debate relative to the utility of university curricula and lack of work-ready graduates' that are being churned out among various stakeholders, especially the end users (employers).

On one hand of the debate, end users are expressing dissatisfaction with current graduate entrant skills and competencies in the field of business. This perception has featured in many anecdotal reports and of particular relevance was a statement by a renowned employer expressing similar sentiment, remarking that "you want people who can apply the skill they have learnt in school and understand that it is part of enterprise development...don't come and quote to me what you learnt in school, it is time for application" (Okoh, 2016). The purported disconnect of university curriculum on one hand and the exigencies of the contemporary society and by extension employers' expectations on the other hand makes this study fundamentally crucial.

On the other hand, the debate dovetails into the universities core mandate, thus the academics argue that "universities are not glorified vocational institutions. Society changes all the time so what you have to do is to train a university student to be able to think and be able to adopt and adapt to situations as they arise" (Addae-Mensah, 2016). In the view of the academics, the recent criticisms against the products of universities

are misguided and ill informed. Such academics maintain that the mandate of universities is not to provide the industry with ready hands but rather to train the mind and students to think laterally and develop the skills that make them versatile.

Therefore, it is critical to move the discussions further to ascertain the legitimacy of industry claim (are industry standards necessarily the same as expected professional standards? How realistic are their expectations of university graduates?) It is within this context that we focused on (a) exploring employers' perspectives on expected skills and competencies of university graduates and (b) proposing implications for universities. For the purpose of clarity, we use the terms *generic attributes* and *skills and competencies* interchangeably.

Employer perspectives on expected skills and competencies

University education conveys some degree of quality and academic thoroughness. Graduates are, therefore, expected to exhibit a high level of cognitive abilities and competencies. The contribution of universities toward the development of these skills and competencies have been rebadged as employability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). The concept of employability, although denying itself of one definition, has been defined as a characteristic of the individual (Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012). This definition limited the employability concept to individual personal attributes; however, Coopers and Lybrand (1998) offered a broader perspective to the concept. According to them, employability represents traditional intellectual skills, key skills, personal attributes, and knowledge of organizations and how they work. Similarly, Harvey (1999), defined *employability* as the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate as necessary for effective functioning of their organizations (cited in Boden & Nedeva, 2010).

The discourse on employability has implication for policy. Employability policies of governments are based on the assumption that the economic welfare of individuals and the competitive advantage of nations depend on the knowledge, skills, and entrepreneurial zeal of the workforce (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003). As a result, researchers have emphasized the importance and acquisition of generic skills by graduates (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2004; Holmes, 2001). Although the concept does not connote one definition, it also holds true that it is attributable to graduates' individual characteristics, ability to secure employment, and by extension generic skills and competencies displayed to maintain employment.

It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the conceptual debates on employability, and rather the focus here is to unearth perceptions of employers on expected key skills and competencies of graduates from universities. Fallows and Steven (2000) highlighted the necessity for students to gain these generic skills and competencies and emphasized that it would enhance their prospects of employment. The world of employment is dissatisfied with graduates' employability skills. They argued that curricula stereotypically pay little attention to the attainment of personal qualities or moral and quasimoral qualities (e.g., efficacy and metacognition) that practitioners require to be displayed in professions (Jackson, 2009; Knight & Yorke, 2001).

Studies on employers' expectations of graduates' skills and competencies have emphasized that employers need graduates who can function in the workplace, be confident communicators, good team players, critical thinkers, problem solvers, and capable of initiating as well as responding to change (Harvey, 1999, cited in Crebert et al., 2004). Employers' rather high expectations of graduates and by extension universities were also highlighted in Crebert et al. that a strong disciplinary knowledge base does not, in and of itself, guarantee a new graduate a job. Their study found that graduates perceived work placement important for their future career prospects, as it facilitates the development of generic skills at university than to acquire content knowledge.

Universities have religiously provided holistic education to graduates to function effectively as well as to adopt and adapt to the changing workforce environment. Thus, one wonders how legitimate the industry claim is. The study was conceptualized under the human capital theory and the framework for assessing and teaching 21st Century Skills by Binkley et al. (2012).

Human capital theory is a well-established part of standard economic theory (Nafukho, Hairston, & Brooks, 2004) as well as underpins the philosophy of human resource management and human capital management (Armstrong, 2006). Bontis, Dragonetti, Jacobsen, and Roos (1999) defined *human capital* as

represent[ing] the human factor in the organization; the combined intelligence, skills and expertise that gives the organization its distinctive character. (cited in Armstrong, 2006, p. 33)

Human capital theory considers education relevant so far as it creates skills and helps to acquire knowledge that serves as an investment in the productivity of the human being as an economic production factor (Nafukho et al., 2004; Robeyns, 2006; Sweetland, 1996). From this perspective, education and schooling are seen

as deliberate investments that prepare the labor force and increase productivity of individuals and organizations (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Nafukho et al., 2004). However, the asset-based content of human capital theory has raised concerns. Robeyns argued that understanding education exclusively as human capital is limiting, as it fails to recognize the intrinsic importance of education.

Although human capital theory is relevant to the present study, it did not propose specific skills and competencies, therefore, to achieve the objective of this study, and so Binkley et al.'s (2012) model was deemed appropriate. This model presents a synthesis of 10 key skills and competencies drawn from 12 relevant frameworks from a number of countries. These key skills were categorized under the following themes:

Ways of thinking: creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, learning to learn and metacognition

Ways of working: communication (knowledge of basic vocabulary, awareness and ability to communicate in written and oral forms, positive attitude to mother tongue and a disposition to opinions of others with open mind, ability to engage in constructive dialogue which reflects in confidence when speaking in public) and collaboration (teamwork)

Tools for working: Information literacy—understanding of computer application, awareness of the opportunities given by the use of the internet and communication via electronic media, accurate usage of these technologies, and openness to new ideas and information

Living in the world: citizenship—local and global, life and career, personal and social responsibility—including cultural awareness and competence (knowledge of the codes of conduct and manners generally accepted and promoted in different societies)

Reflecting over the legitimacy of industry claim, Binkley et al.'s (2012) model dovetails into the philosophy of curriculum development and by extension policy makers' and employers' responsibilities toward the society in general. Development in society and economy require educational systems to equip young people with new skills and competencies that allow them to benefit from the emerging new forms of socialization (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Azevedo et al., 2012). This places universities in middle and low-income countries in a more challenging environment as compared with those in industrialized countries because they are under great strain and underfunded, yet faced with escalating demand. The challenge higher education in developing

nations faces in the 21st century is to ensure access to quality higher education as well as provide students with specialized skills and education that encourages flexibility and innovation relevant to a fast-changing world (Maharey, 2011; Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). Therefore, the onus resides with universities to design and deliver educational programs that have direct, immediate, and demonstrable economic utility.

Method

We employed a qualitative methodological approach based on the assumption that such a strategy is best suited to capture phenomenon in context-specific settings (Patton, 2002). To explore employers' experiences with regard to the discourse on the desired skills and competencies of graduates, an exploratory research design was used. According to Creswell (2003), exploratory research design is appropriate in studying under-researched topics such as the subject matter of the present study. The Cape Coast Metropolis was the area selected for the study. The Cape Coast is situated south to the Gulf of Guinea with a population of about 169,894 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Although the region is acknowledged as the hub of the most important and influential senior high and tertiary schools in the country, it ranked fifth (40.6%) in terms of literacy rate in Ghana (Ghana Living Standard Survey Round 6, 2014). Yet, the level of education has been acknowledged as a major determiner of employability and economic independence as well as resource for wealth creation (Al-Roubaie, 2013; Roblek, Meško, Bach, & Bertoneclj, 2014). It is, therefore, not surprising that the region recorded a high unemployment rate of 4.6% of a total unemployment rate of 5.2% in Ghana (Ghana Living Standard Survey Round 6, 2014). This situation has contributed to more outflows of people to other parts of the country than it has received people migrating into the region.

Irrespective of this, Cape Coast was purposely selected as the study area because of the significant role it plays with regard to education in Ghana. We were of the view that exploring employers' perspectives on the subject matter would enable educational institutions within the metropolis understand employers' expectation from their products. Within the Metropolis, the major business institutions that serve as ready source of employment to graduates are known; therefore, a nonprobability sampling technique was employed for the selection of the target population. The target population was purposively drawn to sample eight industry giants that engage the services of university graduates. The target population was categorized into two main groups: banking sectors and administrative sectors (accounting, audit, revenue

authorities, and human resource departments). These sectors were purposively sampled since they differ in terms of organizational structure, strategy, work environment, and culture, among others. Therefore, it was envisaged that their varied opinions would help explore the phenomenon better. A convenience sampling technique was used to reach individual respondents.

An in-depth interview guide was employed to guide in exploring in detail respondents perspectives relative to the subject matter (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The instrument sought to probe respondents' perspectives on required skills and competencies they expect graduates to exhibit at work; whether they are satisfied with the current output of the graduates they have employed; skills and competencies graduates lack in the workplace; and how different operational issues are from the curricula taught in universities. The instrument was subjected to critical analysis by four professors with expertise in qualitative research to ensure content validity. It was pilot-tested and inconsistencies were addressed to ensure reliability of the instrument. Of eight business industries selected for the study, half declined to participate in the study due to political reasons. Therefore, in consonance with ethical consideration, the other four (50%) that expressed willingness to participate in the study were assured anonymity and confidentiality. The following represents a brief profile of each of the responding institutions that were represented in the study by their top management officials.

Institution 1 (public) was a bank and one of the largest indigenous institutions in Ghana. It had employed over 2,300 employees distributed across over 150 branches in the nation. The participating branch had about 20 employees. Institution 2 (bank—private entity) had been operating in Ghana for over a decade with over 22 branches across the nation. It had employed over 1,000 employees distributed across the nation. The participating branch had 35 employees. Institution 3 (public) provided financial and administrative services and was one of the largest employers within the metropolis. The participating department had over 130 employees. Institution 4 (public) offered financial and administrative services with a strong presence in all the regions and districts of the country, with about 30 employees.

We are, however, convinced that the sample is fairly representative of the target population because views were varied and some semblance of representation across the two sectors was achieved. Interviews with respondents lasted between 35 and 45 minutes and were recorded with their consent. Data were transcribed verbatim and coded for analysis. Furthermore, thematic content analysis was employed to analyze the views of the employers. In the next section, the findings are presented and discussed.

Results

The findings from the study are organized around the following themes: knowledge of academic discipline, skills, and competencies (personal attributes). These are discussed in turns.

Knowledge of academic discipline/key technical skills

The study found contrasting views from the two categories of respondents regarding knowledge of specific academic discipline, a prerequisite relative to engagement of graduates. On the one hand, the findings suggest that employers within the administrative category (50%) require specific knowledge rooted in the business or accounting academic disciplines relative to employment or engagement with them. The following narrative confirms this:

Their background is very important, and for those of us within the accounting field, it is a key technical skill that we will require from these graduates. We believe you should get the knowledge of the theory and some level of practical work so that when you get yourself into a job you can apply. (Administrative sector)

In support, another had this to say:

we believe you should get the knowledge of the theory, it is a key requirement for those of us within the accounting field. (Administrative sector)

These notwithstanding, it became evident that the graduates were strong in theory but deficient in specific industry training in a typical work environment. This is shown in the following narratives:

They are very good academically but operationalizing it is the problem for them. When they come and you give them a problem to solve, to think on their feet and request for the right information to work is a problem... Industry always look at your first entry skills and find out that the disconnect is there. You train people with accounting and marketing backgrounds, with no industrial exposure and these people are found wanting in a typical work environment because they lack industry specific skills... but I also have a responsibility to create the best out of you. The people that you are training, in fact industry will have to do a lot. (Administrative sector)

This employer had this to say in support of the first view:

For example, accounts reconciliation, they come around and you give them cash book and basic information and expecting that having learnt it from level 100 it should be normal but surprisingly what they learn from school and what they are required to do the gap is so much. And you don't know what is really happening. But if you give them the textbook with accounts questions for

them to solve most of them can easily solve it but on the field it doesn't happen. I for example think the practical aspect could be lacking. (Administrative sector)

Another employer sentimentally stated that:

In fact, the situation is terrible that somebody will finish a university and an administrator for instance conducting meetings, even writing minutes will become a problem for the person. In fact, simple things that we believe they should acquire they don't have it. In fact, the situation is pathetic, to be honest with you. When they come they know nothing about simple simple things... So the disconnect is there. (Administrative sector)

Another striking finding emerged from the study. Employers were of the view that the lack of practical training in graduates could be as the result of lecturers with no or little industry experience. As such, these lecturers are limited in their delivery to theory, which is a reflection of the graduates' output. The following narratives support this finding:

Such a person with no exposure from the corporate world will only pass on information from the book or internet to the students. So the practical aspect of the relevance of the course is lacking... it is only theoretical no industrial experience and it is a reflection of the graduates coming out. (Administrative sector)

Yet, another respondent shared this experience and emphasized the need to make university training more practical:

Lecturers should make classroom teaching exciting by blending it with industry experience... how they set questions should be practical oriented to make students think...there should be more of internship, excursions to stock exchange so that students can relate it with theory. There should be a lot of group studies, presentations, case studies. (Administrative sector)

These notwithstanding, employers were of the view that students who engaged in internship programs are better placed and equipped with basic skills and competencies for the workplace. An employer from the administrative sector remarked that "those who took their internship serious are better."

On the other hand, the second category of respondents (50%) did not necessarily require specific academic background to secure a job. They rather relied on a rigorous selection test that gave equal playing field to all applicants with varied academic backgrounds. One employer (bank) expressed that

We do not discriminate whether you've done business course or have done sciences. However, the aptitude test they write will show us who meets the standard we require. We are not so interested in whatever academic discipline you offered. (Banking sector)

Another has this to say in support of first view:

Basically, banking is very practical. ... University education broadens your mind therefore, irrespective of what you learnt in school does not really matter here. From the point of view of my institution you are employable. Largely whatever you learnt will be different from the field. We will teach you and we expect you to grasp quickly, but the grasping is an issue. (Banking sector)

Skills

The study found communicative skills as key, as all respondents alluded to the fact that it is critical toward effective enterprise development. The results showed that communicative skills is very essential for employers. They require people who are able to communicate effectively, put thought together on the spur of the moment. Yet employers expressed ambivalent views on new graduates' communicative skills. One employer expressed this sentimentally in the following narrative:

One key thing which is worrying is communication. They come out of school and even the language is something else. You find one or two gathered and you see them speaking pidgin which at times they even extend it to the clients who are their contemporary, which is ethically not acceptable... most of them do not know how to write a report, they lack business communicative skills and the confidence to be able to articulate their issues in a typical office situation is also lacking. (Administrative sector)

Yet in support of this view, another employer had this to say:

Even speaking simple English language, full of errors and it is like a nightmare, considering them being graduates. (Banking sector)

Furthermore, the study found that employers generally value creativity especially those within the field of banking. According to this employer,

In banking creativity and innovation are interrelated and are important. Here those who create are celebrated... You can create a certain product to serve customers and then do a paper on it for management to approve and you are celebrated for ever. This is what we want, those who think outside the box, create and imagine things. It is the bedrock on which my institution survives. I won't say it is important but it is essential. (Banking sector)

Another key finding that emerged from the study was that employers require graduates to exhibit some level of confidence. With this finding participants expressed concerns that graduates' lack understanding of work-related issues hence, they lack the confidence to carry out tasks:

Education gives you confidence, they lack confidence... Some too lack understanding of what they are doing and

just do it according to how they've been asked to. (Banking sector)

The study also found that employers require graduates to be abreast with information and communication technology (ICT), yet expressed dissatisfaction about the level of knowledge of some graduates with regard to ICT. An employer expressed this opinion in the following narrative:

For our area like accounting, ICT is the future. They should be able to make effective use of the internet, search for information, have good typing skills. But some will complete the four years and may not have an idea of how to use the internet, with no email addresses. (Administrative sector)

Competencies (personal attributes)

Furthermore, the study found that a section of the employers expected competencies such as endurance and aggression; although this finding is atypical for this employer, the word *aggression* connotes pre-emptive and the inner tenacity to persist until one wins:

We rather look out for the right attitude. Attitude is number one skill to everything. You should be able to endure because it is about money, so you can't say I am tired when you need to take a decision to serve customer, it brings you integrity. For us our style or indicators for our bank is aggression. Some of them are laidback although they will do what is expected of them you have to "kick them." (Banking sector)

The findings from the study also showed that employers also require graduates who are quick learners. A cross-section of the respondents were of the view that some of these graduate are slow to catch up with training. The following narratives support this finding:

Once you go through the university we expect that you are educated and since you are new on the field it is my responsibility to teach you and I expect that it will sink in with minimal efforts, but that is not the case. Some of them you have to go over it over and over again... I think they limited themselves to just the curricula they are studying in school, nothing else mattered to them. (Banking sector)

Yet, another had this to say in support:

At times you assign duties to somebody ... and some of them you need to supervise them 24 hours, to me it is not the best. I had the chance to speak to some of the students and I told them, your qualification will get you in but it may not keep you there because you need something extra. They are lacking a lot. (Banking sector)

Furthermore, the study found that employers require these graduates to exhibit some level of confidence and

observe some level of ethical issues at the work environment. The following narrative supports this finding:

For example, "professional work ethics, dress codes, punctuality, relationship with superiors and all that, what to say and what not to say, these are key skills I believe they should have but most of them lack them."

In addition, the study found that graduates are not able to quickly adapt to the work environment. They are often lost between establishing a linkage between personal goals and the collective goals of the organization. The following narrative from a section of the respondents affirms this:

Unlike on campus, where one is moved by quest for grades which defines how to learn, submit assignments, prepare for exams etc. at the work environment where we work toward achievement of organizational goals, ... you find some of them very indifferent to task, they don't seem to know which task should be given seriousness. I think at the work environment, it is all about the clients, it about how you project the organization through your manners and I would like to see graduates to be very courteous, mindful of the language and see them to be sensitive to the needs of the clients.

From the findings, generally employers are of the view most of the things that are taught in the classrooms are hardly utilized at the workplace. Therefore, their perspective of work-ready graduates is of those who have basic knowledge, exhibit the right attitude, have the ability to apply basic knowledge on the job, have communicative abilities, are aggressive or proactive, are creative, are quick learners and team players, and are equipped with simple work-related skills in addition to some key skills sets and competencies.

Discussion

It appears from the findings that there is an ambivalent view about the relevance of a specific curriculum relative to the employment of graduates. This can be attributed to contextual issues in relation to a specific industry. For some industrial undertakings a strong disciplinary knowledge is a key requirement prior to employment whereas for other jobs a key requirement is a possession of generic skills and competencies that makes individual persons versatile. This finding partially agrees with findings reported in Crebert et al. (2004) which proposes that a strong disciplinary knowledge base does not of itself guarantee a graduate a job.

Furthermore, it emerged from the study that graduates are generally strong in theory but deficient in knowledge application. The finding is intricately linked with the earlier debate raised by employers that current graduates are strong in theory but weak in application.

This finding raises two important concerns. On the one hand the current situation can be attributed to the philosophical orientation of lecturers, and on the other hand it is linked with either lack of or weak industrial training component in the curriculum. The studies of Crebert et al. (2004), Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006), Peter Hart Research Associates (2006, as cited in Azevedo et al., 2012) consistently point toward lack of industry training for graduates prior to their engagement confirms the finding. Furthermore, how dedicated is the industry toward the training of students on industrial attachments? Is it treated as cost or liability, and to what extent is the practical training delivered? The scenario calls for a consented collaboration between both academia and industry.

It again emerged from the study that generally respondents emphasized the acquisition of skills and competencies as essential and critical for participation in the field of business by graduates. Furthermore, it appears from the findings that employers perceive the acquisition of these skills and competencies as the sustaining factor for continual employment of graduates. The findings confirm the study of Azevedo et al., 2012, which highlighted employers concern for the development of 21st century skills and competencies in the new entrants. Fallows and Stevens (2000) and Crebert et al. (2004) highlighted employers increasing interest in the acquisition of skills and competencies for the 21st century. The findings from the study have given prominence to the possession of the 21st century skills and competencies by new graduates; it also holds true that most of these competencies are also relative to individual personalities involved. Universities have always succeeded in training the head, the heart and the hands however, regarding personal attributes, is highly dependent on the individuals involved. This notwithstanding, academia needs to highlight the expectations of employers to students either covertly or overtly. It is envisaged that knowledge of employer expectations will facilitate a conscious development of these skills and competencies among students.

Conclusion and way forward

There has been a renewed interest in academia and industry, which mainly serves as the end user of products from the university and by extension the society. This is reflected in several discourses toward finding strategic solutions to the purported disconnect between graduate output and industry expectations. In the thinking for strategies, perspectives of employers on expected skills and competencies strikes as key. It emerged from the study that for some employers a strong specific

disciplinary knowledge is a key requirement, whereas others do not consider it a key requirement. Further, the study found that employers are largely not satisfied with the weak or no industry training of new graduates. Yet, employers emphasized the acquisition of the 21st century skills and competencies as key toward attraction and retention of employment.

The findings from this study suggest that training of students and development of employable skills and competencies should be a joint activity between industry and academia. This should not only end at the attachment stage of training. The collaboration should start from the point of curriculum development. When this happens, it is envisaged that industry would be self motivated to support universities with necessary logistics for developing the relevant skills and competencies in these students. Furthermore, universities should rethink through the focus of their curriculum content because they now depend largely on alumni contributions for their survival, so the more employable skills and competencies universities develop in their students, the more able the graduates will be who gain employment, equipped with resources to support their alma mater. In addition, it will fulfill the government expectation of earning returns on investment made into university education. Universities cannot continue to operate as an ivory tower of the past. Thus, more attention needs to be given to foster the development of these key skills and competencies in undergraduate education. The study further highlighted the need for academia and industry collaboration to equip students with work related skills, which is essential in the world of employment. Furthermore, academia needs to make the expectations of employers more pronounced to students to create awareness among them as well as facilitate the development of these skills and competencies.

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