

THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *There is growing awareness in Ghana of the importance of higher education to develop and enhance employability skills in the increasing competitive global market. Both higher education and labour market are changing rapidly. As the student intake is becoming more diverse in age, background, previous educational experience, interests and ambitions, graduate employment is also changing and diversifying as many students continue to work part-time throughout their study programmes. Essentially, this study explores the development of employability skills in higher educational institutions through the review of research studies, policy documents and experiences from other countries. Relevant literature relating to potential sources, promotion and barriers to employability skills development are further examined. The paper concludes with strategies and policy guidelines to enhancing employability development in HEIs in Ghana to promote graduates mobility in the rapidly changing working environment.*

KEYWORDS: Employability Skills, Higher Educational Institutions, Generic Competencies, Graduates

INTRODUCTION

Economic, political and social developments associated with the forces of globalization have far-reaching implications for the provision of social programmes, public services including education and training policies in Ghana. Both higher education and labour market are changing rapidly. As the student intake is becoming more diverse in age, background, previous educational experience, interests and ambitions, graduate employment is also changing and diversifying as many students continue to work part-time throughout their study programmes. Associated with these rapid technological development and changing scenes in the workplaces is the renewed focus on generic skills development. Clearly, generic skills and employment are inextricably linked and that generic competencies, or the lack of it, are key determinants for workforce participation. Developing and enhancing these skills have become part of national agenda in education and training at both pre-tertiary and tertiary levels and their development is a priority to Ghana government.

Over the last decade, there have been increasing reports, papers and political discourses from government, industry, higher education practitioners and civil society groups urging higher education sector and technical and vocational institutions to focus more on key, core, transferable and employability skills in the teaching, training and learning experiences of students. Acquisition of key skills like communication, numeracy, information technology (IT) and 'learning to learn' is considered as essential for all undergraduates while generic skills 'professional skills' are seen as crucial at the graduate level (Atkins, 1999). They are relevant for everyone from pupils in schools to Chief Executives in large companies particularly on

when, where and how to use these skills to improve the quality of our learning, work and performance.

The growing emphasis on employability skills is evidenced by nomenclature such as 'entreprise' 'core' 'key' 'soft' 'common' 'transferable' generic' 'foundational' or classification of skills like personal attributes, process skills, or non-technical competencies. This is because employers are increasingly interested in what higher education has to offer to aid recruitment purposes and as a source of part-time training and development for their existing employees.

A survey by the Confederation of British Industry shows that employers do not anticipate employees entering the workforce 'readymade' with all the technical skills, but do expect new employees with good employability skills, including problem-solving, team work, and time management skills (CBI, 2010). Similarly, Smith (2003) reported that the challenges of new employees at work are not so much related to the technical side of their jobs, the major one is 'fitting in' (i.e. employability skills). However, several studies also claim that teachers do not integrate these professional competencies into learning and assessment strategies (NCTVET 2006, Barrie 2005).

In this study however, the term employability skills has been used to describe all non-technical skills and competencies, values, attitudes and character of an individual that form an important part for effective and successful participation in the workplace.

Changing trends in the labour market demands

The world of work has changed significantly since the 1980's. Commerce and industry, public and private sectors are all operating in the world of continuous change driven by information revolution, the growing need to be responsive to stakeholders and increased pressure from global competitors. Both higher education and labour market are changing rapidly. Among the changes in the graduate labour market include;

- Changes in the structure of commerce and industry, particularly the emergence of small, medium and large scale enterprises and responsive organisations,
- More graduates employed in small organisations , becoming self-employed, combining part-time or fixed-term employment with freelance work,
- public sector reform to improve performance and accountability
- government initiatives and interventions to create jobs to address youth unemployment

In the case of higher educational institutions, students' intake is becoming more diverse in age, background, previous educational experience, interests and ambitions, regular, Online or sandwich education, while many students continue to work part-time throughout their study programmes.

Changes in global economy and the desire of firms and industry to reduce cost of production and increase their profit margins lead to continuous refinement of their production processes, internal systems and marketing strategies which do not often align with the institutional curricula, course organisation and pedagogy in higher education. Under these circumstances, graduates cannot expect either a job for life or linear career progression but rather require a broader range of soft skills, professional competencies and attitudes to continually adapt and

transfer skills and knowledge in different contexts. Although new technologies eliminate some jobs at the workplace through automation, they also create certain jobs that cannot be performed by machines but through human beings. They include interactive attributes - communication skills, interpersonal skills and team working, personal attributes - intellect, problem solving, analytic, critical and reflective, willingness to learn and continue learning, flexibility, adaptability and risk-taking. Recruitment methods in most enterprises increasingly reflect testing these skills to identify the difference between being good at subject and being good on the job and also a subtle means to eliminate a greater number of applicants against available vacancies. For example, in 2000, there were just 18,000 places on graduates' recruitment schemes in the UK available for 400,000 graduates (Harvey, et al, 2002).

Although degree qualification is important in job advertisements in Ghana, employers go beyond and emphasise more on job responsibilities, work experience, personal attributes, required knowledge and skills, leadership skills, generic competencies among others (Daily Graphic, Tuesday, September 9, 2014). Archer and Davison (2008) indicate that regardless of the size of a company, employability competencies rate highly than technical skills or good qualification. In fact, most employers perceive degree qualification as a minimum standard they expect from new recruits but rather place high premium on demonstration of soft skills or personal competencies as major criteria for selection. Thus, industries are in constant search of employees who are capable of combining technical skills with employability competencies in innovative and productive ways for effective participation in the emerging patterns of work and organisation (Mitchel et al, 2006; Brown et al, 2008).

Problem statement

The high rate and causes of unemployment among the youth in Ghana has remained the single most daunting challenge for successive governments and continue to take the centre stage of discourses among parliamentarians, civil society groups, and religious leaders and politicians. The World Bank in its current report on jobs in Ghana has disclosed that about 48% of the youth in the country, between 15- 24 years do not have jobs. In a recent recruitment exercise by the Ghana Immigration Service, over 15000 people turned up to be screened for only 500 vacancies, indicating the extent of unemployment among the youth.

According to a recent study by the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), only 10% of the country's graduates are employed after National Service. Further, it takes more than ten years for most graduates to secure jobs after leaving school. The frustration of gaining employment from the job market has sent many graduates back to school to pursue post-graduate programmes with a greater number of them leaving the country to study abroad (Catholic Standard, 2018).

Several initiatives and interventions by past and current governments aimed at empowering the youth through skills training and internship modules include Youth Employment Agency (YEA), Nation Builders' Corps (NBC), Planting for Food and Jobs, One District, One Factory, etc; through the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Education and Employment and Labour Relations. However, these initiatives have not achieved the desired results of addressing the youth unemployment in general and the unemployed graduates in particular.

In Ghana, feedback from employers' surveys indicates that HEIs graduates offer weak employability skills, particularly in terms of problem-solving, organizational skills, ICT, communication and teamwork (Boahin et al, 2010). It is reported that poor employability skills

among graduates compel some employers to take prospective employees through longer orientation and probation schemes before the best performing candidates are selected (Boateng and Sarpong, 2002). For this reason, some graduates accept job offers mainly on short-term contracts, part-time and casual hours because they do not possess adequate generic competencies to perform well in a profession (World Bank, 2009).

Given these realities, this study attempts to investigate the extent to which education and training delivery in HEIs have been creative in developing a range of long-term integrating strategies and opportunities for students to enhance their employability in the complexity of modern workplace settings.

Research question

The main question for the study is: To what extent does higher education institutions in Ghana equip graduates with employable skills to obtain and retain fulfilling work in the changing labour market?

Significance of the study

Employability is about attribute development, building confidence and self-promotional skills and encouraging lifelong learning (Harvey, 2002, Neilson, 2007). In this regard, the study is significant because it can help Ghana's competitiveness by raising the general level of education, performance and mobility of graduates. In addition, the outcome of the study may strengthen HEIs and industry linkages through increased employer-higher education dialogue, co-operation in curricula development, knowledge and technology transfer, consultancy services, staff and student exchanges, research collaborations and other variety of ways to enhancing students' employability and continuing professional development and lifelong learning.

The Ministry of Education and HEIs in Ghana in particular stand to benefit from this study by introducing range of opportunities for students to understand the complexity of the modern workplace and the needs of employers and prospective employees in a variety of different settings; large and small, private, public and voluntary, employed and self-employed. It goes on to generate more sophisticated understanding of the interplay of factors that affect employability and its relation to employer recruitment practices.

METHODOLOGY

The study aims at employability skills development in HEIs and its effect on graduates' performance in the rapidly changing labour market. Changes in workplaces increasingly cause students to become more diverse and so do higher education institutions and graduate career opportunities. In response to this complexity, the study examined relevant literature and policy papers from several databases including Academic Search Elite, Science Direct, Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Web of Science to obtain deeper understanding about the concept, nature and diversity in employability skills development. In evaluating the on-going debates on the best context to promote employability skills, barriers and strategies to enhance students' employability, series of Google searches were also performed for a deeper exploration and analysis. Further, series of case studies of initiatives from HEIs in the United Kingdom were explored to gain deeper insight into variety of ways of enhancing employability in changing work environment. The analyses of the review were used to generate conclusions to develop a

range of long-term integrating strategies and opportunities to enhance employability skills development the in changing workplace settings.

The notion of employability skills

Employability skills have different meanings as different terms are used by different countries to describe it, although with considerable overlap. In Australia and the UK, employability skills are defined as competencies, personal attributes and values that should be acquired, not only to gain employment but also to progress within an enterprise to achieve both individual's potential and the enterprise's strategic goals (Neilson 2007). In view of the growing emphasis of employability skills in the UK, the term has been variously described in series of White papers and policy documents as '21st Century skills', 'Opportunity for All in a world of change', 'Skills for new economy', 'the Skills employers want', 'Realising our potentials' among others (Neilson, 2007).

In USA, employability skills describe foundational skills on which a person builds job-specific skills. Gibbs (2000) argues that the notion of employability goes beyond the possession of technical skills to feature less factual, value-driven uses of practical judgment in the workplace. Little (2003) defines employability as 'work readiness'. Thus, employability refers to both external skills and the character and attitudes of an individual. In contrast, Hughes and Stoner (2001) prefer the term 'deployment skills' deployed in employment situations as a form of self-presentation, self-confidence and basic work habits.

Employability skills apply to all kinds of work and organisation and therefore, form an integral part of the design and structure of study programmes in the higher education institution (HEIs), competency standards and assessment guidelines for assessors to make valid inference from the learners' performances (Guthrie 2009). These competencies equip individuals to function effectively in a wide range of social settings, workplaces, further education and adult life (Guthrie, 2009, Kouwenhoven, 2011). According to Finn (1991) and Mayer (1992), cited in Harvey et al, (2002), generic competencies include

- Collect, analyze and organize information
- Communicate ideas and information
- Plan and organize activities
- Work with others and in teams
- Use mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solve problems
- Use technology
- Use cultural understanding.

Although there are variations of employability skills across HEIs, several key skill groupings appear common to many institutions and these include basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, interpersonal skills such as communication, teamwork, and personal attributes such as, creativity, problem-solving, capacity to learn and adapt to changes in the workplace or organization (Gibb, 2004). These key competences are embedded within competency

standards and that assessment guidelines must provide broader performance criteria so that assessors can make valid inference from the learners' performances.

Why are employability skills important?

The major stimulus for increasing interest in employability skills is in response to high labour mobility and the fact that current jobs require flexibility, initiative and ability to undertake many different tasks. In a knowledge and information-based economy posed by globalisation, most jobs are becoming more service-oriented, making information and social skills increasingly important. Thus, jobs in business, finance, insurance and retail sectors require interpersonal skills, customer handling skills, communication and general information technology (IT) user skills to respond to client needs. Similarly, manufacturing and craft workers often work with more complex processes and therefore require greater thinking, reasoning, problem-solving skills and team work to operate machinery or deal with faults.

The use of computer-based packages in many insurance, banking and call centres require greater communication skills for mediating, negotiating and persuading customers and attitudes such as confidence, judgment and personal organisation. Furthermore, decentralized supply chain management and systems integration require greater communication, team leadership, business and commercial awareness including mediating, negotiating and persuading others from all staff. Other value attributes being sought by employers include being able to work under pressure, commitment, dependability, imagination, creativity, getting on with people and willingness to learn. Educational programmes that emphasise these skills offer learners comparative advantage in the labour market as they tend to encourage learners to be more reflective and self-directed (Neilson, 2007).

Therefore, prospective employees need to acquire a broader range of skills, professional competencies and attitudes to continually adapt and transfer skills and knowledge in different contexts. Thus, industries recruit and retain employees who are capable of combining technical skills with professional competencies in innovative and productive ways for effective participation in the emerging patterns of work and organization (Mitchell et al, 2006; Gibb and Curtain, 2004; Brown et al, 2008). A study by Australian Industry Group revealed that over 90% of the firms were looking for people who are flexible and adaptive, willing to learn on the job, team workers, technically competent and committed to excellence (Allen Consulting Group, 2006). Studies demonstrate that people with proactive skills, for example, engage in more self-directed learning (Jossberger et al. 2010).

Employability skills are crucial to all stakeholders in HEIs because employers recruit and retain employees with varied skills, including communication, problem-solving and critical thinking, instead of just technical or job-specific skills (Gibb 2004; Neilson 2007). Employability skills help learners become more reflective, self-directed and capable of maintaining family and community relationships (Hager, Holland, and Beckett 2002) cited in Neilson (2007) .

In most developed economies, inadequate employable skills in organisations and establishments often lead to automation, increased use of temporary workers, deliberate creation of contingency workforce, part-time, poor or no pension schemes, job security, staff benefits or union compensation. In developing countries, the effect of inadequate employable skills lead to transnationals using twenty-first century technology to operate early nineteenth-

century economic regimes, causing firms to spend heavily for remedial training, higher scrap rates, increased downtime and slow rates of technology adoption.

Linking Competency-based training with employability

Over the last decade, competency models have been used worldwide in place of intelligence test to establish the building blocks of superior performance in many professional and technical, academic, organizational and manufacturing endeavours. From human resource perspectives, competencies are combination of skills, attributes and behaviours that are directly related to successful performance on the job (Kofi Annan, 1999) cited in (Cole et al, 2002). In this sense, competency represents observable and measurable knowledge, skill, ability, behaviours, and attitudes associated with excellent job performance, work results or outputs.

In the educational arena, competencies are forward-looking; aimed at clarifying expectations, defining future professional needs, developing curricula, course design and performance assessment for professional and technical programmes (Coe et al, 2002). In this regard, Competencies can be categorized into three main areas, namely core or generic (communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, etc) managerial (empowering others, decision making, conflict resolution, building effective teams, etc) and technical competencies as key technical skills required for specific jobs, roles and positions in an organisation such as identify register, distribute letters/documents or troubleshoot a computer.

Central to all the perspectives however, competence is expressed as a function of three components namely; skills, knowledge and attitudes or behaviours that enable successful job performance. In his views, Hofmann (1999) identifies three constituents in of competence, namely; observable performance; which focuses on the ability to complete a task, standards; which relates to the quality of observable performance, and underlying attributes; that includes the required underpinning knowledge, skills and attributes that can be adapted to workplace changes and social requirement. Integrating these constituents increase access and encourage self-beliefs, problem-solving strategies and capacity for self-regulation to achieving employable and life-time learning among students.

Closely linked to competence is the concept of employability. According to Reid and Fitzgerald (2011), employability is about being capable, and learning how to learn to be able to meet future challenges in a work situation. Bigshaw (1997) offers a dynamic view of employability which is not linked to possession of skills and competencies to survive in a work situation, but requires flexibility and adaptability to be able to seek alternative employment in a changing world. In this sense, individuals who are employable must be capable of setting goals and priorities, be proactive in management of change, and possess necessary skills for self-advocacy and networking to cope with changing circumstances, be active in the maintenance of continuous learning and capable of working within changing teams. This view seems to support Sanguinetti's (2004) assertion that people are responsible for becoming employable by acquiring a particular identity and set of attributes and skills required by employers.

Yorke (2007) perceives employability as multi-faceted characteristics of an individual to gain employment and be successful in the chosen occupations. The understanding of employability is further linked with 'job mastery' and its relationship with the qualities of the study programme, on-the job training and working environment (Aamodt and Havnes, 2008). Synthesizing the available literature, employability is seen as a combination of factors that enable people to increase their chances of getting a job, staying in and progressing further in the workplace.

Linking employability with the training curriculum, Knight and Yorke (2003) present the USEM model as four broad and interrelated components that influence employability. They are (a) Understanding of disciplinary subject-matter, (b) Skillful practice in context (academic, employment and life in general), (c) Efficacy beliefs that denotes the degree to which learners believe that they are able to demonstrate behaviour that will result in achieving their goals and (d) Meta-cognition that also reflects the notion of self-awareness, learning how to learn and capacity for self-regulation. This framework suggests that the notion of employability is derived from competency-based training that combines skills, attributes and behaviours towards successful performance on the job and to achieve lifetime learning. These qualities are very important because in the context of rapid global economies, professionals need graduates who can grow and keep pace with changes in operations and demands in the contemporary workplaces

Are employability skills promoted in academic disciplines or industries?

An on-going debate in the literature is whether or not employability skills are taught within academic disciplines or promoted in industries. Some authors are of the view that employability skills are best promoted in industries, agencies or extra-curricular activities in work contexts (Green et al. 2009; Stiwnne and Jungert 2010). Some processes used by organizations and agencies to develop employability skills include induction, buddy and mentoring systems, socialization, staff assessment and performance appraisal systems, conflict resolutions, discipline, task rotation and allocations of more responsibility (Smith and Comyn 2004). On their part, Waterhouse and Virgona (2004) are of the view that on-the-job training can improve the development of employability skills because it usually involves teamwork, interpersonal relationships, communication, self-efficacy, problem-solving and adaptation to new patterns of operations in the industry.

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that employability skills become manifest in different social contexts through communities of practice, such as life outside home, taking responsibility in clubs and societies, religious fellowships, debates and discussion on social issues, meeting and interacting with people from different nationalities and cultures, travelling overseas or doing voluntary and community work.

Other authors however, argue that employability skills can best be acquired in specific disciplines, particularly those that involve more student-centred learning (Ghana MESC, 2004, Barrie 2005). These skills are fostered through a more student-focused approach to teaching, such as enquiry-based, problem-based, reflective learning and authentic work experiences that provide more opportunities for students to explore their own creative ideas (Trigwell, 2002). Crebert et al (2004) find that industry-based learning, internships, structured work experiences and employer involvement in course design and delivery improve the generic skills of students in different disciplines.

Factors hindering employability skills development

External factors

Employability is the process of learning that leads to individuals gaining and retaining fulfilling work. However, whether a graduate has a fulfilling job or not is primarily based on a range of factors outside ones employability potential. Studies reveal that factors such as status of university, subject studied, and geographical region of applicant, socio-economic or ethnic

background of the graduate among others tend to influence recruitment decisions (Harvey, 2002). Sanguinetti (2004) reveals that people with suitable employability skills are not always employed due primarily to factors such as a lack of jobs or employment opportunities, age and experience.

Personal characteristics

Acquisition of employability skills alone does not always guarantee employment. An institution may develop graduates and enhance the attributes that make them employable. However, individual's employability can be hampered by personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and personality traits. The institution is but one among factors that influence the employability of graduates. Employment rate of graduates may also be influenced by a range of factors including subject mix of the applicant, the characteristics of undergraduate entry, the mix of full and part time students, and so on.

Subject discipline

Employability development opportunities are affected to some extent by subject discipline of the graduate. Some study programmes particularly in the engineering, technology and design disciplines tend to be active-oriented including interactive activities such as discussion, investigation, reflection and team work that promote employability (Ghana MESC, 2004, Boahin & Hofman, 2013). Some subject disciplines more readily lend themselves to developing particular employability attributes or engagement with the world of work through reflection and articulation, exploration and creativity in the learning processes.

Recruitment practices

Recruitment practices of employers particularly among large companies and organizations most often tend to be skewed in favour of certain groups of graduates often from institutions that are not in the leading edge of employability development initiatives. These organization exhibit some bias by discriminating against other qualified but older applicants (Harvey, 2002). Most large companies with different activities and concerns recruit graduates using selection criteria and processes that are not always fair and transparent.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing tendency for most organisation and institutions to adopt more direct job-related recruitment schemes by recruiting from students who have had some work experiences and relevant skills. The use of internet for recruitment also widens the potential pool of recruits with required specific competencies that lead to individuals gaining and retaining fulfilling work.

Educational implications for enhancing employability skills development

Diverse range of learning activities and settings

As employability skills can best be acquired in teaching and learning environment that involve more student-centred learning (Ghana MESC, 2004 Trigwell 2002; Barrie 2005), there is the need for teachers to adopt a more student-focused approach to teaching, such as enquiry-based, problem-based, reflective learning, authentic work experiences and workplace projects to provide more opportunities for students to explore their own creative ideas and acquire higher employability skills. Potential activities include role playing, simulations, team and group

projects, brainstorming, developing action plans and portfolios and problem-solving tools depending on the kind of employability skill(s) to be acquired.

Employability skills manifest in different, authentic contexts so a wide range of settings including direct interaction, video conferencing, on-line and workplace learning must be provided for learners to experience and apply their relevant skills.

Continuing professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning

Higher education institutions require innovative and holistic approach in their training delivery by developing alongside their traditional courses, professional Courses that will ensure development opportunities to enhance their skills and abilities. A range of CPD courses include strategic management and project management aimed at small and medium enterprises (SMEs), developing a business and marketing plan, computer skills for humanities students, and leading teams in the public sector.

Encouraging seamless relationship between higher education and industry

It is imperative for industry to engage in innovative forms of collaboration with training institutions to assist prospective employees to acquire a broader range of soft skills, professional competencies and attitudes to continually adapt and transfer skills and knowledge into different contexts. To achieve this HEIs need to be equipped with entrepreneurial education to provide training on basic knowledge transfer, business skills, networking skills, start-ups and spin-offs from inventions, managing intellectual property, etc. Furthermore, HEIs programmes need to be strongly oriented towards helping solve the scientific and technological challenges in the world of work. Such partnerships will afford HEIs to gain industrial experience and be able to network outside their area of expertise on strategic issues to enhance graduates employability skills.

Redefining role of higher education institutions in developing countries

Enhancing employability of graduates in the changing world of work demands an expansion of mission HEIs in developing countries to include collaboration with industry. With this new role, HEIs particularly in Ghana will go beyond teaching and research to solving key social challenges and introduce innovations. In this direction, HEIs will not only generate new ideas but also churn out competent and highly skilled workforce that will not only help graduates to obtain jobs but to retain fulfilling work. Higher education institutions need to reach out to their communities, collaborate with employers, develop innovative and successful ways of enhancing students' employability, enabling them to manage their careers, preparing them for lifelong learning and providing continuing professional development.

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