

# **PREPARING GRADUATES FOR WORK: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES**

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## **SPEECH DELIVERED BY MR. SENYO HOSI AT A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ORGANISED BY THE COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2019**

### **1.0 Introduction**

Provost, Members and students of the College of Humanities and Legal Studies, Ladies and gentlemen, I am grateful to this college for the opportunity to share my perspective on a subject matter that I am passionate about.

A few weeks after my recent, well-publicised submissions at the University of Ghana, I was approached in church by two undergraduates who said they agreed with my views.

They said and I quote: “Mr. Hosi, we have taken note of happenings with our seniors and our biggest fear and worry going through university is that when we graduate, we will still be unemployed. Unemployment has become a default position for most of us and employment an exception.” My heart sunk.

Their words never left me. When the words of those two young men come to mind, I begin to wonder how as a country we may have missed the plot so much so that our future leaders feel such a strong sense of hopelessness.

I remember that as a student going into the university where I experienced the fullest of my freedoms and an opportunity and assurance to end my economic dependence on parents, I saw my seniors

graduate to employment opportunities in low-level management or management trainee programmes. Others got absorbed into the banking sector and various sectors of the economy (especially the services sector).

Over time, the quality of jobs for most graduates dwindled. In my time, more graduates were compelled to work as low-level officers like tellers and call centre operators. I do not believe the situation has improved over the years.

It must be realised that for most students, being in a university is significantly linked to their employability and their economic aspirations. Students on average do not attend universities simply for the love of academic activity. They identify their future and consider university education a means to a necessary phase of their lives – being economically and socially viable members of society.

Universities therefore are in many ways transitional points in the lives of individuals. They facilitate our transition from youth to adulthood, from learning to earning, from joblessness to gainful employment, and assist in unlocking our imaginations about how to create a better a world. Universities therefore matter, and they matter a great deal in shaping opportunities for nurturing big dreams and achieving aspirations.

## **2.0 The Uncertain Future of Work**

The emergence of the fourth industrial revolution that is expected to be dominated by artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, blockchain, nanotechnology, quantum computing, augmented reality and similar disruptive technologies, is bound to make the world move faster and feel smaller than ever before. The technologies that are in development today will in the very near future force us to throw most of today's jobs into a pit of obsolescence. There will be little need for human hands in most workplaces. For example, we are going to travel around in driverless cars and lecturers can use holograms to deliver their lessons even if they are far away in the South Pole.

Those of us hoping to resort to UBER as a temporary job after school should be ready to kiss those dreams good-bye sooner rather than later. For those of you who dream of working in banks, brick

and mortar financial institutions will soon be a thing of the past as there are some banks operating in the world today with no branches whatsoever.

All these point to the fact that our world has changed a lot and continues to change extremely fast. But with every change comes opportunities and challenges.

Newer opportunities will be unearthed with access to more markets provided the technology is leveraged to improve consumer solutions and experiences. Ghanaian professionals like lawyers, radiographers and psychologists will be able to attend to clients more efficiently anywhere in the world without travelling.

These technological advancements we are seeing, birth a dichotomy which on the one hand, presents an opportunity for growth by various economies with easier influence and access to different markets. On the other hand, they could expose serious, uncompetitive fault lines in the world's most feeble economies and cause them to be overwhelmed by developed and/or better prepared economies. The fourth Industrial Revolution will widen the gap between the makers and takers in the global economy. In simple terms the fourth industrial revolution will threaten the viability of some economies while bringing growth and opportunity to others. I can't help but wonder how prepared we are for that immediate future and whether our Ghanaian economy is positioned to survive and thrive. As Ghanaians, will we be makers or takers?

For a country to optimise its economic potential, it is a necessary condition that it engages its full labour in its production function. As a country desirous of being a first-world country someday, employment for Ghanaian youth cannot and must not be considered a privilege nor a social necessity. It is absolutely not! It is an economic imperative. It must be realised that putting the youth to productive work sustainably is a necessary part of our country's ability to survive, compete and thrive in the future. The skills of our youth must therefore be positioned to make them viable in today's world, and competent in the present tomorrow's world. It is therefore refreshing realising that the University of Cape Coast is paying attention and thinking about its people and their future in the

workplace. It is not surprising that the UCC is gaining a reputation for operating the best distance learning programme in Ghana.

Having said that, I wish to ask, as a scholarly society for present and futuristic thinking, has the University of Cape Coast embarked on a study of the implications of the fourth industrial revolution on the human resource landscape of the country, and assessed the required modifications to its present administration of teaching? If yes, that should be ground-breaking. If no, there goes my first recommendation for the university's role in preparing graduates for work.

*Universities must constantly review evolving trends and assess futuristic implications on industry and reposition education to be competent in meeting the requirements of the present future.*

### **3.0 Connection with Industry**

The story goes that an employer was accused by one of his managers. According to this manager, Kojo, the employer had overlooked him for promotion in favour of Aku. Kojo alleged his boss was partial and used tribal prejudice in determining who got promoted. The employer empathized with the hurt expressed by Kojo but denied the allegation of bias. He called Aku to join Kojo and him in a meeting. At the meeting, he asked Kojo to check out the price of an HP laptop from the Accra mall, and asked Aku to go do same at the West Hills Mall. Both returned at about the same time. Kojo reported that there was no HP laptop at the Accra mall with the specifications indicated by the employer. For her part, Aku reported that the exact specifications were absent but had checked online and realized that she could get HP computers with the desired specifications at the A&C mall and in a shop on the Oxford street in Osu. She ran the employer through a comparative analysis on price and warranty and after-sales service policies. She also notified the employer that there were other brands with similar specifications indicating their comparative pricing, policies and shop locations, as well as payment terms. After her presentation, the room was quiet. The employer asked Aku to leave the meeting. He then turned to Kojo and asked: "need I say anything further?"

What is the difference between Aku and Kojo? The world today needs more Aku-s.

I ran a survey prior to this speech on a closed group of senior business executives asking a number of questions.

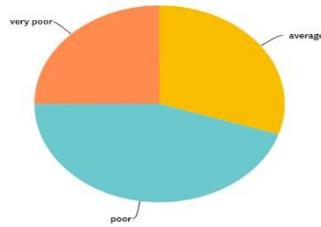
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**Question**

**Results**

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**How ready is the average public university graduate for work?**

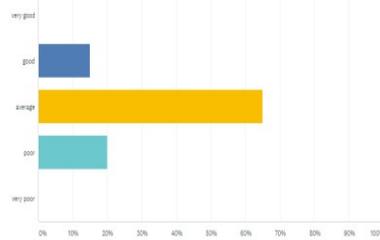


70% of respondents consider graduates to be poorly or very poorly ready for work

No good or very good rating.

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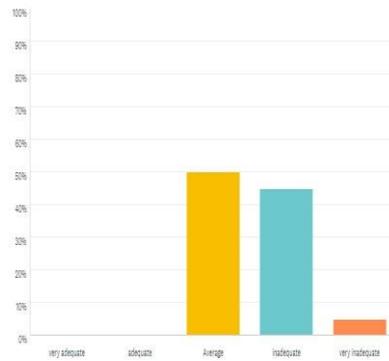
**How do you rate the average public university graduate's attitude to work**



85% of respondents consider graduates' attitude to be averagely or poorly prepared.

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**In your assessment of fresh graduates from public universities how well do their basic technical skills match your expectations**



50% of respondents considered the basic skill of graduates inadequate or very inadequate while the other 50% them average. No respondent rated them adequate or very adequate.

**What top five skills do you consider as workready skills for university graduates**

- Emotional Intelligence
- Good communication skills
- Computer proficiency
- Critical thinking
- Teamwork

**What top five attitudes do you require of a work-ready university graduate**

- Passion
- Punctuality
- Curiosity/eagerness to learn/initiative
- Attention to detail
- Creativity

**What key values do you look out for when hiring fresh university graduates**

- Integrity
- Can do
- Service
- Hard work
- Commitment

These responses affirm the hypothesis that academia is disconnected from the broader employer community and its needs. What assessment have our public Universities been making for each department about the suitability and superiority of their products to employers? Is there a feedback and evaluation system? Who is doing the tracer study? Who is assessing the employment and average income of the graduates of the various departments? Who is doing the thinking and strategic positioning to effectively compete in student impact and superiority in industry? Who is constantly engaging with employers to ascertain what skills the students need to be useful and productive to industry today and tomorrow?

### **3.0 Why Prepare at University and Before work**

The subject of my submission as directed by the dean is “preparing graduates for work, the role of universities”. To prepare is an act of equipping oneself ahead of a task which in this case is work. We all get trained while working but being prepared precedes work. Life through the University for most students is among the most defining phases of their lives before ‘Work’. This is perfectly illustrated in the bible’s parable of the virgins in Matthew 25 which reads:

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

As the kingdom of heaven is in the above parable, so is the kingdom of work. The competitive nature of today's world has no time for the unprepared. Organisations realise this and will opt to minimise their training costs and time without compromising quality where possible. One will therefore be likened to the foolish virgins if one thinks that preparation is the burden of industry. As was the case in the parable, the door to work will be shut to the unprepared!

Industry understands that graduates will have to be trained for their specific work roles but requires preparedness on the part of graduates in respect of values, attitudes and the basic skills that make graduates conveniently trainable and viable throughout their time in the firm and across various tasks and roles.

#### **4.0 What should graduates prepare for?**

The World Economic Forum in its job report for 2016 shares perspectives on what skills are required for the present future 2020 and beyond. It lists the following skills as the top ten skills the world's workplaces need today and in the not too distant future:

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Creativity
4. People management
5. Co-ordinating with others
6. Emotional intelligence
7. Judgment and decision-making
8. Service orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive flexibility

I find this list very interesting because I consider all these skills to be intricately connected and not mutually exclusive in any form. In other words, you need to possess all of these skills at once – even if in varying degrees of competence.

How do you solve complex problems without critical thinking and creativity? How do you effectively manage people without coordinating with others, without emotional intelligence and a service orientation? How do you effectively negotiate without judgement, decision making and cognitive flexibility? Two things are therefore clear to me: first, the thriving workforce of the future must be completely skilled and prepared to be able to compete effectively and secondly, the permeating feature of all the skills is creativity.

Marty Neumeier in a lecture at the University of Toronto classified four types of work. These are:

- **Creative:** Unique, imaginative, non-routine, and autonomous.
- **Skilled:** Standardized, talent-driven, professional, and directed.
- **Rote:** Interchangeable, routinized, outsourceable, and managed.
- **Robotic:** Algorithmic, computerized, efficient, and purchased.

Of these, he recommends that you want to focus on creative work, because that is where you are likely to remain employable. Every professional can be creative in the work she does. When you work your craft, you are creating an art.

Key to the viability of the skills enumerated by the World Economic Forum are the basic skills required of a graduate today. These include communication (oral and written) as well as presentation and effective IT skills such as the use of the Microsoft Office suite. It is disappointing hiring a graduate who struggles to effectively draft a simple letter like an invitation to a meeting or running an average of numbers or organising data in an excel spreadsheet or navigating Microsoft PowerPoint. It is unacceptable that a modern graduate will struggle with typesetting in Microsoft Word.

While skills are important, it is our attitudes and values that bring them to life on any job. These include curiosity, excellence, responsibility, accountability, integrity, candour, confidence, hard work,

respect for time, attention to detail, meritocracy, ownership and my favourites – good citizenship and the recognition that we must focus on EFFECT not effort.

In my office you dare not tell me you sent that email that JSS grad could have sent. You better let me know you got the feedback needed for our decision-making. The world rewards EFFECT, not effort. Today more than ever the world has little room for those who can show nothing but effort. Few remember the team that placed third or fourth in the 1998 World Cup. They did their best but if their best didn't win them the championship or get them into the finals, which is the EFFECT they may have wanted, we have no space for them in our memory.

This underpins the need for us to build a passion for excellence and winning as a country.

You often find many graduates today who are not curious or inquisitive enough; graduates with low hunger for knowing how to do things and graduates who have no interest whatsoever in going the extra mile. Ironically, these are the graduates who possess a strong sense of entitlement, walking around with the erroneous notion that they do not need to soil or muddy their hands because they have university degrees and so are entitled to everything they desire in the workplace. They are eager to tell you they did their narrow part instead of telling you they got the results the company needs.

These bad attitudes are easily reinforced in the University experiences students encounter. Lecturers publish more for promotion than impacting society. Students study for certificates rather than knowledge and skills. The university alumni office is operated as a matter of course not as an institution of force in the development of the University.

How many of our Alumni are connected to the university society? The University issues certificates to graduates and cares less how they fare on the job market. It is no wonder political governance pretends to serve while citizens struggle. We are often in a hurry to share GDP figures rather than human development indices and unemployment figures. We delight in talking about falling inflation rather than how policies are reducing poverty and inequality. As a people we need a whole new

orientation and that must be driven by the culture in our Universities – a culture that rewards RESULTS and EFFECTS not effort.

With that in mind, I turn now to sharing my thoughts on how to prepare students for the workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will begin with an exposition of how students need to position themselves in order to be prepared for the workplace and then turn to the role of universities in preparing their students for the world of work.

### **5.0 A charge to Students**

To students I beseech you, come to grips with the fact that you owe it to God and country and most importantly, to yourself, to excel. Mediocrity is not an option. Strive to excel in all you do. The pervasive culture of mediocrity in Ghana will do you no good. The requirements for your success and survival are way higher than I or your lecturers ever experienced. Ghana needs your excellence to survive tomorrow's world.

5.1 Stop learning just to pass your exams. Learn more to know more and learn how to learn and know.

The world will change faster than before and you must be quick to adapt, learn new things, unlearn old things and relearn.

5.2 Learn to speed read and read critically. The poor reading culture in Ghana which you may have been trapped in will only lead you to failure and economic hardship. You must quickly acquire knowledge and make better meaning of information better than any robot. You have the advantage of wisdom and humanity to outdo any robot.

5.3 Be very flexible in thought and views. In other words, be open minded. The rote approach and regimented nature of our education system will render you obsolete if you don't break free and realise that in a fast-changing world, ideas are not static and that methods are bound to change. You therefore have no choice than to change and adapt to the changing times. Be creative in your thinking and be open to new ways and creative ideas.

5.4 Seek to effect and stop showing effort. Take seriously the World Economic Forum skills as well as the attitudes and values recommended. They will shape you right if get committed to them.

5.5. Learn how to code. It is the English and Maths of the future.

5.6 Be prepared to hire yourself. The Africa Development Bank estimates that Africa's labour force will be nearly 40 percent larger by 2030. If current trends continue, only half of new labour force entrants will find employment, and most of the jobs will be in the informal sector. This implies that close to 100 million young people could be without jobs. This is an awakening reminder that the era of someone hiring you is narrowing. Technology and the recommended skills and values provide you an opening.

5.7 Stop being a taker and be a maker. Give something to the world. Let the world remember you for something you made. If you aim to make and give something to the world, you will be focused on delivering it and you will have little time to waste on things that don't matter. You will spend far less time on social media. Whenever you are tempted to cyber slack on social media, remember that kids in Singapore, India, China, Germany and other countries are preparing to make you their taker.

Furthermore, remember that in the abundance of time, there is no time.

## 6.0 Recommendations to Universities

*6.1 As indicated above, Be in tune with evolving trends.*

- a. Universities must constantly review evolving trends and assess futuristic implications on industry and ensure education is positioned to be competent to meet the requirements of the present future.
- b. As a matter of urgency, government must commission the universities to undertake a thorough study on the implications of the evolving 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution on Ghana's Human Resource landscape and ascertain necessary changes to the educational curriculum and system to ensure graduates are equipped with the skills they need to thrive in that present future. This study must be widely published.

*6.2 Stay Relevant and Intune with Industry*

- a. As a matter of policy, the University must commission annual tracer studies to assess the impact of their graduates and procure feedback from employers and managers as input for modifying or reaffirming educational strategy. This should include competitive studies

to evaluate the superiority of the graduate in the respective Universities. I believe this must be a requirement for the revalidation of their accreditation.

- b.** As a matter of policy, universities must restructure the Business and Executive Committees and their Academic Boards to include illustrious alumni and industry executives. They must also promote the engagement of experienced, innovative and proven corporate and public executives as part of their faculties. This will ensure greater connection with industry and help sustain the relevance of the education. It will facilitate student and the faculty's ability to translate theory into practise.
- c.** Building a vibrant alumni will be helpful in connecting effectively with industry. It will provide a strong platform for the development of functional internship programmes for students. For many who have schooled in developed countries, your alumni are often in touch with you, sharing what goes on with it and the university as well as staying in touch with your progress. It is unacceptable that we observe and learn best practices elsewhere but deliver less when here. Our business schools should be able to develop and implement strategies on how to re-energise the alumni for the development of the universities. It is key that as a school, you optimize every opportunity to translate theory to practice on campus.
- d.** Consider establishing a marketing and communications unit to develop and implement a strategy to promote key research from the University to relevant sectors (including industry) and the public. In other words, take your research and successes to the public in relatable forms. This will boost your visibility and socio-economic impact in the primary market you serve.

### *6.3 Review the method of teaching*

An execution of the above will stimulate a rethinking of how teaching is administered. The skills as enumerated by the World Economic Forum and the values I have shared are unlikely to be delivered by the current pro-rote learning method of teaching in our universities. It is unacceptable for university students to be examined using multiple-choice questions, which leave absolutely no room for critical thinking or creativity. It is unacceptable for lecturers to be reading out notes in class. It is unacceptable for lecturers to suppress dissenting views on theories or opinions, marking down students who dare to think creatively and not reproduce the notes of their lecturers. It is unacceptable for lecturers to modify their teaching in submission to the poor culture of reading among students.

Employers expect to have students who can make stellar presentations and address more case studies. These should be learnt in our universities. Lecturers should take communication and literacy skills seriously and teach them effectively. Industry and public policy practitioners will be useful in complementing what the lecturers impart to final year students especially. Lecturers must also make it a point to give students copies of their marked scripts, so they learn from the grammatical and analytical errors they make. Otherwise, you will continue to breed students who grow and make a virtue out of their errors. What exactly are we protecting when we withhold the scripts from the students? Why are no rubrics shared with students? Why are there no examiners' reports in most cases?

Teaching must change to deliver the right skills and attitudes. Unfortunately, our universities have been cultivators of the culture of conservatism rather than communities of dynamism and creativity. As a people we need our universities to be spaces of futuristic thinking. It must be realised that the days of monopoly over higher education in Ghana are long gone for the public universities. Competition exists locally and internationally and will become even stiffer when Ghanaians can access a Harvard education, for example, through hologram-administered lectures and systems.

In a recent conversation with a senior lecturer on this subject, he indicated to me that students don't like to read. I agree but I ask, if reading is key, why pass them if they don't show they read? Score

what you wish to see and the University students will deliver for you. If you allow shortcuts, they will take them. How many children will take working over playing if there are no motivations or consequences? Passing students who don't meet the necessary standards or lowering the standards to pass student hurts the country. They will not appreciate meritocracy, hard work, etc. We must remember that s/he who carries your certificates and can't live the certificate, does your University a gross disservice. The world is fast changing, and no one pays a salary or hires for just a degree but rather the value they receive from the holder of that certificate. It is no wonder, Google, Apple, IBM, Costco etc do not require degrees for many top jobs.

My lecturer friend also lamented that the large class numbers don't help either. I do agree but as a University, excellence must not be compromised. We must innovate on ways to effectively educate the high numbers and/or reject the over burdening effect of partisan political pressure that thrusts the unsustainable numbers on us. We are a developing country and hence it is expected that the capacity of the Universities will be stretched but this must not be allowed to fracture quality. The political push for high numbers may be well intended but must be accompanied with the minimum required resources. As it is said, one must put their money where their mouth is. Overstretching the resources beyond reasonable limits will only compromise quality and in the end shortchanges the country.

#### *6.4 Live what you Teach*

The universities must also become examples of excellence and the type of environment they wish for Ghana. In simpler words, the universities must practise what they teach. The work-ready attitudes and values shared above, must be reflected in the culture of the University. We cannot have lecturers being late and expect students to build a culture of timeliness. We cannot act on favouritism and expect students to be imbued with a culture of meritocracy. We cannot suppress debates in class and expect students to be confident and develop candour and open-mindedness. We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to teaching assistants writing thesis on behalf of students and expect not nurture a culture of impunity, dishonesty and cheating.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

Parents generally wish the best for their wards and overtime I believe it has become obvious that the affluent including lecturers and political elite who can afford, do not prioritise public universities in Ghana when selecting universities for their children. Local universities pride themselves in having produced Presidents, but I do not recall any president under the 4<sup>th</sup> republic who educated their children in any of the Ghanaian Universities.

As Alvin Toffler once said, “The illiterate[s] of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” Things cannot be the same as we work to prepare our graduates to face an uncertain future for the survival of our country. So today, we have a choice as to who we wish to be: the literates or the illiterates of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

God bless our homeland Ghana. Thank you.