

# **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**

Mr Chairman, distinguished speakers, members of faculty, Ladies and gentlemen, today, I am here to try and expand on the ideas I tried to put out during what has come to be known in some media circles as my 'rant' at the University of Ghana.

I am grateful to the University of Cape Coast for this opportunity.

A few weeks after my well-publicised 'rant' at the University of Ghana, I was approached in church by some youth who said they were students in two public universities who agreed with my submissions.

They told me: "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 would 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. They haunt me and they will do so for a long time to come. 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.

It must be realised that for most students, being in the 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 adults.

Universities therefore are in many ways transitional points in the lives of individuals. They facilitate our transition from learning to work, from youth to adulthood, from joblessness to gainful employment, and assist in unlocking our imaginations about how to create a better 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, block chain, nanotechnology, quantum computing and similar technologies, are bound to make the world move faster than ever before. The technologies that are in development today will in the very near future force us to throw most of the jobs we know now 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.

In the same vein **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.**

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

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 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 workspace. I am not surprised that UCC has gained or 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, Kojo. According to Kojo the employer had overlooked him for promotion in favour of Aku. Kojo alleged he was partial and used tribal prejudice in determining who got promoted. The employer empathized with the hurt expressed by Kojo but explained to him that it was not the case. 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 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 employer asked Aku to leave the meeting. He then turned to Kojo and asked: “need I say anything further?”

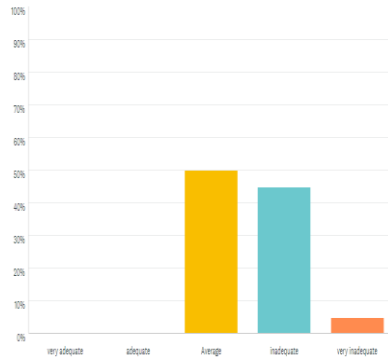
What is the difference between Aku and Kojo? The world today needs more Aku-s.

I run a survey prior to this speech on a closed group of senior business executives asking the following questions.

Question	Results
<p><b>How ready is the average public university graduate for work?</b></p>	<p>70% of respondents consider graduates to be poorly or very poorly ready for work</p> <p>No good or very good rating.</p>
<p><b>How do you rate the average public university graduate's attitude to work</b></p>	<p>85% of respondents consider graduates to be averagely or poorly prepared.</p>

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



very adequate.

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

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**What top five skills do you consider as work-ready skills for university graduates**

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

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

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

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

- Integrity
  - Can do
  - Service
  - Hard work
  - Commitment
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The above results 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 by the Bible’s parable of the virgins in Matthew 25:1-10. In this parable, 10 virgins are invited to a wedding banquet. Five of them went prepared with extra oil for their lamps. When the bridegroom takes a little too long in coming, everyone’s oil runs out but the five virgins who came prepared for exactly this eventuality are able to keep watch for a little longer. When the bridegroom finally arrives, the prepared virgins with extra oil are able to attend the banquet while the unprepared ones go off in search of extra oil. The Bible says and I quote:

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!

#### **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 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.

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. It is unacceptable that a modern graduate will struggle with typesetting in Microsoft Word and is so incompetent in navigating Microsoft PowerPoint.

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 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.

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 really struggle. We are often in a hurry to share GDP figures rather than human development indices and unemployment. 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, please 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 quickly, 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 process information better than any robot. You have the advantage of wisdom and humanity to outdo any robot. As Avil Beckford puts it, Sometimes it's better to read articles in respected technology journals, as books may become quickly outdated.

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 noted above and the attitudes and values recommended above. They will shape you right if get committed to them.

5.5 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 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. Undertake a thorough study on the implications of the evolving 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution, artificial intelligence and other present and emerging disruptive technologies, geopolitical and socio-economic shifts on Ghana's Human Resource needs. Present a position paper and reposition the educational curriculum and system to ensure graduates are equipped with the skills they need to thrive in that present future.

## **6.2 Stay Relevant and in tune 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 comparative and 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 the 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 practice.
- c. 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. 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 else you will continue to breed students who grow and make a virtue out of their errors.

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. Our universities must 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. **Passing students who don't meet the standards deemed necessary hurts the country. They will not appreciate hard work, thoroughness, critical thinking, problem solving 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.

#### ***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 practice 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 be open-minded.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

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.” It is time to learn, unlearn and relearn how better to prepare our graduates for work and keep them competitive in the uncertain future for our survival as a viable country. Things cannot be the same. I pray we stay, if not become, the literates Ghana needs.

Thank you and God bless our homeland Ghana.