

## Exploring Professional Work-Ready Graduate Attributes from the Employer Perspective

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore what we mean by professional work-ready graduate attributes from the employer perspective.

**Design/ Methodology/ Approach** – The research design was essentially qualitative. Following, Yin's (2003) suggestion, the researcher gathered data through three primary sources, namely, document, conducted semi-structured interviews and recorded observations, at three large multinational companies. The researcher analyzed and interpreted the data collected in form of field notes, interview scripts, audio recording and information from documents. Yorke and Knight, (2004), emergent work of skills research initiative known as USEM account of employability was integrated as conceptual frameworks.

**Findings** – Three themes emerged, the findings highlighted three broad areas considered to constitute, what employers described as graduate attributes, this includes soft skills/personal attributes; subject specific skills and disciplinary content knowledge and understanding.

**Research/Limitation/Implication** – Collective voice of employers on acceptable meaning of what graduate attribute stands for, will lead to establishing a common higher education programme or curricula that is work-based and skill oriented, which in turn help students to develop broad range of skills, work attitudes and values to face future challenges of the world competitive market.

**Original value** – This paper seek to fill the 'skill gap' occurring between the demand and the level of educational preparation of graduates, by providing acceptable meaning of work-ready graduate attributes.

**Keywords** – Graduate attributes, employer, work-ready, skills attributes, Higher Education.

### 1.0 Introduction

The significance of education to national development is widely recognized the world over. It is acknowledged that it influences positively the economic growth and development, it is also argued further that, the growth and development of this nature hinges predominantly on the quality and quantity of education. Of recent, employers of labour complained that some of the professional graduates from higher education have the certificate of degree, but lack the practical occupational skills, or job experiences, and therefore are considered incompetent for not being able to relate theoretical part of their education to the practical working environment in industry and other related business organizations. As a result of this, Employers of industries, various experts and professionals, agree that there is need to develop graduates who are highly skilled and ready to face the challenges of increased competition. More than ever, we need graduates who are responsive to

economic, social, cultural and technical environment change and can work flexibly and intelligently across business contexts.

The issue of graduate skill attribute has become very serious and crucial, while institutions of higher learning are saddled with the enormous task of developing these skills with the intent of enhancing knowledge to make graduates more attractive to employers. Numerous studies have noted with great concern the magnitude for graduates from higher education to possess relevant skill attributes that makes them employable in the labour market (Hewitt 2005; Billing 2003; Atkins 1997). The world over, employers are demanding workers that are able to transform knowledge and skills learnt into successful workplace performance. Research evidences available suggests that employers are more concerned about soft skills or attributes rather than technical knowledge or competencies. Crebert, Bell and Patrick (2004), are of the view that, it is becoming increasingly important for graduates to be able to apply the knowledge and skills learned in higher education institution to the workplace, and this call for the need for a fundamental shift towards an emphasis on general skills in education. Further research evidences have also clearly shown that graduates of higher education are not equipped with the much needed skill attributes necessary for employment particularly at the entry-level, and thus are not prepared to enter the workforce (Cragolin 2004; Hasketh & Williams 2003; Peddle 2000; Tetreantt 1997). Dunne and Rawling (2000), asserted that a reason for graduates being ill-prepared to apply the transferable skills to their work is the fact that student often fail to realize the importance of possessing such skills and assume that mastery of technical skills within disciplinary content is more important to employers.

Empirical studies on employability skills has shown that soft skills such as problem solving, communication, teamwork, critical thinking and interpersonal skills have become critical for hiring and promoting employees to key positions, thus, are therefore the skill attributes most desired by employers. Even though these skills assist graduate entering the labour market, Candy and Crebert (1991), notwithstanding concluded that, the level of preparation of such graduates in these areas, left much to be desired. Many reasons were identified to be responsible for lack of graduate adequate preparation before entering the labour market, one of the major reasons noted by researchers is a “skill gap” occurring between the demand of employment and the level of educational preparation of graduates (Andrew Morley 2001; Shivpuri & Kim 2004; Robison 2000). As a matter of fact, employers do not feel as though higher education is succeeding in adequately developing the graduate skill attributes (Peddle 2000), while the belief by the employers is that higher education can be held accountable for providing such skills, a series of basic questions should be answered in this regard, such questions include, what constitute skills attributes, and what skills are most important for graduates in performing their jobs as required by the employers.

It is obvious that the situation in the labour market, requires new graduates who possess those qualities and understanding of the part they play in building their organizations and the practical skills to work effectively in their roles. However, really contributing in the workplace means more than having the technical skills alone, it means engaging with the organization and its goals, understanding the dynamics of the workplace and baking up a job role with an informed knowledge of all its requirement. It also means applying a brand range of skill learned in many contexts and through a range of experiences.

### **1.1 What do labour market want of Higher Education**

The question of what skills are needed to enhance labour market advantage in vying for competitive employment or simply obtaining a job depends on who is asked what and how, some employers

often opt to indicate that all they need are workers who have work conducive behavior such as reliability, cooperativeness and the quality to follow directions. Whist others argue that today's with the increasing technological and changing workforce, occupational skills become obsolete quickly and the emphasis should be placed on basic academic skills, which are transferable and useful in bearing new learning work skills. While in the same vein, it is difficult not to conclude that at least some employers are looking for individuals with good work habits and basic academic skills. However, it is to be noted that the issue now is no longer what additional credentials will lead to labour market advantages for a graduate. Bishop (1995), observes that, market advantage have a set of unique skills that are related to occupations that are high paying and in demand. According to him, "it is unwise to devote one's entire education to learning things that everyone else already knows (such as basic skills), one must select a vocation for which there is market demand and for which one has talent, and then pursue expertise and excellence within the niche."

From the foregoing, it become necessary, when trying to appreciate the potential for higher education to contribute to economic well-being, it is helpful to distinguish between the formation of subject of other valued skills, qualities and dispositions. Whereas the world of employment has, by and large, been satisfied with the disciplinary understanding and skills developed by graduates, for example in the United Kingdom, the grumbles of employer about the graduates generic skills have been longstanding, meaning to say, they are less happy with what have been termed generic skills, although Hasketh (2002), provided evidences to suggest that, there may be an element of discrepancies in the perceptions. Researches have shown that there is much less evidence concerning the satisfaction of graduates regarding their preparedness for the world of work. Harvey et-al (1997), showed that employers in the U.K. tended to favour generic skills more highly against disciplinary-based understanding and skills. Whereas in the U.S.A. Reich (2002), has argued that advanced economies need two sorts of high-level expertise, one emphasizing discovering and the other focusing on exploiting the discoveries of others, through market-related intelligence and the application of interpersonal skills. Reich further emphasized that the key contribution of higher education to the development and prosperity of a nation, lay in the development of graduates with the skills of the symbolic analyst at their disposal. This conclusively demands that undergraduate programmes should be concerned with four areas in particular i.e. Abstraction, System thinking, Experimentation and Collaboration.

### **1.2 Understanding Individual attributes of employability**

In recent time, researches have shown that the conceptualization of graduate attributes is problematic for several reasons. Barrie (2006), have argued that such problems stem from the theoretical nebulous nature of the graduate attributes agenda. The variety of terms used by policy writers often interchangeably, to describe desirable graduate outcomes is indicative of this confusion. The term has several synonyms, including personal, transferable, key, generic, common and work or employment related skills. To add to this semantic confusion, these skills are often referred to as competences, capabilities, attributes, element or learning outcomes. Similarly, the various lists of skills elicited from employers, are diverse in both extent and purpose, reflecting differences in definitions and interpretations of their significance.

Bowden et al (2000), describe graduate attributes as the qualities, skills and understanding that an institutions of higher learning agrees its students would desirably develop during their time of study at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as citizens. From the foregoing, the definition of graduate attributes is view in two phases, first has to do with the individual's capacity as a citizen (his ability to contribute towards a well-

functioning society). (Rychen & Salganik 2005), and the second aspect is one which affect the individual capacity to obtain and maintain work (Harvey 2001, McQuaid & Lindsay 2005), thereby contribute to economic productivity.

Whereas, the main impetus for the recent interest in graduate attributes is part of the move towards developing human capital to meet the needs of the new knowledge economy (Curtis & McKenzie 2001). Issues relating to graduate attributes have been in existence long before now. Hyland (1994) and Tribe (1996), suggest that the research study to highlight the concept of a common core of skills was that of the further education unit (FEU, 1979). The list of core skill was complex and extensive, this include aspects of knowledge, skill and personal development were all considered essential to meet the basic demands of contemporary society. The proliferation of list of employers' skill demand appeared through the 1980's, but they did little to clarify the definitions of the skill labels used. More recently a discourse of attributes has been added to the discourse of skills (cf. HEQC 1997), although this may only serve to exacerbate the evident conceptual confusions. The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR 1995), for example, set out to identify the attributes – vaguely defined as a mixture of knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes – which graduates will need in light of the changes taking place in graduate careers, and concluded that they needed to be self-reliant in career and personal development and the skills to manage process rather than functional skills. The report identifies twelve such attributes and claims that without self-reliance other skills can be wasted.

The most recent study of managers is also framed in the discourse of attributes, and indicates clearly the extent of employer demands of higher education. Harvey Moon and Geall (1997), report that employers want adaptive, adaptable, transformable people to help them maintain, develop and ultimately transform their organizations in response to, and preferably in anticipation of change.

The AGR report, concludes that the attributes identified should be developed within the curriculum of every institution, and further prescribes without any justification, that these will improve the quality of learning, enable students to make an informed choice of degree model and provide the techniques needed to manage life-long learning. To sum it up, graduate attributes deemed important by employers, contain different sets and combination of skills and are based on different purposes, definitions and interpretations.

This difficulties inherent within the attributes agenda in higher education ranging from defining, interpreting to developing, transferring and even implementation and uptake of effective training of graduates that are employable become more of an illusion than reality. And part of the fallout of the consequences effect was a manifestation of graduate open unemployment, that means opportunities for most students graduating from Higher Institutions cannot mobilize their skills, talents and energies in the modern process to work successfully in a particular work environment. It is against this backdrop that this study aimed at exploring those attributes that the employers are demanding in a contemporary work-ready graduate.

The two research questions that guided the study are;

RQ.1 What is the meaning of graduate attributes as perceived by employers?

RQ.2 What do the employers look for in professional work-ready graduate?

The study is limited to the specific purpose of exploring graduates of Higher Education skill attributes from the employers' perspective. First the conceptual framework of graduate attributes for employability will be examine in the following section.

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework

Meja, (2004) – Conceptualizes education as a public and private good, he argued that, it is an investment capable of yielding benefits that have externalities. Education and training are therefore, viewed as the main instruments available to government and the community to prepare individuals for a rapidly changing and increasingly demanding world of work, in order to improve graduate ability to secure and maintain a job. This is why scholars of economics of education and educational planning continue to link investments in education to national development. Perhaps, it is this belief that led to the global declaration of Education for All (EFA) in 1990 in Jomtien.

The “human capital theory” on education which was dominant from the 1950s to the late 1970s to early 1980s made economists to change their view of education from being ‘consumption’ to ‘investment’. In other words, education would increase personal capital and by implication, become an investment and a veritable tool used for addressing social problems among others. The human capital model attempts to explain the link between education and employment and/or supply of skills by educational and training institutions to the labour market. The key premise in this theory is that education is an investment which leads to high wages reflecting the increased levels of productivity, resulting from human capital accumulation. The mechanism for human capital to impact ability of graduates to participate in the labour market is either due to the accumulation of this factor in production, or innovation and technological progress resulting from the existing stock of human capital. That is graduates who have accumulated more education and training, have a higher productivity and therefore should be rewarded with a higher employment probability and wages.

If everyone is educated according to this model, then everyone is equal. Premised on education being an economic priority, the educational institution experienced massive expansion which impacted on teachers in terms of improved salaries and social prestige. There was also the expectation that teachers and the school system would be able to solve social and economic problems. This model was subject to criticisms because positions were not available to all educated people equally. In addition, if more people were able to be educated, there would be an oversupply of well-trained individuals.

*The ‘Manpower model’* which has been prominent since the early 1980s and premised on the ‘Harrod – Domar model views schools (or education) as a process of cultural birth, of bringing forth a new generation of children who will carry on or replicate the culture while the consumerism model views schools as a machine, an industrial process not unlike an assembly line. Its purpose is to mass produce *factors of production*, – well-trained, obedient inputs that can be used in the creation of wealth or to engender growth and development in a nation. The model, in its simplest form, avers that growth in income achievable by a nation depends on the rate of savings and investment in human capital, in other words, education is a necessary condition for national growth and development or the more the capital invested, the higher would be the output growth in a society.

There seems to be a consensus in all the models available in the area of education, in a sense that they all agree that education particularly higher education is crucial to national development, discussed different prescriptions for how to improve our schools ranging from curriculum design, how to retain good teachers, teaching methods and discipline as well as other germane issues in the context of the study. Urama (2009), explores the role of higher education for sustainable development in Africa. He explores the emergence of trans-disciplinary sciences, system thinking and responsible innovation and their complications for education for sustainable development innovations (ESDO in Africa). He argues that current pedagogues and incentive structures in African institutions of higher learning are discipline based and hence, precludes systems thinking, collaboration and responsible innovation which are necessary condition for economic progress as well as social and environmental sustainability, a complete re-engineering of the knowledge systems such as curriculum design, teaching and learning methods, research and development, stakeholders engagement and systems of knowledge sharing, dissemination incentive structures including research assessment exercises (RAEs) and promotion criteria etc. are urgently required.

In spite of the efforts by higher education to achieve objectives particularly in the area of national development and economic growth, the issue of quality of graduates in terms of employability skills remains a serious challenge. Abdulwahab (2000), identify institutions of higher learning with inadequacies such as acute shortage of workshop equipment/facilities, inadequate infrastructures, ill-motivated teachers, low quality of consumables for students' practical and overcrowded classrooms, under these conditions, the teaching and learning of graduate skills or attributes are adversely affected and the quality of the graduates' employability skills becomes questionable.

Yorke and Knight (2004), emergent work of skills research initiative known as USEM account of employability was integrated as conceptual framework that guided the review and evaluation of this literature. The model is probably the most well-known and respected in this field, they offered a now widely accepted defining statement of graduate attributes as a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that makes an individual more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

## **2.0 Method**

The study, researcher used the case study design Yin (2003) to explore how the employers perceive the meaning of graduate attributes, and what are the kinds of these attributes they are demanding in a professional work-ready graduate. This method recognizes subjective human construction of meaning through interpretation, yet permits some level of objectivity based on theory (Yin 2003), the method, further takes a constructivists perspective to analyzing data, these by promoting collaboration between the researcher and participant and giving focus to the voice of the participant (Crabtree and Miller 1999).

Using the case study design, the researcher also chose a good location that provides multiple streams of data for analysis such as reviewing of current literature about the chosen location, making onsite observations and conducting interviews with employers. The following sections discuss the rationale for selecting the companies, data collection, analysis and presentation.

### **2.1 Selection of the companies and participants**

Three companies selected for the study fall within the largest multinational and service providers in Nigeria, in terms of providing services of various kinds, among others is employing graduates of higher education particularly on the areas that focus on skill delivery. The three companies have

outstanding records of good reputation in dealing with graduates of higher Education of different kinds of discipline or professions. The researcher believed these companies have been in existence for very long period, well recognized due to a wide range of experiences in service delivery and good characteristics of best practices in carrying out their activities as companies. It was in the realization of this fact that the researcher deemed it necessary to select these companies so as to have balance information about the graduate attributes. The selection is also based on the status, ownership, and years of experience providing service to humanity. Against this backdrop, the first company tagged 'CA' is the Power Holding Company of Nigeria established to integrate electricity power development and make it effective. The category 'CB' is a company established by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the mandate of designing and implementing programmes to combat mass unemployment. It also include articulating policies aimed at developing work programmes with labour intensive potentials, this company known as National Directorate of Employment (NDE), is fully owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Whereas the third and last company tagged 'CC' is the Cement Company of Northern Nigeria (CCNN), the company is owned by both local and international investors. Three professionals one from each company was chosen as participants for the study, their selection was based on their experiences, status and educational background particularly on staff recruitment and human resource development.

## 2.2 Data Collection Instrument

The investigation had three main primary sources of data collection, observation, interviews (semi structured) and document or artifacts analysis (the artifacts may include photographs, audio, or video recordings), and several other items that can provide the researcher with relevant information.

*A qualitative observation-* is a mode of data generation in which the researcher takes field notes on the behaviour and activities of individual at the research site (Cresswell 2009). The researcher also collected documents as a source of data. *Qualitative document-* is a kind of public documents such as minutes of meetings, official records, magazine and newsletters or even private documents like personal journals, diaries, letters, e-mail etc. (Merriam 2009). The researcher retrieved documents such as, fresh graduates recruitment guidelines, management practices on fresh graduate employment, refresher training courses for newly employed graduates, Human Resources Development Records; graduate employee performance records etc.

The interviews involve unstructured and generally open ended questions that are few in number, intended to solicit views and opinions from the participants (Cresswell 2009: 181). The interview questions were carefully phrased according to the requirement of the research objectives and a semi-structured method was adopted in order to make sure that participant share information freely regarding their experiences of graduate skill attributes. While providing flexibility and openness, the guide was split into two general sections with each section reflecting a particular research question of the study. Thus;

1. Perception of graduate attributes by the employers.
2. What employers look for in a contemporary work-ready graduate

## 2.3 Key Informant

Beside the dominant sources of data generation, a key information, someone that is known to the researcher for a period of time and have established a good rapport was chosen. The research believed such a person will be helpful and insightful, someone who can assist in locating participants and any relevant source that can facilitate the conduct of this research (Bikken and Bogdan, 2007). Accordingly a male Nigerian aged 48 years was chosen to serve as key informant.

### 3.0 Findings

The analysis was carried out in three stages, familiarization and organization of data; coding and reducing of data interpretation and representation of data. The three streams of data collected to specifically address the research questions is presented and analyzed in this section, responses of participants and subsequent themes that emerged in respect of each research question were treated under a separate heading. But first, the document or literature will be analyzed as the first step taken and then followed by semi structured interviews and observation field notes.

#### 3.1 Document Analysis

Documents collected were reviewed for common themes, the content of the documents were analyzed using content analysis (Boyaz, 1998). This is a process of sorting words into categories based on their congruence with the construct of study (Bikken and Bogdan, 2007). Themes were allowed to emerge from each work for making meaning to data. One theme emerged from the entire document; understanding of subject discipline and skill practices.

The theme '*understanding of subject discipline and skill practices*', focused on the emphasis by the companies on skills demand, when recruiting fresh graduates and the various strategies adopted such as rigorous interview/test processes etc. in order to gauge a graduate capabilities in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and other related attributes or variables, matched to desired job sought by the graduate. This matching process was believed to provide a level of good job fit between the graduate applicant and the employer requirements.

Researches have even suggested the meaning of such graduate attributes as synergic combination of personal qualities, comprising of skill of various kinds and subject understanding (Knight 2001), that enable a graduate to obtain and retain suitable employment within the current labour market context. To a large extent, the existing definitions suggest that individual characteristics and behaviour determines employability, they also assume a link between employability and employment, meaning to say if one possesses the right mix of skill, attitudes and behaviour, then one is supposedly employable.

#### 3.2 Employers Perception of Graduate Attributes

Views and opinion on the actual meaning of graduates skill attributes particularly in relation to labour market expectations were sought, the key questions asked includes, employers perception of graduate attribute agenda, how the skills look like in higher Education, whether or not these perceptions tallies with the common practices of the institution approach to developing such skills. Finally, how employers perception affect the development of the skill agenda throughout the framework.

The following section explore the emergent theme- '*work readiness*', explored as an expression of the employers perception of the meaning of graduate attributes, this theme emerged as what participants expressed to be their best general understanding of the concept in the learning context of tertiary institutions. All the three participants expressed graduate attributes as a bunch of skills competences that an individual or professional graduate possess having passed through an organized and coordinated training programme in most cases from tertiary institution. For example one of the participants shared his experience as follows;

"My company has standard criteria for assessing graduate skill attribute, before employing fresh graduate we usually consider quite a number of graduate personal qualities that serve as our yardstick to employ or not employ such a candidate. Usually after subjecting a candidate to a series of interviews, skill test and sometimes even refresher courses to fill some skills gaps with particular



candidate, the basic areas we give priority include among others, subject or discipline-based skills and personal qualities, understanding of work environment. Accordingly we expect all these skills to be of a right mix.

As a strategy to ensuring we employ the graduate with the right collection of attributes, candidates are being subjected to a qualifying skill ‘test’ that relates to the graduate propensity to exhibit or demonstrate certain competences/expertise which the company anticipates will be necessary for future effective functioning.”

### 3.3 Graduate attributes required by Employers

The research question attempted to explore what are those qualities/attributes as required by a work-ready graduate. The key questions asked to gather specific data in the interview in relation to this research question includes employers views on what they require from a professional graduate, and what needed to be done to enhance such attributes. The emergent themes, from the research question include; ‘soft skills’ or ‘personal attributes; subject specific skills and ‘disciplinary content knowledge and understanding’.

#### *i. ‘Soft-skills or personal attributes’ such as...*

The theme soft skills or personal attributes is characterized by what the employers expressed as their views on aspects of graduate attributes. Clearly, the picture is more complete with all the participants taking in common position. They held the notion that soft skills and personal attributes, possessed by a graduate such as honesty, reliability, integrity as well as technical competences are very crucial and prominent, as such, they upheld the opinion that higher institutions should emphasize the coherent relationship of discipline theories and practice when preparing a graduate, and that, the first consideration is that they must build a foundation of skills and abilities based on existing employment demands, which is to be provided with a broad-based professional skill training that will help them adapt easily to the workplace environment, rather than through abstract learning experiences that many never be required or used.

#### *ii. ‘Subject specific skills are important but...’*

This theme is characterized as the views of the employers on what they consider most important ingredient to consider which form the basis from which graduate skill attributes can be developed, even though, most of the opinions expressed by the employers favoured skills related to subject of course of study, notwithstanding, they still argue that other skills are also available. The point being made here is that students while in the institution should first receive their training in a particular discipline whereby they will be well skilled in the subject area, surely certain to provide the graduate sufficient relevant skill much needed by the employer. Thus while developing graduate attribute skills; higher institutions should emphasize more on the subject skills, because the employers believe that it is the backbone of employability skills.

#### *‘Disciplinary content, knowledge and understanding in addition to....’*

The theme disciplinary content knowledge and understanding is characterized by the employers’ views on those attributes that graduated needed. In addition to subject skills, the employers are also looking for graduate with a sound knowledge and understanding within the context of the professional discipline, it involves the knowledge of the organization and how they work. Employers maintain that, it is not only enough for a graduate to possess the knowledge but even the ability to use such knowledge in a given situation become very crucial. Emphasizing the fact that acquiring the skills only without the know-how of its applicability, still leave a wide gap between employability and employment which must be bridged.

#### 4.0 Discussion

Findings emerging from the employers expectations from a job-ready graduate, and what the institutions are to consider when preparing their graduate for a particular professional occupation, the findings highlighted three broad areas to be considered. This includes what they describe as soft skills and personal attributes; subject specific skills and disciplinary content knowledge and understanding. They describe soft skills and personal attributes as honesty, reliability, integrity as well as technical competences, which they believed are pertinent and crucial aspect of important elements that can help in preparing graduate for job market, and therefore should be taken seriously. The argument is that most important aspect of consideration first is to build a solid foundation of skills and abilities to correspond with the existing labour market demands, followed by a broad-based professional skills training that help them adapt easily to the workplace environment. These broad based knowledge and special abilities help the graduates to work in a team, and come up with new innovations. Self-confidence, optimism coupled with critical thinking ability are also vital elements, this will not only produce graduate for just world of work, but most importantly for them to get a job, work successfully by giving their best to the job and continue to grow and even make progress. It is expected that, higher institutions while preparing a graduate for job, must consider three aspects of the learning endeavor, technical skills, through education and experience (communication, teamwork, problem solving and sense of responsibility known as personal skills). Others include personal attributes which includes honesty, reliability, integrity etc.

The graduate employability skills literature has consistently pointed out employers' expectation on what should constitute graduate attributes. Data from the graduate outlook (2006) showed that employers rate applicants' academic skills and performance significantly higher than they rated on areas aligned to skill attributes. Table. 1, shows data gathered from Graduate Outlook (2006) on graduate top ten key selection criteria, other than relevant qualifications, the data is consistent with the data gathered in interviews for this research study, however interviews for this research indicated more priority on other personal skills abilities and fitness.

Table. 1. Top 10 selection criteria for recruiting graduates (Adopted graduate outlook, 2006)

S. No.	Selection criteria	%
1.	Interpersonal and communication skills	57%
2.	Academic qualification	35.45%
3.	Work experience	27.6%
4.	Leadership skill	18.1%
5.	Knowledge of industry/commitment/attitudes	15.7%
6.	Team work skills	15.7%
7.	Critical thinking/problem solving/technical skills	15.0%
8.	Emotional intelligence	8.7%
9.	Activities Extracurricular activities	7.9%
10.	Cultural alignment/values fit	7.9%

However, small number of the participating companies are more inclined to subject specific skills, that are more or less related to knowledge and understanding of course under study, even though they agree that there are other skills available that are of paramount importance. Going by this fact, the argument brought to light, was the believe by the fact that, institutions should first consider subject area skills, that is to say, a graduate being prepared for employability skills, should receive adequate training in their field of study, to provide graduate with the sufficient relevant skill needed by the employer, that this should constitute the backbone of a framework meant to develop graduate attributes. Some employers' opinion also suggested skills of disciplinary content knowledge and understanding in addition to subject specific skills, bearing in mind that, a graduate having a subject specific skills without having knowledge and understanding of how to apply and use those skills is baseless, with little or no benefit. In a nutshell, acquiring subject specific skills alone without having the knowledge of its applicability, leaves a wide gap between employability and employment which must be bridged. This finding emerging from the analysis is in agreement with the summary report of the findings of the (Nettleton 2007), where the interviewees comprising of professional and experts were asked to confirm, what are the attributes of a professional work-ready graduate? Many of those professionals observed that employers, in as much as subject specific skills or technical skills are necessary, the basis of their recruitment decisions are made more on perceptions of generic professional attributes, stating that while employers can train new graduates in technical skills, it was simply 'too hard' to develop understandings and skills in communication, teamwork, initiative ability to develop report with clients, analytical skills, making sound judgment and applying their technical knowledge (Nettleton, Litchfield, Taylor, 2008).

The following key attributes were identified as being wanted in graduate across all the professional societies

- Ethics and professionalism
- A global perspective
- Ability to work well in a team
- Ability to apply knowledge
- Creative problem solving and critical thinking skills, even though, the list are not exhaustive of the graduate attributes as suggested, these are the ones considered most important across all the societies (Litchfield et al, 2008)

#### **4.1 Inference:**

From the foregoing, employers even though agreed that subject skills are important, they also believe, personal skills abilities and fitness are also crucial. Most favoured opinion of the professionals interviewed was that graduate attribute were considered to be of greater importance than even the subject skills. Employers want graduates that possess different kinds of skills in different aspects that help them to succeed in their chosen occupational career, such skills are to be acquired through education and experience, learning endeavours. Harvey (2000), lamented that, graduate attributes are increasingly becoming more important than the degree subject studied. The investigation clearly shows that, some employers does not hold the subject skills with high esteem as the graduate personal attributes, as a matter of fact, graduates ability to handle complex information and communicate effectively is what some employers prefer most than the degree subject studied (Knight & Yorke 2000). Graduate recruiters want a variety of other skills, personal and intellectual attributes rather than specialist subject, such as oral communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership.

The employers therefore describe graduate skill attributes as those qualities that make an individual not only employable but someone with flexible attitudes towards work and career,

someone with self-theories that create in himself confidence and optimism. Personal attributes mostly preferred apart from subject skills were described as, interpersonal skills, creativity, teamwork, adaptability, work experience, critical thinking/problem solving ability, emotional intelligence, awareness of work environment attitudes, although other skills are also available but these are seen to be more important.

## 5.0 Conclusion

While the meaning of graduate attributes in higher education was met with statement of having series of definitions, meanings and interpretations, ranging from use of different terminologies to describe the concept, in much of the literature available. However, there exist several conceptualizations that can be summarized at more holistic approaches, variously acknowledging labour market and personal characteristics. The question of what attributes the employers want to enhance labour market advantage depends on who is asked what and how. Some employers prefer graduates that possess different kinds of skills in different aspects that help students to succeed in their chosen occupational career and such skills are to be acquired through education and experiences learning endeavors. The meaning of graduate attributes as provided by the respondents and even supported by literatures from this study is sure to have accommodate notions of concept encompassing more than short term employment outcomes, it more or less represent skills necessary for gainful employment in a more broader sense. For instance, such definition or descriptions of the concept suggested that, the capacities of these attributes underpin two broad areas, 'subject or discipline based skills and personal or generic skills'. Graduate attributes are therefore, skills that are directly or indirectly associated with employment and it has to do with individual characteristics and behaviour in terms of occupational skills, that makes an individual 'work-ready' and to achieve this qualities he must possess the right mix of skills attitudes and social emotional behaviour, character and other special abilities.

The employers described an employable graduate as a person with flexible attitudes towards work and career. Someone with self-theories that create in himself confidence and optimism. Person attributes or generic skills includes, interpersonal skills, activity, teamwork, adaptability, work experience, critical thinking/problem solving ability, emotional intelligence, awareness of work environment and attitudes. Even though, other skills might also be available depending on the nature of the occupational field of study.

## 5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings that emerged, this study developed a set of recommendations as follows;

1. Issues identified as relevant to the development of graduate attributes must be covertly and explicitly defined, and addressed and covered properly to avoid unnecessary discrepancies and misinterpretations of the concept. Overloading the curricula with intellectual content, at the expense of basic engineering and technology, meaning to say that, Auxiliary or subsidiary subjects (general studies) selected to support core courses must align with specific disciplinary content of a particular occupation.
2. There has been agreement among employers that young graduates need a set of skills that will prepare them for both employment and further learning, and in most cases employers are looking for these skills in people irrespective of whether they are prospective or existing employees.

3. The study identifies graduate attributes that employers argue, individuals should have along with the job-specific or relevant technical skills, however, the employers participating in this study also argued that there is need to extend the range of skills, explicitly acknowledging the role of personal attributes in employability and improve the learning outcomes for some skill areas.
4. The employer noted that there will be a need for ongoing skill attribute development in graduates to take account of emerging occupations and changing skill requirements as a result of technology and workplace processes.
5. The subject specific skills in conjunction with the personal attributes, identified as graduates attributes includes;
  - Communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relationship between employees and customers
  - Teamwork skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes.
  - Problem-solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes.
  - Initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes
  - Planning and organizing skills that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
  - Self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
  - Learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes; and
  - Technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks.

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