

Full Length Research

Disciplined character: A re-emerging quality for graduate employability in Ghana

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This was part of an on-going opinion study to determine the relationship between character and employability of entrée graduate applicants. From the results, the ideal expectation for graduate entrée employment should be portrayal of three qualities: academic performance, job skills and disciplined character. However, in a keen competition Students and Employers tended to differ in the ranking of the final determinant qualities. They variedly emphasized 'job skills' and 'disciplined character' respectively, as central to combinations with other qualities. Impliedly, in modern Ghana, during a keenly competitive recruitment, employers would emphasize disciplined character of graduates, but students were ignorant of this trend.

Keywords Discipline, character, college students, graduate employability, employable qualities.

INTRODUCTION

While not everyone who goes to university aims at moving on to further study, most students expect to improve their employability (public or private) and/or increase earnings with university education (American Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2011). Employability is composed of a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (Yorke and Knight, 2006). In this sense employability is not just about getting a job, it is about keeping it. It is about graduates developing malleable skills and qualities that will help them maximize their potential in any workplace and enable them to realize this potential (Ulster, 2011). So, employers expect graduates to exhibit a wide range of personal attributes in addition to the acquisition of a body of knowledge (Harvey et al., 1997).

In Ghana, Presbyterian Church of Ghana had emphasized a holistic philosophy of training that made the learner gained excellent intellectual knowledge in the head, very skilful with the hands and cherished disciplined character in the heart – with high moral responsibilities dubbed 'the Presbyterian Discipline'. This meant one who received character training and excellent academic education (Asare, 1995) – what Astin et al., (2011) referred to as development of both the 'inner' and 'outer' of a person at the same time. However, 40 years

after the political administration took over supervision of all educational institutions, including the faith-based schools, in the mid 20th century; emphasis on "the Presbyterian Discipline" began to wane out from the church-based schools. By the close of the 20th and turn-in of the 21st century "the Presbyterian Discipline" had virtually died out from the educational institutions. The level of the resultant negative effects of the absence of 'the Presbyterian Discipline' on industry, societal and economic life became so highly obvious that both the church and state leadership declared 'war against indiscipline' (Prempeh, 2003).

However, with the inception of private universities by the close of the 20th century, attempts in Ghana by some private faith-based universities to actively inculcate Christian character values in students met outcry from both some students and members of the public. The protesters tended to regard Christian character promotion programmes as unnecessary imposition of institutional doctrines on students; infringement on their religious freedom and interference with their primary reason for coming to the university. Yet, about the same time (the close of the twentieth century), there has been an emerging global movement for the formal cultivation of moral values and ethical behaviours in undergraduate education. Dalton et al. (2011) described it as a very interesting and unexpected thing happening in higher

education institutions in many places. They observed that instead of becoming more secular and irreligious, colleges and universities have become increasingly engaged with the moral values and character development of their students. Bahai educationists see the phenomenon as an imperative occurrence in the developmental history of humanity, which is necessary for the moral and material benefits of the age (Bahai Topics, 2011). Thus, some employers began to re-emphasize need for disciplined character as employable qualities in both entr e and continuing employees (ACCI, 2002), or that graduates must exhibit wide range of personal attributes in addition to a body of knowledge (Harvey et al., 1997). Perhaps, students' protestations to character promotion in Ghana could be due to their ignorance that despite the waning down of the once cherished "Presbyterian Discipline", disciplined character is re-emerging as an equally serious employable quality as their academics.

The study objectives

It was hypothesized in this study that although disciplined character is equally important as academic qualification at the gate of entr e employment in Ghana today, most students, ignorantly, tend to value opportunities to improve academic performance more than acquisition of disciplined character. It ultimately aimed to determine, through opinion of Students, Alumni and Employers, whether or not disciplined character has any place in the employability of entr e graduates today, to enable faith-based universities design appropriate character and personality development programmes to improve quality of their graduates.

Study type and target population

The study is non-interventional, but quantitative and descriptive opinion pooling. Many authors have employed similar approaches in the study of ethical issues (Peslak, 2008; Shaw, 2003; Hilmer et al., 2003). The target population consisted of Students, Employers and Alumni of Presbyterian University College, Ghana (PUCG). The students were drawn from five Christian-based tertiary institutions belonging to the Conference of Private Universities in Ghana (CPUG), namely Presbyterian University College, Ghana (PUCG); Pentecost University College (PUC); Methodist University College (MUC) and Valley View University (VUU) as well as one public tertiary institution - Abetifi Presbyterian College of Education (ABETICO). These colleges were established by churches already known for promoting disciplined character through either formal education at pre-tertiary levels or informal Christian education at church levels.

The respondents from the Employers category

included top leaders of churches that own private tertiary institutions; senior managerial staff of member enterprises of the Employers Association of Ghana (EAG) and Association of Ghana Industries (AGI), as well as human resource managers at government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs).

The Alumni category consisted of the first and second batches of students that graduated from PUCG in 2007 and 2008. They were chosen for being the only ones (among all the participants) who were readily accessible to give feedback on exposure to some form of informal character education programmes during their last years before graduating and entering industry.

A total of 575 respondents were reached out to. They consisted of 425 Students, 100 Employers (senior management staffs of industry and churches) and 50 Alumni of PUCG.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected using structured and semi-structured interview questions. Based on the literature review, the following null sub-hypotheses were formulated to guide the questions and analysis of results:-

Hypothesis 1. Students/Employers/Alumni who know the three topmost qualifications considered in selecting entr e applicants are academic performance, job skills and disciplined character are more than 95%.

Hypothesis 2. Students/Employers/Alumni who know disciplined character *per se* is seriously considered at entr e employment gate are more than 95%.

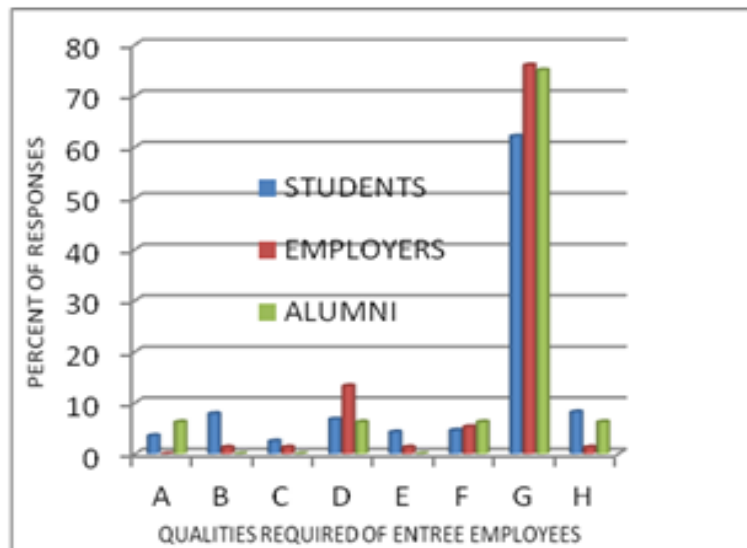
The questionnaire was pre-tested with students at Okwahu campus of PUCG; Mpraeso branch of Ghana Commercial bank and Okwahu-East District Assembly office. The pre-test assessed respondents' understanding of the interrogative items. This resulted in reframing some of them to be relevant for the objectives of the study. It helped also to change from using a Likert-type scale for self scoring to simple trinomial "yes", "no" and "undecided" type of answers for the closed questions.

Alumni answered the questionnaires online within one month via their e-mails. The questionnaires were administered to Students immediately after a class session, upon soliciting their participation, and collected within one hour. Student participants in the classrooms were selected randomly from those present through balloting. Employers were interviewed in their offices using the same questionnaires, with further interrogation for detailed explanations. Accuracy was cross-checked from permitted voice recordings.

Chi square test of goodness of fit of the responses was accepted at significant of $p \leq 0.05$ levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 371 (64.52%) responses were retrieved from



Legend: A=Academics only; B=Job skills only; C=Character only; D=Academics and job skills; E=Academics and character; F=Job skills and character; G=Academics, Job skills and character; H=No basis for option.

Figure 1. Opinions of students, employers and alumni about topmost qualities considered at entree employment gate.

the 575 questionnaires administered (including those used in interviewing). This consisted of: Students 280 out of 425 (65.88%); Alumni 16 out of 50 (32%) and Employers 75 out of 100 (75%). The results were presented according to the issues addressed by the sub-hypotheses.

Knowledge about topmost qualities required at the gate of entrée employment

All three categories of respondents – Students (62%), Employers (76 %), and Alumni (75%) – indicated that academics, job skill and disciplined character are the three topmost or core qualities employers would consider when short listing entrée applicants (Figure 1).

According to Employer Interview Tips, Techniques and Guide (2010) employers would look at different aspects in candidates, but generally they look at knowledge, skills, and attitude. A respondent (banker) in the current study explained: “possession of all three qualities gives perfect and appealing *curriculum vitae*, which puts the applicant in a more advantageous state than others in this competitive market”. It was suggestive from these results that Students knew the topmost qualities (academics, job skills and discipline character) that employers would require of them as entrée applicants.

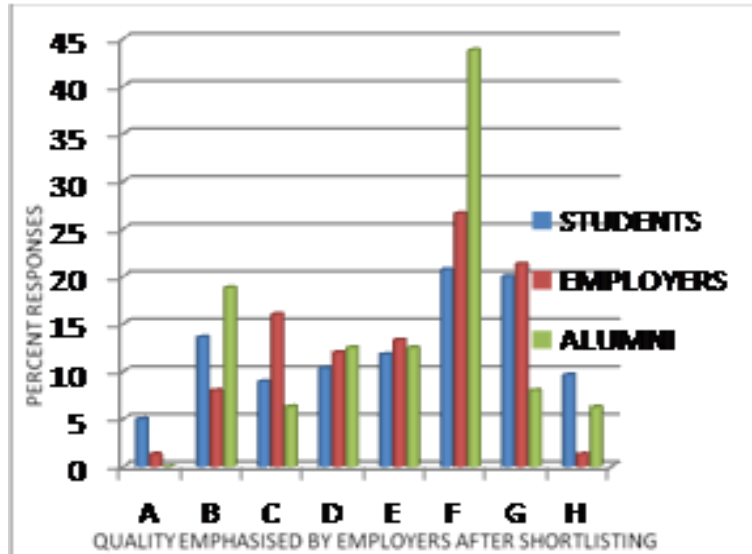
From the relative differences of the columnar heights in Figure 2, the determinant quality emphasized for selection of applicants in a keen competition, in the opinion of Students, would be ‘job skills and disciplined

character’ (20.7%); if need still be, then ‘job skills only’ (13.6%). This varied slightly from the observations made by Williams and Ball (1993) in their survey to find the influence of current activities of Appalachian State University graduates while in school on their employability. In that survey the graduates believed that in addition to their college major, academic performance and work experience, co-curricular activities were also important factors in getting jobs.

In the opinion of Employers in the current study the determinant quality was ‘job skills and disciplined character’ (26.6%), followed by ‘disciplined character only’ (16.0%). Thus both Students and Employers indicated awareness of the same factors or qualities required of entrée graduate employees. However, in a keen competition Students and Employers tended to differ in the ranking of the determinant qualities: the former would emphasize ‘job skills’ and its combinations with other qualities while the latter tended to emphasize ‘disciplined character’ as central to combinations with other qualities. This difference in emphasis corroborated the observation of Williams and Ball (1993) who concluded that graduates knew employers’ preferences although employers and graduates differed in the ranking of the qualifications.

Disciplined Character *per se* as Quality Seriously Considered by Employers

Rynes et al. (2001) had reported that employers did



Legend: A=Academics only; B=Job skills only; C=Character only; D=Academics and job skills; E=Academics and character; F=Job skills and character; G=Academics, Job skills and character; H=No basis for option.

Figure 2. Opinions of students, employers and alumni on the final determinant qualities in keen competition

not recognize or reward applicants with behavioural skills, despite their frequent complaint that business students lacked such skills. Their research questioned whether or not behavioural and interpersonal skills increased the employability of newly graduated business students. Their finding suggested that while employers did not act in ways to show or motivate demonstration of good interpersonal skills, as disciplined character traits, in their employees, all the same they seriously desired that employees had such character traits. Similarly, and in a more specific and emphatic observation, an Australian study reported that employers now require a set of character or personal attributes in all employees, because enterprises had noted their shortfall in expecting but not seriously demanding behavioural skills in entrée employees (ACCI, 2002).

Consequently, although the responses to the first hypothesis in the current study suggested that Employers would emphasize 'disciplined character' during keen competitive selection of entrée applicants, it probed further to determine whether really disciplined character *per se* would be seriously considered for entrée employment by employers in Ghana. It hypothesised that Students/Employers/Alumni who knew that disciplined character *per se* is seriously considered at entrée employment gate were more than 95%. In other words, the majority of respondents were assumed to do know that disciplined character *per se* was seriously considered for entrée employees; and so if any proportion found not to know is less than 5% it would be

insignificant.

Table 1 shows the frequencies of respondents agreeing to, disagreeing with or having no basis for expressing opinion on the hypothesis. Considering the chi square values in Table 1 the hypothesis held highly for employers, because of the highly insignificant χ^2 of 1.56, ($P > 0.05$). It implied that majority (69.3%) of Employers in the study opined they were aware that disciplined character *per se* would be seriously considered when selecting applicants for entrée graduate employment. By extension this suggested what Ghanaian Employers would do in this contemporary times.

It corroborates reports that Australian employers participating in a research placed a strong emphasis on the need for both entry level and ongoing employees to exhibit a broad range of good character and personal attributes, because character and personal attributes are an integral feature of an employable person (ACCI, 2002).

For majority (54%) of Students in the current study the statistic ($\chi^2 = 3.76$), was not significant ($P > 0.05$), but skewing towards significance (in comparison with the $\chi^2_{critical}$, which was 5.991). This indicated a tendency of majority of participating Students being unaware of the seriousness employers would attach to disciplined character at graduate entrée employment gate. By implication the students in this study appeared not to know the importance of disciplined character *per se* as a factor that could affect their graduate employability. This was contrary to observations of Williams and Ball (1993)

Table 1. Respondents' Awareness of Disciplined Character *per se* a Quality Seriously Considered by Employers

RESPONDENT	AGREE (AWARE)	DISAGREE (UNAWARE)	UNDECIDED	TOTAL	Chi Sq. Value
STUDENTS	150 (54.0%)	53 (19.0%)	77 (27.5%)	280 (100.0%)	3.760
EMPLOYERS	52 (69.3%)	15 (20.0%)	8 (4.7%)	75 (100.0%)	1.561
PUCG ALUMNI	7 (43.8%)	6 (37.4%)	3 (18.8%)	16 (100.0%)	6.232*

*Test of goodness fit is significant, $P \leq 0.05$; $n = 2$

that Appalachian State University graduates categorically knew employers would seriously consider character (gained through personal and social responsibility co-curricular activities) when recruiting graduate employees.

The Alumni involved in this study were among the very first two batches of products of PUCG. Their experiences were to throw some feed-back light on the hypothesis, having been exposed to some informal character education programmes in their last two semesters prior to entering industry. Therefore, the significant difference in their opinion ($\chi^2 = 6.23$, $P < 0.05$) was further surveyed with follow-up interrogations. From the explanatory comments received from 25% of them, they knew a good character would be added advantage to academic performance and desired by employers, but just as Rynes et al. (2001) had observed, they did not think that employers necessarily seriously considered it when engaging first-time job seekers.

CONCLUSION

The study was part of an on-going attempt to scientifically determine, from opinions of Students and Employers, the relationship, if any, between disciplined character and employability of an entr ee graduate applicant. It was suggestive from the opinions of the respondents that, in Ghana today, the ideal expectation at the gate of graduate entr ee employment should be portrayal of three qualities: academic performance, job skills and disciplined character. The reasons advanced could be summed up with the opinion of one respondent: "possession of all three qualities gives perfect and appealing *curriculum vitae*, which puts the applicant in a more advantageous status than others in this competitive market".

However, in a keen competition Students and Employers tended to differ in the ranking of the final determinant qualities: the former would emphasize 'job skills' and its combinations with other qualities while the latter tended to emphasize 'disciplined character' as central to combinations with other qualities. Consequently,

Students appeared not to be aware of the seriousness attached to discipline character *per se* as a quality considered by Employers, and how it might affect their employability in modern Ghana.

This should alert tertiary educational institutions in Ghana to consider the suggestion of Astin et al. (2011) in reviewing their educational policies and curricula to develop both the 'inner' and 'outer' of their students if they must take advantage of the global competitive job market.

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