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**Claiming the 21st Century: Young people's perceptions and aspirations of future employment in Ghana**

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## **Introduction**

The UN and the AU declared the International Year of the Youth (August 2010 to August 2011) and Decade of Youth Development (2009-2019) even before the tumultuous and world-changing events in Tunisia and Egypt underscored the fact that the hopes and fears of young people are a force shaping our world. Africa is spoken of as a 'youthful continent' because of the high population of young people. If Africa would grasp the opportunity that this youth bulge presents, those who suggest that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the African century may well be vindicated.

Policymakers on the continent have awakened to the significance of young people - their choices, opportunities and constraints - to development (UNECA 2009). Unemployment is perhaps the preeminent challenge in regards to young people; we see that the rates of unemployment are disproportionately high for young people all over the world (ILO 2010), a fact thought to have fuelled the North African uprisings. Thus, youth unemployment has become a salient policy issue on the continent.

While young people's employment is a crucial social and policy issue, the quality and the breadth of information informing the discussions and solutions are still inadequate. An exploration of the themes covered by published research on young people in sub-Saharan Africa found that the preponderance of such material covered young people's mental and sexual health, with significant less attention to questions of employment and livelihoods (Kuchanny and Sumberg 2010). There is even less material on young people's aspirations of the future (Leavy & Smith 2010). Yet these perceptions and aspirations are important influences on their present and future choices, and on their eventual life outcomes (ibid.).

There has been a recognition of the importance of attending to the voice of young people in policy processes (te Lintelo 2011); for instance, the World Bank 2007 report makes the recommendation that young people should be consulted in interventions targeted at them and the Africa Youth Charter highlights the need for young people to participate in decision making (UNECA 2009). While these statements are commendable, we are making a case for something different from consultation of young people in policy; we are arguing first and foremost for research that will provide a rich understanding of the contexts and contents of young people's lives, which information can then be fed into the policy formulation and implementation process. Policies and programmes that rightly attend to young people should be informed by an understanding of young people's lived realities.

## **Definition of Youth or Young People**

The category of youth or young people<sup>1</sup> is commonly defined by chronological age. Global governance institutions such as the UN and ILO conventionally use the age category 15 to 24 years. Ghana's National Youth policy defines the youth as persons aged from 15 to 35 years, a definition that is consistent with the Africa Youth Charter.<sup>2</sup>

These differences in definition are important to note because they affect interpretation of research findings and statistics related to the youth. With specific reference to this paper focusing on university students, un/employment statistics of young people in the 15 to 24 age range may not be entirely relevant. For this reason, and also because our attention is on Ghanaian youth, we will use the 15 to 35 age range in our discussions. (When citing from documents that use other age definitions, we will make this explicit).

## **Young People and Employment**

The policy discourse on young people globally and on the continent are often focus on the question of employment. The African Youth Charter has 'education and employment' as one of its three thematic areas (UNECA 2009). At a national level, a recent study on policy narratives in five African countries indicated that the un/employment was one of the main threads of policy narratives about young people (Anyidoho et. al. 2011). The situation on the continent mirrors what is happening in globally; the World Program of Action for Youth also identifying 'employment' as a priority area and institutions such as the ILO and the World Bank also speak to the urgency of youth unemployment in their various reports (see the 2007 World Bank Report and the ILO 2010 report on *Global Youth Employment Trends*). It is indicative that the MGD's sole mention of young people specifically is in reference to employment: Goal 1 on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger specifically mentions young people under Target 1B: "Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people".

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<sup>1</sup>We are aware that the UN uses the term 'young people' to refer to the age range 10-19 years although it is also used to refer to both children and the 'youth' (te Lintelo 2011), but in this paper, we use 'youth' and 'young people' synonymously in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Again, the National Youth Council (n.d.) attempts a culture-based rationalization for the age bracket (15 to 35 years) by stating, 'The process of socialization really begins at 15 [and] Ghanaians tend to assume full adult responsibility at 35'.

There are compelling reasons for the increased attention on young people's employment situation and prospects. The first is the sheer numbers of young people, especially on the African continent. UNECA/AUC (2010) figures indicate that 70 per cent of Africa's population is under the age of 30, with the figure being approximately 66% for Ghana in 2010.<sup>3</sup> In Ghana, persons aged 15 to 29 years made up 28% of the population in 2010.<sup>4</sup> A second reason that the policy attention to young people is warranted is the worrying unemployment rates for this social category, particularly in the wake of the recent economic crisis (ILO 2010). For sub-Saharan Africa, the crisis was preceded by at least three decades of 'jobless growth' in which employment creation failed to keep up with demand (Mkandawire & Soludo 1999). Young people the world over are more vulnerable to unemployment than older cohorts; in sub-Saharan Africa, young people are twice as likely as adults to be unemployed and are also less likely to be involved in decent work (ILO 2010). The reasons include would encompass the demographic context of large youth populations and growing youth labour participation (UNECA 2009, World Bank 2007). It is also a function of young people's relative disadvantage, compared to adults, in labour market experience; in the knowledge and resources needed to secure a new job or to change jobs; and in the ability hold on to work (Baah & Achamoka 2007, ILO 2010, UNECA 2009).

The ILO (2010) reports that, globally, youth labour force participate rates (that is, the percentage of young people between 15 and 24 years who are economically active, whether employed or unemployed) decreased from 53.8% to 50.9% between 2000 and 2010, primarily due to increasing at educational attainment which postpones labour force participation. Figures for sub-Saharan Africa go against this global trend, as the percentage of young people in the region entering the labour force annually is rising with an anticipated 2.2. million young people set to enter the labour force each year from 2011 to 2015 (ILO 2010). This is against the backdrop that labour force participation in sub-Saharan Africa was already the second highest of any region at 57.5% in 2010. At the same time, sub-Saharan Africa has recorded an improvement in employment-to-population ratio for young people by 33.3% between 1998 and 2008, the highest of any region, even while experiencing a growth of 31.4% of the youth population in the same period (ibid). While this statistic may appear positive on the surface, we need to question the

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<sup>3</sup> Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*. CD-ROM Edition.

<sup>4</sup> ibid.

underlying reason for both continued growth in the numbers of young people entering the labour force and their increased levels of employment. On balance, the available data suggest that young people in sub-Saharan Africa are compelled by economic need to forgo education and to enter the labour market (ibid).

For this paper focusing on Ghanaian university students, it is pertinent to talk about graduate employment and unemployment in the country. The challenge, however, is the lack of readily available data on the labour market in Ghana (Baah & Achakoma, 2007), which would include the employment situation of graduates. Recourse to data collected by international bodies such as the ILO is limited by the fact that the reference group for the youth is frequently persons between 15 to 24 years, an age range which would exclude a great number of university graduates whose entry into the job market is delayed. However, on the basis of data that is available, it has been argued that in developing countries, unemployment rises with increased education (UNECA 2009, World Bank 2007). There are indications that this is also true of Ghana (Baah-Boateng & Turkson, 2005). Anecdotally, the Association of Unemployed Graduate Students in Ghana have made news headlines a number of times, most recently in August 26, 2011 when it threatened to organize a public demonstration if government did not provide for unemployed graduates of tertiary/higher education.<sup>5</sup> While there was some bemusement about the existence of such an association of which very little public information is available except that it has a purported membership of 3,000<sup>6</sup>, it provides yet another opportunity for public discussion about what both policy makers and the public regard as a defining problem of young people.

In Ghana, the formal sector – the preferred sector of employment for university graduates (Baah 2007) – is shrinking to give place to an ever-expanding informal sector. It is estimated that the formal economy employs only 15% of the national workforce. By contrast, the informal economy employs 84.6% of the economically active population and, while there are no firm statistics, it is estimated that it contributes between 20% and 40% to Ghana's GDP (Appiah-Kubi 2007). A 2003 study suggested that the formal sector is able to take in only 2% of students

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<sup>5</sup> "Unemployed graduates threaten demo for jobs" (August 26, 2011). Retrieved on 27 August 2011 from <http://www.modernghana.com/news/347277/1/unemployed-graduates-threaten-demo-for-jobs.html>

<sup>6</sup> See 'Funny GH: Unemployed Graduates' Association', a commentary by journalist Ato Kwamena Dadzie which lists the association under 'strange groupings in Ghana'. Responses to the web posting is also informative, running the gamut of those ridiculing the association to those defending its existence and mandate. Retrieved on 27 August 2011 from <http://www.atokd.com/blogContent.aspx?blogID=409>

graduating each year from universities and other tertiary institutions (Baah-Boateng 2003). If the formal sector continues to contract in both size and economic contribution, young people may opt out of the labour market altogether (see ILO 2010) or turn to employment in the informal sector which has higher incidences of poverty (43.8%) relative to the formal sector (19.3%) (GSS 2007), and is further characterised by insecurity of income and livelihood. It is also likely that, rather than go into the informal sector, graduates might opt out of the labour force altogether, at least for a period. In fact, reasons given for high graduate unemployment rates in Ghana include discrimination in the kind of work that graduates are willing to accept (Baah-Boateng and Turkson 2005). This has been called the 'educated youth hypothesis' which is the phenomenon of young educated persons choosing to stay home, unemployed, if they are not able to obtain their preferred work (UNECA 2009).

### **Young People, Employment and Development**

The Africa Youth Report reports a shift in the policy orientation of African governments to acknowledging 'the centrality of youth issues in the development agenda' and perceiving young people not as a 'problem' but as part of the 'solution' (UNECA 2009:7). Given their numbers, and the energy and creativity of young people, policymakers recognise the need to tap the potential of young people for national development; in this cause, the engagement of young persons in productive work becomes important. Ghana's 2010 National Youth Policy has the introductory statement, 'The youth are a valuable resource and they must be harnessed for development' (MYS 2010:1), and goes on to identify unemployment as 'a major development challenge' (MYS 2010:11). Moreover, national development plan - the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA) - stresses the need to create employment for young people as part of its general concern with mobilising young people for national development (NDPC 2007).

The potentially negative consequence on personal and national development of having young people who are unable to find productive work to do is another motivation for policymakers. The inability of young people to obtain decent work early may affect future prospects of finding full and productive employment later in life (ILO 2010), partly because of increasing difficulty in moving from low-skilled to better jobs, particularly if one wishes to move from the informal to the formal economy (Curtain 2001). There are also social hazards associated with unemployed or underemployed youth; Ghana's National Youth Policy makes

dire predictions of deviant behaviour of young people who are not engaged in productive activity, which behaviours include drug abuse, criminality and violence (MYS 2010).

The Africa Youth Report states that underemployment and working poverty 'are...greater challenges in Africa than unemployment itself' (UNECA 2009:17). This means that that we should be concerned not simply in young people finding employment but also about the nature of the work they do, and its personal and national impacts. Young people are more vulnerable to 'decent work deficits'; they are less likely than adults to engage in full and productive work under acceptable conditions (ILO 2009, World Bank 2007). We may delve even further to into the *meaning* of work for young people. We can ask: What does employment represent for young people; what rewards (intrinsic and material) do they expect work to bring them? What kind of reward primarily motivates them? We can also pose questions about young people's perception of the job market and of their own prospects for finding work. What informs these perceptions and are they based in an accurate reading of the job situation? What do young people perceive as the supports and constraints in the job market?

A parallel rationale for bringing out the voices of young people can be found in the paradigm-shift poverty research and policymaking of which the World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' study was an indication and to which it contributed. The 50-country study consulted about 60,000 poor people all over the world and contributed to the understanding that, beyond the objective measure of income, poverty is a social, psychological/phenomenological phenomenon. In this paper, we are arguing similarly that, as a social category of importance to development, young people deserve a deeper exploration of their lived realities. While the normative aim of inclusion is sufficient reason for such research, the insights gained will additionally inform policy discourse and policy interventions.

### **Research Design and Methods**

This paper is based on the first phase of a three-year research study on university students' occupational aspirations which examines the content of and influences on aspirations, and the academic and life choices that derive from these.

A sample of 85 undergraduate students of the University of Ghana took part in 12 focus group discussions and in a survey. The population from which the sample was chosen was undergraduates of Ghanaian nationality pursuing 4-year degree programs at the University of

Ghana and in the Faculties of Social Studies and Arts, and the Sciences.<sup>7</sup> The sample was purposively selected from all four years of undergraduate programming, and across the faculties of the university. The focus groups were formed around both year in school ('level') and y faculty (Humanities and the Sciences); thus 2 focus groups was organised for each year or level for the Humanities (that is, Social Studies and Arts) and one each for the first to fourth year students in the Sciences.

In this non-random sampling, a conscious effort was made to obtain diversity in terms of disciplines, genders, income and family backgrounds. This was done first by the ways in which the net was cast for volunteers; research assistants physically went to different faculties to solicit the participation of students. Out of the large pool of students who indicated their willingness to participate in the study, we purposefully selected participants in such a way as to maximize diversity. The average age of the sample was 21.9 years, with a range of 18 to 34 years. Across the focus groups, there were 29 female and 56 males students.

Data was collected in March and April 2011 through focus group discussions and a survey of focus group participants. Each focus group was facilitated by one or two of the three authors, using a prepared guideline, and with two research assistants to take notes. Each focus group was also recorded with the consent of participants.

The questionnaires, which was administered before each focus group session, collected demographic information from each participant as well as academic history (schools attended and courses taken at secondary school; subjects applied for in first year; subjects given; etc.) As well, we elicited responses about their preferred careers and the major considerations for that preference. The focus group discussions (FGD) were the avenue for gathering information about occupational aspirations and on their perception of the labour market.

We applied a number of techniques of qualitative analysis to the transcripts of the focus groups, field notes and researcher notes or memos. First, we undertook descriptive coding, ascribing a code to sections of the data field notes and researcher notes as an index of the data's content; for example, there were sections categorized under *what a career means*, *constraints to getting work*, etc. Sections with similar codes where then extracted and organized for further analysis during which we looked for themes. The themes were then grouped according to commonality, and super ordinate themes imposed. As much as possible, we used *in vivo* codes

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<sup>7</sup> This excluded then international students as well as those in programs that had irregular admissions procedures or unique schedules such as medical students.



that captured terms and phrases 'indigenous' to the participants and which would allow their voices and meanings to come through (see Saldana 2009).

The semi-structured interviews were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis (e.g. frequencies of males and females) and also to simple content analysis (e.g. word count).

## **Findings**

### **Aspirations**

The choices that people make and their eventual life outcomes are influenced by their aspirations. Despite its importance, noted that empirical studies on the aspirations of young people in Africa are rare and often dated (Leavy & Smith 2010).

Aspirations can be alternatively defined as dreams or hopes that are not necessarily tied to reality or as more or less realistic expectations towards which a person is planning (see Leavy & Smith 2010 for a review of the literature on aspirations). In our research study, we lean towards the latter conception of aspirations as 'a future goal in which an individual is willing to invest time, money and effort, based on the belief that individual assess opportunities, constraints and risks' (Sherwood 1989). However, in the focus groups, we did not attempt to restrict students to a narrow definition of aspirations since our interest, at this first stage of our study, was in exploring the range and types of aspirations young people held.

#### *Preferred occupations*

The specific occupations that students aspired to enter naturally varied according to programs, and our analysis did not yield any clear patterns, with one exception. One employment that cut across all academic programs (whether in the arts or sciences) was 'banking'. This finding merits discussion, first, because the ubiquity of this aspiration among young people is easily remarked even in cursory analysis of public discussions and is borne out by research: Baah's (2007) survey of students from more than six Ghanaian universities showed that by far the most preferred sector was the 'financial services and real estates'. More important for our paper is that the reasons given by students for this stated preference illuminates their perspectives.

In the first place, the aspiration to work in the banks has basis in the reality that the financial sector is fast growing. A survey of 376 enterprises in Ghana to determine private sector demand for young people in 2009 projected that the 'banking and other financial sectors' would

have the highest demand for labour (YEN & IYF 2009). A second reason for the preference for banking is a function of lack of information. There is generally a dearth of information about the job market and, as we have discussed, young people do not often have the experience or the resources to access whatever information is available. In such an environment, the opinions of peers and family, and cues picked up in social interactions, may have inordinate weight in decision-making. Students admitted being influenced by the many television spots advertising short courses and graduate degrees in business and finance, which signalled to them the availability and desirability of work in the financial sector. The final reason for the drift to banking relates to the characteristics of work that students considered important. We will revisit this point in the next section on work values.

*'Career' versus 'job'*

We move now to a broader discussion of the nature of employment students aspired to. In general, students wanted to have 'careers' and not 'jobs' or 'work'. A career was a long-term line of work in which one was interested, competent, and from which one could earn a sustained living. A career was of one's choosing; one was not compelled by others or by circumstances into a career. A career was to be 'achieved' and therefore required both intent, a plan and investment of time and money.

By contrast 'a job' or 'work' implied something that one did without necessarily having a liking for it or a commitment to staying in it permanently. One might fall into a job because it was available and 'for the money.' One might also be more purposeful about leveraging a job into a career.

The following excerpts are illustrative:

Grace: I think I agree with what they said because a work is what you find your hands to do but a career that is what you want to pursue.

[Focus Group 6, Level 300 Humanities, 8 April 2011]

Shadrack: I think...a job is something when you move out from the academia, what you meet, what you have been doing or the opportunity you meet.

...

I: Ok so a job is something that you've been offered but is not necessarily what you want to do. How many of you agree with that definition?

[all agreed with Shadrack's definition of a job]

Stephen: To buttress what he said. I think with a career, a career goes with all the factors we raised up here like passion, that drive for it, the future that you want to have; but with job, it doesn't really, it doesn't really come with all those factors. It comes like, it meets you, okay, what to do to eat.

[Focus Group 12, Level 400 Sciences, 14 April 2011]

Thomas: Now if you are embarking on anything that will bring you money, that is a job. That may not be a career, what you really want to do. Career is what you really want to do, what you are planning to achieve at the end of everything. But job, anything that fetch you money -- at the moment you are having a job but that is not really your-- what you aspire to do.

[Focus Group 5, Level 300 Humanities, 7 April 2011]

Male S3: I think besides making a living out of the career, for me or in my opinion I think fulfilment would come to play because besides having things for myself I would like to engage in something that would make me kind of fulfilled, fulfil my (heart and purpose?) and I would like to perhaps make an impact on the generation I'm in.

[Focus Group 2, Level 100 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

Ebenezer: Someone who has a career is a person-- the thing he is doing he is interested in it and wants to move ahead so that they improve upon it. But a job is like a temporary something, if that person wishes he would end it and move to other different thing.

[Focus Group 3, Level 200 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

To the question of whether the majority of Ghanaians, and of university graduates had had 'jobs' or 'careers', students' were unequivocal in their responses - 'jobs':

Chris: I don't think people have careers because some people just want to get money so anything they find around to do to get money, they get to it. So they don't actually like what they are doing, they are not interested... Yes, that's why there is some kind of foul play around the work ...they just want the money.

[Focus Group 1, Level 100 Humanities, 31 March 2011]

To a further question of what they aspired to, students' stated that they wanted to have, and expected to achieve, careers. However, most students planned to look for a 'job' on their initial entry into the job market, even if it had no relation to the eventual career that they wanted to have. Going by their own definitions of a job, they said that they would look mainly at the money that they would get, putting aside all the other considerations they had raised in their discussions of career.

The disconnect between their stated end goal of a career and their plan to look concentrate on making money is a function of the constraints that young people experienced or anticipated in attempting to embark on a career, which we will discuss more fully later in the paper.

## **Work Values**

Work values – 'the importance one places on d potentially have an various characteristics and rewards of employment' (Wray-Lake et al. 2010) -- influence student occupational aspirations.

In our study, analysis of work values was based on both the focus group and from the survey. In the focus groups, students discussed the meaning of 'career' and also responded to the question, 'What are the most important considerations when choosing a career?' Responses to similar questions in the questionnaire were also analysed.

The following characteristics of work were most prominent in the FGDs and surveys:

- an 'interest' or 'passion' for the work, which would lead to a 'fulfilment', 'satisfaction' and 'happiness'
- 'income' or 'money' - this referred to the capacity of the career to provide one with a good living, which is a matter of amount of income sustainable and secure over time
- 'job security' and 'stability'
- 'skill' or 'ability' - a competence in that work, derived from innate ability or talent, as well as from education and training
- room to 'grow, 'develop' professionally
- 'positive impact' on society
- 'prestige' and 'status'

In this list, the personal rewards that came from work were balanced out by other considerations that did not have to do with compensation. Moreover, even when considering compensation, students mentioned both intrinsic (fulfilment, prestige) and extrinsic (money) rewards. This is a balanced perspective on work which contains echoes of the concept of 'decent work'<sup>8</sup> in that it addresses both material and intangible rewards, as well as conditions under which work is done. However, this set of desired work attributes transcends 'decent work' with the added considerations that work can/should be emotionally and psychological fulfilling and should positively impact others and society at large.

Surprisingly, however, when students were further asked in the focus groups to identify examples good 'careers' (the list of which invariably included banking and medicine, and frequently law), and to explain their choice of illustrations, 'money' was the most frequently mentioned reasons, alongside prestige, status and job and income stability. Finally, when it came to looking for a 'job' or 'work', soon after school, students were more straightforward in baldly stating that money was paramount, almost to the exclusion of all else.

What accounts for the disparity in the relative weight assigned to money in different sections of the focus group discussions? It may partly be the difference between the ideal and the reality of how students make choices; it may be that the ideals have no practical bearing on the pragmatics of decision-making because they are not strongly held. A second possibility may be that students are challenged by the exigencies of life and the vagaries of the job market that do not allow them to be fully expressive of their aspirations.

The second explanation is relevant to another disparity already discussed - students' long-term aspiration to have a 'career' versus their immediate intent to find a 'job'. This is an example of pragmatic decision making based on perceived obstacles to one's goal. Students explained that, while they aspired to a career, they were aware of the following constraints: first, the possible unavailability of their preferred work; second, their lack of qualifications to immediately embark on a career (which was often the result of either not being admitted into a relevant academic program); third, the immediate need to make money to earn a living and to

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<sup>8</sup> The ILO (1999) defines decent work as "productive work for men and women in conditions of freedom, equity security and human dignity. Decent work involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income; provides security in the workplace and social protection for workers and their families; offers better prospects for personal development and encourages social integration; gives people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives; and guarantees equal opportunities and equal treatment for all."

fund one's career through further training. These constraints are illustrated in the following quotes:

Lawrencia: Yes. And it is because I'll love to get the money safe and then use it to develop something in the future, something that I love to do so I think for me I will go in for the money and then the job-earning one and then later on...

I: So take the money to free yourself off later on to make choices you want?

Lawrencia: Yes.

[Focus Group 12, Level 400 Sciences, 14 April 2011]

Selasie: Me like I don't believe...I am not really planning to have the job that I want to do after school. Yes like I want to go into Law ok and then, I want to be a Journalist too... So I am not really concerned about the job I get after here. After the university, it's just like a stepping stone...so any job will do.

I: Got ya. The rest of you were you thinking about job that you're pretty happy with or just any job at all? Any job--

Betty: Any job, I am happy with.

[FGD 3, Level 200 Humanities, 1 April]

In summary, students recognised a number of different characteristics that were desirable in regards to work. However, when faced with the structural and personal constraints, their work values contracted down to money, at least in the short term.

## **Perceptions**

### *Perception of employment opportunities*

We have discussed the bleak picture for graduate employment in Ghana, with a shrinking formal sector incapable of absorbing the graduates from university every year. How did young people perceive the job market in terms of work opportunities?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that used the formal sector as their frame of reference for their discussions of the job market which is the preferred employment destination of university students. Baah's (2007) survey findings are that 81% of surveyed university students had a preference for employment in the formal sector.

Students had mixed feelings about their prospects on the job market. They showed some awareness of a rate of unemployment, especially for graduate students. In one focus group, a first year student stated baldly 'There is no job at all!' and announced his intention to start his own business. However, most students were less pessimistic about finding a job; if they evinced any anxiety, it was less about the availability of employment than about whether they find work the right work and quickly.

I: Do you generally think that there are jobs outside there? How do you feel about your prospect of getting a job?

Female S2: I think there jobs out there but it's limited and then the university also doesn't prepare us for the job market. I think we only deal with the theory and...it's all about books. We can't really get to know how it is outside. So there are jobs out there but the people or the companies don't *trust* we can do it. (They think it's only about?) books, you don't have the practical---

I: Showing of hands, how many of you feel positive there are jobs out there, I can get a job....?

*[all 6 students raise their hands]*

[Focus Group 2, Level 100 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

I: How many of you are confident that you'll get a job that you can live with, you are ok? *[Seven out of the eight students raise their hands]*. So you are not sure that you'll get the job that you really really want but you can get a job?

Elizabeth: Yes

Dr: So that means you don't think it is too bad out there?...

Selasie: I know this, that for graduates, I think the main problem is what they actually want to do, you understand? For instance, someone wants to be bank manager and the person is waiting to get that job immediately he finishes school. So even if you tell the person, 'Just teach, try supporting yourself before you find other avenues', the person will not take it; he will say that 'But ah me paa, after my university degree I should do something [like this]?' That is the more reason why people complain that after university they don't get any job to do--

Dr: So it is not that the jobs are not available--

Selasie: Yeah, there are jobs available but they don't think that their degree goes in line with such a job.

[Focus Group 3, Level 200 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

This thinking was one reason why students stated that, while they would aspire to pursue a career, they would nonetheless focus on finding a job in their first few years in the labour market: They were not confident of finding preferred work, and so they would do whatever was available for the time being. The general belief was that one could find a job if one really wanted it; if some graduates stayed unemployed for months and years, it was because they were unwilling to take up available work. In other words, as the second sets of quote above indicate, students supported the 'educated youth hypothesis' (UNECA 2009) that suggests that more unemployed youth might be more successful at finding jobs if they were less discriminating.

It would seem that students were positive about finding a 'job' after school, even if it was not related to their preferred career. It is difficult to determine where their confidence is misplaced, and whether indeed graduates people do find jobs when they set their sights lower. We do not, after all, have national employment data on graduate employment that can be used as a frame of reference. It is telling, however, that in Baah's (2007) survey, 50% of respondents' expected to get a job within 3 months (74% within six months). Juxtaposing Baah's finding against the finding that, in developing countries, it takes young people more than a year after school to find a stable job (Fares, Montenegro and Orazem 2006, cited in World Bank 2007), we may deduce that students might have a distorted perception of their employment prospects. This would mean then that they will not be able to prepare adequately while in school and when they enter the job market.

#### *Perception of helping factors*

An important question is the factors that students think are important in securing employment, whether in terms of a 'job' or in line with one's preferred 'career'. The three major helping factors, across all 12 focus groups, for finding gaining employment were *personal relationships ('who you know')*; *additional skills and knowledge ('added value')*; *practical skills and experience*; and *'personality'* which signified a cocktail of personal attributes.

Students were almost unanimous about the importance of personal relationships and social networks, or 'who you know', in securing employment (see also Baah 2007, Chant & Jones 2005). The phrase 'who you know' embraced relationships from family, to friends, to acquaintances across variety of settings including at school, seminars, internships, and so on.



Through animated (and often voluble) discussions, students tried to delineate why, when, where and how the phenomenon work, and under which circumstances it could be considered natural and not wrong and undesirable.

In order to explain the operation of 'who-you-know', we must first explain that students perceived the process of getting jobs in four generic stages:

- finding out about available work
- being under consideration
- being shortlisted for an interview
- being offered the job

According to our participants, at its most innocuous, the influence of personal contacts diminished in the course of the job search process. In other words, 'who you know' would be important for gaining information about potential work opportunities or bringing one to the notice of employers for consideration. However, the importance of personal contacts would diminish at the third stage in favour of relevant skills and experiences. At the interview stage, at which presumably a final decision is made, the attributes subsumed under 'personality' become most dominant. In this scenario, 'who you know' did not work unilaterally and was not always the most important factor and that its impact was mediated by other factors such as grades and 'personality'.

Students said 'who you know' was a pervasive problem that needed to be corrected when it was exclusionary and directly deterministic who got a job offer.

Fali: I know a highly reputed bank in Accra here, it is a very good bank and I am pursuing some voluntary work there so at least I know some people. When you talk to the very few honest ones, 'How did you get in here?' "Yeah, I schooled in London and my daddy knows the boss' and that's all it is...They are very nice people but getting there is very, very difficult and that is why I realized that you can even write application and they'll never open the letter; they just go and throw everything away. In that case, you have to know somebody before you get there; everybody knew somebody before they got there.

[Focus Group 7, Level 400 Humanities, 8 April 2011]

Abu: You see, those of us who do social sciences, usually we are at a disadvantage because if a bank is hiring, we, should I say, I believe we are the last people they consider after taking the business people, the banking people, we are the people they'll consider last. So you'll

find out that not many of us would have the 'who you know', that opportunity to get into banking like in other courses.

[Focus Group 8, Level 400 Humanities, 9 April 2011]

Second to 'who you know' in influence was additional skills and knowledge that one could acquire while still in school or after graduation - what students termed 'added value'. Students perceived the competition for work as being keen, and taking for granted that many job applicants would have a good first degree, it was important to distinguish one's self from the pack. A second reason for acquiring additional skills was the understanding that employers wanted students who had generic skills for the current work environment. Therefore students spoke about the need to computer and ICT skills and to learn a language. Adding value could even extend to taking a further certification or degree.

I: Ok great. Some people go out for jobs they seem to get it; some people seem to struggle a bit more, what do you think make the difference? What makes people able get jobs and then other people have a harder time?

Female S2: I think when you go to the interview they look at personality, how you are able to present yourself and then maybe your eloquence. Then, coming to academics, aside maybe your first degree what you have added to it--

I: Like?

Female S2: Like professional courses or even your masters, something else to--

[Focus Group 2, Level 200 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

Fali: Everybody wants to work in the bank because we all have the perception that banks pay and all that. So me for instance, I am doing an external course, business related so I can get a job in bank or insurance company.

[Focus Group 7, Level 400 Humanities, 8 April 2011]

Thirdly, students spoke of 'ability' and 'practical' skills. There was a general dissatisfaction with the university curriculum which students complained was just 'theory'. Thus, a student could come out with a first class and not be fit for the job market. What mattered more to employers, they believed, was competence. This was a function of both relevant training and work experience, such as student might gain through internships and attachments.

Female S1: ---'cause I think two people would do economics one would have the first class but the person may not have the abilities to do the work...

...

Male S1: Yeah, to add to what my sister said it is true because there is now the general perception that people who come out with first class are book worms. All they know is books and they leave the other part of their social life, just because of books. So there is some kind of perception in most employers that people who come out with first class are not likely the best to fit certain positions in the company...

[Focus Group 2, Level 100 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

Stephen: If you are in school for instance as we are now and you are all academic, academic, academic, you might end up with a first class but then you'll be unskilled even though you are...you are skilled mentally, you'll be unskilled practically

Dr: Yes

Shadrack: But the companies of today are not looking for people who can talk, they are looking for people who can work, people who have seen it being done before and they can replicate it.

[Focus Group 12, Level 400 Sciences, 14 April 2011]

Finally, students were agreed that 'personality' also mattered. This was regarded as a set of both innate and learned personal attributes and included confidence, eloquence, social skills, breadth of knowledge, intelligence and learning aptitude.

Joshua: And also I think presentation counts. A lot of people have the ability to do something but you see them and you don't see the ability in them. The way they project themselves, doesn't project a person who can do what he's saying what he can do. Sometimes, I think it also does come to. Because a lot of who these days, those people who get these jobs, are the ones who is brave, who is open, who is --

Jennifer: Who can talk.

[Focus Group 1, Level 100 Humanities, 31 March 2011]

In summary, students agreed that the 'who you know' factor could not be discounted, first, because it existed everywhere ('except in heaven', as one student stated) and was an

effective means of entering into the job market for new graduates. However, students differed on the pervasiveness and the exact of operation of 'who you know' and their varied perspectives can their outlook and their choices regarding employment.

Based on the consensus of the ubiquity of 'who you know', in all the focus groups students stressed the importance of 'making friends' and 'establishing links' in university, as a way of increasing their probability of finding work in the future. Some students went so far as to say that this was the primary value of their university education, to have contacts that would be useful to them in the future in terms of work and other opportunities.

However, there were some students who believed that the 'external' factor of social contacts was so pervasive and strong as to overshadow all other considerations. Such students might be discouraged in their job search or might opt out of the system, as a few students threatened.

Other students (admittedly in the minority) stated their conviction that in the current job market, the influence of social contacts was diminishing, and particularly within the formal, private sector where the majority of students aspired to find work. Such students, believing that their own achievements and efforts had greater influence on their life outcomes, might be more encouraged to pursue avenues of self-development.

Given the salience of social contacts as a leverage for employment in this study as well as in others (e.g. Chant & Jones 2007, Baah 2007), it merits further study in terms of the nature of its operation and its influence.

#### *Perception of constraints*

The focus groups specifically discussed the constraints to making a 'career', such as all students claimed to aspire to. The most frequently mentioned source of constraints were choice of program or, more accurately, the lack of choice. Across the focus groups (and corroborated in responses to the individual questionnaires) it was uncommon to have a student who was doing a course they had originally chosen in applying to the university. For a variety of reason (bad grades; high levels of competition for spots in selected courses; restrictions placed by the university on certain course combinations), the huge majority of students were doing courses that were not of their choosing, and for some of them, this compromised their ability to embark on a career.

I always want to work for myself so I study Elective Maths, Business. I'm thinking that I will get to university and do Accountancy, something to help me...but you know the English...wasn't strong so I was given something that I don't feel like--yeah, something I don't feel like, something that deprive me from my business I want to do.

[Focus Group 1, Level 100 Humanities, 31 March 2011]

Male S3: It's like the education system here in Ghana is kind of limiting our career choice so if you want to engage in one particular course because you didn't make the grade point you wouldn't be given the chance to offer that particular course so we are being limited in the choice--But I have not considered, I don't know about foreign lands and other countries how they do theirs.

[Focus Group 2, Level 100 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

There was the further perception by students that those in the Sciences and so-called professional courses in the Social Sciences (business, law, nursing, medicine) had an advantage in terms of finding work and even starting a career because they would leave university marketable skills, compared to students in the Social Sciences.

Richard: In Ghana now most people that have career are the doctors, the nurses, probably the business sector. Those who are doing accounting go straight into the banking sector the accounting aspect; those who do maths, stats go straight into the statistical system of the country. Those are the people that have careers but people like those who do a course like social work on campus and they end up in the bank, I see it to be like work. It's because...you didn't build it up.

[Focus Group 6, Level 300 Humanities, 8 April 2011]

Dissatisfaction with the programs being offered feeds into a related complaint about the content of their education being too 'theory-based' as opposed to practical. It is worth noting that this complaints came from Science and 'professional' students as well as from the Humanities.

Stephen: From the beginning I was saying that you may be a graduate from the premier university with a first class ok but then the skills, the requisite skills to work, that technical skills

are not there so you must end up being knowledgeable with the theory but the practical aspect is not there.

[Focus Group 12, Level 400 Sciences, 14 April 2011]

The second set of constraints was the lack of time and resources to build up a career. Students felt that, since a career was a process of building on one's knowledge and skills, it required further training and education beyond the first degree, which for many students implied financial and other resources. Not having such resources, therefore, would be a constraint to their aspirations. This would be one reason, as has been discussed, why students choose 'a job' over 'a career' initially, in order to finance their hoped-for careers.

Thirdly, students felt that a lack of knowledge of the possibility of having a career, or how to go about pursuing a career, was a big barrier and was one explanation for their assertion that the majority of Ghanaians, and the majority of graduates, did not have careers.

Nana: I think people who are able to figure out what they want in life at the very early stage are the people who normally have careers. Because the aim at their target but jobs it's like you are uncertain so maybe within the job then you get, so I think that those who are able to find out at a very early stage are those who normally have careers.

...

Alex: And also if you find yourself in an environment whereby you would be helped to discover your career it will help you to streamline you into career. But when you are in an environment where they don't care about what you do in future you would really find it difficult.

...

Elias: Some people don't have that focus probably because they haven't been introduced to the concept of career versus job so they don't even know that they should actually pursue a particular direction of work. Probably they are just looking for money, they have not thought about the fact that they should concentrate on a particular line of work. I think that is more likely for a lot of people.

[Focus Group 3, Level 200 Humanities, 1 April 2011]

## **Implications**

Our paper presents some implications for national policy in terms of job creation and more effective efforts to absorb young people into decent work, but these are discussed effectively in some of the research cited in this paper. I will limit my recommendation therefore to the immediate research and institutional policy implications of our findings.

Each of our findings raise further questions for research. A promising area of research is to track the academic career of young people to see how the academic choices they make (however limited) are influenced by their aspirations. Related to that is the need to better understand, generally, the influences on student occupational aspirations. Another area in urgent need of research is the job search process for young people; how in actuality do young people go about looking for work and what factors make them more or less successful. This could be done in a tracking study of young people as they leave university and enter the labour market. Universities themselves are equipped to carry out research some of this research on their student population.

Policies and programmes that rightly attend to young people should be informed by an understanding of young people's lived realities and aspirations which studies such as ours provide. We present a few recommendations that immediately arise from our findings. First, it is clear that students feel constrained by program selection. This is a structural problem for which a solution is not immediately obvious; demand for higher education is very high, public universities are over-populated and certain programs are over subscribed. The restrictions on course choices are part of the universities' strategies to contain the numbers of students and to ensure somewhat even distribution across programs. However, the university can do more to make them aware of the possibilities of their new fields and to educate them with knowledge and skills that will make them able to operate in those fields. We are talking here both about the content of the curriculum and a more concerted effort at academic and career guidance. Students called for a restructuring of the curriculum to make it more relevant to the requirements of the work world, including introduction of courses in 'entrepreneurship' and seminars on job choice and search. Students also complained the academic and career counselling was sorely lacking, both at the beginning of and during their tenure at the university. These are a few ways in which universities can be more effective at supporting young people to prepare for the labour market while they are still in school.

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