

Employers' Perception About Employability of Graduates of The Free Senior High School Programme in Ghana.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates employer perceptions of the employability of graduates from Ghana's Free Senior High School (SHS) program, which was introduced in 2017 to promote access, equity, and inclusion in secondary education. Although enrollment has increased, persistent concerns remain regarding teaching quality and graduate preparedness. Drawing on the Skills Mismatch Theory, the research assesses whether Free SHS graduates possess the skills and attitudes that employers require. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 30 employers across six regions in Ghana, and data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Findings indicate that while graduates demonstrate basic skills such as literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology (ICT), they lack essential employability attributes, including critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, leadership, and discipline. Employers reported a significant skills gap and insufficient practical experience, underscoring a misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market demands. Nevertheless, employers expressed willingness to hire graduates if provided with structured internships, mentorship, and vocational training. The study concludes that the existing skills mismatch impedes employability and calls for urgent curriculum reforms, including the integration of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), the development of soft skills, and enhanced collaboration between industry and educational institutions. This research contributes to the discourse on aligning education with employment in developing economies and offers policy recommendations to strengthen Ghana's Free SHS program. It advocates a transition from theory-based to experiential, competency-based, and job-oriented learning to improve employability and support national productivity.

Keywords: employers' perceptions, employability, Free Senior High School, skills mismatch, Ghana, vocational education, curriculum reform.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as a critical driver of socioeconomic progress and the development of human capital. In Ghana, the introduction of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) Policy in 2017 represented a major initiative to increase access to secondary education by eliminating financial barriers for students (Ministry of Education, 2018). The policy aims to expand educational opportunities, promote equity, and improve employment prospects for Ghanaian youth (Wahid, 2024). Following its implementation, enrollment rates have increased substantially, and the policy has been commended for enhancing participation and reducing disparities among socioeconomic groups (Ananga & Osei, 2020). The central objective of the policy is to provide equitable and inclusive education, thereby equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and competencies required for higher education or gainful employment.

Although the policy has effectively expanded access, concerns persist regarding its impact on educational quality, student discipline, and the preparedness of graduates for employment (Akyeampong, 2021). Employers play a pivotal role in evaluating graduates' skills and work readiness, and their perspectives significantly influence hiring decisions, skill development policies, and the perceived credibility of the program. Consequently, understanding employers' viewpoints is essential for assessing whether the policy has fulfilled its human capital objectives and for identifying gaps between educational outcomes and labor market needs.

(Boateng & Adjei, 2022).

Despite the increased access to secondary education provided by the Free SHS Policy in Ghana, questions remain regarding the employment readiness of its graduates. Employers have reported varied experiences concerning the competence, discipline, and productivity of young employees from the Free SHS system (Akyeampong, 2021). Some stakeholders argue that the rapid enrollment growth has strained educational resources, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and a decline in instructional quality (Wahid & Loveline, 2024). Consequently, a significant proportion of graduates may lack the soft skills and technical expertise required by employers in a competitive labor market.

Despite these issues, empirical research on employers' perceptions and experiences with graduates of Ghana's Free SHS program remains limited. In the absence of robust evidence, policymakers risk making decisions based on assumptions that may not accurately represent workplace realities. This study seeks to examine employers' perspectives on the employability skills, work attitudes, and job performance of Free SHS graduates. Such insights are expected to inform reforms that align educational outcomes more closely with labor market requirements and sustainable development objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This provides a comprehensive review of existing academic literature regarding employers' perceptions and graduate employability in Ghana. It specifically explores the theoretical foundations, as well as the conceptual and empirical contributions made by previous scholars on this subject.

2.1 Conceptual and Empirical Review

Employer perception refers to the views, expectations, and judgments held by hiring managers and organizations about job applicants, employees, and overall workforce readiness (Jackson & Wilton, 2023). These perceptions significantly shape recruitment decisions, workplace dynamics, and career advancement opportunities. When evaluating candidates, employers mainly focus on skills and qualifications.

The expanding young population and rising gross enrollment rates, driven by free secondary education policies, have major implications for youth employment in Ghana. The increase in access to free secondary schooling affects both the supply and demand sides of the labor market, impacting employment and labor outcomes. On the supply side, higher enrollment creates a larger pool of skilled labor. On the demand side, employers may modify their recruitment strategies to meet changing skill needs, thus influencing employment trends. Ultimately, employers' perceptions of the quality of education under the free secondary system impact their hiring decisions.

Graduate employability refers to the ability of graduates to secure employment and advance in their careers, encompassing job security and career growth within their chosen field (Tymon, 2020). It also encompasses vital skills, knowledge, and personal attributes valued by employers, which facilitate a smooth transition into the labor market (Jackson, 2019). In this study, graduate employability is broadly defined as the ability of graduates to secure meaningful employment by applying a range of skills, including both hard and soft skills, as well as problem-solving abilities. It reflects the skills, knowledge, and practical experiences gained through education and training, indicating how well-prepared graduates are for the labor market and their ability to pursue career goals.

Amponsah (2023) investigated employer perceptions of the skills, attitudes, and employability of Free SHS graduates. The study assessed how well graduates meet employer expectations and identified areas needing improvement. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving surveys of 100 employers and follow-up focus group discussions. Employers from the education, retail, and construction sectors in the Volta and Eastern regions participated. Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS, while qualitative insights emerged through thematic coding. Results showed that employers view graduates as possessing basic academic knowledge but lacking critical soft skills, such as teamwork, initiative, and adaptability. Many employers noted that graduates require

substantial on-the-job training to reach productivity levels, with perceptions varying by sector. Employers in education were more positive than those in retail and construction, who highlighted gaps in practical skills.

The study concluded that enhancing the employability of Free SHS graduates requires curriculum enhancements and adjustments in teaching methods to develop essential employability skills. A limitation was that the research covered only two regions, restricting its broader applicability. My study addresses this by sampling a more diverse group of employers across more regions, enabling wider generalizations and offering more robust empirical insights into employer perceptions and their impact on graduate employment.

Boateng and Aidoo (2020) examined how the Free SHS policy has influenced employers' views on graduate employability. Their aims included identifying employer expectations and assessing whether graduates meet these standards. The study used a cross-sectional survey of 200 employers from the manufacturing and service sectors in Kumasi and Accra. Data collection involved the use of structured questionnaires, with analysis conducted through descriptive statistics and chi-square tests.

Findings indicated that, although employers appreciated the increased access to education due to Free SHS, many believed graduates still lacked essential job skills. Specific shortcomings included communication, digital literacy, and practical experience. Perceptions varied across industries, with service sector employers generally rating graduates more favorably than those in the manufacturing sector. Overall, the study highlights that Free SHS graduates face challenges in meeting employer standards, emphasizing the need to revise curricula to enhance both practical and soft skills. A notable research gap is how employer perceptions vary by location and industry. This study aims to fill that gap by examining perceptions across different sectors and regions, thereby helping to identify contextual factors that affect graduate employability and informing targeted policy development.

2.2 The Skills Mismatch Theory

The Skills Mismatch Theory, introduced by Richard Freeman in the late 1970s and early 1980s, posits that mismatches can occur between the skills acquired through education and those demanded by employers in the job market. This theory provides a crucial framework for examining the alignment between educational outcomes and labor market demands. In Ghana's Free Senior High School (SHS) policy context, it plays a crucial role in evaluating whether graduates possess the necessary skills for employment. Mismatches may involve cognitive, technical, or soft skills and can prevent graduates from finding jobs or succeeding in their careers (Sánchez-Sánchez, McGuinness, & Connell, 2019).

The theory identifies various types of skills mismatches: qualitative mismatches (differences in the level or type of skills), quantitative mismatches (an excess or shortage of skilled workers), and spatial mismatches (a disconnect between job locations and where job seekers live) (International Labour Organization, 2014).

The Free SHS policy in Ghana has dramatically expanded access to secondary education. Nonetheless, a key question remains: Does this increased access lead to the development of relevant skills? The Skills Mismatch Theory encourages examining whether the curriculum and teaching methods align with the skills needed in the job market (Adu-Gyimah et al., 2019). According to this theory, qualitative skills mismatches, such as a mismatch in the level or type of skills, are especially important. Assessing whether Free SHS graduates possess the skills required by employers across various industries can reveal the policy's effectiveness in addressing these skill mismatches. The theory underscores the importance of understanding employer expectations. Gathering employer opinions on the skills of Free SHS graduates and how well they meet industry needs is essential (Boateng & Gyimah, 2021). Additionally, since different industries demand specific skills, it is crucial to explore whether graduates from various disciplines possess industry-specific skills that improve their job prospects. Analyzing employer feedback on whether the skills gained through the Free SHS program match job requirements is therefore vital (Boateng & Gyimah, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Initially, the study used stratified random sampling at the regional level. Ghana's diverse geography and

socioeconomic differences prompted the division of the country into three zones: Northern, Forest, and Coastal. This stratification ensured proportional representation from each zone, improving the generalizability of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). From a pre-defined list of potential regions, two regions were randomly chosen from each zone, totaling six regions. This stratified random selection helped reduce bias and increased the chance of capturing the varied educational contexts across Ghana. The selected regions from each zone are:

1. Northern Zone: Northern Region and Upper West Region
2. Forest Zone: Ashanti Region and Bono Region
3. Coastal Zone: Central Region and Greater Accra Region

A purposive sampling method was employed to select five employers from each of the chosen regions, resulting in a total of thirty employers who have hired graduates under the free senior high school policy. These employers were interviewed to gather their insights and opinions on graduate employability skills, job readiness, and personal attributes. This approach helped assess whether the curriculum effectively aligns with industry needs and whether academic success correlates with access to job opportunities.

The interview proceedings were audio-recorded and systematically analyzed by noting patterns, themes, and subthemes aligned with the research goal. The decision to use a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was based on their flexibility, enabling the interviewer to modify questions to probe deeper and gather rich contextual information about the research problem. This approach also gave participants the freedom to openly share their views and perspectives without restrictions or predetermined response options, allowing the researcher to identify key themes, patterns, trends, and the relationships between main and subthemes. This comprehensive analysis facilitated the creation of a coherent report. The qualitative data collected from these interviews were presented and analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Results

This aims to explore in-depth insights into employers' perceptions of the employability of graduates from the free SHS program. Based on data gathered from interviews with employers, the following results have emerged.

Table 4.1: Themes, Subthemes, and Patterns Emerged (Employers' Perception)

Themes	Subthemes	Patterns Observed
Graduate readiness	Limited employability skills	Employers concern over skills gaps in critical thinking, real world problem-solving skills and etiquette
Employability skills	Foundational communication, teamwork, and numeracy skills	Though some skills are present but limited competences including leadership and workplace discipline
Learning agility & adaptability	Varied adaptability skills & need for structured training	Graduates grapple with independent judgement & decision-making
Employability prospects	Willing to hire but concerns over skills gaps	Employers are interested in graduates with practical experience
Employer consideration	Conditional employment	Role specific hiring preferences
Areas for Curriculum improvement	TVET, digital literacy skills, soft skills, hands-on work exposure,	This calls for reforms to align education with industry requirements.

Source: Interviews, 2025

Case 1: *“Based on firsthand employer experience, graduates of the free SHS program possess basic literacy,*

ICT, and numeracy skills. However, they demonstrate limited essential and job-specific skills necessary for rapid workforce entry. Many graduates also lack essential skills such as teamwork, analytical thinking, realworld problem-solving, and effective communication. Most importantly, they lack practical hands-on experience, workplace etiquette, and real-world exposure, which hampers their smooth and immediate transition into the workforce.”

-Employer of two graduates of the free SHS Programme, Upper West Region.

The findings in case 1 highlighted existing gaps in industry-related skills, including the lack of experiential knowledge and practical skills-based competencies. This perception of skills deficit by employers points to an adverse effect on graduates' employability prospects, triggering preferential and conditional hiring and selection decisions, thereby perpetuating a cycle of graduate unemployment and underemployment. This emerging issue of skills gap or mismatch underscores the importance of strengthening the quality and effective delivery of the curriculum to improve learning outcomes, which positively induces graduate employability prospects.

Case 2: “The findings also indicate that graduates have different levels of skills and competencies that affect their employability. I have noticed that many graduates possess basic ICT literacy, a collaborative spirit, enthusiasm for teamwork, and a willingness to learn and adapt to changing corporate environments. They also generally have basic verbal and written communication skills. However, they often lack leadership abilities, workplace discipline, and commitment.”

-Employer-Greater Accra Region.

The findings in case 2 show that despite challenges, graduates display readiness and resilience to adapt. However, their ability to quickly and effectively adjust to the professional work environment, given their lack of prior exposure to structured and practical training, remains slow and inconsistent. Employers also note that, most importantly, graduates lack critical thinking skills and real-world problem-solving abilities. This raises concerns about the quality and relevance of the curriculum, its effective delivery, and overall learning outcomes, which in turn affect the readiness and preparedness of prospective graduates for entry-level jobs. It highlights the urgent need for interventions such as internships, on-the-job training, and organizational simulations to improve job readiness, enhance employability prospects, and support career development.

Case 3: “Indeed, I would consider hiring more graduates from the free SHS program if the organization offers structured internships, mentorship, practical training, and work-oriented skills development. Their enthusiasm and eagerness to learn and adapt make them promising candidates for entry-level roles. However, without tailored skills training and targeted initiatives, their immediate impact on overall efficiency and productivity may be limited.

Case 3: Employers generally view hiring graduates of the free senior high school program positively. This suggests that some employers prefer to offer conditional recruitment, mainly for entry-level positions, depending on whether graduates have completed internships, mentorship, and practical work experience. These components are seen as enhancing the efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness of organizations. The findings highlight the significance of internship, mentorship, and hands-on training programs in equipping future graduates with vital skills and qualities highly regarded in the job market.

Case 4: “From my experience, graduates usually have a strong academic foundation; however, they often find it challenging to apply these concepts and theories in real work settings. This gap leads to limited practical experience and a lack of essential job skills. Consequently, many graduates find it hard to perform effectively in unstructured or high-pressure roles, which can impact overall productivity.”

-Employer-Bono Region.

In case 4, the results showed that graduates of the free senior high school program possess a strong academic foundation. However, they face difficulties in applying this theoretical knowledge to practical tasks in the workplace. The absence of practical skills and work-related competencies further lowers their self-efficacy,

negatively impacting their employability, career advancement, and ability to adapt to a changing, competitive job market. This underscores the need for interventions such as mandatory internships, problem-based assessments, and enhanced TVET education. These measures can improve learning outcomes and increase employability by providing candidates with relevant work experience and skills, which are highly valued by employers and crucial for driving organizational growth and maintaining a competitive edge position.

Case 5: “Having worked with graduates from the free SHS policy, I notice they often have significant skills gaps and limited practical experience, even for entry-level roles that need basic skills. To address these issues, graduates need real-world exposure like internships, apprenticeships, and focused skills training, which can facilitate a smoother transition and enable them to contribute effectively from the outset.”

In case 5, the findings on employers’ perceptions of the employability of graduates from the free SHS program indicated that while graduates possess basic skills, they lack essential and job-specific skills. Specifically, they exhibit a deficit in practical training, hands-on experience, critical thinking, analytical skills, and real-world problem-solving abilities. Additionally, the study found that graduates often lack professional and leadership skills, indicating a significant skills mismatch between job demands and educational outcomes. Employers recommended improvements in the curriculum, such as increasing experiential knowledge and practical training through TVET, enhancing soft skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. They also emphasized the need to strengthen internship programs, career guidance, counseling, and leadership or mentorship training to facilitate a smoother transition into the dynamic workforce.

4.2 Discussions

Studies indicate that employers perceive graduates of Ghana’s Free SHS program as possessing basic academic skills but lacking essential employability attributes. Identified deficiencies include limited practical experience, insufficient critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and underdeveloped leadership and professionalism. This misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market requirements is significant. Employers advocate for reforms such as expanding experiential learning through technical and vocational education and training (TVET), fostering soft skills, including teamwork, communication, and emotional intelligence, and increasing access to internships, career guidance, and mentorship to better equip students for employment.

Empirical studies corroborate these perspectives. The Ghana Employers’ Association (2021) reported that employers increasingly value practical skills over academic qualifications. Similarly, Boahim and Hofinam (2013) and Adomako (2022) found that, although the Free SHS policy has expanded educational access, employers continue to view its graduates as lacking practical experience and adequate preparation for employment. Boateng and Kusi (2023) reinforced these observations, highlighting that limited internship and mentorship opportunities contribute to graduates’ unpreparedness for the workforce. Collectively, these findings underscore the need to revise the Free SHS curriculum to prioritize practical, job-relevant, and soft skills, thereby enhancing the employability of graduates.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study found that employers generally perceive Ghana’s Free SHS graduates as possessing basic academic skills but lacking essential employability and job-readiness competencies. These graduates often demonstrate limited practical experience and encounter challenges in applying theoretical knowledge to real-world workplace contexts. Additionally, deficiencies in critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership contribute to a misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market requirements. Employers attribute this gap to a curriculum that prioritizes theoretical instruction over practical, hands-on learning. This misalignment impedes graduates’ preparedness for employment, particularly within the formal sector. The study further identifies insufficient collaboration between educational institutions and employers, resulting in inadequate industry-relevant training. Employers recommend curriculum reforms that prioritize practical and experiential learning through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), as well as enhanced development

of soft skills, internships, career guidance, counseling, and mentorship programs to facilitate graduates' transition into the workforce.

5.2 Recommendations

The recommendations emphasize the urgent need to tackle skills gaps and mismatches among graduates of Ghana's Free SHS. While the policy has expanded educational access, its effectiveness is limited if graduates lack readiness for the labor market. To boost employability, a comprehensive curriculum review should focus on practical, analytical, and teamwork skills.

1. **Strengthen Practical and Vocational Training (TVET):** Employers highlighted the need to incorporate comprehensive TVET elements into the SHS curriculum to provide students with hands-on, industry-specific skills. This requires investment in modern workshops, laboratories, and qualified teachers, along with promoting vocational education as on par with academic streams.
2. **Foster Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving:** Shift the focus from rote memorization to inquiry-based and project-driven teaching methods. Use case studies, real-world scenarios, and interdisciplinary projects to enhance students' analytical, problem-solving, and reasoning abilities.
3. **Encourage Creativity and Independent Thought:** Equip students to challenge assumptions, assess information critically, and think creatively through debates, discussions, and research activities that cultivate independent thinking.
4. **Strengthen Industry–Education Collaboration:** Establish stronger partnerships between educational institutions and industry stakeholders. Employers should actively participate in curriculum development, apprenticeship initiatives, and teacher training to ensure education remains aligned with market demands. Industry can also contribute by sharing resources, equipment, and expertise.
5. **Promote Internship and Apprenticeship Programs:** Develop formal internship and apprenticeship schemes to provide students with practical experience and workplace exposure prior to graduation.
6. **Enhance Teacher Capacity:** Provide teachers with continuous professional development and industry-relevant training to ensure classroom instruction reflects current workplace standards. Ultimately, aligning education with industry requirements will enhance graduate employability, reduce unemployment rates, and boost Ghana's economic productivity. The success of the Free SHS program should be evaluated not just by access but also by the quality and readiness of its graduates.

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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS ONLY

Employers Perception about Graduate Employability of Graduates of the Free Senior High School Programme.

Answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge and experience.

Q1. From your experience, are graduates of the free SHS programme well prepared with the relevant employability skills necessary for employment? Explain

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Q2. Based on your experience, state the employability skills demonstrated by graduates of the free SHS programme.

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Q3. In your experience, describe the learning agility and whether or not graduates are flexible and adaptable to the organizational work environment.

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Q4. Would you consider employing more graduates of the free SHS in the future? Explain why or why not.

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Q5. In what areas do you think the free SHS curriculum could be improved to enhance to skills development and preparedness of graduates for the job market?

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End of Interview with Employers