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Skills or Credentials? Comparing the Perspectives of Degree- and Non-degree-holding Ghanaian Graduates on the Value of Higher Education

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Abstract

The massification of higher education, fuelled in part by demand from young people and their families, has coincided with more competition in the graduate labour market. This article seeks insight into the interpretative framework through which graduates view the relationship between higher education and the labour market. Specifically, given evidence of diminishing employment opportunities for graduates, the study examines the relative strengths of human capital theory and credentialism in explaining the value that young people continue to place on higher education. Using survey data from a sample of 2,036 Ghanaian higher education graduates, the article investigates the relative value students accord to skills and credentials through analysis of two self-report measures: satisfaction with their higher education experience, and, second, labour market expectations in respect of employment and income. Overall, non-degree holders self-assessed as having more skills training. Nonetheless, degree-holders generally were more satisfied with their educational achievements and had higher labour market expectations than those without degrees. These findings imply that young people value higher education less in terms of the skills they acquire and more in regards to the face-value of the qualifications they obtain, indicating a credentialist perspective that is in marked contrast to the human capital approach which undergirds policymaking on higher education in Ghana and much of the African continent.

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Résumé

La massification de l'enseignement supérieur, alimentée en partie par l'exigence des jeunes et de leurs familles, a coïncidé avec une concurrence accrue sur le marché de l'emploi des diplômés. Cet article cherche à éclairer le cadre interprétatif à travers lequel les diplômés perçoivent la relation entre l'enseignement supérieur et le marché de l'emploi. Plus précisément, selon les preuves sur la baisse des opportunités d'emploi pour les diplômés, l'étude examine les forces relatives à la théorie du capital humain et à l'accréditation pour expliquer la valeur que les jeunes continuent à accorder à l'enseignement supérieur. À l'aide de données de recherche provenant d'un échantillon de 2 036 diplômés ghanéens de l'enseignement supérieur, l'article étudie la valeur relative que les étudiants accordent aux compétences et aux diplômes par l'analyse de deux mesures d'auto-évaluation : d'une part, la satisfaction à l'égard de leur expérience dans l'enseignement supérieur et, d'autre part, les attentes du marché du travail en matière d'emploi et de revenu. Dans l'ensemble, les non-diplômés s'auto-évaluent et considèrent qu'ils ont plus de compétence professionnelle. Cependant, les titulaires d'un diplôme étaient généralement plus satisfaits de leurs résultats scolaires et avaient des attentes plus élevées sur le marché de l'emploi que ceux qui n'ont pas de diplôme. Ces résultats démontrent que les jeunes accordent moins d'importance à l'enseignement supérieur en termes de compétences acquises et plus à la valeur nominale des qualifications obtenues, ce qui indique une perspective en matière d'accréditation qui contraste fortement avec l'approche du capital humain qui sous-tend l'élaboration des politiques de l'enseignement supérieur au Ghana et sur la plupart du continent africain.

Introduction

Formal education changes aspirations and life prospects. The experience of formal education transforms young people's knowledge, capacities and values, shaping how they see themselves in the present and where they see themselves in the future (see Kingston *et al.* 2003). Normatively, education also improves life chances, notably through employment, which in turn facilitates other life transitions necessary for independent adulthood (Honwana 2012; Cieslik & Simpson 2013).

On the African continent, the valorisation of education as a vehicle for social mobility has a long history. In the late pre-colonial and colonial periods, Western education offered new pathways to wealth and social status, primarily through expanded opportunities for employment in nascent formal economic and political systems (Lord 2011; Ahlman 2012;

Tsikata & Darkwah 2013). For African countries that gained independence from colonial rule in the late 1950s and 1960s, these aspirations were reinforced by a policy rhetoric of education as 'the master determinant of all aspects of change' for nation-states in transition to a 'modern' society (Coleman 1965:3, quoted in Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban 1976). This change would happen at both individual and national levels; education was to be the making of the nation through changes to the *skills* and, the mindsets, of the population. Institutions of higher education,[1] in particular, held pride of place as a symbol of a modernising nation expected to produce graduates with the skills to support socio-economic development (Ajayi, Goma & Johnson 1996; Morley, Leach & Lugg 2009).

However, the assumption that higher education credentials denote the possession of skills is challenged by studies in which employers point to a scarcity of employable skills among graduates of higher education (Brown & Hesketh 2004; Moreau & Leathwood 2006; Bawakyillenuo *et al.* 2013). The evidence from Ghana (e.g. Adu-Amoah 2008; Bawakyillenuo *et al.* 2013) and elsewhere (e.g. Purcell, Morley & Rowley 2002; Brown & Hesketh 2004; Moreau & Leathwood 2006) suggests that employers increasingly attach less importance to formal academic credentials and more to skills.[2] In other words, employers discriminate between skills and credentials.

Do young people likewise place differential value on the skills and credentials obtained through higher education? We know much more about policy-makers' and employers' perspectives than those of young people because there are few studies in African contexts that explore their understanding of the relationship between education and the labour market and of themselves as (prospective) workers (Moreau & Leathwood 2006; Leavy & Smith 2010; Ismail 2016). This is a significant area of neglect since trends in education and the labour market are not only the result of actions by governments and by employers but also of the aggregate decisions of young people and their families.

This article investigates the differential weight that higher education graduates accord to skills and credentials in assessing the ways in which their higher education experience translates to labour market success. It is based on survey data from 2,036 graduates of Ghanaian higher education institutions interviewed during the one-year mandatory national service period which, for many, precedes their first or full entry into the labour market. The study compares holders of degrees (the majority university graduates) and holders of non-degree qualifications (the majority graduate of polytechnics) on two dimensions: their evaluation of their higher education experience, including a self-assessment of skills acquired; and their

employment expectations. While non-degree holders assessed themselves more highly on skills training, degree-holders expressed more satisfaction with their educational achievements and more optimism about their labour market prospects. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of graduates, across all higher education institutions and qualifications, regardless of self-report of skills obtained, expressed a desire to obtain higher credentials. These analyses suggest that graduates place a higher premium on obtaining credentials to get work than on acquiring skills to do work.

Literature Review

The article is grounded in two perspectives on the relationship between higher education and the labour market: the human capital theory and the credentialist perspective. These do not operate in a mutually exclusive manner nor are they exhaustive. However, they represent two dominant frameworks in the literature on the higher education-labour market nexus (Tomlinson 2008). To use Tomlinson's 2008 heuristic, the human capital framework is about 'the skills and knowledge… needed to *do jobs*' while the credentialist perspective is about 'what is needed to *get jobs*' (p. 50, italics in original).

As is true for many post-colonial African countries, Ghana's educational policy-making has been underpinned by human capital theory (Assie-Lumumba 2006). The theory proposes that the more years of education an individual has, the more knowledge and skills they acquire and, consequently, the greater the returns they obtain in terms of employment opportunities, earnings and career progression. During the era of economic reforms in African countries in the 1980s commonly referred to as the structural adjustment period, the World Bank's policy prescription of drastic reductions in public expenditure on higher education was based on human capital theory, and specifically on studies that suggested that higher education yielded higher returns for the individual than the society (Samoff & Carrol 2003; Teferra & Altbach 2004). Other studies have indicated that private returns from higher education are greater than primary education. This relationship is especially strong for African countries (see Montenegro & Patrinos 2014; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos 2018). Despite these inconsistencies in its empirical support, human capital theory has persisted as the ideological basis for educational policy-making in many countries on the continent.

In Ghana, the association of education with the acquisition of employable skills has consistently been articulated in policy discourse since the first post-independence government. Moreover, it was explicitly stated as the goal of educational reforms in the 1980s, one of the most comprehensive in the

country's history (Anyidoho, Kpessa-Whyte & Asante 2013). Three decades later, in 2012, the Ministry of Education described its mandate thus:

> to provide relevant and quality education for all Ghanaians especially the disadvantaged to enable them acquire skills which will make them functionally literate and productive to facilitate poverty alleviation and promote the rapid socio-economic growth of the country (emphasis added).[3]

In 2021, the website of the same ministry has a statement of purpose that focuses more on the individual's work prospects rather than national development and retains a focus on skills acquisition.

> The MoE is committed to ensuring that all Ghanaians are prepared to succeed in the world of work. It achieves this through the development of an educational system that focuses on promoting problem solving and creativity and building critical skills through academic, technical and vocational programs (emphasis added).[4]

These policy statements are especially pertinent for higher education; if education is meant to impart employable skills, then individuals who complete higher education would be among the most highly skilled in society and, according to human capital theory, the most rewarded in the labour market. Indeed, in contemporary development discourse and practice, higher education is presented as 'a central site for facilitating the skills, knowledge and expertise that are essential to economic and social development' (Morley, Leach, & Lugg 2009:56).

In the Ghanaian context, human capital theory is called into question by evidence that graduates of higher education institutions have higher rates of unemployment than the general youth population (see Ajayi & Anyidoho 2021), in a country in which economic growth has consistently outpaced employment rates and job creation (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng 2016). In particular, the formal sector – the traditional and preferred destination of higher education graduates – has become more constrained; formal sector jobs have been growing by an average of 1.3 per cent while the increase in the populations of graduates has been much higher (Baah-Boateng 2015).

Young people in Ghana and, indeed, on the rest of the continent, are aware of the diminishing value of a graduate degree in terms of employment prospects. Even while they expect higher education qualifications to open doors for them through secure employment, they recognise that such credentials do not have as much value as they did in terms of work and general life prospects (Honwana 2012). From a human capital perspective, one explanation is that higher education may not be providing young people the skills needed to obtain and to do work. There is some support

for this in the fact that both Ghanaian employers *and* graduates complain that higher education graduates lack the right set of skills for available jobs (Tagoe 2009; Bawakyillenuo *et al.* 2013; Acquah 2016).

To the extent that young people perceive skills acquisition as a determinant of labour market outcomes, one would expect that they would show a preference for programmes and institutions that are seen to convey employable skills. Polytechnics in Ghana are public institutions that are set up to train young people with industrial and technical skills that are presumably in demand by the labour market. With the framing in Ghanaian public discourse that degree programmes are theory-bound and that diploma programmes in polytechnics and professional institutes offer more 'practical' and work-relevant skills (Acquah 2016), one might expect that young people would place more value on polytechnic education. On the contrary, polytechnics have acquired a reputation as a backup option for students who are unable to gain admission to degree programmes in universities (Amaniampong 2014). Universities, on the other hand, have experienced an increase in admissions that cannot be explained solely by the increase in population size (SAPRI 2001; Anyidoho, Kpessa-Whyte & Asante 2013; Anyidoho 2014; Anyidoho 2019).

There are evidently limits to the extent to which the human capital approach can explain the demand for forms of higher education that both graduates and employers claim do not provide employable skills. The credentialist perspective offers an alternative set of explanations. Credentialism is a concept with a long history used here to describe the demand for higher education as the pursuit for a ticket into the labour market (and attendant social status) rather than the attempt to acquire the skills with which to do a job. From a credentialism perspective, credentials are less indicators of work skills than markers of socio-cultural position and advantage (Mincer 1974; Bourdieu 1986; Brown 2001; Jonasson 2006).

Credentialism is not a new phenomenon in higher education. Credentials have always been prized for their symbolic value and as 'a legitimation of advantages that empower degree holders in occupational and organisational recruitment' (Brown 2001:20). However, there are indications that the phenomenon is more prevalent in contemporary times and is a major driver of the expanded demand for and participation in higher education worldwide (Jonasson 2006). The diminished value of a higher degree in the graduate labour market is partly the result of increased participation in higher education; as more people gain a higher education qualification, it becomes less of a marker of distinction than a basic requirement for a professional job (Harvey 2000; Brown & Hesketh 2004; Tomlinson 2008;

Wilton 2011). This means a higher education qualification does not convey as much competitive advantage as it used to – a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as 'credential inflation', where jobs that did not previously, and may not strictly, require a higher education qualification are hard to attain without a higher education qualification.[5] People are thus compelled to acquire more credentials to stay competitive in the job market without necessarily adding to the capacity that they need to do work competently.

Credentialism could, therefore, potentially offer an explanation for the preference of Ghanaian students for degrees and for degree-granting universities over non-degree qualifications offered by polytechnic and other institutions that offer professional or technical skills. Even the body set up to oversee education concludes that young people appear to be more attracted to the social status that goes with being a degree-holding university graduate (Ministry of Education 2014; also Dasmani 2011). Indeed, there is the suggestion that the policy announced in 2016 (shortly after data collection for this study had been completed) converting polytechnics into degree-granting technical universities in Ghana may have been a populist response to the privileging of university degrees over non-degree qualifications ('Conversion of polytechnics into technical universities' 2016; Nunyonameh 2016).

The foregoing suggests that it is important to understand young people's configuration of the relationship between higher education and the labour market. In this study, we are specifically interested in which of the two theories of interest (with their differential emphasis on skills and credentials) better captures young Ghanaian graduates' understanding of the value of higher education for job market success. This study is a response to the gap in the literature on the interpretive frameworks through which graduates view the labour market and themselves as workers (see Tomlinson (2007) and Tymon (2013) as exceptions). Moreover, it adds to the sparse literature that explores young people's perspectives on policy discussions of youth employment and unemployability on the African continent (Ismail 2016).

Research Methods

Sampling and Data Collection Methods

The article is based on a survey of graduates of higher education institutions within one year of completing school. Respondents were from both public and private institutions, including universities, university colleges, polytechnics, and institutes of professional studies. Respondents were interviewed between October and November 2015, during their one-year participation in the National Service Scheme (NSS) which is mandatory for all higher education graduates under 40 years of age.

The 2015/2016 cohort, from which this sample is drawn, was made up of 75,000 graduates working in public and private institutions all over the country. As we were unable to obtain 2015 data from the NSS, data from 2014 was used to derive a sampling frame of institutions to which national service persons were posted. The study randomly selected 1,020 establishments in three of ten administrative regions: Greater Accra, Ashanti and Northern Regions. Given resource constraints, the three regions were chosen to represent geographical spread, being respectively in the southern, middle belt and northern regions of Ghana. The three regions (which also have the three largest urban centres) also absorb 60 per cent of all national service personnel.

In each establishment, national service persons (NSPs) were invited to complete a 45-minute interview with trained research assistants. Respondents, therefore, self-selected into the study. A maximum number of 10 respondents per establishment was set so that none of the establishments were over-represented in the sample. (The 2014 dataset on national service persons indicated that each establishment had between 1 and 10 national service persons.[6]) The eventual non-random sample comprised 2,036 graduate NSPs from 454 establishments.[7]

Respondents were informed about the goals of the study and completed a consent form prior to taking part in the survey.[8] They were informed about their right to opt out at any point in the interview.

In addition to questions about family and educational background, the structured questionnaire elicited responses about their secondary and higher education programmes and performance, including their assessment of the extent of their skills training. Additionally, they were asked about their labour market expectations.

Sample Composition

The final sample was non-random and biased towards establishments that had NSPs in 2014. It was also biased towards individuals available and willing to participate in the survey during the period of data collection.

The data set consisted of 2,036 graduates from higher education institutions in Ghana. The sample was made up of 57 per cent males and 43 per cent females. The 1,180 degree-holders (almost all of whom were university graduates) made up 58 per cent of the sample, with the other 856 (42 per cent) being recipients of Higher National Diplomas (HND) and other non-degree credentials (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample composition

	Universities and other non-polytechnic institutions	Polytechnic	TOTAL
Non-Degree	242	614	856
	28.3%	71.7%	100%
Degree	1,178	2	1,180
	99.8%	0.2%	100%
	1,420	616	2,036

Analysis

The statistical differences between degree- and non-degree holders were analysed using t-tests and chi-squared tests. Both probit and multivariate linear regressions were used to determine the contribution of other variables that might be related to the decision to pursue degree or non-degree programmes.

Findings

Assessment of Experience of Higher Education

Overall satisfaction with higher education

The question of young people's satisfaction with higher education is a measure of the value they accord to it. The entire survey focused on the transition to and prospects for work, and so graduates' self-reported satisfaction can be assumed to be with primary reference to the opportunity higher education provided them for employment (see Honwana 2012).

An overwhelming majority (94 per cent) of the sample – irrespective of programme of study, type of institution, or terminal credentials – expressed satisfaction with the education they had obtained. As further confirmation, about 95 per cent of the sample affirmed that, if they had it to do all over again, they would still choose to get a higher education qualification.

Table 2: Would respondents select the same or different institution/course?

	Frequency	Percentage
Different course at different institution	314	16.26
Different course at same institution	210	10.88
Same course at same institution	943	48.83
Same course at different institution	463	24.03
Total	1,931	100.00

Beyond this broad evaluation, graduates were asked specifically to evaluate the programmes or courses they had done and institutions in which they had studied. Of the 95 per cent of the sample who confirmed their choice to get a higher education, about half (49 per cent) stated they would choose to do the same course at the same institution (Table 2). Another 40 per cent would choose a different institution and 27 per cent would choose a different course. What is noteworthy is that nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of these students would have preferred to do the same course but at a different institution. In other words, they discriminated between the content of the course and the credential (a degree or alternative qualifications given by a specific institution).

Table 3 displays the responses to the same set of questions but with differences between degree and non-degree holders highlighted. The results of a series of chi-squared tests indicated no significant difference in the expression of overall satisfaction between graduates with degrees and those without. However, degree-holding graduates (99.8 per cent of whom attended university) were more likely to affirm *both* their programme of study and institution. On their part, non-degree holders (the majority of whom were polytechnic graduates) were more likely to say that they were happy with their course but would have wanted to be in a different institution. Further, out of the 221 diploma-holding graduates of polytechnic institutions who said they would elect to do the same course but in a different institution, 40 per cent gave as their reason that they would want to go to university to get a degree or to get a 'better' or 'higher' credential.[9] This tally may be an underestimate as it includes only those responses in which an explicit desire for a degree or for university admission is stated; it is probable that similar preferences were implicit in further responses that expressed a wish to explore other institutions or environments. The desire to do the same course (implying a general satisfaction with the knowledge and skills acquired) but in a different institution appears to fit with the credentialist perspective that says that students may place more emphasis on the face-value of the qualifications than the content of their programmes of study.

Self-assessment of Skills Training

The survey elicited students' assessment of skills training they had acquired in the course of their higher educational careers. Specifically, respondents were asked about the extent of training in a number of skill sets. The list of skills presented to respondents is not exhaustive and, admittedly, there is little agreement on the set of skills necessary for the graduate labour market or about their operational meanings (Tymon 2013). Nonetheless,

the list is indicative of the skills that the literature suggests are important to employers. Consequently, it skews towards intra- and interpersonal ('soft') skills relative to technical skills, as the literature suggests the former is more valued by employers (Tagoe 2009; Bawakyillenuo *et al.* 2013).

Table 3: Satisfaction with higher education

	Non-Degree	**Degree**	**Diff.**
Very unsatisfied	0.051	0.058	-0.007
			[0.010]
Somewhat satisfied	0.421	0.425	-0.005
			[0.022]
Very satisfied	0.528	0.516	0.012
			[0.022]
Would still choose to pursue higher education	0.960	0.938	0.022
			[0.010]**
a15==Different course at different institution	0.164	0.162	0.002
			[0.017]
a15==Different course at same institution	0.040	0.160	-0.120
			[0.014]***
a15==Same course at same institution	0.462	0.508	-0.046
			[0.023]**
a15==Same course at different institution	0.334	0.171	0.164
			[0.019]***

Between 60 per cent to 70 per cent of respondents in each category believed they had 'the right amount' of training in each skill set, with the notable exception of technology or IT skills (Table 4).

There were differences between degree and non-degree holders in the assessment of skills gained, but with few consistencies in the extent and direction of the differences. Out of the eight skills categories assessed, a significant difference was observed for five; in four cases degree-holders reported that they had received less training than they needed for the job market and in three cases non-degree holders stated that they had received *more* training than they needed. Overall, degree holders were likely to rate themselves as having less skills training.

Table 4: Skills training

Skills	Non-Degree	Degree	Diff.
Teamwork==Less training than needed	0.116	0.114	0.002
			[0.014]
Teamwork==Right amount of training	0.679	0.676	0.002
			[0.021]
Teamwork==More training than needed	0.206	0.210	-0.005
			[0.018]
Leadership==Less training than needed	0.166	0.202	-0.036
			[0.017]**
Leadership==Right amount of training	0.598	0.595	0.003
			[0.022]
Leadership==More training than needed	0.236	0.203	0.033
			[0.019]*
Motivation==Less training than needed	0.132	0.173	-0.041
			[0.016]**
Motivation==Right amount of training	0.606	0.620	-0.014
			[0.022]
Motivation==More training than needed	0.262	0.207	0.055
			[0.019]***
Ability to learn==Less training than needed	0.078	0.106	-0.028
			[0.013]**
Ability to learn==Right amount of training	0.612	0.609	0.003
			[0.022]
Ability to learn==More training than needed	0.310	0.285	0.025
			[0.020]
Problem solving==Less training than needed	0.159	0.160	-0.001
			[0.016]
Problem solving ==Right amount of training	0.625	0.610	0.015
			[0.022]
Problem solving ==More training than needed	0.216	0.230	-0.014
			[0.019]
Communication==Less training than needed	0.089	0.117	-0.028
			[0.014]**
Communication ==Right amount of training	0.623	0.630	-0.007
			[0.022]
Communication ==More training than needed	0.289	0.253	0.035
			[0.020]*
Analytical skills==Less training than needed	0.155	0.154	0.001
			[0.016]
Analytical skills==Right amount of training	0.657	0.642	0.015
			[0.021]
Analytical skills ==More training than needed	0.188	0.204	-0.016
			[0.018]
Technology or IT ==Less training than needed	0.350	0.318	0.033
			[0.021]

Technology or IT ==Right amount of training	0.460	0.499	-0.039
			[0.022]*
Technology or IT ==More training than needed	0.189	0.183	0.006
N: non-degree holders = 856 856, degree holders = 1180			[0.017]

These findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited set of skills surveyed. Nonetheless, they do lead to two interesting conclusions: First, despite employers' complaint that young people lack the appropriate 'soft skills' for work, on all seven measures, a majority of graduates (60 per cent or more) assessed themselves as having received the right amount of training. This is at odds with employers' evaluation of graduates (Tagoe 2009; Bawakyillenuo *et al.* 2013). Second, given the accepted wisdom in Ghana that university degree programmes are more 'theoretical' and technical programmes such as those offered by polytechnics are more 'practical', it is interesting that degree-holders from universities were slightly more positive about their IT training than non-degree holders, 78 per cent of whom attended polytechnics.

Internships and other such experiences help students to acquire work-relevant skills as well as improving their job-search and job-retention skills (Tymon 2013), the lack of which is a disadvantage to young people in the job market (Baah & Achamoka 2007; ILO 2010). The survey, therefore, asked graduates if they perceived that their institutions had provided them adequate opportunities for work experience (Table 5). While roughly half of each group of respondents (and slightly more for degree-holders) reported an optimum amount of such work experience, non-degree holders reported having received *too much* of such experience compared to about 20 per cent for degree-holders, while 21 per cent said they had received *too little*, compared to 27 per cent of degree holders. Here again, by their own self-assessment, degree holders would appear to have less work experience (and, by implication, less opportunity for acquiring work-ready skills) in the course of their higher education than non-degree holders.

Table 5: Work experience by type of credential

	Non-Degree	**Degree**	**Diff.**
			[0.017]
Attachment/work experience==Less training than needed	0.206	0.269	-0.063 [0.019]***
Attachment/work experience==Right amount of training	0.454	0.535	-0.080 [0.022]***
Attachment/work experience==More training than needed	0.340	0.197	0.143 [0.019]***

Desire for additional certifications

Respondents were asked about their desire to acquire further qualifications. These figures must be interpreted cautiously given that aspiration and intent do not automatically result in action. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that almost the entire sample (that is, 96 per cent) expressed a desire for further higher education qualifications, with no difference between degree and non-degree holders (Table 6). Not surprisingly, non-degree holders had a significantly higher desire for a bachelor's degree compared to degree holders who already had this qualification. What is more interesting is that non-degree holders were significantly more likely to report a desire for a master's degree.

Table 6: Desire for additional qualifications

	Non-Degree	**Degree**	**Diff.**
Would like additional higher education qualifications	0.963	0.965	0.008
			[0.008]
Highest qualification desired			
Bachelor's degree	0.158	0.012	0.146
			[0.011]***
Master's degree	0.417	0.339	0.078
			[0.022]***
Doctorate degree	0.388	0.614	-0.227
			[0.022]***

The survey did not elicit the motivation behind this desire for further qualification. However, when interpreted against the backdrop of the difference between degree and non-degree holders in their self-assessment of employable skills training, these results indicate that skills acquisition may not be the primarily incentive for additional credentials. Indeed, the fact that 61 per cent of degree-holders and 39 per cent of non-degree holders would want a doctorate degree is reasonable evidence that some other calculations are behind their responses, given that there are few available jobs that require the specific skills that doctorate training would offer. The more likely explanation is 'credential inflation' where young people believe that even higher qualifications may give them an advantage in a crowded job market.

Labour Market Expectations

The survey provided information on three indicators of labour market outcomes. The first variable is based on respondents' simple self-assessment of the odds of earning an income within the first six months after national service, either through a job or self-employment (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 0 being 'no chance at all' and 10 indicating certainty). For the entire sample, the mode for this ordinal variable was 5 out of 10 (effectively a 50-50 chance) and the median was 7 out of 10 (Figure 1).

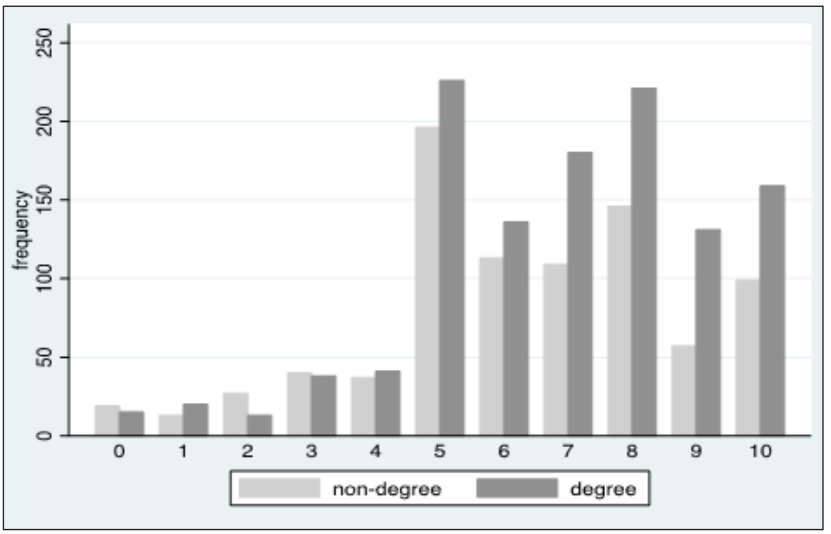

Figure 1: Chance of earning income within 6 months of national service

Regression analyses were conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences between degree and non-degree holders in their labour market outlook, and also to explore alternative explanations for these differences. Table 7 shows the results of a probit regression for the self-reported chance of earning income within six months of completing national service and a multivariate liner regression for minimum and expected monthly earnings respectively (reported in Ghanaian cedis). Degree holders reported a significantly higher expectation on all three variables (equations 1, 2 and 3).

Degree holders' higher labour market expectations held up even with the introduction into the models of variables that might be expected to influence both labour market expectation and self-selection into degree programmes and degree-granting institutions, given research that shows that economic

and social advantage is associated with admission into degree-granting universities (Addae-Mensah 2000). The variables included the demographic characteristics of sex and age; a self-esteem measure using the Rosenberg self-esteem index (Rosenberg 1965);[10] educational background, including programme of study and self-reported grades on the nationwide Secondary School Certification Exam (SSCE), a standardised and uniformly graded national examination that largely determines admission into higher education institutions; family background variables (including parents' education, parents' work with government and family's political connections) as proxies for socio-economic status and social capital; and, finally, paid work experience since secondary school. Out of these variables, self-esteem was consistently significant, indicating that, regardless of qualification, graduates with higher reported self-esteem tended to be more confident about their prospects in the labour market. Programme of study also proved to be significant across all the models; compared with students in all other programmes, including business, students in STEM were more optimistic about their chances of employment and their income levels. SSCE scores were significant in explaining the differences between degree and non-degree holders, but only in relation to income. Sex, age, previous work experience and family background variables proved to be significant, but not consistently so.

In sum, despite reporting lower work-related skills training and work experience, degree holders generally had higher labour market expectations, suggesting again that the type of qualification matters to graduates in evaluating their chances of labour market success.

Table 7: Type of qualification and labour market expectations

	(1)	(1A)	(2)	(2A)	(3)	(3A)
	Chance of Income	Chance of Income	Minimum Acceptable Income	Minimum Acceptable Income	Expected Income	Expected Income
Degree	0.263***	0.153**	251.565***	159.702***	435.545***	244.582***
Demographic characteristics						
Sex (female)		-0.073		-49.438		-135.159**
Age		0.006		10.535**		8.644
Socio-emotional attribute						
Self-esteem score		0.407***		132.719***		238.209***
Programme of study						
SSCE standardised score		0.045		67.506***		111.100***
Tertiary field of study = STEM		0.137*		170.617***		293.774***
Tertiary field of study = Business		0.044		17.653		8.737
Family background						
Father completed primary		0.006		-125.012***		-180.479**
Father completed secondary		0.108		-74.232		-40.552
Father completed tertiary		0.052		-86.755		-90.302
Mother completed primary		0.018		-22.803		-106.221
Mother completed secondary		0.028		37.124		60.300
Mother completed tertiary		0.242*		135.511		229.395
Father ever worked for government		0.107*		31.258		99.931
Mother ever worked for government		-0.061		-36.080		-95.914
Family member in political office		0.228**		55.649		288.529*
Work experience						
Work experience since secondary school (work for profit/pay)		0.107*		-43.436		-69.757
Constant	-0.049	-1.658***	1,018.115***	418.579**	1,534.531***	703.469**
Observations	2,036	2,036	2,036	2,036	2,036	2,036

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Conclusion

Although the expansion of higher education is partly fuelled by the personal ambitions of individuals and their families, policy discourse and research on higher education pivots around the perspectives and interventions of governments and employers. Young people's experiences are underexplored, which implies that very little of their voice is filtered into policy (Ismail 2016). This article provides insight into the interpretative framework that young people apply to the relationship between the higher education and labour market participation. Specifically, it examines the relative strengths of the human capital theory and of credentialism in explaining young people's demand for higher education.

Compared to degree holders (the majority graduates of universities), graduates with non-degree qualifications (the majority graduates of polytechnics) self-assessed as having more skills training as well as attachments, internships and other experiences that would be expected to provide work-relevant skills. If students held to the human capital theory that posits that skills acquisition is rewarded with labour market success, then non-degree holders would be more optimistic about their employment prospects. On the contrary, the study found that non-degree holders expressed less satisfaction with their education, with many explicitly stating a preference to have a degree and/or to attend university, even if they were to maintain the same programme of study. This desire by non-degree holders for alternative institutions and programmes, despite higher self-assessment of their skills training, may indicate that students place more importance on the face-value of credentials than on skills. Moreover, almost all graduates stated a desire to seek further higher education qualifications, with little difference in the two groups of graduates in the extent to which they expressed this desire. One may see further evidence of credentialism in the fact that degree-holders generally had higher labour market expectations (in terms of employment opportunities and earnings) than graduates without degrees, again despite the former self-reporting lower work-related skills training. Statistical analyses indicate that the differences in labour market expectations between degree and non-degree holders proved to be significant, but were associated with other dimensions of educational and social advantages (see Addae-Mensah 2000). This is consistent with the theory of credentialism that proffers that educational qualifications both signify and deepen social advantage (Mincer 1974; Bourdieu 1986; Brown 2001; Jonasson 2006).

Our findings also suggest a disconnect between two important stakeholders in the graduate labour market – graduates and employers. Ghanaian employers complain about the lack of work-ready skills of

graduates, particularly in regard to generic skills (Adu-Amoah 2008; Bawakyillenuo *et al.* 2013) but the Ghanaian graduate students in our study generally believed their education had provided them with adequate training in the skills desired by the job market. They were also generally sanguine about their employment and earnings prospect, a finding that is consistent with research in both African and non-African contexts (De Graaf & Van Zenderen 2013; Mahama *et al.* 2013; Tymon 2013). Their apparent bent to credentialism and optimistic employment outlook – both of which appear to be at odds with the objective situation of a labour market that values skills over credentialism – suggests that young people may be working on a different model of the relationship between higher education and the graduate labour market than policy-makers who, by and large, subscribe to a human capital approach. This implies a need for greater attention to young people's subjectivities in research and policy-making around youth employment and employability.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'higher education' in its broadest sense as referring to post-secondary education. In this way, it is used synonymously with 'tertiary education' in this article (see https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation). In Ghana higher education institutions include universities, polytechnics, technical and vocational schools, teacher training colleges, nursing schools and distance learning centres that award academic degrees, professional qualifications and diplomas (World Bank 2021; Leach *et al.* 2008).
2. It should be noted that the shift described – from credentials to skills, and from 'hard' to 'soft' skills – is less observed in specialist and technical programmes and occupations (Purcell *et al.*, cited in Moreau & Leathwood 2006).
3. Homepage of the Ministry of Education, http://www.ghana.gov.gh/index.php/governance/ministries/331-ministry-of-education. 30 October 2012.
4. Ministry of Education website. https://moe.gov.gh/about-us/. 30 June 2021.
5. Tholen identifies the related phenomenon of 'graduatisation' – 'an increase in the share of labour entrants with university degrees into previously non-graduate occupations' (p. 1071).

6. Based on NSS data, each establishment had received between 1 and 10 national service personnel in 2014, with an average of 2 per establishment, yielding a target sample of approximately 2,000 respondents if we had perfect response rates and if the numbers of national service persons (NSPs) posted to selected establishments remained constant.
7. We do not have full information from the field on response rates.
8. The nature of the survey was explained to respondents beforehand. The consent form said: 'The project will study tertiary graduates who are beginning their National Service this year. The goal is to collect information on the education, training, and work experience of young adults in Ghana in order to understand the employment issues facing today's youth. We are asking you to take part in this study because you are a tertiary graduate and we would greatly appreciate you completing the survey questions.'
9. This finding is based on a simple coding of open-ended responses (e.g. 'I want to enjoy a university education too' and 'My former institution did not run a degree program').
10. We define self-esteem as an individual's 'overall sense of worthiness as a person' and we measure it using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Morris Rosenberg 1965). The questionnaire prompted respondents to: 'Please indicate for each of the following ten statements which response best describes you'. We then read a list of statements and asked respondents to indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each one. Examples included 'On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and 'I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on equal level with others'. We coded responses from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. We constructed an index score by reversing the scoring on responses 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 and then calculating the mean score for the ten responses so that the self-esteem index score ranges from 1 to 4. Schmitt and Allik (2005) examine the cross-cultural performance of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale using data from a sample of 16,998 respondents in 53 nations. Their sample includes six African countries: Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Morocco, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. They find that the scale generally has similar psychometric properties across cultures and conclude that their study "provides evidence of the structural equivalence of global self-esteem across cultures, supporting the notion that a person's overall evaluation of self-worth is a universally quantifiable human characteristic' (p. 637).

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