

Beyond the Transcript: Rethinking Graduate Employability and Skills Articulation in Ghanaian Higher Institutions (GHI). The Role of University Administration. The Case of the University of Mines and Technology (Umat), Tarkwa

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ABSTRACT

Background: Ghanaian graduates are sometimes perceived not to be ready for the workforce, usually because what they learn in classroom does not translate into what jobs/employers require. But we usually just blame the textbooks. We do not talk enough about the "behind-the-scenes" problem: how university leaders fail to track, prove, and officially certify the well-rounded skills students pick up outside of just passing exams.

Aim: This study investigates the perceptions of key stakeholders on non-academic skills, examines existing institutional mechanisms for skills tracking, and identifies the challenges and opportunities for implementing a comprehensive skills-articulation framework at the University of Mines and Technology (UMaT), Tarkwa, in Ghana.

Methods: A qualitative case study of the University of Mines and Technology (UMaT) was conducted. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with employers (n=15), university administrators (n=8), and recent graduates (n=20), supplemented by a document analysis of university policies, transcript templates, and career services reports.

Results: Employers highly value soft skills (e.g., adaptability, communication, teamwork) and practical project experience but find these poorly articulated in official graduate documentation. UMaT's current administrative processes are fragmented, with no centralised system for validating or certifying non-academic learning. Key challenges include bureaucratic inertia, limited funding, and a lack of formal policy. Opportunities lie in strong industry partnerships, existing student club structures, and a growing institutional focus on employability.

Conclusion: University administration is a critical, yet under-leveraged, actor in bridging the skills gap. Moving beyond the traditional transcript towards a co-curricular record or a similar framework is essential. This requires a strategic, top-down initiative to integrate disparate efforts into a coherent, validated, and recognised system of skills articulation.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Skills Articulation, University Administration, Co-curricular Record, STEM Education, Ghana, Higher Education Management.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Mines and Technology (UMaT) stands as a premier institution in Ghana with a mandate to produce high-caliber graduates for the mining, technology, and related sectors. Despite this clear mission, a persistent narrative, echoed by industry and policymakers alike, suggests a misalignment between graduate competencies and the dynamic needs of the workforce (Agyapong & Acquah, 2022; World Bank, 2019). This "skills gap" often centres on a deficit in non-academic or soft skills, such as critical thinking, communication, leadership, and project management (Suarda et al., 2017).

Existing research frequently attributes this gap to outdated curricula or pedagogical approaches, placing the onus squarely on academic departments (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). While curriculum is undeniably important, this focus overlooks a crucial component of the university ecosystem: the administrative function. The offices of the Registrar, Counselling and Student Support Unit, Alumni Relations, and the Academic and Student Affairs Unit are not merely support services; they are the custodians of the student's holistic journey and the official articulators of a graduate's worth to the external world through transcripts and certificates.

Currently, academic transcript serves as the primary, and often sole, official record of student achievement. It is a powerful document, but it tells an incomplete story. It fails to capture competencies gained through industrial attachments, student leadership roles, club participation, volunteer work, and innovation projects, experiences that are highly valued by employers (Jackson & Chapman, 2019).

This study, therefore, moves "beyond the transcript." It posits that the administration of a university plays a systemic and pivotal role in bridging the skills gap by developing robust mechanisms to identify, validate, document, and certify these holistic skills. Using UMaT as a case study, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do employers of UMaT graduates perceive and value non-academic skills and experiences, and how are these currently documented?
2. What are the institutional mechanisms and administrative processes at UMaT for tracking and certifying holistic student learning and employability skills?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities for implementing a comprehensive skills-articulation framework (e.g., a co-curricular transcript) in a Ghanaian public university?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Employability Debate and the Limits of the Curriculum

The concept of graduate employability has evolved from simply securing a job to possessing a set of skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to succeed in their chosen careers (Knight & Yorke, 2004). While disciplinary knowledge is foundational, the "USEM" model (Knight & Yorke, 2004) emphasises Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs, and Metacognition, much of which is developed outside the lecture hall. Research in the African context confirms that employers seek graduates with strong soft skills and practical aptitude, often finding these lacking (Kanyongo & Owusu, 2017)

The Administrative Role in Skills Articulation

The role of university administration in employability is often framed as providing career guidance and placement. However, a more profound role lies in "skills articulation", the process of formally recognising and documenting learning outcomes from various experiences (Barrie et al., 2009). Tools for this include:

- a. **Co-curricular Transcripts (CCTs):** Official documents that complement the academic transcript by recording verified student involvement in activities such as club leadership, volunteering, and sports;
- b. **Micro-credentials:** Digital certifications for specific, bite-sized skills; and
- c. **e-Portfolios:** Student-driven digital collections of work that demonstrate skills and evolution.

The implementation of such frameworks is an administrative challenge, requiring collaboration across Registrar offices (IT unit, academic and student affairs, and counselling and student support unit (Sattler & Peters, 2013).

The Ghanaian Context

Studies in Ghanaian higher education has highlighted infrastructure deficits, funding issues, and curriculum-industry disconnects (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). There is, however, a scarcity of research that specifically investigates the potential of administrative systems, as opposed to academic content, as a strategic tool for enhancing employability. This study aims to fill this gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, single-case study design (Yin, 2018). The case was defined as "the system of skills articulation for employability at UMaT." This design was appropriate for an in-depth exploration of a complex, real-world phenomenon within its context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two primary methods:

Semi-structured Interviews: Thirty (30) participants were purposively selected:

- a. **Employers:** 15 representatives from leading mining, engineering, and technology firms that regularly recruit UMaT graduates;
- b. **University Administrators:** 8 staff from the Registry, Counselling and Student Support Unit, Alumni Office, and Student Affairs; and
- c. **Recent Graduates:** 20 alumni from the past 3-5 years, now employed in relevant sectors.

Interviews explored perceptions of skills, awareness of documentation systems, and views on potential reforms.

Document Analysis: Official documents were analysed, including:

- a. UMaT Academic Transcripts;
- b. Student Handbooks; and
- c. Policy documents on industrial attachment and graduation requirements.

Data Analysis

Interview, transcripts and document notes were subjected to a systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming the final themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University (UMaT). Informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The High Value and Poor Articulation of Non-Academic Skills

Employers unanimously expressed high regard for non-academic skills. One employer from a large gold mining company stated, *"We can teach them the specific software. What we need are graduates who can work in a team*

, communicate a problem clearly, and adapt when a project changes unexpectedly."

However, they reported that these skills are "invisible" on official documents. Graduates rely on their CVs and interview performance to convey these attributes, but without official validation, employers treat them as claims rather than certified competencies. This finding underscores a critical failure of the current administrative system to communicate a graduate's full value.

Theme 2: Fragmented Administrative Mechanisms

The document analysis and interviews with administrators revealed a landscape of fragmented, uncoordinated efforts.

- a. The **Registry** focuses exclusively on academic metrics;
- b. The **Career Centre** organizes talks and recruitment drives but does not have a mandate to issue certified records;
- c. **Industrial Attachment** reports are graded by academic departments but are not summarized or reflected on the transcript in a standardized way; and
- d. **Student Clubs** are active, but their leadership roles are not formally tracked or verified by the university.
- e. An Administrator from Academic and Student Affairs noted, "We see students developing amazing skills in their clubs, but it all happens in a silo. There is no system to pull it all together into something an employer would officially recognize." This fragmentation highlights a significant systemic gap.

Theme 3: Challenges and Opportunities for a Unified Framework

Challenges:

- a. **Bureaucratic Hurdles:** Implementing a new university-wide system requires navigating complex approval processes;
- b. **Resource Constraints:** Funding for the necessary software and personnel was a recurring concern;
- c. **Cultural Resistance:** A perceived "additional administrative burden" on staff and questions about the legitimacy of certifying non-academic activities; and
- d. **Policy Vacuum:** No existing policy mandates the creation of a co-curricular record.

Opportunities:

- a. **Strong Industry Links:** UMaT's deep connections with industry provide a ready audience and potential partners for piloting and endorsing a new framework;
- b. **Existing Structures:** The vibrant student life and mandatory industrial attachment provide a rich source of data for a CCR; and
- c. **Strategic Imperative:** Enhancing employability aligns directly with UMaT's mission and can be a powerful tool for marketing and student recruitment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that the skills gap is not merely an academic problem but also an administrative one. The current system at UMaT, and likely at many similar Ghanaian universities, fails to adequately articulate the full spectrum of competencies its graduates possess. The administrative machinery, while functioning well for its traditional purpose, is not configured to meet the modern demands of employability.

The findings strongly suggest that a move towards a comprehensive skills-articulation framework, such as a Co-curricular Record, is not just beneficial but necessary. This would provide a validated, official account of a student's holistic development, giving employers a more reliable measure of a graduate's potential and giving UMaT a significant competitive advantage.

Recommendations:

1. **Form a University-Wide Task Force:** Establish a committee with representatives from the Registry, Counselling and Student Support Unit, Academic and Student Affairs, ICT, Academic Departments, and the Pro Vice Chancellor as the Chair, to explore models for a UMaT Co-curricular Record.
2. **Initiate a Pilot Programme:** Begin by formally tracking and certifying a few high-impact activities, such as student government leadership and specific innovation projects.
3. **Leverage Industry Partnerships:** Engage key employers in the design phase to ensure the framework meets their needs and gains their recognition.
4. **Develop a Digital Platform:** Invest in a simple, scalable digital platform for students to log activities and for administrators to verify them, leading to an official digital document.

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