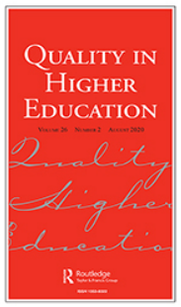

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Enhancing post-graduate programme effectiveness through tracer studies: the reflective accounts of a Ghanaian nation-wide graduate tracer study research team

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ABSTRACT

Graduate tracer studies have come to represent one of the key approaches for enhancing study programme effectiveness in contemporary higher education. This has led to a surge in graduate tracer studies by Ghanaian higher education institutions. However, reflective practices on challenges and lessons from these studies are lacking. Through focus-group discussions and individual interviews with members of a research team that undertook a nation-wide data collection in connection with a graduate tracer study, this article distils challenges the research team struggled to surmount and lessons learnt for the conduct of future graduate tracer studies within the context of Ghana. Against the backdrop of the insights generated and discussed, it is concluded that reflective research exercises, such as the one reported in this article, are a scholarly imperative for continuous improvement in the conduct of graduate tracer studies, which is rarely undertaken in the Ghanaian higher education context.

KEYWORDS

Study programme effectiveness; graduate employability; graduate tracer studies; alumni research; Ghana's higher education system; reflective research exercise

Introduction

Contemporary higher education institutions are increasingly under pressure to improve the employability of their graduates as a measure of their study programmes' effectiveness. Increasingly, the effectiveness of study programmes of higher education institutions are being measured by graduates' success at the workplace (Kinash *et al*., 2016; Shah *et al*., 2015). Thus, an effective study programme in a university is considered as one designed and delivered in a way that is well aligned with the learning needs of its target population such that it produces relevant skill gains that lead to beneficial employment successes (Palameta *et al*., 2011; World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Employment, 2014). In effect, employability defines study programme effectiveness of contemporary higher education institutions. Employability in the higher education context is considered as institutions

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having supported graduates to develop generic and disciplinary skills, knowledge and attributes, as well as identity, thereby enabling them to thrive beyond graduation (Kinash *et al*., 2016; Australian Association of Graduate Employers, 2011). It has been established that there is growing recognition of higher education curricula, resources and services not optimally suited to support employability and employment outcomes (Kinash *et al*., 2016; Dickinson, 2000).

The increasing focus on employability to measure study programme effectiveness requires that higher education institutions collaborate with past graduates and employers in study programme reviews (Kinash *et al*., 2016). Effective collaboration and engagements of these stakeholder groups helps to capture their inputs to improve graduate successes at the workplace. The British Council (2014), for example, reported widespread employer concern about the work readiness of graduates from higher education institutions in Africa. According to the Council, while employers are generally satisfied with the disciplinary knowledge of students, they perceive significant gaps in their information technology skills, personal qualities and transferable skills. Similarly, Taabazuing (2010) in a tracer study of agricultural graduates in Ghana explained that the general feedback from employers of agricultural graduates indicated that most agricultural graduates come to the job market with little or no practical exposure. Against this backdrop, Taabazuing (2010) concluded that the Ghanaian agricultural graduates involved in the study appeared ill-equipped with the necessary soft skills, such as, communication, inter-personal relationships, critical thinking and problem-solving, thus making them less versatile in a diverse and rapidly changing demands of the 21st century job market. Tran (2018) explained the root cause of this problem. Tran offered criticism against the non-inclusion of alumni and employer inputs in study programme design and review, and described university curricula generally as too theory-focused, outdated and irrelevant to labour market needs.

The term 'graduate tracer study' in this context is being used interchangeably with other research terms, such as, 'graduate survey' 'alumni research', and 'follow-up study', where in all cases, the aim is to assess the impact of study programmes graduates have received from a given higher education institution (Schomburg, 2003). The International Labour Organization defines a tracer study as an impact assessment tool where the impact on target groups is traced back to specific elements of a project or programme so that effective programme components may be identified (Pacatang, 2016). To achieve this, a graduate tracer study is usually conducted after some time of being engaged in the field of certification. According to Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008), graduate tracer studies provide valuable information on evaluating the impacts of the higher education and training institutions. This information may be used for minimising any possible deficits in a given educational programme's content, delivery and relevance.

Thus, graduate tracer studies have become an integral component of higher education institutions' quality assurance mechanism worldwide. In Ghana, they constitute a key requirement of external quality assurance of higher education institutions. The National Accreditation Board (NAB) of Ghana demands graduate tracer studies reports before re-accreditation is granted to a study programme in any higher education institution in Ghana. On average, a study programme is due for reaccreditation after every five years. This suggests that a graduate tracer study is required at least every five years in a study programme's lifetime. The implication is that graduate tracer studies are regular operational activities of higher education institutions in Ghana.

This article is an offshoot of a nation-wide graduate tracer study conducted recently in Ghana (Nudzor *et al*., 2019). That nation-wide tracer study examined how graduates of the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) were placed and utilised by their employers and how efficient and effective the graduates were at their respective schedules and places of work. This was proposed against the backdrop of a dearth of information concerning how IEPA graduates are placed and utilised effectively in the labour market to enable them contribute their quota towards Ghana's developmental agenda. This current article takes a slightly different form and focus from the original nation-wide tracer study. The article distils challenges that confronted the team of researchers in their pursuit of the goals of the nation-wide tracer study and the lessons they have learnt from undertaking that body of research. This article is driven by the need to continue to have reflective discussions on the challenges and lessons of conducting graduate tracer studies using case-study experiences from less explored context, such as Ghana. Such a reflective exercise is a scholarly imperative for continuous improvement in the conduct of graduate tracer studies particularly in the face of the increasing focus on employability as a measure of study programmes' effectiveness.

The article is organised as follows. The next section sets the context for the study by providing a brief background information about the establishment of the IEPA. This is followed respectively by sections on how the nation-wide tracer study on which this article is based was conducted, and the rationale for the selection of the tracer study as a reflective 'case'. Thereafter, the study methods for the current article and findings are illustrated before the concluding thoughts.

Establishment of IEPA: a brief historical account

The IEPA, the academic department of UCC on which the research reported in this article is based, was established in August 1975 on the basis of a joint agreement between the Government of Ghana and UNESCO/UNDP. The establishment of the department was as a result of the felt need at the time to set up a 'hub' for the training of educational planners, administrators and other

specialists in the field of education (Owusu & Dzinyela, 1994). According to the historical records, the department was established and mandated *inter alia to*:

- generate empirical knowledge and research to inform educational policy and practice;
- provide education and training aimed at improving planning, leadership and management capabilities of personnel in the education sector;
- improve the operational efficiency of personnel within the Ghana Education Service and educational institutions in Ghana (Owusu & Dzinyela, 1994; Nudzor *et al*., 2019).

Since its establishment, the department has contributed (and still continues to contribute) its quota towards the development of Ghana. This is particularly evident in the leading role it has assumed in the preparation of graduates for careers within the Ghanaian educational sector and other sectors of the general economy. In addition to being the 'hub' for the training of future educational planners and administrators of the nation, the department plays a leading role in international-funded capacity strengthening projects in educational leadership and planning throughout the country. For example, the department has developed strong working relations with the International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) of UNESCO, and had recently partnered with the IIEP in delivering a distance education programme in Educational Sector Planning in Ghana. Between 2004 and 2010, the department collaborated with Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam to undertake a NUFFIC-funded research project that enhanced leadership and management capacities of lecturers of Ghana Polytechnics. The department was also involved deeply in the recent past in DFID-sponsored 'EDQual' research partnership with the University of Bristol and the University of Dar es Salaam, which researched into educational leadership and quality issues in Ghana and Tanzania (Nudzor *et al*., 2019).

The department currently runs leadership, management and administration-oriented graduate programmes leading to the award of M.Ed in Educational Administration; M.Phil in Educational Planning, Educational Administration and Administration in Higher Education. In addition to these graduate programmes, the department offers a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programme in Qualitative Research. This programme was introduced deliberately and with the aim of strengthening or enhancing the research capacities of early career researchers of UCC and other professional research institutions in the country in the area of qualitative research. It is also heart-warming to note that the department is in the process of introducing new programmes, namely: MPhil/PhD in Educational Leadership, MPhil/PhD in Monitoring and Evaluation in Education, MPhil/PhD in Economics of Education, PhD in Educational Administration, PhD in Educational Planning, and Postgraduate Diploma in Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education. These programmes are being introduced to fill in human resource gaps in these

critical areas of the Ghanaian educational system and other sectors of the Ghanaian economy (Nudzor *et al*., 2019).

Thus, through these training and capacity building programmes *vis-à-vis* the study programmes it renders, the department has assumed a leading role in the preparation of graduates for careers within the Ghanaian education sector and other sectors of the general economy. While this undoubtedly is a significant contribution to the development of the nation, it is unclear how employers of the department's graduates and alumni of the department perceive the effectiveness of the department's study programmes. This thus called for a nation-wide tracer study which, apart from helping to probe these issues, could inform a revision, if need be, of the department's curricula and general modes of training and course delivery to ensure that it produces efficient and effective graduate employees to serve the human resource needs of the education sector in particular, and other sectors of the Ghanaian economy.

So, largely, it is against this backdrop that the nation-wide graduate tracer study on which this article reports was undertaken. The next section explores the methodological approach.

Context of the nation-wide graduate tracer study

Essentially, the graduate tracer study sought to combine the views of employers of the department's graduates and alumni of the department to, among other things, review and improve the effectiveness of the department's study programmes. In pursuit of this goal, two of the guiding research questions for the study were:

1. How efficient and effective are IEPA graduates in the respective schedules and places of work?
2. Which areas (if any) of IEPA's curricula and general modes of training and delivery require revision to make the institution relevant to the 21st century needs and aspirations of its clientele?

Considering the nature of the phenomenon under investigation and the context within which the study was to be undertaken, a concurrent mixed methods design was employed. This involves the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously within one study or among several studies in a programme of inquiry (Creswell, 2009). The choice of a concurrent mixed method design was appropriate whereby both qualitative and quantitative research elements were incorporated to broaden understanding and help to explain the phenomenon under investigation. In line with this thinking, qualitative data in the form of insights from semi-structured open-ended interviews with employers of the department's graduates were elicited for analysis. This

was complemented by the analysis of quantitative data derived from self-administered questionnaires distributed to graduate employees.

The target population for this nation-wide tracer study comprised two groups of people. The first group consisted of carefully selected officials from organisations in which graduates of the department were employed. These selected officials occupied senior or strategic positions in their various organisations and were considered as representatives of the chief executive officers (CEOs). The research team had difficulty in gaining access to the CEOs but, unlike the CEOs, the employer representatives had direct oversight responsibilities over the department's graduates and could readily say whether or not they were efficient and effective in their respective places of work. The department's graduates were employed in various organisations including but not limited to: Ministry of Education (MOE), Ghana Education Service, private schools, Ghana armed forces, Ghana health services, prison service, Ghana's tertiary institutions, non-governmental organisations (local and international) resident in Ghana, development partner organisations, the police service, Ghana's civil service, private businesses (particularly, schools) and institutions outside Ghana.

The second group comprised all alumni who obtained the various degrees awarded by the department (M.A./M.Ed./M.Phil in Educational Administration or similar) and who were employed in organisations whose 'employers' are chosen as participants of this study. A preliminary analysis of the department's database estimates the number of graduates holding the department degrees from 2010 to 2015 to be about 2,100. This study's target population was alumni who graduated from the department from in the period 2000–2015. The total number of graduates for this period was estimated to be 5,300, excluding holders of the department degree who were without full-time employment, deceased or retired. Also, those who took part in short courses organised by the department were not eligible for the study. This was because the duration of these short courses was not considered long enough to have enabled them to cover the full contents of the department's courses or programmes of study.

It is also to be noted that although holders of degrees in the department programmes in the various fields alluded to above were considered as the target population, sight was not lost of the fact that not all holders of these degrees were in full time employment either in the public or private sectors. For this reason, and granted that a significant aspect of the study involved interviews with employers of the department graduates regarding effectiveness of their employees who were graduates of the department, the accessible population for the second group of participants of the study comprised graduates who were in full-time employment either in the public or private sectors of the Ghanaian economy. Conversely, employees of organisations who were undertaking any courses or programmes of study with the department at the time of this study were not considered as part of the population. The reason for this was that they were considered not to be in full-time employment for a meaningful

assessment to be made by their employers of their effectiveness in their respective schedules.

In view of the overall study purpose, the choice of the concurrent mixed methods design to drive the research, and considering Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for selecting sample size for research studies, the actual sample for the research was 423. This number consisted of two groups of participants. The first group comprised 16 'employers' of the department's graduates who were selected purposively for semi-structured open-ended in-depth interviews to ascertain the effectiveness of the department's graduates in their respective roles and schedules. The second group comprised 407 of the department's graduates selected from organisations within which employers were selected.

An interview guide and self-administered questionnaires were the two data collection instruments employed to gather data from participants across the country for this research. The carefully and expertly developed interview guide was used to engage and elicit insights from employers. The self-administered questionnaires, on the other hand, were administered to the department's graduates in organisations from which employers were selected for the semi-structured open-ended interviews.

The tracer study involved a nation-wide data collection undertaken by a research team made up of one principal investigator, four co-principal investigators who were senior academic members of the department that undertook the tracer study and 19 research assistants who were PhD and MPhil candidates of the department, either as academic staff members or graduate students.

Rationale for the selection of the graduate tracer study as a reflective 'case'

This particular graduate tracer study was selected as the case for the reflective research exercise for two main reasons. The first reason was that this particular tracer study is primarily on Master's study programmes, which appeared to be one of a kind in the Ghanaian higher education context. It would be interesting to observe if there is any departure, regarding challenges and lessons, from the much more regular tracer studies on bachelor's degree study programmes. Second, this particular tracer study was the only one involving a nation-wide data collection found to have been undertaken by a single department in a university. Challenges and lessons from such a large-scale exercise by a single department would be insightful for informing the conduct of graduate tracer studies in the Ghanaian higher education context and in other national higher education systems.

Study methods

The research on which this article draws was based directly on the nation-wide graduate tracer study (Nudzor *et al.*, 2019). This means that it is expedient to

outline and justify two key methodological issues. The first issue is that, given that the researchers for the nation-wide graduate tracer study were themselves participants or respondents of the follow-up reflective case study, serious ethical issues of insider bias and conflict of interest may have arisen. In dealing with these ethical issues, two practical steps were adopted. First, the principal investigator and one of the co-principal investigators for the nation-wide tracer study have had to recuse themselves as participants/respondents and to re-designate themselves as researchers for the follow-up reflective case study. While this approach adopted may not have been the 'magic wand' to deal with the ethical issues that had arisen, this measure has assisted the researchers enormously in distancing themselves from the follow-up reflective case study and to adhere to the ethical principle of 'reporting nothing but the truth'. Second, this study fell within the 'insider-researcher' or 'going native' research category (Sikes & Potts, 2008), which raises issues of credibility. Credibility in research has been defined as the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In connection with credibility, qualitative research generally evokes questions about believability or trueness of findings due to perceived levels of subjectivity and biases. The questions about believability become even more profound when qualitative research is situated in an 'insider researcher' research approach where self-reflection is a key feature of involvement (Floyd & Arthur, 2012). Nonetheless, it has been demonstrated that researching from within is different from, not better or worse than, other forms of research, although it is concerned with questions that cannot be tackled as effectively by non-insider researchers (Loxely & Seery, 2008). This appeared to be the case in the present study because the over-arching question was: 'What reflective insights could we report on regarding the challenges and lessons from our nation-wide graduate tracer study to inform similar studies in the future?' According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), the whole issue of credibility in research is about establishing whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants' original views. In this present study, the findings were reported based purely on participants' original views because there was no motivation to report anything other than the realities of the tracer study research team members. This was because the study was about reporting the realities for a common cause of providing insights to guide similar studies in the future where there was no immediate or remote incentive(s) to misreport realities of the tracer study research team members.

The second methodological issue is to justify the methodological approach adopted. A qualitative case study methodology was adopted for the follow-up case study. The rationale for this was grounded in the aim to gain illustrative insights into the challenges and lessons associated with the conduct of the graduate tracer study in question. Understanding complex real-life dynamics in

graduate tracer studies requires either experience or specific cases that one can learn from (Eisner, 1998). Although it is unusual for the outcome of a case study to be generalised in the way that natural science data can, it is possible, according to Denzin (2009). Case studies do enable rich context analysis of problems to facilitate understanding on how to address context-specific issues (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Piekkari and Welch (2011) advised case study researchers not to sound apologetic in their write-up. They argued that just because case studies involve small sample size does not mean an absence of rigour. For them, case studies solve real problems even if the results might not be generalised. It has even been claimed that knowledge transfer occurs through outcomes of case studies (Eisner, 1998; Yin, 2014).

The illustrative case study was pursued through focus group interviews and individual interviews with the research team members of the graduate tracer study. For the follow-up reflective case study, on which this article reports, 22 researchers (3 co-principal investigators and 19 research assistants) constituted the participants/respondents. In view of the total number of participants/respondents for this study, coupled with the choice of research design, four focus group interviews were conducted involving all 19 research assistants. The three co-principal investigators were purposively selected for individual in-depth interviews. Thus, focus group interviews and individual interviews provided the core data for this study but additional data were provided in the form of the nation-wide graduate tracer study report.

Thematic and content analyses of the data generated through focus groups and individual interviews were employed. First, the data were coded and transcribed. The transcribed data were then cleaned by correcting errors in grammar and typography without distorting the meaning of sentences. The thematic analysis involved taking the challenges the researchers encountered in the conduct of the nation-wide graduate tracer study and the lessons they have learnt as themes along which lines the analysis and discussion of findings was conducted. Second, and as a follow-up to the thematic analysis, what focus group discussants and individual interview participants reported about their experiences regarding challenges and lessons from the tracer study were categorised and the contents of their reports were compared with statements that were made by other participants in the focus group discussions and individual interviews regarding the same issues (Flick, 2014).

Challenges of the nation-wide graduate tracer study and lessons learned

The major patterns that emerged during the categorisation and comparison of data on the challenges encountered by the graduate tracer study research team include: difficulty in accessing élite alumni; absence of a reliable database on graduates; wide physical geographic coverage; bulky survey questionnaire;

obsession with academic titles; and difficulty in linking graduate employment success to study programmes pursued.

Difficulty in accessing élite alumni

Access to élite alumni was one of the challenges reported by the research team members of the graduate tracer study. It emerged from the focus group discussions, for example, that majority of the alumni involved in the tracer study were considered to be in élite positions and access to them came with many difficulties:

> All the department's alumni have a minimum of Masters' degree with a reasonable number of them in high positions such as Regional Ministers, Principals of Colleges of Education, University Registrars, Regional and Municipal Directors so it was difficult getting access to them for interviews. (Focus Group 1)

> Our graduates were occupying élite positions and with their busy schedules, they hardly make time for either filling out the questionnaire for us or granting interviews with us. Meanwhile, these were critical participants of the study who could not be ignored because they were information rich when using employability to measure the effectiveness of the department's study programmes. (Focus Group 3)

> The challenge was gaining access to the graduate in élite offices to agree and schedule dates and venues for the data collection exercise, especially the interviews. (Focus Group 2)

The narratives from the focus group discussants seem to confirm what has already been reported in the literature on challenges associated with accessing élite participants in tracer studies. Harvey (2010) asserted that accessing respondents and indeed organisational élites for the purpose of interviewing them for qualitative data, is difficult. Maramwidze-Merrison (2016) corroborated Harvey's assertion by claiming that élite participants are often difficult to access because of the need to alleviate time pressures around their commitments. The interesting thing about this issue of access to élites is that while this was a major issue for the 19 research assistants involved in the focus group interviews or discussions, the effect was minimal for the three co-principal investigators. This was because unlike the research assistants, the co-principal investigators were PhD holders and therefore were regarded as colleagues and, in some instances, as superiors by the élite participants in the research. This, reiterates the view in the research methods literature (Goldman & Swayze, 2012; Nudzor, 2013; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002) that the relative willingness of élites to take part in a study is enhanced when and where knowledge about the professional credibility and identity of the researcher is established within the élite network.

It emerged from interactions with the research team that had undertaken the nation-wide graduate tracer study that academic titles or credentials played a prominent role in gaining access to élite respondents:

> Surprisingly, it emerged that the mentioning of academic titles such as 'Dr.' and 'Prof.' provided easy access to élite respondents whereas lower academic titles such as 'Mr., and 'Ms.' almost closed the access gate to élite respondents. (Focus Group 1)

> The same élite respondents who were reluctant to grant access to the team members with lower academic credentials, did grant easy access to the team members with higher academic credentials for interviews to be conducted. This put pressure on the research team to reshuffle spontaneously anytime such situation occurred and it made the data collection exercise more challenging than anticipated. (Focus Group 4)

This insight is revealing because gaining access to individual research participants is considered a relational issue (Feldman *et al*., 2003) but not academic titles as was reported in this graduate tracer study. This thus speaks to the level of social capital attached to academic titles in the Ghanaian society, which is an important lesson to be learned from this study. A discussant of one focus group said:

> … We thought that because we were dealing with our alumni things were going to be easy regarding gaining access to them for data collection purposes. We were wrong. These people [referring to IEPA alumni] were willing and ready to welcome and arrange dates for the interviews and self-administered questionnaires with their compatriots, the Drs and Professors, than with us. They sometimes treated us [inferring to those without academic titles and/or credentials] as if we didn't matter …. (A Discussant of Focus Group 4)

An individual interviewee added to these interesting insights:

> Henceforth, we'll ensure that in dealing with Educational Elites, senior members are at the forefront. We've realised that access to most of these élites was a problem for our researchers. This also prolonged the data collection phase unduly … (Respondent 2)

Similar sentiments were shared by the remaining focus groups and individuals interviewed.

Absence of reliable database on potential study participants

The absence of a reliable database of potential participants was another major challenge reported by the research team.

> There was no reliable database, which captured the contact details of the department's graduates, especially their phone numbers, places of work or residential addresses. This really made the data collection exercise difficult because we had to rely on few contact details and apply snowballing technique to reach other graduates. (Focus Group 4)

The other focus groups and individual interview participants made similar claims about the absence of reliable data on study participants. While the absence of reliable databases of alumni appears to be a common phenomenon in the Ghanaian higher education context (Taabazuing, 2010), the unavailability of this resource meant that the graduates who could not be contacted via the snowballing sampling technique were automatically excluded from the study.

This could have had implications for the study findings because it could have affected the right 'mix' of graduates to provide appropriate representation of alumni views on the effectiveness of IEPA's programmes. In this light, the issue of absence of reliable data on study participants could be seen more as a limitation of the nation-wide graduate tracer study (rather than a challenge), in the sense that it has the propensity to affect the validity or reliability of the study's findings.

The obvious lesson from this nation-wide data collection for graduate tracer study is the need to keep up-to-date alumni database. A discussant of focus group 3 made the point succinctly, 'We have learnt how important it is for our department to keep a reliable and updated database of our alumni … .'. A discussant of focus group 2 added, 'At the point of graduation, students should be made to confirm their contact details (including residential and workplaces; and periodically alumni should be contacted to update their contact details with the department. This will ensure that access to them in the future for research purposes is easier'.

Wide physical geographical coverage of study participants

It also emerged that the geographical spread of potential participants was a major challenge encountered by the team in the data collection for the study. This was reiterated by all the interviewees:

> The use of online data collection techniques failed to yield the needed results due to low internet penetration and unreliable telecommunication network in most part of the country so we had to travel throughout the whole country identifying the department's graduates for the study. It was difficult traveling from one location to the other, especially the three Northern Regions where the distance between one town and the other is far. (Respondent 1)

> We had to spend days in different location in Ghana identifying the areas and institutions where graduates of the department were staying or working in order to recruit them to participate in the study. (Respondent 2)

While the wide geographical coverage of study participants was an issue, this appears to have been exacerbated by the online data collection techniques employed. Maramwidze-Merrison (2016), for example, claimed that online data collection techniques have substantial cost advantages, time saving affordances, ease of access, and wider ethnographic scope compared to traditional approaches such as face-to-face questionnaires and visits to organisations. However, this claim may hold true for contexts with high Internet and technology penetration. Although there has been improvement in Internet and electronic mobile penetration throughout Ghana, its application in research work (especially accessing data) is rather low. It emerged from the focus group

discussions that, generally, respondents preferred, or were more content with, paper.

> We witnessed a low response rate to the google forms that we employed. We envisaged that with the advent of technology, more of the department's graduates could be accessed through electronic means but the response rate indicated it is still a challenge to use electronic data collection in Ghana so we had to use face-to-face in most cases. (Member of Focus Group 4)

Length of survey questionnaire

Another challenge encountered by the research team concerns the length of the survey questionnaires. To capture sufficient information for effective measurement of IEPA study programmes' effectiveness, the nation-wide tracer study research team developed self-administered questionnaires with too many items that made them bulky and time consuming to complete. This, according to the research team, negatively affected the return rate and extended the data collection period.

> The bulky nature of the questionnaire required up to 60 minutes to fill. Most of the respondents were reluctant and unwilling to answer the questions due to the bulky nature of the questionnaire and considering their busy schedules. Some of the respondents did not return the questionnaires distributed to them so we had to look for additional participants, which extended the data collection period unnecessarily. (Focus Group 1)

The other three focus groups and individual interviewees made similar statements concerning the questionnaire. Although the participants for the tracer study were 'highly literate', and the choice of self-administered questionnaire was justifiably suitable, there were too many items on a questionnaire that appeared to have placed huge cognitive demands on respondents, which may have affected the return rate and validity of the results. Bowling (2005) argued that when a self-administered questionnaire has too many items, it becomes difficult to obtain cooperation from respondents, and when they do cooperate, they may not be meticulous in providing responses that represent reality.

Difficulty in linking graduate employment success to study programme pursued

The research team revealed that attributing graduates' employment success directly to the programmes of the department was one of the major challenges they encountered.

> Judging the effectiveness of our study programmes was challenging in this particular tracer study in the sense that almost all of the department alumni were gainfully employed before beginning their studies at the department. Besides, majority of the

> participants, even though spoke about their satisfaction with the department's study programmes, had undertaken (in their various institutions of employment) continuous professional development programme since completing their programmes at the department. (Member of Focus Group 3)

A member of another focus group added,

> A reasonable number of participants had been placed on jobs outside their specialisation of study at the department. This, therefore, made it difficult to judge the effectiveness of the department programmes by linking their performances, successes and/or failures at the workplace to the training and qualification they have had from the department. (Member of Focus Group 2)

Thus, at face value, the challenge of linking graduate employment success to their study programmes as reported by the research team seems logical. However, this was impractical in the sense that no baseline study had been undertaken to enable value added to be established by the graduate tracer study. Thus, an attempt to establish a direct link of graduate employment success in the absence of baseline data therefore seems unnecessary when the graduates have expressed their satisfaction with the study programme and pointed out areas that need improvement.

Positive student experiences lead to alumni commitment in tracer studies

A major challenge and an important lesson that emerged from the tracer study concerns good treatment of students while they are still on their study programmes. An interviewee put this in plain words:

> One of the challenges we faced with data collection was the difficulty the research team encountered in convincing some alumni to participate in the study because of perceived unpleasant treatments they received whilst pursuing IEPA programmes of study. We have learnt that it pays to treat our students well. (Respondent 2)

Another respondent captured it this way:

> Generally, some alumni had unpleasant experiences with either some teaching staff, non-teaching staff or the institutional structures during their time at the department, which made it difficult to convince them to participate in the study. It is important that we treat our students well. (Respondent 3)

Additionally, a respondent retorted:

> Some alumni still do harbour bitter experiences about their alma mater. Consequently, we should bear in mind that one day we may require them to contribute towards the growth of the institution or become goodwill ambassadors. (Respondent 1)

Clearly, these responses, put together, show that the issue of unpleasant experiences of alumni was or is a combination of their experiences at the department and the university as a whole. This implies, therefore, that lessons on promoting

positive student experiences need to be discussed not only at the departmental level but at the university-wide level as well. Essentially, the insights in this section of the article show largely that positive student experience is a panacea to alumni commitment, especially in graduate tracer studies in Ghana.

Conclusion

This article is based on a nation-wide graduate tracer study, which investigated how alumni of IEPA were placed and utilised by their employers and how efficient and effective the graduates were at their respective schedules and places of work. Essentially, this article has provided an illustrative insight into challenges associated with conducting graduate tracer studies for postgraduate programmes effectiveness in the Ghanaian higher education context. The article has unearthed some critical challenges that the nation-wide graduate tracer study research team struggled to surmount. These challenges include: difficulty in accessing élite alumni; obsession with academic titles; absence of reliable database on graduates; wide physical geographic coverage; lengthy survey questionnaire; difficulty in linking graduate employment success to study programme pursued. Lessons learnt in the process are quite insightful for the conduct of future graduate tracer studies within the context of Ghana. These lessons include: paying attention to academic titles in data collection in graduate tracer studies in Ghana; keeping reliable database on graduates is fundamental to successful conduct of a graduate tracer study for post-graduate programmes in the Ghanaian higher education context; and enhancing positive student experiences to facilitate their cooperation in graduate tracer studies when they become alumni. Against the backdrop of the issues discussed, the article concludes that paying serious attention to the challenges and lessons discussed within the context of this graduate tracer study is a useful foundation for successful graduate tracer studies in the Ghanaian higher education context. The research approach and the findings of this reflective study present valuable insights that could significantly improve how graduate tracer studies are carried out not only in the Ghanaian higher education context but also other higher education systems in the developing world whose cultural, economic and higher education contexts are similar to Ghana.

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