EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF FIELD READY: A NEW MODEL OF EMPLOYABILITY FOR STATE INSTITUTIONS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

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Abstract

Field Ready programmes bridge the gap between education and employment by producing individuals who are ready to work in the industrial sector. Universities, colleges and institutes are licensed to run Field Ready programmes that are validated by an Alliance of companies. These programmes help companies who finance scholarships to access safe, motivated and loyal new employees from a sustainable local source. The term ‘Field Ready’ describes a person who is highly employable and ready to be deployed in their field of work.

Field Ready was established in 2015 and now operates in Mozambique and Ghana with plans to launch in Senegal and Nigeria later in 2019. This paper sets out the approach that Field Ready has developed to address the gap between the outputs of state-run education institutions and the requirements of employers. The model is based on a combination of applied technical skills, applied personal skills, health, safety and environment training (HSE) and field experience. The involvement of employers is key – the participating companies influence the curriculum that is taught, oversee the delivery of the programme and validate students as ‘field ready’ once they have completed their studies.

Having presented the model, we provide a case study of the first programme run in Ghana. Using mixed method research based on surveys and interviews, we look at the students from the first cohort in Ghana who were sponsored – and then employed – with a particular focus on five students who were sponsored by a global oilfield services company. We look at the quality of student experience and then consider the impact of the programme on the employability of those students from an employer perspective.

The study demonstrates that by placing employers at the heart of the education model you can increase the quality of the student experience and ensure that the outcomes of the programme lead to a greater level of employability than is typical with state-funded vocational training programmes. This provides evidence that the Field Ready model can be transformative in building locally-led employability programmes that ensure a legacy of talented graduates, a strengthened talent pool and act as a driver for economic growth.

Keywords: vocational training, employability, developing world, employer-led.

1 INTRODUCTION

The disconnect between the outputs of education and the requirements of employers has deep historical roots and remains a key challenge for societies around the world. Although Barack Obama’s famous statement – ‘those who out-educate will out-perform’ – remains true, the connection between education systems and the economies that they feed into is complex. In their landmark report – Effective Education for Employment: A Global Perspective – Hall and Playfoot define effective education for employment as ‘the development and assessment of the requisite skills, knowledge and behaviours that constitute an effective employee in the 21st century’[1]. The report goes on to state that ‘there is a significant disconnection between education systems and the needs of 21st century employers, both public and private. The match between what employers, individuals and governments seek and what respective education and training systems provide appears ill-fitting in many countries [2]. This challenge is particularly acute in many parts of the African continent (although is also prevalent elsewhere). A report by the Wilson Centre states the context thus: ‘Despite the progress made by African governments to skill the youth and workers through TVET [technical and vocational education], provisions are still fraught with challenges. In most African countries, there is an inherent bias in the form of low prestige towards technical and vocational courses, and it is generally associated with low educational attainment [3].’ A report last year by Kenyan consultancy Advantech further highlighted the specific challenge facing Africa: ‘Education systems are preparing graduates for jobs in sectors that are saturated, neglecting
skills that are a reflection of labor market realities. This has rendered most young people in the region unemployable[4]. This is the context within which Field Ready was born.

Field Ready is specifically designed to address the challenges set out here – namely the mismatch between education and employment, the failure of the state education system to prepare young people for work, the lack of employability of graduates, the poor status of TVET and the lack of involvement in education provision amongst employers and industry. This paper presents the Field Ready model that has now been rolled out in Ghana and Mozambique and offers some brief analysis of the success of the approach through consideration of students who have completed Field Ready programmes in Ghana and the feedback of a major employer in Ghana who has become a Field Ready partner. The conclusions offer clear direction to those wishing to tackle the lack of employability amongst young people in the developing world.

2 THE FIELD READY MODEL

Employers are at the heart of the Field Ready model. This ensures their direct involvement in and validation of student selection, programme content, instructor development and ultimately, the employability of students upon completion of the programme. Employers join the Field Ready Alliance in each participating country. The Alliance comprises major international and national industrial organisations, relevant government agencies, such as education ministries or industry regulators, as well as licensed education institutions. The success of the model is dependent on facilitating a close working relationship between employers and state educators who operate and deliver the programme.

The Field Ready programme is grounded in years of research on the gap between education and employment. Interestingly, the skills, knowledge and behaviours identified for employable entry-level technicians, engineers and operators are the same across multiple industrial sectors. This includes energy, construction, transport, logistics, food- and agro-processing. The research has informed and shaped a programme with four main components:

1 Technical knowledge and practical skills

The technical programme is the basis of what makes Field Ready learners employable. It provides students with the technical knowledge and skills they need to become employed in the industrial sector. It combines theoretical and practical technical training across different engineering disciplines, including mechanical, electrical, process and instrumentation. The core content is usually based on nationally approved units of study that are already taught at Licensed Institutions.

2 Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) ability and mindset

The HSE programme gives learners the critical safety skills they will need in any industrial sector job. Knowledge of HSE processes and behaviours is critical within the modern industrial workplace. Many companies will not consider anyone to be employable unless they are fully trained in HSE, particularly within high-risk sectors like oil and gas and construction. HSE often represents the biggest gap between technical education provision and the requirements of employers. The Field Ready programme focuses not only on teaching the core principles and procedures of HSE but also on promoting an HSE culture and developing an HSE mindset. Companies can contribute to the overall HSE education of Field Ready students, for example through delivering guest presentations.

3 Applied personal skills

The applied personal skills programme is designed to give learners the employability skills, attitudes and behaviours they need to flourish in the workplace. This means things like communication skills, teamwork, problem solving and leadership. The programme is delivered in two parts, usually one week at the beginning of the teaching schedule, and one week at the end. However, it is intended that all components of the Field Ready programme are augmented by ongoing personal skills reinforcement activities throughout.

4 Field experience

The field experience element of Field Ready is designed to give students exposure to a real working environment. This allows students to see how their theoretical knowledge and applied learning from the classroom or workshop applies to a live field site context. Every Field Ready learner has the opportunity to go on field placements with companies in the Field Ready Alliance.
These can vary in duration from a day site visit to a placement of up to six months (as is the case in Ghana).

Where required, English language training – including general and technical English, forms the fifth component. It is typically delivered by a local partner and is designed to bring learners up to a good basic level of English proficiency (to a standard required by international companies recruiting entry-level staff).

While the Field Ready programme has a core curriculum for each of the components outlined above, participating employers have the opportunity to amend or make additions to the programme according to local workforce requirements. This is one of the key roles of a Technical Commissioner.

Technical Commissioners are senior technical or operational members of staff nominated by companies in the Field Ready Alliance to participate in the programme. They each have the responsibility to:

• Participate in the selection of students onto the programme
  A rigorous six-stage selection process sources the best national engineering talent onto the programme. The process emphasises personal skills, attitudes and behaviours to select students that display an eagerness to learn, leadership, communication skills and other key qualities that form the basis of highly employable people.

• Inform and validate programme content
  Technical Commissioners may identify additional knowledge or skills required for employability in the local context or aligned to the industry sectors participating in the Alliance. Often Technical Commissioners will supply modules from in-house company training or onboarding programmes. Content must be approved and agreed by all Technical Commissioners before it is included onto the programme.

• Mentor students through the programme
  Technical Commissioners offer an invaluable network and resource for students, with unprecedented access to senior members of staff in major industrial companies. Once students are assigned to companies for scholarship award, an introduction is made with their Technical Commissioner. This relationship is nurtured throughout the programme via visits by the Technical Commissioner to the education institute, phone conversations and email. This also helps to build students’ professional communication skills.

• Arrange and host field experience placements
  Where possible, Technical Commissioners arrange and host field placements for students and instructors at their company. This forges stronger relationships between students, instructors and the company who has funded their scholarship, with the added advantage of giving Technical Commissioners the chance to observe students ‘field readiness’ within a work environment.

• Deliver guest presentations
  Guest presentations offer students valuable industry insights to supplement what is taught on the core curriculum. Presentations may focus on technical or HSE topic areas or discuss an area of employability and personal skills.

• Validate students as ‘Field Ready’ at the end of the programme
  The process of final assessment is based on consultation between instructors and Technical Commissioners and considers the students’ performance over the duration of the programme. A portfolio of evidence is validated by Technical Commissioners and followed by a final interview before Technical Commissioners confirm students are ‘field ready’, or not. This validation is a powerful endorsement of the employability of the student as they start their careers.

Another key part of the Field Ready model is investing in the professional development of instructors at licensed education institutions. This ensures they have access to the training and experiences that will help them develop their teaching and learning skills. Instructors delivering the Field Ready programme receive professional development with the following elements:

• Instructor Support Consultants support instructors to deliver the Field Ready programme and provide ongoing mentoring to instructors. They are highly experienced members of the Field Ready team who are assigned to each licensed institution. These individuals have a wealth of industry experience and give instructors training and support around course content, particularly
on the HSE and applied personal skills components of the programme. Whilst the Instructor Support Consultants are not there every single day, these individuals are with instructors throughout the programme, help with their professional development and monitor instructors’ progress towards achieving their goals. They also report back to the management of the licensed institution on the success of the instructors’ Field Ready experience.

- Dedicated HSE training from the Instructor Support Consultant with support to instructors to deliver the HSE programme to students. This is part of Field Ready’s sustainable approach to ensuring licensed institutions become self-sufficient delivering the programme. It is important that the instructors embody the HSE attitude, behaviours and actions that is expected of the students. This means adhering to policies about wearing Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), making sure that equipment is used in a safe way, following best-practice and industry standards, running toolbox talks and being strict about the use of mobile phones.

- Worksite visits and field placements are arranged for both students and instructors in a range of industrial sectors. Instructors get the chance to interact with leaders and practitioners in industry and learn from their expertise and experience. This helps instructors give a context for the programme content and supports them in preparing students for employment.

- Instructor Development Programme delivered over three years. The Field Ready approach is based around the belief that employable graduates receive the best industrial training from dynamic and motivated instructors. Part of this is to ensure that the learning experience is active, collaborative and engaging. The Instructor Development Programme includes training on teaching and learning techniques. This covers some of the latest thinking around how to make learning sessions as interactive and immersive as possible. Instructors learn some of the latest approaches to bringing learning alive and develop instructors’ skills as teachers and trainers.

- English language training (where required). In countries where English is not the first language, English language training is offered to all Field Ready Instructors during the first three years of operation. The aim is that after this three-year period, instructors will be able to deliver the programme in a mix of their home language and English.

3 FIELD READY IMPACT EVALUATION

The Field Ready model has now been applied in two countries – Ghana and Mozambique – with plans for launch in Nigeria and Senegal. We have looked at a number of different metrics in evaluating the impact and success of the model so far, with a focus on the graduates and students in Ghana. Field Ready has been run in partnership with Takoradi Technical University – a state funded institution – since 2016. In reporting the impact of Field Ready, we first look at the student perspective and then at the employer perspective.

3.1 The student perspective

To augment our evaluation, we have run a survey with the two completed cohorts exploring student experience and perception of employability. The results of this survey are summarised below. Regarding the experience of studying with Field Ready, the 26 students surveyed responded as follows:

- 92.4% of students surveyed ‘greatly’ or ‘mostly’ enjoyed their experience of learning with Field Ready
- 80.8% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they found their FR studies stimulating
- 92.3% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed teaching and learning sessions were interesting and engaging
- 88.5% of students surveyed said they had sufficient opportunities to be active and practical in their learning

Regarding the degree to which the surveyed students felt that their Field Ready experience prepared them for professional life, responses were as follows:

- 100% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed they were given a good level of basic knowledge to build their skills around
- 84.6% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed they were able to develop a good level of technical skills for their chosen career
• 100% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to develop the applied personal skills they needed for employment

• 88.5% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their field experience contributed greatly to their development as a technician/engineer

When asked about the specific applied personal skills that studying with Field ready developed, responses were as follows:

• 100% of students surveyed identified teamwork as an applied personal skill they were able to develop as part of their Field Ready experience

• 92.3% of students surveyed identified communication, critical thinking, problem solving and taking the initiative as applied personal skills they were able to develop as part of their Field Ready experience

When asked about the HSE component of their education, responses were as follows:

• 88.5% of students surveyed said they had the right level of HSE knowledge, skills and mindset to be a safe employee. The remaining 11.5% said they needed some additional knowledge

And when asked about their general level of employability following their Field Ready experiences, responses were as follows:

• 46.2% of students surveyed agreed that Field Ready prepared them extremely well for employment

• 65.4% of students surveyed agreed that Field Ready gave them the knowledge, skills and behaviours to be a success

• 65.4% of students surveyed agreed that they were confident in a professional working environment as a result of their training with Field Ready

• 96.2% of students surveyed felt that they did not require any further training to be an effective employee

Taken as a whole, these figures demonstrate extremely high levels of student satisfaction both in terms of the quality of the student/learning experience and the confidence students have in their own capacities and in their overall employability. These figures are particularly striking when you bear in mind they are based on an education programme run entirely within a state-funded education institution where student satisfaction and graduate employability rates are typically much lower.

To augment these figures, the survey also asked for open responses relating to the experience of studying with Field Ready and the impact that Field Ready has had on students. On the first point, students provided a range of almost entirely positive comments. Students were specifically asked how their experiences of learning with Field Ready were different from their other studies. Responses here included: “more stimulating and interactive”; “focus on practical training and opportunities to network”; “purpose driven and tailored to meet the demands of industry”; “my studies previously were centred on how to pass my exams…Field Ready was different”; “hands-on training under the supervision of well-qualified trainers”; “the training offers students the skill of teamwork, leadership, positive attitudes, and decision taking initiatives which are all key elements for career and personal development”; “learning is focused and practically orientated”. These quotes give us further evidence that the highly practical, experiential and industry focused approach of Field Ready – coupled with a sustained emphasis on applied personal skills – transformed the learning experience. In terms of the employability of the students, their comments further cement the view that Field Ready provides real impact. Students describe Field Ready as follows: “tremendous positive impact…earning me some great leadership roles in my organisation”; “a very beneficial programme for my development…giving me the opportunity to network and meet my current employer”; “one of the best things to ever happen to me…shaping me into a resilient, confident and professional individual”; “…has had a huge impact on my career growth…and opened up countless opportunities”. These comments demonstrate the significant impact that Field Ready has on more intangible employability aspects like self-confidence and self-belief. They also highlight the value generated through connecting Field Ready students with employers throughout the programme. This leads us into a more detailed analysis of the employer perspective, something critical to the success of Field Ready.
3.2 The employer perspective

To assess the impact of Field Ready on the employability of students from an employer perspective, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the Technical Commissioner from a global oilfield services company in the Ghana Alliance. This company funded scholarships and subsequently hired five graduates from the first cohort of students and is currently funding two students in the second cohort.

The Technical Commissioner made the following comments on the impact of the programme on students’ employability:

- Field Ready students have an advantage over their peers in terms of their understanding and knowledge of the field. While each role is slightly different and requires on-the-job training, they have a wide-ranging basic knowledge to build upon. Field Ready students are very trainable and come with additional experience and learning in comparison to others.

- HSE is a key area where Field Ready students stand out. They know how to work safely. Students are well-practiced with the use of toolbox talks and task-based risk assessments, which is excellent preparation for the processes and procedures used in the work place. While it is necessary for all new recruits to receive further HSE training, the Field Ready programme provides students with a very good basis.

- Field Ready students have a noticeably different mentality to their peers: they know how to compose themselves in the workplace, communicate with colleagues, and think outside of the box. Field Ready students have an eagerness to learn and can easily adapt to new roles.

This feedback is echoed in field placement performance reports for cohort two students at the same company. They highlight students’:

- Readiness to learn and openness to new ideas and suggestions
- Broad technical knowledge and adaptability
- Proactiveness towards HSE, their safety and that of others
- Teamwork and professionalism

In general, the Technical Commissioner agreed that the Field Ready programme was an excellent method of preparing students for work. The programme is viewed by the employer as an effective way of sourcing talent. Additionally, the ability to input into the content of the programme and the provision for Technical Commissioners’ involvement throughout, were identified as major benefits.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The Field Ready model is highly novel in that it takes as its starting point the delivery of technical/vocational training within a local state-funded institution and inverts the usual challenges that such an approach faces. In many parts of the world – and countries across Africa in particular – state-funded institutions are not considered to offer an educational experience that is fit for purpose for the 21st century. The technical, practical and personal skills that are the bedrock of employability are either absent, poorly structured or badly delivered. The Field Ready model has demonstrated how a well-structured programme, supported by investment in the local educators delivering that programme and allied to sustained and focused industry involvement can create a compelling student experience and lead to high levels of employability.

What this paper has shown is the following:

- That local institutions can offer the kind of highly practical, experiential learning that builds technical capacities to industry standards
- That a strong focus on health, safety and environment can transform the employability of students, particularly those looking to work in the industrial sectors like oil and gas, construction, agribusiness and food processing
- That an explicit programme developing applied personal skills – like leadership, teamwork, communication, collaboration, problem solving – is vital in ensuring that individuals develop the attitudes and behaviours they need to thrive in a professional environment
• That the sustained and deep involvement of employers in the design and delivery of educational programmes ensures the students build their industry awareness, creates opportunities for networking and increases the relevance of the taught elements of the programme

• That designing and monitoring field placements into the programme of learning creates the vital experience component that employers are looking for and that this provides a ‘bridge’ to employment

• That local state-funded institutions are entirely capable of successfully delivering a programme of this nature given the right level of support, training and mentoring

We will continue to monitor and evaluate the Field Ready programme as new cohorts complete their studies and enter the world of work. We will report this impact as widely as possible and through our website: www.getfieldready.com.

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