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Effect of COVID-19 on acquisition of employable skills among national service personnel in Ghana

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examined the effect of COVID-19 on the acquisition of employable skills among national service personnel in Ghana.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopted the cross-sectional descriptive survey design from the positivist paradigm to collect data from a sample of 2,263 out of a population of 77,962 trainees (national service personnel) posted to the public (85.1%) and the private (14.9%) sectors for the 2019/2020 service year. Sampling techniques were simple random, stratify and snowball sampling techniques and Google form softcopy questionnaire was used for data collection.

Findings – The study found that COVID-19 had made workplaces and work schedules very risky for trainees' acquiring employable skills in Ghana because their employers/trainers' were unable to provide adequate PPEs for trainees. Preventive measures such as mandatory leaves, reduced workload/working hours and shift system had reduced the duration for acquiring employable skills which could affect employability and aggravate graduate unemployment in Ghana. The sustainability and quality of job opportunities presented by COVID-19 to graduate trainees-farming; trading and online teaching could also not be guaranteed.

Research limitations/implications – It was recommended that employers/trainers should provide adequate PPEs, introduce teleworking with the necessary tools and training for their trainees. Educational institutions should provide work-based learning methods in their curricula to enhance employable skills for national service graduates. Government's support for trainees venturing into self-employed job opportunities presented by the COVID-19 was also recommended

Practical implications – It was recommended that employers/trainers should provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), introduce teleworking with the necessary tools and training for their trainees. Government's support for trainees venturing into self-employed job opportunities presented by the COVID-19 was also recommended.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the everyday way of living since its emergence in December 2019 (ILO, 2020). Apart from being a global health crisis, the COVID-19 (and its causative virus – Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2-SARS-CoV-2) also poses a major global socioeconomic challenge to education, skills training and work or employment (Deloitte, 2020). The socioeconomic disruptions to education and work-based learning, training and on-the-job learning; and finding quality jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Watterson, 2020), have a greater effect on the youth acquiring employable skills than other age groups. Thus, the fundamental human rights enshrined in section 24 of the 1992 constitution of Ghana on the right to work under the economic rights of citizens (Hodges and Baah, 2006) and the right to education in Ghana, could be difficult to assess during the COVID-19 pandemic. One category of the youth acquiring employable skills for transiting to the job market is the tertiary graduates undertaking mandatory national service (Segbenya *et al.*, 2021).

According to Segbenya *et al.* (2021), "countries have adopted the mandatory national service as a practical training period to reduce the skill mismatch and enhance employability among tertiary graduates transiting from school into the job market". This method of enhancing employable skills could play a complementary role to the work applied management methods such as work-based learning in the form of apprenticeship undertaken by these graduates when they were in school (Rizvi *et al.*, 2013). Meanwhile, the impact of the COVID-19 on employable skills acquisition under the mandatory national service is not very well reported in the literature on education, training and employment. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature on work-applied management, work-based learning, training, employable skills and employment by specifically examining how the emergence of the COVID-19 has affected the acquisition of employable skills through the mandatory national service in Ghana.

In terms of studies on the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19, the ILO (2020) found that full or partial lockdown measures introduced to curtailed the spread of the virus has affected about 2.7 billion workers, representing approximately 81% of the global workforce especially unprotected informal workers. ILO found that predicted reductions in economic activity would cause an unprecedented decline in employment in terms of quality and quantity of jobs available to the employed and the unemployed. Meanwhile, the ILO indicated that some industries/sectors stand to benefits from the COVID-19 whiles others stand to suffer negatively.

Buheji and Buheji (2020) also examined "planning competency in the new normal–employability competency in a post-COVID-19 pandemic". The authors proposed a two-dimensional framework (such as the demands of the new normal and essential employable skills) required under the new normal to be adopted to meet the unruly, uncertain and turbulent new normal poses by the COVID-19. The demand for the new normal dimension posits that for people to become competent and employable, they need to react, realise, resolve, reshape and be resilient (5Rs). The essential employable skills required under the new normal were proactiveness, preparedness, pulling together, problem-solving and publishing/publicising (5Ps).

Upoalkpajor and Upoalkpajor (2020) also examined the effect of COVID-19 on the education system in Ghana. The study employed the quantitative approach and the descriptive and explanatory design with questionnaires in addition to library research to collect data from primary and secondary data from 100 teachers and students of selected Senior High Schools (SHS) in the Tamale Metropolitan area of the Northern Region of Ghana. The study found that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected secondary school

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education in Ghana. The study recommended that schools in Ghana should be resourced to reconstruct the loss suffered in education through the COVID-19 epidemic.

Study gap

There have been very limited studies (ILO, 2020; Buheji and Buheji, 2020; Upoalkpajor and Upoalkpajor, 2020) on the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 at the global level and in Ghana. These few studies have been limited to sectors that stood a chance to benefit or suffer from the impact of the pandemic; the demand and skills needed for the new normal pose by the pandemic; and the impact of COVID-19 on educational systems in Ghana. These studies have proven that COVID-19 has impacted the educational system and the world of work. However, the effect of COVID-19 on trainees (the national service personnel) who are neither students nor workers but are undergoing employable skills acquisition through the mandatory national service in Ghana, is not known. Thus, there is a lacuna in the literature with regards to the impact of COVID-19 on skill acquisition by the national service personnel in Ghana.

The national service personnel (tertiary graduates) serve as the most refined job market entrants with some level of acquired employable skills as compared to their counterparts in school transiting into the job market (Ajayi, 2016; Schroyens *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the socioeconomic effect of the COVID-19 definitely has repercussion on the fortunes of these labour market entrants in Ghana. This study contributes to the literature on work-applied management, work-based learning, employable skills, employment and the socioeconomic impact of a pandemic COVID-19 by examining the impact of COVID-19 on employable skills acquisitions in Ghana. Specifically, the study sought to provide answers to three research questions which were:

RQ1. How have the COVID-19 affected schedules of activities or skill acquisition of trainees (National Service Personnel) in Ghana?

RQ2. What supports were provided by "employers"/supervisors of trainees to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the skill acquisition of national service personnel in Ghana?

RQ3. What job opportunities did the COVID-19 present to trainees in Ghana?

The next section examines the theoretical and conceptual issues, results and discussion and conclusion section to the study.

A theoretical and conceptual perspective of the study

This study is grounded in the system theory with the justification that skills acquisition under the national service (backed by the human capital theory) exist in a system or lies between educational institutions and employment. Thus, the impact of the COVID-19 on the main system (that is the country or the global world) or parts of the system-educational institutions and the world of work, surely has an impact or influence on national service personnel's skills acquisition process.

A system can be seen as "an entity, which is a coherent whole such that a boundary is perceived around it in order to distinguish internal and external elements and to identify input and output relating to and emerging from the entity" (Mele *et al.*, 2010, p. 127). A systems theory is a theoretical perspective that examines a situation as a whole. The emphasis is on interactions and the relationships between the elementary parts to comprehend an entity's organisation, functioning and outcomes (Golinelli, 2010). Over time, the system theory has developed simultaneously across various disciplines such as social systems (from sociology, which is guiding this study), service systems (from Service Science, Management, Engineering and Design – SSMED), and viable systems (from Viable

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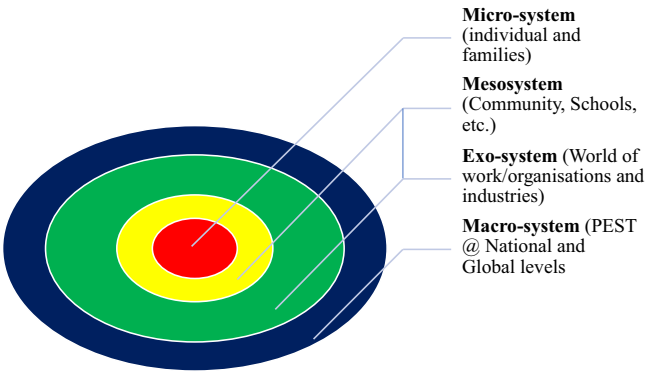
Systems Approach – VSA) (Chih-Hui and Sapphire, 2017). The rest are smart systems (from systems thinking), reticular systems (from network theories), living systems (from natural sciences), economic systems (from economics), institutional systems (from the law), technological systems (from cybernetics), conceptual systems (from psychology) and ecosystems (from ecology) (Mele *et al.*, 2010).

The social system theory from the sociological perspective (Schlippe and Hermann, 2013) is used in this study to suggest that the individual trainee (national service personnel) came from a micro-system (such as individuals from families) who grew, interacted with the mesosystem such as the community and the educational system where some level of skills have been acquired (see Figure 1). These learned skills are better enhanced, and other more specific employable skills learned through the mandatory national service. These acquired and required employable skills learned (Prikshat and Nankervis, 2019) to catalyse and propels these service personnel into the exo-system where organisations and industries are located for employment. The first three systems-micro-system, mesosystem and exo-system are all superimposed by the macro-system or environment consisting of the political, economic, sociocultural, technological factors at the national and the international levels. Thus, the effect of the COVID-19 on the political economic, social and technological (PEST) system at the national and global levels influences the world of work (exo-system) and the skill acquisition processes that are linked to it (Badu *et al.*, 2018) (see Figure 1).

COVID-19 pandemic and national service in Ghana

Nazario (2020) posit that SARS-CoV-2 causes the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organisation confirmed on the 12 January 2020, that the SARS-CoV-2 was responsible for a respiratory illness recorded in the world, and further declared the novel COVID-19 a pandemic. Ghana confirmed its first two cases on 12 March 2020, through two infected Turkish and Norwegian (Nazario, 2020). The government of Ghana quickly instituted several measures on the 15 March 2020 to help contain the spread of the virus. These measures were bans on all social gatherings, bans on school activities, restrictions of movements, temporary lockdown of people in the Ashanti and Greater Accra Regions of Ghana (Upoalkpajor and Upoalkpajor, 2020).

Whiles some infected people with COVID-19 will feel minor or modest respiratory illness and may recuperate without special treatment, the older folks especially those with underlying health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory illness are more likely to develop severe illness (Ghana Health Service, 2020).



Source(s): Adapted from Segbenya *et al.* (2018) and Woolcott *et al.* (2019)

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework of the study

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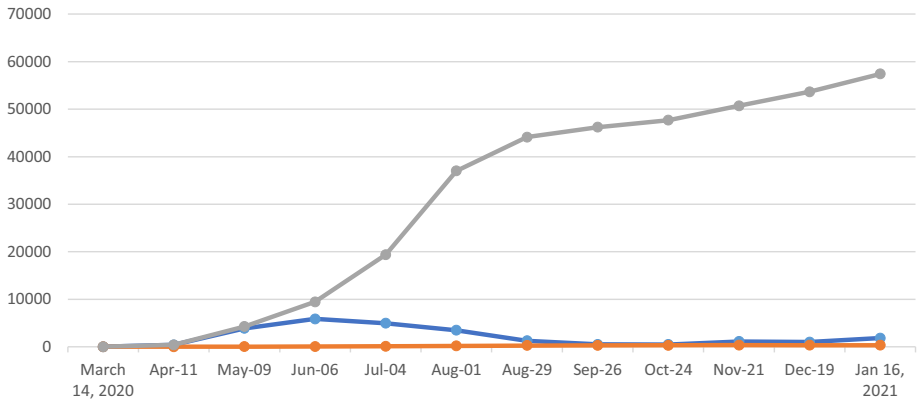
Thus, to contain and slow the spread of the COVID-19, the government has intensified education on the mode of transmission, signs and symptoms of the COVID-19; using of an alcohol-based sanitiser regularly or washing of hands and not touching one's face; and wearing of nose mask. As at 29th August, the total number of cases stood at 44,118 with over 42,246 recoveries, 270 dead (see Figure 2) (Ghana Health Service, 2020).

Ghana, among other 20 African countries, has introduced compulsory national service for tertiary graduate under the age of 40 in all sectors of the economy to enhance their employable skills (Segbenya *et al.*, 2021; Ajayi, 2016). The National Service Scheme of Ghana came into force in 1973 with the aim of supporting the national human resources needs in various sectors such as education, technology, and agriculture, among others. For this reason, tertiary graduates after the completion of an accredited degree or diploma programmes are posted to all sectors of the economy to work for a year to acquire some employable skills for the job market (Langer and Meuleman, 2019). "National service personnel are paid an allowance of less than $100 a month after been posted to either private or public sector organisations that request their services" (Segbenya *et al.*, 2021, p. 9). The compulsory nature of the national service coupled with postings to sectors solely determined by the national service secretariat on behalf of the government poses ethical and right to work challenges.

In order to curb the spread of the coronavirus and ensure the safety of trainees (national service personnel) in Ghana, the Ghana National Service Secretariat (NSS) directed that all personnel should undertake a mandatory paid-annual leave effective Thursday, 26th March 2020, till the end of April 2020. The personnel resumed the mandatory leave on the 4 May 2020 (NSS, 2020).

Effect of COVID-19 on sectors of the Ghanaian economy

The estimated effect of COVID-19 was a fall in the global GDP from 3.3% to less than 2.9%; Africa's projected GDP growth from 3.2% to 1.8% and Ghana's estimated GDP growth from 6.8% to about 2.6% for 2020 (Deloitte, 2020). In terms of the sectorial effect, the real sectors of the Ghanaian economy such as agricultural, industrial and services are likely going to be affected by the COVID-19 - either negatively or positively. Agricultural which employs about 65 per cent of workers in Ghana is likely to suffer in terms of farmers accessibility to machinery, insecticides, fertilisers and seedlings due to slow down in the agricultural supply chain. Reduction in household spending and consumption could also have an indirect impact on the agricultural sector. Meanwhile, there is also the possibility that retrenched workers



Source(s): Ghana Health Services (2020)

Figure 2. COVID-19 infection rate in Ghana as of January 2021

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from other sectors of the economy due to the COVID-19 could also venture into agriculture which could boost production in either the short or long term.

The industrial sector which comprised of manufacturing, mining, construction, electricity and water stand to suffer due to employee lay-offs due to redundancies, shutdowns of various organisations as well as shortages of inputs or raw materials as a result of COVID-19. However, the demand for hand sanitisers, tissues papers, nose mask, "veronica buckets" could have a positive effect on the industry sector of the economy by offering production and employment opportunities for individuals and organisation in the industrial sector. The service sector, which also comprises education, information and communication, tourism, aviation/transport, hotels and restaurant, defence and health is another sector that stands to experience the severe impact of COVID -19. The main challenges for this sector stem from the need to maintain physical distancing and ban on public gatherings as well as the closure of borders (land, sea and air). The subsequent effect of these would result in slow down activities of schools, and airlines are reducing revenue generation and slowing down activities of schools, airline businesses, hotels, restaurants as well as tourist sites.

Methodology

The study adopted the cross-sectional descriptive survey design from the positivist paradigm (Creswell, 2009) to collect data from a sample of 2,263 (2.9%) out of a population of 77, 962 national service personnel posted to the public sector (85.1%) and the private sector (14.9%) for the 2019/2020 service year. The study adopted a multi-stage sampling technique comprising probability and non-probability sampling techniques such as simple random, stratify and snowball sampling techniques (Segbenya *et al.*, 2019). Due to restriction on public gathering and the mandatory paid leave granted to the respondents, it was difficult to contact respondents at their workplaces where they could easily be reached. Thus, the snowball sampling technique was deployed so that the Google form softcopy version of the questionnaire could be forwarded by a respondent to other respondents whose whereabouts were not known to the researcher.

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire (Google form softcopy version) due to the research design. The items of the questionnaire were both open and close-ended items. However, due to the quantitative approach and the descriptive survey design adopted, the open-ended responses were coded quantitatively for the analysis. The questionnaire was divided into two parts, with part one focused on biodata, and part two centred on the three main research questions. Data collection was done from May to June 2020, where the soft copy of the Google form questionnaire was sent through WhatsApp platforms to identified respondents which were further forwarded to other respondents for their responses. All ethical provisions such as anonymity, freedom to participate and withdraw, confidentiality and no harm to respondents among others were adhered to. Data were analysed with descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations.

Results and analysis

The presentation in this section will start with the biodata of respondents and results on the three research questions and concluded with the discussion of the results. The result for the biodata of respondents can be seen in Figure 3 and 4. The results in Figure 3 on the gender and highest education of national service personnel in Ghana for the 2019/2020 service year show that majority of the respondents were diploma holders (94%) from the college of education who were males (52.4%).

Figure 4 also shows the results for the sectors that respondents national service personnel were posted for the 2019/2020 service year. Out of the nine subsectors found in the public and private sectors, the majority of the respondents were found in the education subsector (93.5%) followed by government agencies (3.4%) and the health subsector (2.4%).

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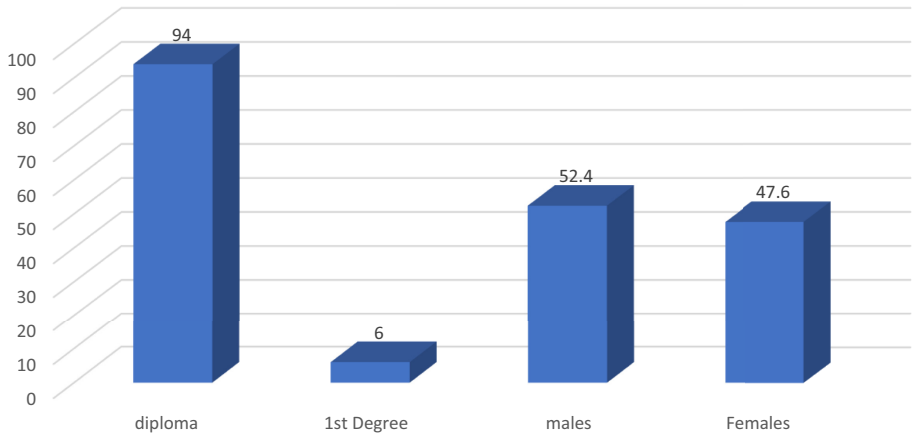

Figure 3.
Highest education and gender of respondents

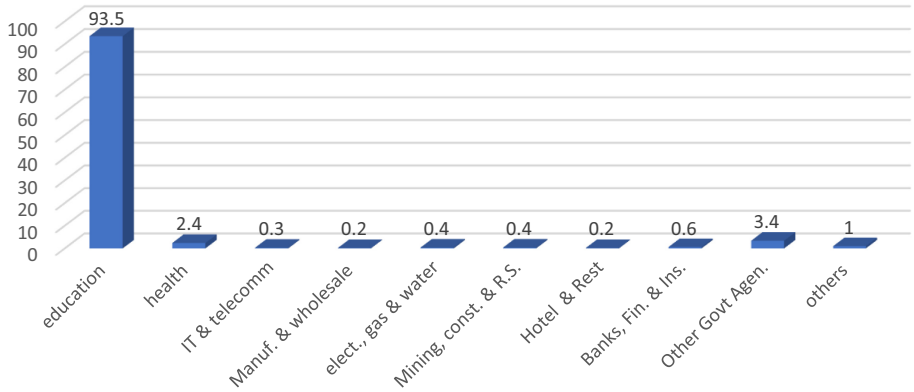

Figure 4.
Sectors of respondents.

How COVID-19 influences schedule of activities of national service personnel in Ghana

The first research question of the study examined the influence of the COVID-19 on the work schedules of trainees (national service personnel in Ghana) and the results can be found in Figure 5.

Six items were used to measure this objective. Among the six items, (as can be seen from Figure 5) respondents disagreed that their organisations have reduced or stopped the financial support or allowance given to them during the COVID-19 (N = 1,585); provides all the personal protective equipment (PPEs) (N = 1,452) and undertaking teleworking due to COVID-19 (N = 1,150). The majority of the respondents, however, agreed that their work schedules had become very risky due to the COVID-19 (N = 1,420); reduced workload (N = 1,510) and working hours (N = 1,520) due to COVID-19.

Organisational/institutional support to mitigate the influence of COVID-19 on work schedules of national service personnel in Ghana

Research question two sought to examine the organisational/institutional support available to mitigate the influence of the COVID-19 on the work schedules of national service personnel

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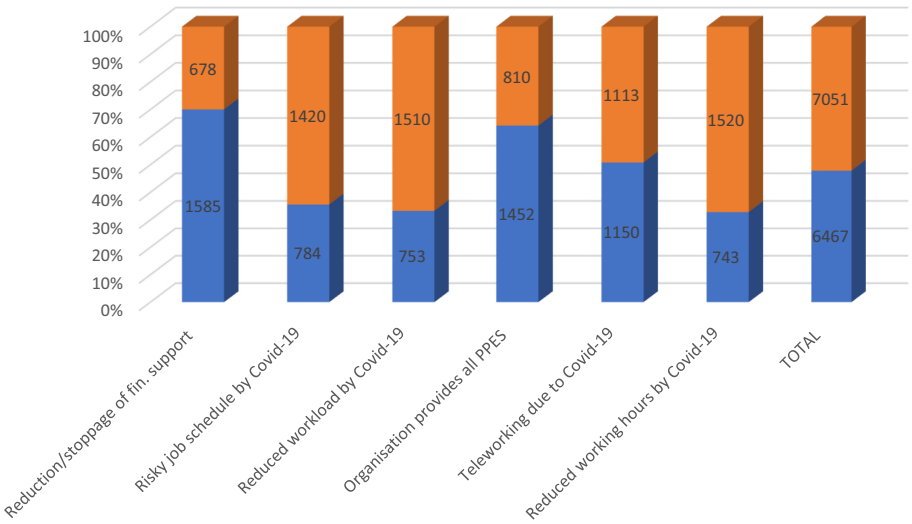

Figure 5.
The influence of COVID-19 on work schedules of national service personnel in Ghana

acquiring employable skills for the 2019/2020 service year. The results as shown in Figure 6 indicate that the respondents received five different categorisations of supports from their employers though some also revealed never getting any support from their employers (21%). Among the five categorisations of supports, provision of PPEs and education or orientation on COVID-19 (21%); receiving remuneration/allowance whiles at home (20%), suspension of national service due to mandatory leave (17%) and introduction of a shift system and reduced working days (17%) were highly rated by respondents.

Job opportunities offered by COVID-19 national service personnel acquiring employable skills

The last research question examined the kind of job opportunities that the COVID-19 presented to the national service personnel for the 2019/2020 service year, and the result can be seen in Figure 7. It is clear from Figure 7 that respondents took advantage of twelve job opportunities during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. Out of these twelve

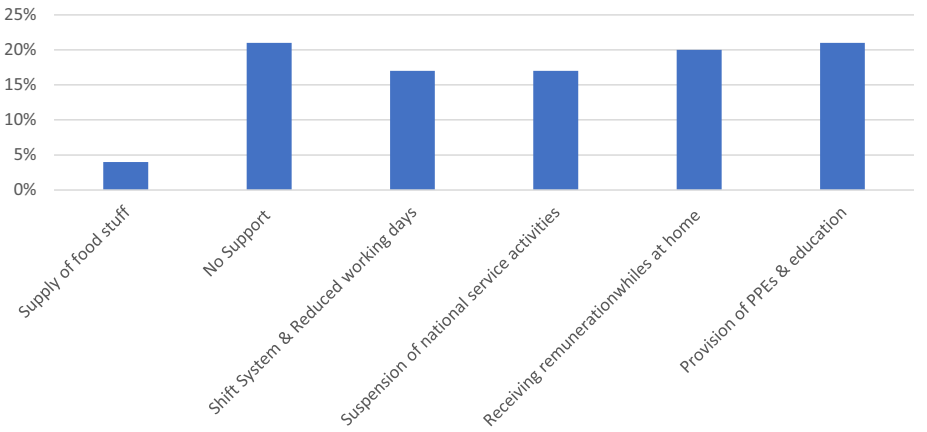

Figure 6.
Institutional/ organisational support

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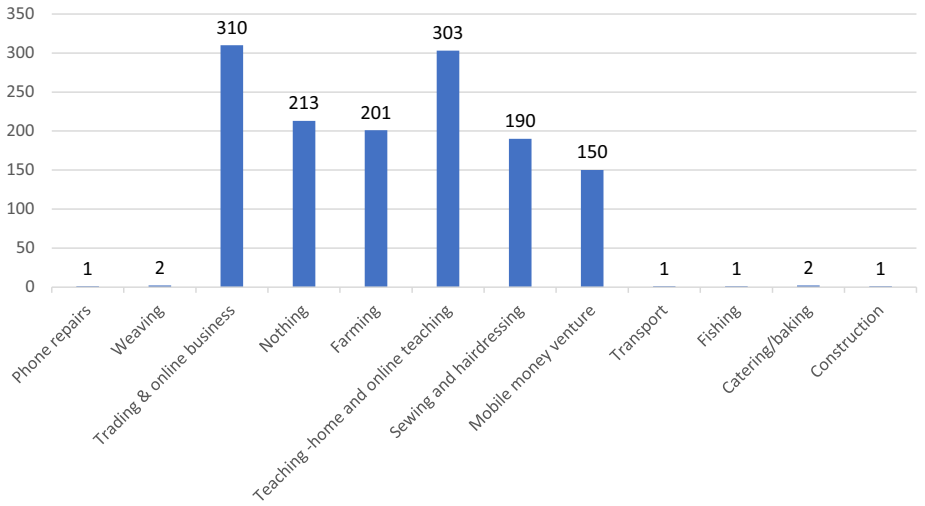

Figure 7. Job opportunities during the COVID-19

job opportunities, only five of them were undertaken by the majority. These job opportunities were trading and online businesses ($N = 310$); home and online teaching ($N = 303$), farming ($N = 201$), dressmaking and hairdressing ($N = 190$) and mobile money venture (money transfer) ($N = 150$).

Discussion of results

The findings of respondents' disagreement that their organisations/institutions had reduced or stopped extending financial support or allowance in place before the COVID-19 suggest that the financial conditions of these service personnel in vogue could not worsen due to the pandemic. Meanwhile, because their organisations or institutions could not supply all the PPEs, the trainees (service personnel) would have to spend their meagre allowance on purchasing the necessary PPEs for their adequate protection and to supplement what was provided by employers. The personal responsibility for the provision of additional PPEs by trainees (service personnel) had made the nature of their job schedules very risky, especially for those who could not afford the additional PPEs.

Meanwhile, the nature of risk that these personnel faced due to the COVID-19 extends to their interaction with possible asymptotic work colleagues and customers or clientele of their organisations/institutions and exposure to contaminated work surfaces and gadgets. What this means is that failure or inability of the state or employers to provide adequate PPEs to national service personnel due to the global/national economic challenge of the COVID-19 has a direct impact on the socioeconomic and health conditions of national service (Deloitte, 2020). The results agree with the conceptual framework of the study that macro systems (PEST at the national and global levels) affect the Exo-systems where organisations/institutions operate (Segbenya and Ahiatrogah, 2018).

Interventional measures introduced by organisations and institutions to assuage the effect of the COVID-19 on national service personnel included the introduction of a shift system, reduced working days/hours and workloads, mandatory leave for all service personnel. These measures were very laudable to reduce the level of risk that personnel were exposed to at the workplace due to the COVID-19. Though respondents were still paid their full allowances whiles enjoying these leaves and reduced workload and working hours/days, there were several associated challenges with employable skills acquisition and productivity. The results mean that there was a reduction in the entire duration for the acquisition of

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employable skills by this batch of national service personnel, which could affect their employability. Thus, Buheji and Buheji (2020) assertion that trainees need skills such as proactiveness, preparedness, pulling together, problem-solving, publishing to function in the new normal is upheld by this study. Thus, the position of the conceptual framework that challenges the exo-system has a direct effect on products or outcomes of the meso-systems (Woolcott *et al.*, 2019). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and for that matter any future pandemic on employable skills among graduates could be moderated by work applied management methods like work-based learning in the academic content taught by the tertiary institutions in Ghana (Rizvi *et al.*, 2013). Thus, post-graduation employable skills acquisition for tertiary graduates (national service) entering the job market should have played a complementary role to work-based learning methods.

Apart from the negative effects of COVID-19 on national service personnel and their workplaces, as indicated above, it also presented opportunities to service personnel. These job opportunities included trading and online businesses and online teaching. Respondents took advantage of the COVID-19 challenges and started retailing in nose masks, hand sanitiser, veronica buckets, among others. Others also undertook online teaching and business as well as mobile money transfer services, which means that IT, telecommunication subsectors as well as the service sectors, could benefit from the COVID-19 in terms of production and employment. Venturing into farming by the service personnel during the COVID-19 as an alternative source of livelihood could also contribute to the agricultural sector in terms of production and employment. Meanwhile, the sustainability, growth/expansion, and quality of these self-employed jobs could not be guaranteed.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study sought to examine the effect of COVID-19 on the acquisition of employable skills among trainees (national service personnel) in Ghana. It can be concluded that COVID-19 had made the workplaces and work schedules for skills acquisition in Ghana very risky especially because of the inability of the employers to provide adequate PPEs for their trainees/apprentices or national service personnel. Preventive measures introduced by trainers of employable skills in Ghana included mandatory leaves, reduced workload/working hours, and a shift system. These interventions had reduced the duration for skills acquisition by trainees and could affect the acquisition of employable skills and employability of trainees under the national service, which could aggravate the graduate unemployment situation in Ghana. The negative impact of the COVID-19 on employable skills due to the shorter duration could be aggravated if these graduate did not undergo work-based learning as part of their academic programmes.

The compulsory nature of the national service is equally associated with inclusivity issues, especially for disabled graduates. This is because the risk factors and challenges associated with compulsory national service differ for both the "disabled" and the "abled" graduates during their skill acquisition period. Another challenge associated with the compulsory national service for skill acquisition for graduate trainees was the human rights implications of the approach, especially in terms of age and ability of some graduates involve in the national service. Graduates do not have the freedom of determining which sector of the economy they are placed in for skill acquisition.

Job opportunities presented to graduate trainees (national service personnel) in Ghana included farming; trading in nose mask, hand sanitisers, veronica buckets; home and online teaching. The sustainability, growth/expansion, and quality of these job opportunities presented by COVID-19 could also not be guaranteed. Thus, the possibility of linking quality education (Sustainable Development Goal 4) to achieving decent work and economic growth (Sustainable Development Goal 8) very daunting through the compulsory national service during the pandemic. The conclusion demands actions on the part of trainers/employers. It is therefore recommended that:

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Trainers, including the government and employers in both the public and private sectors, should provide adequate PPEs for their trainees (national service personnel) in Ghana. This is to make the work schedules of trainees/personnel less risky and to avoid trainees using their meagre allowance on PPEs which worsens their economic conditions.

Additionally, the trainers, including the government and employers in both the public and private sectors should introduce teleworking with the necessary tools and training for trainees during COVID-19 or any other pandemic so that trainees can continue to learn employable skills without a break. This is necessary to ensure that trainees acquired the necessary employability skills within the stipulated time to secure the right job at the right time. Uninterrupted training serves as the basis for acquiring the required or essential employability skills such as proactiveness, preparedness, pulling-together, problem-solving, publishing/publicising (5Ps) needed under the new normal or post-COVID-19 pandemic. Additional national service personnel need continuous training to acquire other employability skills such as meta-skills, intellectual resources, personality resources and job-specific resources.

Management of higher educational institutions should include work applied management methods like work-based learning in their academic curricula to enhance skills acquisition among tertiary graduates. Work-based learning can serve as a complementary method to post-graduation skills acquisition (compulsory national service) for tertiary graduates in Ghana.

The government should support trainees venturing into self-employed job opportunities presented by the COVID-19. The quality, growth and expansion of self-employed jobs have the propensity to contribute to employment creation and reduction in the unemployment rate from other sectors of the Ghanaian economy.

Trainers of graduate trainees should also consider trainees' right in terms of sectors they might want to do their national service and disable graduates who could be exposed to different challenges compared to their counterparts. Paying attention to different risk factors and their effect on different categories of trainees could lead to more effective training and skill acquisition among national service personnel.

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