

A LITERATURE RECAPITULATION ON GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

Employability Skills can be defined as the transferable skills needed by an individual to make them 'employable'. Along with good technical understanding and subject knowledge, employers often outline a set of skills that they want from an employee. These skills are what they believe will equip the employee to carry out their role to the best of their ability. Employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes, how one uses those assets, and how they are presented to the employers. The aim of this paper is to present an exhaustive analysis that relates to the studies and inferences drawn by various scholars who have presented their view on the issue of graduate employability.

Keywords

Competency, Employability, Graduates, Personal efficacy, Skills

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Introduction

India is a developing economy, and with its global recognition, it is far emerging as one among the top industrial countries in the world. The backbone of any developing economy depends upon the values beliefs and the cultural ethics that are imparted through education. The higher education policy of government should aim towards empowering the manpower system of the country to gain competitive advantage in this global market. There is a great amount of supply as far as intellectually equipped and technically qualified manpower is concerned in the form of software engineers, scientists and other professional graduates to the global market. Most of the graduates perceive higher education as a stepping stone for their careers. Post, graduation students have greater expectation from the job market. A major challenge for higher education and research is to develop a learning environment that is conducive to acquire and develop new skills that benefit students, so that fit into the global business competitive environment. This learning curve enables a graduate to learn, relearn and unlearn. The learning environments must focus for towards acquisition of productive knowledge, competent learning and ingenious thinking skills. In this is volatile scenario graduates have to work in a cross-cultural environment. There is an urgent need to explore, hone, and sharpen the skills and competencies of graduates who intend to gain full employment domestically and in the cross-cultural context.

Research scholars such as Coopers and Lybrand (1998) precisely defined 'employability skills' in terms of four key areas:

- 1) Traditional intellectual skills: comprising critical evaluation, logical argument
- 2) Key skills: comprising of oral and written communication skills, ICT Integration
- 3) Personal attributes: relating to an individual's set of being motivated & self-reliant
- 4) Knowledge of organisations and how they work.

There are several synonyms such as core, key, generic, personal transferable skills, common, worker employment related skills. This is another reasons why it is difficult to actually conceptualise what is meant by employability skills. The term is so vast that there are several dimensions to it. Added to that, 'skills' are often referred to as capabilities, competencies or attributes, levels or learning outcomes, thus compounding the sense of confusion.

When hiring, prospective employers all look for a set of core competency skills. When graduates get around to applying to jobs, the ability to demonstrate these employability skills is as important as being able to demonstrate excellent grades in your degree. There has to be a perfect blend of academics and skills. Core skills are largely transferable, graduates must be in a position to device ways to prove or improve them. They must believe in the concept of continuous learning and developing. Students need to continue to develop their skills sets and learn new ones even when they apply for a new job. Such continuous learning enhances their ongoing career progression and equips them as better individual.

This literature review will look in turn, at first, the employability agenda, second, curriculum developments from the academic perspectives, third, employability attributes

Objectives

- 1) To review the important skills sets and competencies that graduates need to possess in order to gain employability domestically and in the cross-cultural context.
- 2) To understand the skill sets which need to be further strengthened and highlighted so that the chances of employability rises amongst the graduates.

Review of Literature

The employability docket

Morley (2001), through a study, suggested that Higher Education Institutes should mediate and manage the government policy and that the boundaries between the academy, government and businesses which have loosened over a period be reformed. This review raised a question on the purpose of higher education. It was arguably discussed whether higher education's aim was to just it was to provide a ready workforce to the market or for increasing the educational stimulus.

Jackson (1999), suggested that the government agenda for the modification in higher education, widening participation, the key skills/employability agenda, lifelong learning etc., is leading to the unification of higher education and by its implication, it is curtailing the academic freedoms.

Several studies were carried out that relate towards sharpening the skill set of graduate pass outs. Research scholars such as Hillage and Pollard (1998), who were associated with the Institute for Employment Studies carried out a report with regard to developing framework for policy analysis on employability for the DfEE, (Department of Education and Skills) (now DfES). Through their study the following key findings were brought to light; Hillage and Pollard stated that “Employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required.”

For an individual, employability depends upon:

- 1) Assets in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes,
- 2) The way these assets are used and deployed,
- 3) Presentation of assets to potential employers,
- 4) The context within which the individual works, e.g. labour market, personal circumstances.

Dearing (1997), explicitly refrained from producing a list of skills, because of the nature of individual programmes of study and their learning objectives, he was of the opinion that it is probably better if the students sort skills as per their learning objectives and programme. His main aim was that students must themselves aim to develop certain skill sets, he believed that such a personal awareness would lead to their own personal development. This meant that students could be aware of any gaps in their own personal development well in advance before applying for jobs

Brennan *et al.* (1999), conducted a survey of across Europe and the UK. This survey was conducted among graduates. The research revealed that UK graduates rate teamwork, working under pressure, oral communication skills and problem solving as their top ten skills. In contrast, none of these appeared in the list of competencies rated highly by the European graduates, instead, they highlighted learning abilities, working independently and written communication skills.

According to Dearing (1997) skills sets consist of four components:

- 1) Communication
- 2) Numeracy
- 3) Information technology

4) Learning how to learn

It was proposed that it was essential that these were developed at undergraduate level. It is at this level that the students are more receptive to change.

Self belief

Knight and Yorke (2000) conducted a research pertaining to the Higher education's curriculum, this was further enhanced by Yorke (2001) who believed that Higher Education's curricula can make a difference to a person's beliefs and approach. It would seem likely that this is the case even though shaping personal beliefs is not the primary aim of the Higher Education system. Through learning and different experiences, students may be exposed to a wider range of people and attitudes which may help them shape their own beliefs and become more confident of their own abilities. Ability is important, but people with high ability may lack persistence.

Curriculum growth

Atkins (1999), however, felt that, if every student emerges the same repertoire of employability skills then the market advantage would disappear. Indeed, Atkins advocated a change of emphasis, where employability skills was left out of the curriculum altogether and it was addressed after graduation when graduates were either job hunting or who were in the transition to find their first jobs

Biggs and Moore (1993), also encouraged self-assessment for an overall personality development. This self-assessment encourages students to become autonomous learners and learn from their own mistakes. Students themselves should be in a position to administer their shortcomings and take corrective measures. Peer assessment is also important, as students will learn from each other. Peer and self-assessment may be moderated by tutors so that a common standard is maintained, and highly critical comments could be moderated.

Orchard et al. (2000) reported a number of inhibiting factors for the training of research students for employability, these included:

- 1) A lack of time, with priority given to research progress rather than personal development
- 2) A lack of interest from supervisors
- 3) Negative experiences of previous profiling systems.
- 4) A lack of relevance of documentation to specific research topics.

Orchard et al. recommend skills building workshops which could help in developing team working skills, and would enable postgraduates to gain a better understanding of their own personal working style, address the challenges posed by the changing nature of work and enhance career management skills, e.g. CV writing, job searching and interview skills.

Coffield (1997) suggested that the Government must plan to create a new culture of lifelong learning without developing a theory of learning, or even recognising that one is required. Dunne *et al.* (2000) further suggested that without a theoretical understanding of how students and graduate employees learn, about institutional and organisational change, the role of Higher Education in economic development and in lifelong learning will not be realised.

According to Skilbeck and Connell (1996), a vital determinant that assesses whether graduates choose to become lifelong learners depends upon the intellectual climate in their institution. Lifelong learning perspectives are paving the way for futuristic learning.

Employability Performance Indicator (EPI)

According to (Harvey, 2000), an Employability Performance Indicator (EPI) is thought by many to be too crude and that it could be used inappropriately. An EPI would probably be used as a management tool for the allocation of funding against performance criteria and also to produce information to inform students about potential career routes that might follow a particular university course (Smith *et al.*, 2000) also expressed the similar concern that an EPI backed by the Treasury would be primarily economically-driven, rather than related to the education mission of Higher Education

Harvey (2000) further stresses that an EPI must have greater emphasis on improvement than on accountability, but that any EPI must be seen as part of the development of the learning process, not detached from it

What Employers Want

Employers are increasingly wanting those graduates who have developed self-theories and who are marked by confidence, optimism, and a belief that they can make a difference. Employers want graduates who can adapt to the workplace culture, be more receptive participative, innovative and those who could use their abilities and skills in order to evolve the organisation

Employers also value critical thinking (reflection) as this is required for innovation and anticipating and leading change (Harvey et al. 1997).

The concept of 'employer-ability' needs to be developed in order to balance out the power-relations embedded in the employability discourse of recruitment and retention.

Conclusions

One of the major problems facing the employability agenda is the discrepancy between what academics view Higher Education to be. Employability skill sets could be divided into four areas:

- 1) Knowledge and understanding of the subject that has been chosen to study,
- 2) Developing skills, both subject specific and generic (key) skills,
- 3) Self-efficacy beliefs,
- 4) Strategic thinking or reflection – thinking about what you have done and how it has helped you develop as a person, not just doing it

Employability is about much more than just key skills. Students need to take care that they do. They must not focus on developing key skills at the expense of other important areas.

Graduates should be aware of the contradiction that may arise. Skill sets aim to develop personal attributes and increase a student's employability chances

One cannot logically develop the individual and then use the institution as a measuring instrument. In order to measure its success, there has to be a strong implication between the teaching faculties and academic institutions that are imparting knowledge, skills and competencies to the engineering graduates. As they have a very strong role in developing the skills and competencies pertaining to employability

A majority of India's population belongs to the middle-class background, most of the students are aspiring for employment. By understanding their need, it is the responsibility of the

stakeholders to develop adequate employability skills and competencies so as to suit to the current organisational context.

From the theoretical point of view, this study establishes a strong review on employability skills sets and those competencies which are exclusively required by the graduating students. Converting younger generation into graduates is an important assignment for any technical institution, but making them employable is a much more important task.

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