

Employability Mismatch in Business Education through ODL: A Study on the Commonwealth MBA/MPA Program of Bangladesh Open University

Abstract

This study investigates the skills catered through the Commonwealth MBA (CEMBA) and Commonwealth MPA (CEMPA) program of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) and their appropriateness in the context of the socio-economic transformation of Bangladesh. The study is driven by two pertinent research questions: R1. Are the skills catered by the CEMBA program relevant to the current needs of the job market? R2. What are the scopes for revisiting the CEMBA curriculum and making it meaningful in the current workplace contexts? The study found a significant skill mismatch in the Commonwealth MBA/MPA graduates. Therefore, the need for transforming the curriculum and instructional methods have been emphasized by the respondents.

Keywords: Employability, CEMBA/MPA, ODL, Higher Education, Curriculum updating.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental tool for socio-economic development a nation. Education enriches individuals' understanding to explore their potentials with an increased productivity (Ozturk, 2001). Higher education plays a significant role in shaping individuals' professional careers with an improved quality of life. Individuals with higher education are more likely to earn more income (Blanden and Gregg, 2004; Jamison et al., 2007), are less likely to be unemployed (Ammermueller et al., 2009; Kettunen, 1997), are happier and healthier (Chan, 2016; Narayan et al., 2010), more likely to engage with charitable activities (Wiepking and Maas, 2009), are more likely to be disciplined in their personal life (Akerlof and Kranton, 2002).

Corporations also seek the best employee with the highest level of managerial competencies. Baruch (2009) argues that a Master in Business Administration (MBA) can generate tangible and intangible input to graduates' professional careers and their employing organizations. Since its inception in the USA, the MBA has dominated as a pedagogical concept in business education (Carnall, 1992; Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003; Kieser, 2004; Tiratsoo, 2004).

Baruch (2009) defines the MBA as a collective term and argues that MBA exists in many forms across the world. For example, executive MBA versus conventional MBA, full- versus part-time MBA (Heimovics et al., 1996), US-versus European-oriented MBA; case-study versus textbook-based MBA; face-to-face versus online MBA (Arbaugh, 2005) are mentioned but a few. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is developed two postgraduate programs, namely the Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration (CEMBA) and the Commonwealth Executive Master of Public Administration (CEMPA) which are being offered 12 commonwealth

countries including Bangladesh. The programs are in distance mode with few face-to-face tutorial sessions.

Studies argue that an MBA program equips graduates with managerial competency and offers an attractive career opportunity. For example, Ascher (1984) and Carnall (1992) argue that an MBA graduate will have higher earnings and self-confidence with the most updated business knowledge and experience. An intention for an extended career opportunity and for acquiring skills for survival in the competitive labor markets are also influential factors for enrollment in this program (Luker et al., 1990). Most studies examined the effects of an MBA program on a professional career (Mihail and Kloutsiniotis, 2014), managerial skills (Kang and Sharma, 2012), analytical and entrepreneurial success (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000), earnings (Ray and Jeon, 2008), and professional hierarchical positions (Lämsä and Savela, 2014). To our knowledge, a few studies examined the status of employability among the CEMBA graduates. ds. Considering Bangladesh Open University, this study examines the impact of the CEMBA/MPA program on graduates' employability. This study investigates the relevance of the CEMBA/MPA program in terms of its contribution to the employability skills, especially in the light of World Economic Forum's (WEF) recommendations. The study also shed the light on the gaps in the achievements of the learners from the CEMBA/MPA program in the context of 21st century work place.

2. Objectives

The study aims at investigating the following:

- Relevance of the knowledge and skill catered by CEMBA/MPA Program
- Gaps in the achievements of the learners in the light of employability
- The scope of revisiting the CEMBA/MPA curriculum in the context of current workplace needs

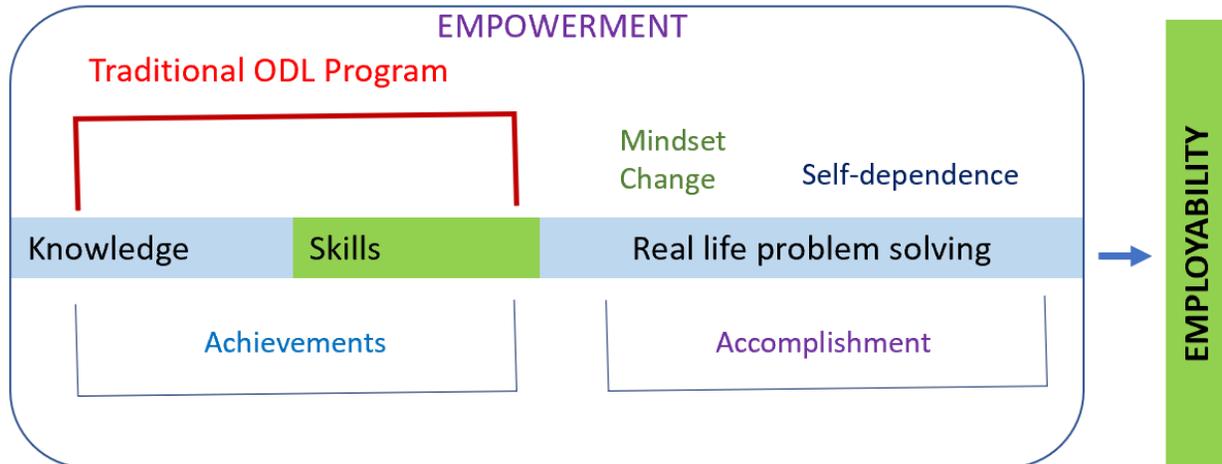
3. Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature. A structured questionnaire has been used to survey the perceptions of 200 CEMBA/MPA graduates and the currently enrolled students in two study centers under Dhaka and Chittagong Regional Centers of Bangladesh Open University. Also, 5 subject matter experts and 5 employers have been interviewed in the study. The study also included 5 FGDs among the alumni and 3rd level students of CEMBA/MPA program at two Dhaka and Chittagong Regional Centers. Descriptive statistics, such as mean, percentiles, and standard deviation, have been used for analyzing the data.

4. Conceptual Framework

The study emphasized on the following conceptual framework. Figure 1 shows that employability in this

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



study indicates the empowerment of the graduates, not only the knowledge and skills.

5. Background of CEMBA/MPA Program

Developed as a collaborative program with participating countries, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has been offering the Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration (CEMBA) since 2002. Currently, Bangladesh Open University (BOU), Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in Pakistan, Botswana Open University (BosOU) in Botswana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana, Open University of Mauritius (OUM) in Mauritius, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in Nigeria, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in Sri Lanka, University College of the Caribbean (UCC) in Jamaica, University College of the Cayman Islands (UCCI) in the Cayman Islands, University of Guyana (UG) in Guyana, and Wawasan Open University (WOU) in Malaysia are offering the program in under the license agreement with COL. The main objective of the program is to enhance the employability of the existing managers.

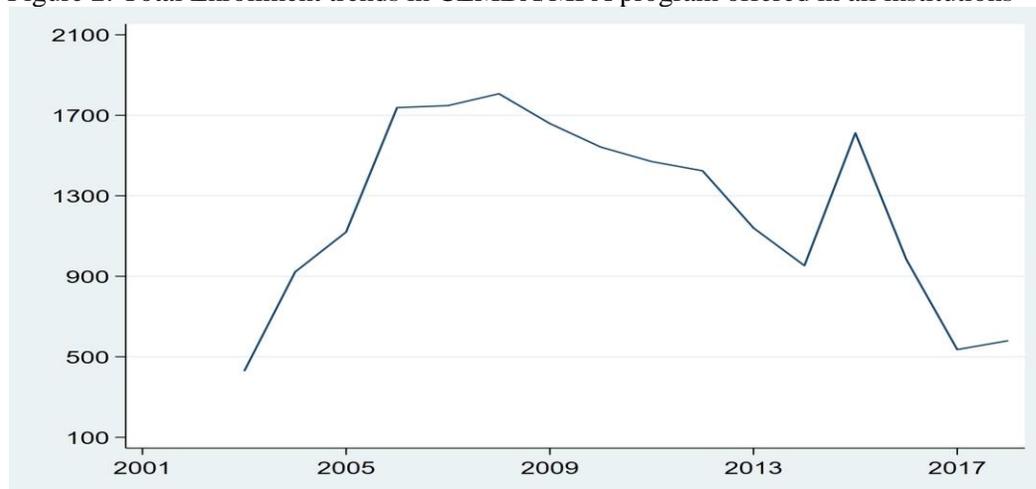
Students usually working as a professional can only enroll into the CEMBA/MPA program. Learners usually have an option to study at any COL partner institution. Learners also have an option of multiple program exit points with an option of earning a postgraduate diploma or a Masters degree. The minimum completion time for the CEMBA/MPA program is two years. The instructional materials are developed by experts in the respective disciplines. The materials for the core courses are developed from universities in the commonwealth including Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Sri Lanka. The main features of this program are 1) to offer affordable access to management education for working executives and managers; 2) to offer flexible and distributed learning mode, especially for part-time learners; 3) to

offer a consortium and program recognized by Commonwealth of Learning; 4) to offer flexible credit transfers across the partner institutions; 5) to offer a high-quality curriculum developed by specialized academics from universities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Sri Lanka.

The standard duration is two years, but learners could have a maximum of seven years for graduation. Learners are required to complete 90 credit hours while courses are offered in the modes of open and distance learning. As of 2018, more than 13000 students have graduated from the CEMBA/MPA program.

Figure 2 shows the trend in the total enrollment in CEMBA/MPA program offered in all partner institutions.

Figure 2: Total Enrollment trends in CEMBA/MPA program offered in all institutions



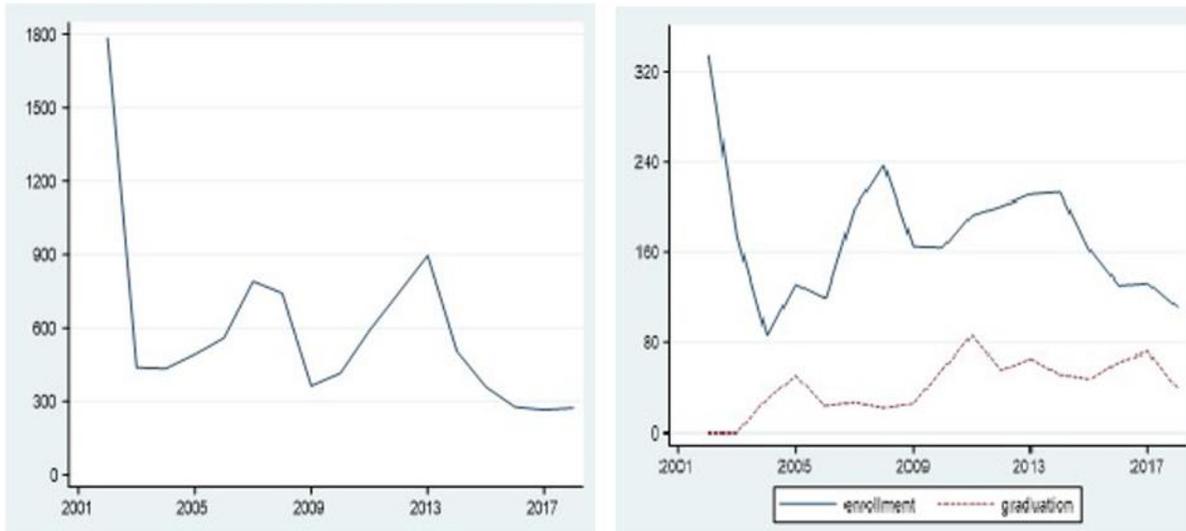
Source: Compiled from the official sources of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in Pakistan, Botswana Open University (BosOU) in Botswana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana, Open University of Mauritius (OUM) in Mauritius, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in Nigeria, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in Sri Lanka, University College of the Caribbean (UCC) in Jamaica, University College of the Cayman Islands (UCCI) in the Cayman Islands, University of Guyana (UG) in Guyana, and Wawasan Open University (WOU) in Malaysia.

Table 1: A brief of the CEMBA/MPA program offered in School of Business, BOU

CEMBA/MPA	Description
Level	Master (Postgraduate)
Total number of semesters	04 (Four)
Semester duration	06 months
Tutorial session	04 months
Credit hours	90 (15 courses @ 6 credit per course)
Duration	02 Years
Maximum duration	05 Years
Course fee per course	Bangladeshi Taka. 6000.00
The minimum requirement for admission	Bachelor or equivalent degree with at least two (02) years of work experience.
Qualifying requirement	Must qualify in the written admission test.

Source: School of Business, BOU.

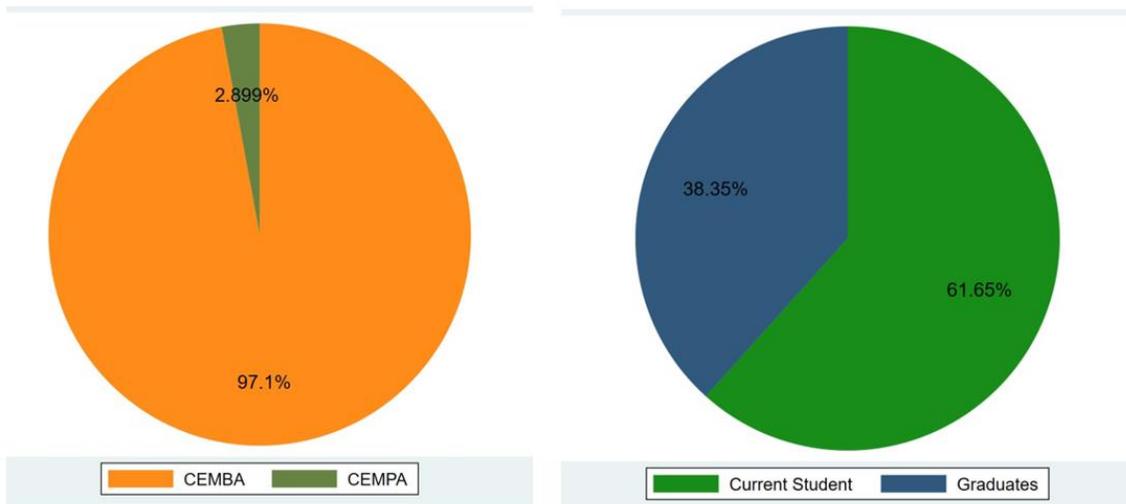
Figure 3: CEMBA/MPA enrollment and graduation trends at BOU



(a) CEMBA/MPA program

(b) Enrollment and graduation Trends

Figure 4: Percentage distribution between graduates and current students



(a) CEMBA and CEMPA enrolment ratio

(b) Graduates and current students ratio

6. Findings and Analysis

6.1. Contribution of CEMBA/MPA Courses to the Employability Skills

Table 2: Percentage distribution of perception about the CEMBA/MPA on employability

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Probl. Solv.	Critic. Think.	People Manamt.	Coordi.	emotio. Judgm.	decis. Making.	servi. Orient.	busi. Negot.	creati.	cognit. Flexi.
High	32.78	41.90	45.56	48.04	30.00	7.22	10.17	7.34	8.47	5.65
Good	0.56	1.68	2.78	1.12	0.56	49.44	33.90	38.42	37.29	33.90
Neutral	43.33	31.28	34.44	32.40	48.33	0.56	42.37	41.24	37.85	46.33
poor	12.76	13.97	7.22	3.40	10.00	7.22	7.91	6.21	9.60	7.91
very poor	10.57	11.17	10.00	15.04	11.11	35.56	6.65	6.79	6.79	6.21
<i>N</i>	179	179	180	179	180	180	177	177	177	177

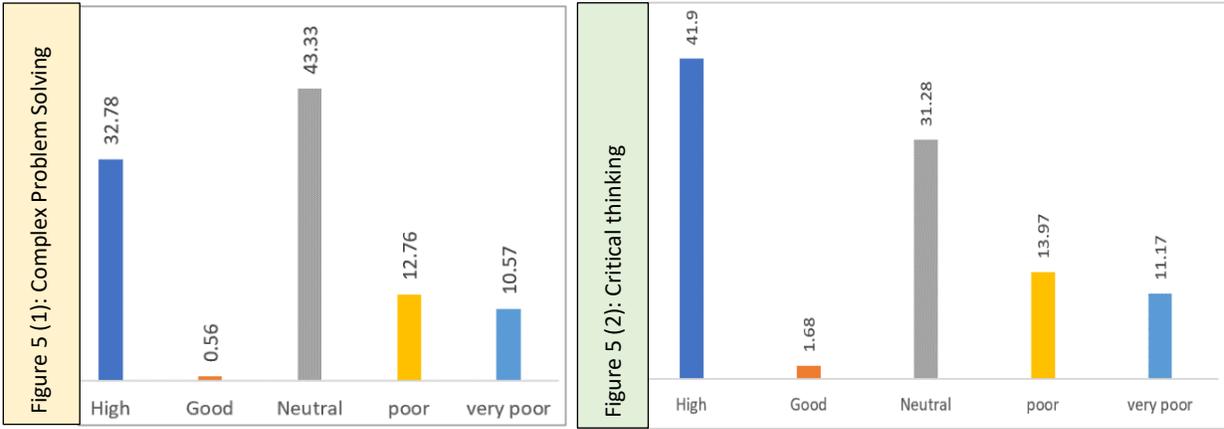
Source: School of Business, BOU.

Note. *N* presents the total number of respondents in each question.

All values are presented in percentage of the total respondents

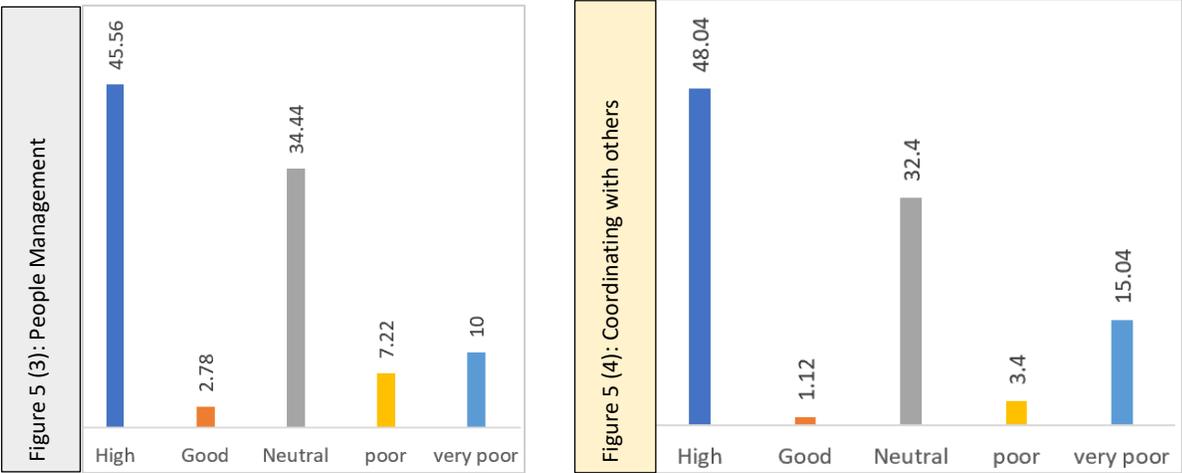
Table 2 shows the learners' perception for World Economic Forum (2020) recommended professional skills: complex problem-solving skills (Probl. solv.), critical thinking (Critical Think.), creativity (creati.), people management (People Manamt.), coordinating with others (Coordi), emotional intelligence (emotio judgm.), judgment and decision making (decis. making), service orientation (servi orient.), business negotiation (busi. negot), creativity (creati.) and cognitive flexibility and ethical values improvement (cognit. flexi.). All values are presented in percentage of the total respondents. Table 2 shows that the majority of learners believe the CEMBA program has a little or poor effect on improving these WEF recommended skills. For example, Column (1) shows that only 33% of the total learners believe that CEMBA has a positive impact on acquiring critical problem-solving skills. According to the World Economic Forum, 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025 as technological adaptation increases.

Figure 5(1) to 5(10) depicted the data from Table 2 on the perceptions of the learners regarding the contribution of CEMBA/MPA courses to the employability skills specified by World



Economic Forum.

Figure 5(1) shows only 33% of the learners feel that CEMBA/MPA courses got high impact on



the improvement of the complex problem solving skills. Whereas, Figure 5(2) shows nearly 42% of the learners found CEMBA/MPA courses contributes to the improvement of critical thinking skills highly.

Figure 5(3) shows 48% of the learners feel that CEMBA/MPA courses have high or good impact on the improvement of the people management skills. On the other hand, Figure 5(4) shows nearly 50% of the learners found CEMBA/MPA courses contributes to the improvement of coordination skills highly.

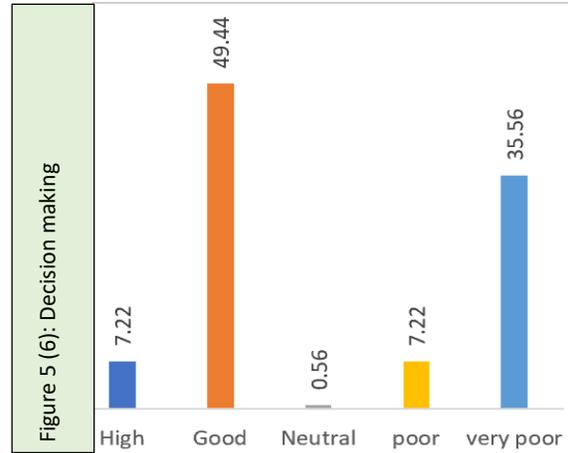
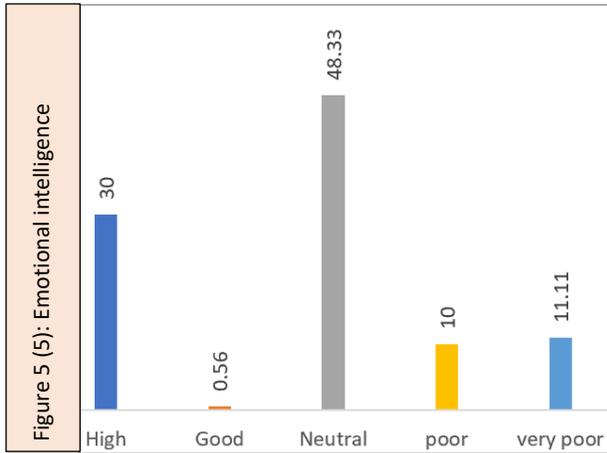


Figure 5(5) shows only 30% of the learners found CEMBA/MPA courses impacting emotional intelligence. Figure 5(6) depicts that only 7% of the learners found CEMBA/MPA contributes to decision making skills which is critical for the managers.

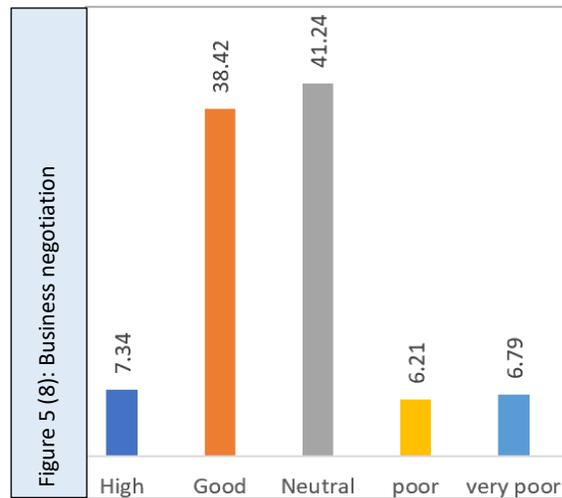
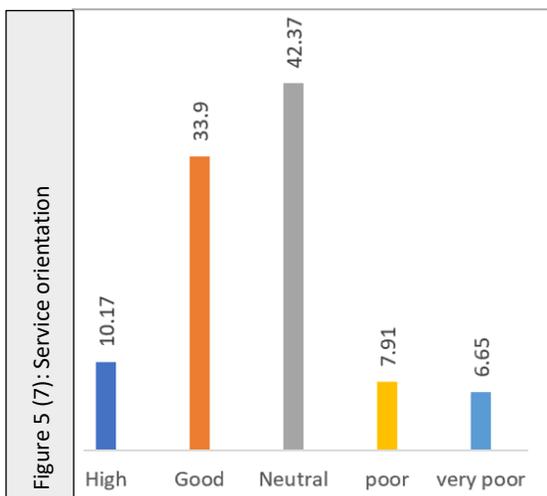


Figure 5(7) shows 45% of the learners feel that CEMBA/MPA courses have high or good impact on the improvement of the service orientation skills. On the other hand, Figure 5(8) shows nearly 46% of the learners found CEMBA/MPA courses contributes to the improvement of business negotiation skills.

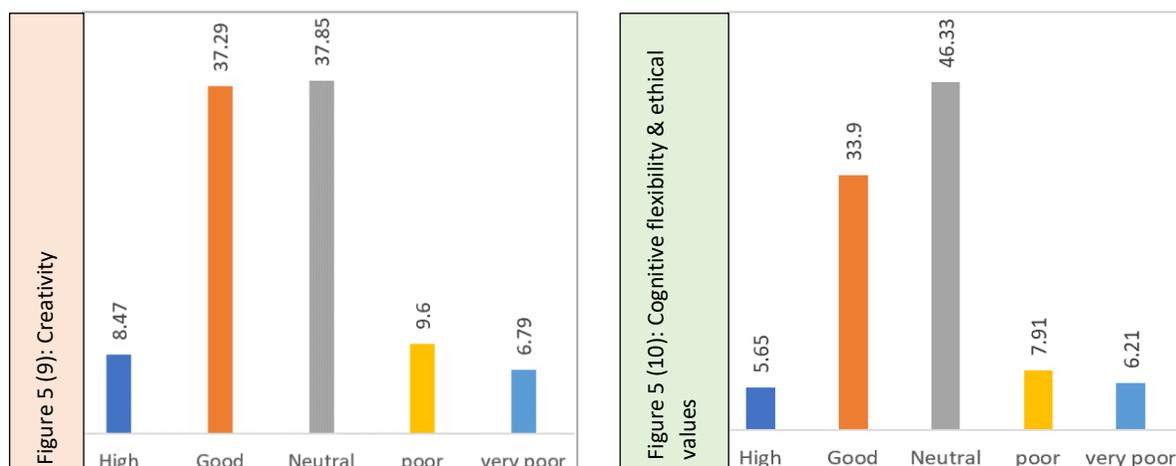


Figure 5(9) shows 45% of the learners feel that CEMBA/MPA courses have high or good impact on the improvement of creativity. Figure 5(4) tells nearly 39% of the learners found CEMBA/MPA courses contributes to the improvement of the cognitive flexibility and ethical values.

6.2. Relevance of CEMBA/MPA Courses for Graduates' Employability

Table 3 shows how CEMBA/MPA program enhances employability skills for technical knowledge, communication skills, ability to work in a team, analytical skills, and skills for information and technology. Table 3 shows that on average 50% of learners believe that the CEMBA/MPA program is very much related to the employability skills. Column (1) shows that only 35% of the total learners find the program very related to improve their technical skills. In the digitization era, the more individuals competent with technical and communication skills the more they are likely to be employed. We also interview tutors in this program, and they agreed with this perception.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of perception about the CEMBA/MPA relevance

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Technical ability	Communication ability	work as a team	Analytical ability	Information technology
Very relevant	35.38	50.77	56.7	48.42	43.23
Somewhat relevant	38.97	37.95	34.54	41.05	38.02
Neutral	14.36	9.23	7.73	7.37	14.58
Not relevant	10.77	1.54	0.52	2.63	3.65
Not relevant at all	0.51	0.51	0.52	0.53	0.52
<i>N</i>	195	195	194	190	192

Source: School of Business, BOU.

Note. *N* presents the total number of respondents in each question.

All values are presented in percentage of the total respondents.

7. Discussions

The majority of learners believe the CEMBA program has a little or poor effect on improving these WEF recommended skills. However, according to the World Economic Forum, 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025 as technological adaptation increases.

Findings shows CEMBA/MPA program enhances employability skills for technical knowledge, communication skills, ability to work in a team, analytical skills, and skills for information and technology. Data shows that on average 50% of learners believe that the CEMBA/MPA program is very much related to the employability skills. In the digitization era, the more individuals competent with technical and communication skills the more they are likely to be employed. The study found the similar perceptions from the FGDs too.

8. Conclusion

The study examined the impact of the CEMBA/MPA program on the level of empowerment of the learners. The study found that the CEMBA/MPA program is relevant with regards to graduates' employability. In doing so, this study first identified any improvement in the level of empowerment of the graduates following course completion; and then determines the relevance of the course contents and materials in the current world of work. Most of the learners believe that the CEMBA/MPA program is not highly relevant to improve the skills on technical knowledge, communication skills, ability to work as a team, enhance analytical ability, and to equip with the most recent information and technology.

9. Recommendations

To improve the CEMBA/MPA program and its impacts, this study offers the following recommendation.

- Including local context-based learning materials, a case study besides the updated global version study materials
- Focusing Industry demand-based complex problem-solving case studies
- Orienting analytical and critical thinking-based academic papers
- Focusing on an academic and professional presentation, both oral and writing
- Assigning capstone project-based assignment
- Recruiting faculties associated with academic research activities and industry collaboration
- Promoting the CEMBA/MPA program to attract more qualified students and well-established employers
- Offering more administrative and other logistic supports, such as multimedia classroom, learning room in the campus, library facilities
- Organizing professional development programs, career fair, career counseling, workshop, regularly
- Offering a scholarship to the top 5% of learners as a motivation

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