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Assessing the Needs of Industries to Enhance Graduate Employability - The Case of Mauritius

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1.0 Introduction

The value of higher education and its relevance in sustaining global competitiveness are indisputable. However, while the achievement of formal degrees remains a priority, the employability of people depends a lot on skills they possess as well. In this competitive era, employers/industries demand cross-disciplinary intellectual skills and in-depth knowledge from graduates. The right people can easily integrate industries, and for this, they need to have both the right educational degree and skills required for that specific post/job. The underlying challenge is therefore, what employers think about the level and type of education being offered by higher educational institutions.

Graduate unemployment remains an alarming issue in many countries. Many graduates cannot find a job in their related field or as per their expectations (fulfilling job). While reasons why these graduates cannot be absorbed by the labour market are many, the most important concerns remain skills and attitudes (which graduates have or do not have) and the demand of the industry. For example, in one study, 96 percent of university presidents in the USA responded that they were adequately preparing graduates for the workforce; in contrast, only 33 percent of senior executives shared this opinion when asked about their views of university graduates (Bisoux, 2015). In another survey, 40 percent of employers in the US believe that there is a significant skills gap between graduates and entry-level requirements (McKinsey and Company, 2012). These findings are sad realities that can be avoided. Universities and other education institutions/ stakeholders have to be able or rather, be willing to respond to the changing market needs. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which is about ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, is key to achieving the other SDGs. Hence, research on employability is of utmost significance to address SDG4, and ultimately, the other SDGs.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 The concept of Employability

Employability has many definitions but they break down into two broad groups. The first relate to the ability of the student to get (and retain and develop in) a job after graduation. The other set is concerned with enhancing the students' attributes (skills, knowledge, attitudes and abilities) and ultimately with empowering the student as a critical life-long learner (Harvey, 2001).

Employability can be defined as "a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Moreland, 2006).

However, the term is used in a variety of contexts with a range of meanings and it can lack clarity and precision as an operational concept (Hillage, J and Pollard, E, 1998). Gazier's (1998a, 1998b, 2001) work on employability provides a useful overview of the concept's development towards currently accepted definitions. Ranging to seven explanations of the term, four important ones for this research are:

1. 'Dichotomic employability' - employable referring to those who were able and willing to work; unemployed referring to those unable to work and in need of 'relief'.
2. 'Initiative employability'- reflects an acceptance amongst individuals and organisations that successful career development requires the development of transferable skills and the flexibility to move between job roles.
3. 'Labour market performance employability' - focuses on the labour market outcomes achieved by policy interventions, measurable in terms of days employed, hours worked and payment rates, and other labour market outcomes for individuals participating in employability-related programmes.
4. 'Interactive employability' - highlights the importance of the role of employers and labour demand in determining a person's employability.

Gazier (2001) concludes that 'labour market performance employability' remains an essential component of policy evaluation, while 'initiative employability' has retained a limited role in HRD thinking. Gazier (2001) suggests that a consensus has gradually emerged around the concept of 'interactive employability' as a defining idea in labour market policy, reflecting an acceptance that employability is about overcoming a broad array of barriers to work faced by individuals and that employability policies should therefore, focus not just on individuals. Therefore, employers should play a pivotal role to enhance employability.

Furthermore, it is assumed that employers transform employability into employment (Harvey, 2001), so their requirements represent the most useful source of information on employability skills. Hence, to be employable, it is imperative that on the one hand, graduates take the initiative of developing the required skills, while on the other hand, employers should emphasise on the skills they need for their particular industry at that specific point in time, as all industries do not have the same needs, and those needs change with the internal and external forces of the organisations. In the same line, universities should be able to understand those needs and offer possibilities so that students get an array of skills, and which are constantly revised and adapted to the needs. A possible model of employability may, therefore, require three intertwined dimensions (Ronald W. McQuaid and Colin L, 2005): individual factors (skills and attitudes), personal circumstances (socioeconomic which may affect the ability, willingness or social pressure for someone to take up an employment) and external factors (labour demand conditions). The balance between and within each element may vary for groups of individuals, depending on their relationship to the labour market.

2.2 Theories underpinning Employability

The human capital theory was articulated by Becker (1964) who, following Adam Smith's footsteps, saw job seekers pursuing education to increase their capability to produce and, in turn, receive higher profits added that human capital is an amalgam of factors such as education, experience, training, intelligence, energy, work habits, trustworthiness, and initiative that affect the value of a worker's marginal product. The human capital theory views skills as commodities and operates around the notion that an individual will choose to invest in his/her own education on the basis that such an investment will result in enhanced marketable skills (Marimuthu et al, 2009).

Useem and Karabel (1986) contextualised human capital theory (Becker 1964) within the higher education arena. According to them, educational institutions could confer three distinct types of human capital onto its students (i) social capital, (ii) cultural capital, and (iii) scholastic capital. Baruch, Bell, and Gray (2005) further extended this framework to include inner-value capital and market-value capital. However, one weakness of this theory is it ignores the fact that education is usually used only as a base during the candidate's selection process, while employers often use recommendations and other credentials to make their final selection.

Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory also has a significance in the understanding of employability as a concept. Granovetter (1994) argued that what matters is the individual's own stock of social capital. For instance, if a graduate is outgoing and open, then he/she may be able to establish social "contacts" whereas others who are reserved and unable to easily communicate possibly due to their own inhibitions, may find it difficult to build up their own social capital. Granovetter (1994) also found out that many studies demonstrated that the overriding mechanism through which individuals find jobs is through their own social capital or "connection". Drawing from this observation, personality traits may as well be of relevance in facilitating employability. Another study also insists that university students are expected to be proactive in preparing themselves for a changing world by actively improving their knowledge and skills to meet the demand of the modern workplace (Bridgstock, 2009)

Despite the attention paid to the relationship between education and employability, much of the research into employability remains theoretical and prescriptive (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010).

3.0 Significance, applicability and interest of this research

Mauritius, a small island developing state with around 1.3 million inhabitants, has an unemployment of 6.4% as at 2018. From this population, about 47% of the unemployed are aged below 25 years. Among these, around 23% are graduates without employment (CSO Report 2018), which is quite alarming. While some researches have tried to determine the priority fields of the country so as to gear universities towards providing courses that meet the demand of the market, there has been no in-depth research to establish what exactly each industry is looking for. Universities are also trying to bridge this gap by providing degrees which are not just fulfilling academic objectives but which are also addressing employability by designing programmes that will ensure transfer of both knowledge, skills and attitudes. This project therefore aims at determining whether employers believe that universities are really meeting the needs industries. This will be achieved through a needs analysis in one particular sector to see whether the programs and qualifications produced by universities are sufficiently

relevant to industry. The opinion of employers on the offering of informal or non-formal programmes linked to possible credit bearing content will be explored. This project could hence provide a gateway for empowerment of both the universities as course providers and the labour market. Consequently, this will also be beneficial for graduates looking for the desired job.

3.1 Delimitation

- i. This study starts with one sector and uses an in-depth analysis to gather as much information as possible to give way for further research using larger groups within this sector and replicating same in other sectors.
- ii. In this research, focus is on analysing employability through the lens of securing fulfilling jobs. For example, it is not about a degree holder securing a job requiring lower qualification.
- iii. The relationships between and the interaction of the elements within the proposed conceptual model that emerged remain theoretical. Further research to test the model is planned.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

The focus of this paper is largely on employability related to unemployed job seekers (graduates) and labour market opinion about the latter's portfolio of qualifications and skills. The aim of this study is to gain insights into what employers seek from graduates and what universities and other education institutions/stakeholders are doing to meet those needs. The following objectives form the basis of this research:-

1. To investigate the various skills employers believe that graduates need to enter the labour market.
2. To determine what the employer looks for which the graduates cannot offer.
3. To determine whether employers have certain preferences when it comes to universities from which applicants have graduated.

3.2 Methodology

As highlighted earlier, each sector may have different needs, both in terms of formal qualification and the skills and attitudes needed. To assess all sectors in Mauritius would require time and financial resources, which may not be achievable in a short span of time. Therefore, as a preliminary research, this study aims at assessing one of the key sectors of Mauritius, the banking sector. According to the HRDC Report 2007, there is a big need for qualified staff in the banking sector, both in terms of quantity and quality. The shortage of skilled professionals is mostly due to the internal and external forces compelling this sector to innovate and adapt to these forces. To meet the different objectives, the following were carried out:-

The objective of the research design is to propose a conceptual model by exploring the relationship between employability determination factors.

3.2.1 Research Objective 1

A qualitative research study that included five one-to-one interviews with employers of leading banks in Mauritius. To ensure participation by a diverse range of participants (Creswell, 2012), the researcher engaged in purposeful sampling methods. Two stratification criteria were used to identify candidates: first, confirmation that individuals directly hired or had significant influence on the hiring decision of new graduates and second, a broad representation of the banking sector.

A semi-structured interview, with a pre-determined set of questions, was carried out. Such interview offers the interviewer to further probe the interviewee in case more information is needed.

3.2.2 Research Objective 2 and 3

When employers conduct interviews of potential candidates, they look for more specific features other than the formal qualification. These may include skills, attitudes, and behavioural traits amongst others. Someone may have the best qualification but cannot respond to the questions of the interview panel, thus may get rejection. Therefore, the main features that employers look for in candidates have been investigated. What are the reasons why candidates are chosen/rejected were also probed into and analysed.

Moreover, secondary school leavers in Mauritius now have a wide choice of universities (both local and foreign) where they can pursue higher studies. For instance, one can major in a degree in finance from a local university but many are those who opt to study same in a private or foreign university, which cost much higher. But when it comes to recruitment, it was useful to also consider whether there is a preference to recruit those who achieved tertiary education from local universities or foreign universities.

This was achieved through an interview with people involved in hiring and conducting interviews of applicants.

Drawing from the literature review and through information gathered in the qualitative interview, using AtlasTi, the various concepts that emerge as contributing to this research have been extracted to propose a conceptual framework.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Almost all employers reported that Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) is one of the major criteria regularly used to recruit graduates to the job market, but this may not be the determining factor. Usually, they also assess for other skills and attitudes. This finding is in line with (Allen et al 2006) proposition that the selection criteria used by employers when screening job applicants may include factors such as work experience, gender and social background which are distributed unevenly within educational qualification categories. This is another potential line of explanation why individuals with similar levels of formal certification may encounter varying degrees of success in securing employment in jobs which make use of their graduate-level skills and knowledge. To be noted that for this sector, almost all employers revealed that for selection of graduate level posts, they usually conduct a written test to shortlist candidates. These tests are mostly to gauge attitudes and understanding.

Another important finding was given that all universities do not offer the same curriculum for the same degree, many other factors make the learning experience of students different. Some employees reported that amongst others, important factors that they consider important when recruiting are the course contents, methods of delivery (whether full-time, part-time or distance education) and modes of evaluation. When probed further, they argued that institutions are too rigorous on formal written assessment which may not necessarily develop the skills necessary for the labour market. Skills they find important are creativity willingness to learn, ability to work under pressure, good communication skills, high adaptation levels, responsible and autonomous. This corroborates to the findings of Yorke (n.d.) who argued that the curricular process may facilitate the development of prerequisites appropriate to employment, but does not guarantee it. Hence, it may not be appropriate to assume that students can be employable on the basis of curricular provision alone: it may be one positive point but it is not an assurance of employability. Employability derives from the ways in which the student learns from his or her experiences.

Moreover, some potential employers also revealed that they do not have any preference as such regarding where the applicant completed studies. However, they mentioned that there are definite criteria such as the match of a curriculum to the employer's business and the reputation of the institution can affect the graduate's chances. This corroborates with Yorke's (n.d.) argument that when a high proportion of the population has come with the demanded degree, selection procedures can call into criteria that may reproduce a preferred composition of the organization's workforce. Moreover, Carfello, W & Cathy, J (1987) argued that interviewers may look for personality, ability, dependability, and reliability; and high grades may not necessarily ensure the above list of traits.

Adding to the argument above, it was interesting to note that employers develop a negative image of the candidate if the latter wears too much perfume or smells of cigarettes, wears a sunglass on the head, gets too in depth about personal life, does not listen to the question of the interviewer and start giving answers, and if the outfit is not appropriate for an interview. While these may seem simple observations, deep down they each have an argument. When further probed, one employer said that too much perfume or cigarette odour may not appeal everyone, so the use prior to attending a meeting has to be considered. Wearing sunglasses on the forehead show either 'forgetfulness' or 'displaying the smart-look', which are both negative signs to appear with in a formal interview. But in most cases, they encounter people who tend to give too much personal information or who tend to 'humbly brag' themselves, especially when asked about their weaknesses. Another observation is also when candidates try to adopt arrogant and off-putting behaviour to show that they are extremely capable. All these thus resumes that personality is an important determinant.

It is also interesting to note that two interviewees pointed that very often, the first ten minutes can be very decisive. For instance, when the candidate enters the room, they look at the etiquette – grooming, outfit, facial expression, body language, communication and interest in listening. Thus, someone may have a good degree, but the remaining factors are not met.

As far to what they believe concerning the curriculum of universities, most emphasised that maybe because of the way examinations are carried out, students are only assessed on the subject content which they prove through writing. Employers believe that students should also be assessed using other forms than written examinations. Two interviewees also proposed that all curriculum should also be accompanied by non-formal education that shape the personality of students so that they become responsible adults, committed and dedicated employees,

demonstrate good communication skills and exhibit a certain level of maturity, emotional intelligence and social adaptability.

5.0 Recommendations and Conclusion

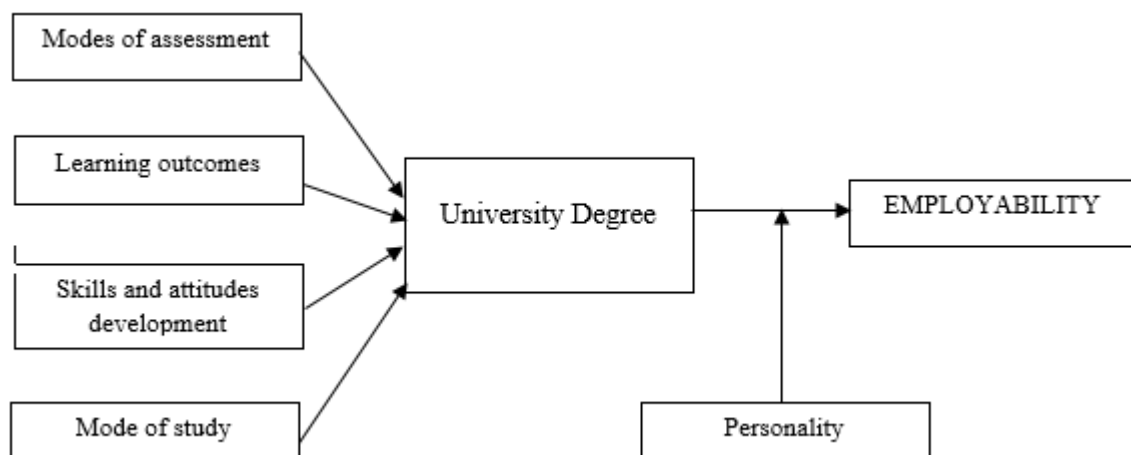
In view of the pertinent issues raised by employees, one main recommendation that arises is the mode of assessment – all programme, or even, all modules cannot be treated in the same way when assessment is concerned. It is recommended that universities start at looking what the learning objectives are and how these can be achieved. For instance, while some modules might require formal written examinations others may require portfolios. Employability is clearly linked to learning outcomes of university and degree programs (Finch et al., 2013) while those activities focusing on soft-skill development are considered vital for successful employability of graduates. Proper assessment could therefore ensure that transferrable skills are produced which can augment the chance of graduates to be absorbed by the labour market.

Second important observation that draws attention is skills and attitudes. It is recommended that universities assess applicants prior to joining the programme which they applied for to know whether they meet the necessary criteria both for the course and possible future employment that the course may offer. For instance, out of this study, it has been found that it is desirable that a qualified chartered accountant should be able to pay ‘attention to the smallest details’. This specific skill may not be possibly developed and cultured over just three to four years of study. It could require development from a very young age. Hence, specific assessment criteria for each programme on offer should be developed by TEIs. To support this endeavour, the choice of subjects at secondary schools should be in such a way that parents understand the importance of selecting the right subjects. For instance, some parents try to influence their children to choose particular subjects. But whether those subjects are really meeting the profile of the student may not be the case. Selection should therefore be done in consultation with the teachers/educators. In this line, educators may also be trained in career counselling to empower them to recognise the talents students possess and thus channelling them to the right choice of subjects.

Third point that was highlighted from the findings is linked to personality. According to a study by I Potgieter et al (2012), extraversion seemed to influence the participant’s ability to demonstrate employability attributes. In another study by Potgieter, I and Coetzee, M (2013) it was evidenced that people's employability attributes relate significantly to their personality preferences. The authors also observed significant relationship between Extraversion (E) and cultural competence which suggests that extraverted people are confident about their ability to act and interface effectively in diverse cultural environments. Moreover, participants with an extraverted personality preference have positive self-evaluations about their career resilience, sociability, proactivity and emotional literacy. These may call for action as to means and ways to develop personality traits that can indeed help in securing and maintaining employability.

5.1 The proposed Conceptual Model

From the findings and discussions above, a possible conceptual model that emerges is illustrated below.



However, given that this research was limited to one sector only and the method used to achieve objectives, it cannot be generalised. Future research could extend this research to other fields to come up new frameworks of employability

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