



EMPLOYABILITY SKILL DEVELOPMENT AT PREPARATORY PROGRAMMES: CURRENT SITUATION, IMPLICATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Research shows that employees who demonstrate skills such as communication, team-working and emotional acumen have a great advantage in their career growth. The researcher looks at the rigour at which employability skill development is endeavoured through selected courses and recommends enhancement methods. The study is aimed mainly at the education managers of higher education institutes.

Keywords: Employability, Generic, I-Brand, Omanization, Skills, Unemployment

Introduction

Most corporate firms consider communicative and generic skills as a sine qua non for their personnel besides their competence in core knowledge and set graduate attributes. Classroom is an ideal learning ground where one can practise alternative ways of dealing with people to facilitate learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form (Hagmann and Almekinders (2003, p. 23). Although most specialized programmes attempt to build proficiency in the three modes of communication viz, interpersonal, interpretive and presentational modes (ACTFL, 2012), industries highlight the fact that a sizable number of graduates lack the necessary general and language skills.

As per the Education and Skills Survey by the *Confederation of British Industry* (CBI, 2012), '72% of businesses say they value foreign language skills' and 52% say they are "recruiting new staff with language skills.' A few preparatory programmes will be analyzed to ascertain their adequacy in learning outcomes vis-a-vis the employability skill demands of industry identified by CBI. The researcher attempted to extrapolate the I Brand Employability Model of Trought (2012) which can be incorporated into the learning outcomes of preparatory programmes. The interactive presentation ends with recommendations on alternative approaches with employability skills that can be embedded into the curriculum.



“It is not the strongest of the species that survive nor the most intelligent but the one most responsive to change,” says Professor Leon Megginson (1963,) summarizing Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. “Unemployment is at its highest since 1995,” “One in six young people are out of work,” “Almost a quarter of graduates are not in full time work 3 years after leaving university!”, “One fifth of graduates in work are not in graduate level professions.” All these news headlines highlight the fact that employers want only the best! What’s employability? ‘.. a set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.’ Yorke (2006)

In other words, employability is a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all should possess in order to ensure they fit into the workplace. A cursory look at the online sources reveal that ‘employability’ is known differently at different parts of the world, as shown in the table below:

Country	Term
United Kingdom	Core skills, key skills, common skills
United States	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how
Canada	Employability skills
Germany	Key qualifications
France	Transferable skills
Australia	Key competencies, employability skills, generic skills
New Zealand	Essential skills
Singapore	Critical enabling skills
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary skills
Denmark	Process-independent qualifications

Study so far reveals that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills; only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge (Klaus, 2010). This shows that three quarters of an employee’s success depends on non-technical skills. On similar lines, Wilhelm (2004) says that employers are increasingly looking for employees who are mature and socially well adjusted, and they rate soft skills as number one in importance for entry-level success on the job. Whether it is entry level or mid-level, it is a truism that transferable skills play a vital role in career success. Several other experts are also equivocal on their importance on skills. According to Watts and Watts (2008), hard skills contribute only 15% to one’s success whereas 85% of success is due to soft skills. Bronson (2007) views hard skills as specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured. By contrast, soft skills are less tangible and harder to quantify.



It has been a much debated issue if educational institutes are responsible for students' employability skill development. Irrespective of arguments, it is undeniable that universities have a major role in creating skilled workforce, since they are meant to mold and groom the future generations. 'The classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practise alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form' (Braakman, 2003). However, there is unfortunately a tendency in higher education to see employability as a bolt-on extra to a degree programme. This does not actually achieve the objectives since employability in degree programme works only if it is embedded in what students learn. Those responsible for educational curriculum should be able to integrate the concept of employability in the subjects, or else it is not going to work in higher education. Most degree usually qualifies the students for another degree and that is how the degrees are designed with its hierarchies – Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctor's. That kind of a design does not adequately fit for purpose in terms of doing something other, then going on to another degree.

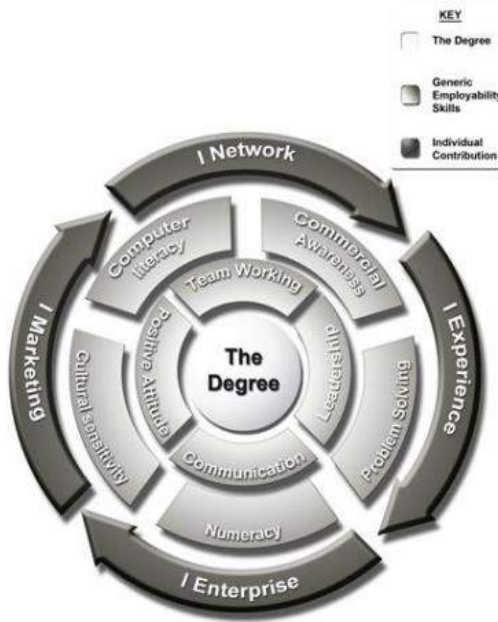
The employment market has become highly competitive. The importance of work experience is generally known by students when they hit the job market where employers expect graduates to have some kind of experience beyond their degree. So, it is wiser for graduate students to undertake some voluntary work throughout the year or during their summer or winter breaks. Although many students find time constraints as an excuse not to involve in extra-curricular or voluntary work, they will always find a few hours nonproductive. Students have to identify that time and invest time in developing their generic skills. On top of the academic studies, students should be able to do some sort of voluntary or project work.

Today's employers are demanding in such a way that they need evidence to your performance output, through various extracurricular activities and other initiatives that the students involve in during their university days. These are besides the report from CV referees (professors, heads, colleagues, tutors, internship supervisors, et al.) The employers are fully justified in their approach, as they need to differentiate yourself from the rest of the job seekers. Having just a graduation certificate (even a meritorious/honours degree) gives an impression to the prospective employer that all that this student can do is to manage his/her studies and nothing more than that. Students must realize that it does not matter much on the sector they volunteered to work – be it a bank, supermarket or a charity organization – as long as they are learning transferable skills they are all a value for time invested. All such experiences would add to students a host of generic skills and attributes.

Reflecting on what you have been through or what you have learned, wherever it comes from, job seekers should have the confidence to explain that to people, is how you get into where you want to be. This also makes the graduate employers to believe in your ability, that you have identified and developed your skills. One of the interesting research fact is that now most large organizations only

recruit through their internship schemes. Therefore, if students are aiming to work in blue-chip companies, the only way to get into them is through their internship schemes. Companies use internship as a prolong selection process and include this in their trainability testing.

At this juncture, it is relevant to refer to 'I Brand Employability Model,' which prompts us to think that if our name was a brand, what would our brand say about us? (Trought, 2012). The model highlights the fact that being a successful graduate is not just securing a degree, but it is about systematically developing generic transferable skills that enriches your CVs to include in your applications and interviews. Based on the 'I Brand,' the Degree – which is the nucleus in the model – is the essence of one's experience gained at University. The two outsider circles around the core, with elements such as communication, team working, problem-solving, positive attitude, etc, refer to the general employability skills which are embedded within the degree programme, although they are not explicitly seen in the course of study. Regardless of the specialism the students enroll in, these are usually known as generic graduate attributes in university programmes. The final outer circle is purely individual experience of each student. Here, the student needs to create a network of friends and even college faculty members. Students should also be able to learn from their experience while working and should be able to develop creative ideas as part of entrepreneurship. This is possible if students explore and join various clubs and forums at universities to find areas to display their creativity. Students have the choice in becoming a part of digital networking by joining sites like *LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.* Besides all these, students should be able to market themselves and their brand.



Students have to do research on what they would like to do after graduation. They should take up internship opportunities to feel perhaps where they actually want to work, such as a staff dealing with customers, or someone who sits behind a desk always creating policies and procedures. There was a case of a student who had wanted to work with banking sector. After two months of internship in a bank, the student was no longer interested in working in a bank and she chose to work in a charity organization, where she was very happy and satisfied.

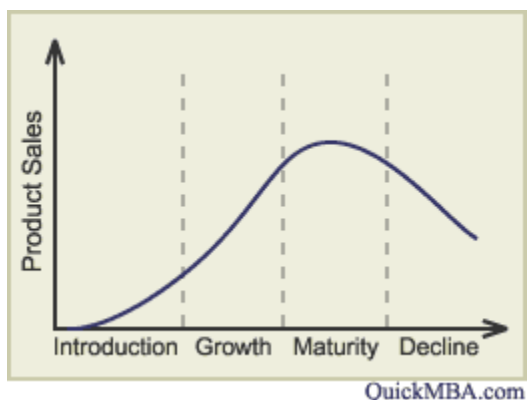
The I Brand Employability Model (Trought, 2012)



Based on the I Brand model let us understand how employability is important for the preparatory stage graduate students so that they can build a plan. Developing your own brand image is extremely essential.

For students, it is extremely important to create a roadmap in the degree programme, which needs to be followed during the specialization. While students pursue their programmes, they should also plan for their journey after exiting the university. Students need to understand that part of the employers' need is to have the right qualifications and part of it is to hone generic skills. It is about how they want to use the degree to get into their employability destinations.

An analogy of 4 P's of marketing mix of a product's Career Life Cycle of Kotler (2008) with Trought's I Brand reveals interesting facts. Just like a product, career-wise we as a product have our development stage, followed by introduction, growth, maturity, and then the decline in the market demand. Therefore it is imperative that the self-development should ideally start at the initial stages of a student's university studies.



(Product Life Cycle by Kotler et., 2008)

Many higher education institutions have set graduate attributes, which are a set of teaching values which are applicable to professional training and academic output. Every module/programme would identify the attributes that the college seeks to bestow in its graduates and the college hopes to spread awareness of this to both faculty and graduates.

College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS) – A brief profile: ‘The College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS), Sultanate of Oman was established in 1983 by an Omani Royal Decree (No. 64/83). The creation of CBFS was primarily motivated by the need to support the national level policy of providing appropriate education and training to ensure full involvement of the nationals of Oman in the field of banking. Pursuant to the fair achievement of nationalization objectives of 90% Omanisation of the workforce in banks by the year 2000, CBFS diversified its activities by affiliating



with internationally reputed higher educational institutions for offering Higher National Diplomas, Bachelor’s, Master’s besides its training collaborations’ (CBFS Portfolio, 2010). Leveraging on its three decades of core competencies, the College also offers its own indigenous degree and foundation programmes. The College boasts of having a student footfall of an average of 1500 students annually in the recent years, as per student registry records. Having revived its strategic plan and related documents, the College has recently realigned its Graduate Attributes for its academic programmes. These are as follows:

CBFS Graduate Attributes (recommended - 2016)
Academic and Professional Knowledge
Communication
Teamwork and Leadership
Global perspective and Cross-cultural adaptability
Critical and Analytical Thinking
Social Responsibility and Ethics
Entrepreneurship Skills
Life-long Learning

The mapping of graduate attributes to the programmes offered by the College is being prepared; this data could later be used for verifying the suitability of graduate output to the market after the completion of the first batch of students.

As far as employability destination is concerned, most of the College graduates are oriented to join banking and financial establishments in Oman. A quantitative feedback was collected from these employers using questionnaire as the data collection method (with stratified probability sampling) to identify the most desired employability skills. The employers shortlisted the highly demanding employability skills as: Communication, Integrity, Interpersonal skills, Professionalism, Responsibility, Teamwork and Work ethics. The chart below interprets each of the desirable skill:

Attributes	Includes
Communication	oral, speaking capability, written, presenting, listening
Integrity	honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what’s right
Interpersonal Skills	nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth, social skills



Professionalism	business-like, well-dressed, appearance, poised
Responsibility	accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined, wants to do well, conscientious, common sense
Teamwork	cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, collaborative
Work ethics	hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance

Interestingly, the graduate attributes of the College addresses all the above desirable employability skills as desired by the employers in one way or the other. It is to be seen if the graduates actually gains these attributes to make them ready for the job market. However, during the course of this study, the researcher attempted to map the employability skills embedded in a selection of three programmes offered by the College. These were the General Foundation Programme (GFP by English Language Centre), Student Self Development (University of Bradford) and Employability Skills (Pearson BTEC – Higher National Diploma).

General Foundation Programme (GFP by English Language Centre): An integrated transferable skill set is found at the level 5 (English for Academic Purpose – English for Specific Purpose module) of the 6-level GFP. The module has a 160 hours of contact session, which is designed to help students to prepare for specialization programmes. The table below shows how elements of Employability Skills is embedded in the EAP-ESP module:

Mode of assessment	First 80 hours	Second 80 hours
1. Class Tests	Test on Study Skills	Summarizing; Paraphrasing; Referencing; Note-making; Listening
2. Essay	Essay (1000 words) with at least three sources with in-text and reference list	---
3. Group Project	---	A group research report: a research essay; an original questionnaire; should report results of the survey using graphs



4. Group Presentation	---	The team presents the findings to the audience. Practise for a group presentation: marks for individual and group presentation
Employability Skills embedded	<i>Integrity in referencing; Professionalism; Responsibility; Time Management</i>	<i>Communication – oral & written Integrity in research and report Interpersonal Skills; Professionalism Responsibility; Teamwork; Work ethics; Time Management</i>

Table: Employability Skills embedded in the EAP-ESP module of GFP

Student Self Development (SSD): BSc Degree - University of Bradford, UK: The module descriptor of SSD states that it is designed to help develop the essential skills needed to succeed in your studies. Moreover, there will be opportunities for students to develop skills in group work, presentations, critically thinking, referencing and writing that are the basic building blocks for success. This is a 100 hour participative module that requires students to be involved in activities within and outside the class. The outcomes of the module include students compiling a personal development plan (portfolio) relating to their development. The module categorically states some essential personal Transferable Skills for students, such as to (a) identify and demonstrate good practice in working with others and managing your time; (b) give a coherent argument for a specific point of view; and (c) present information in a confident and logical manner.

The Learning Outcomes of Student Self Development are: Employability and Personal Development, Organising Yourself and Managing Your Time, Writing for University, Critical Thinking Skill, Working with Others, Presentation Skills, Examinations and Revision Skills. As in the previous case, a range of transferable skills are found embedded in the module, which are given in the table below:

Mode of assessment	Details
1. Individual Presentation / Critical Thinking (20%)	Present a concept studies in the class
2. Group Project & Presentation (30%)	A group project report & presentation in front of a panel
3. Portfolio (50%)	Individual Personal Development Plan – Assignment



Soft Skills embedded	<i>Professionalism; Team Work Responsibility; Time Management Communication – (Oral & written) Integrity in research and report Interpersonal Skills; Planning for future/workplace</i>
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Table: Employability Skills embedded in Student Self Development (SSD): BSc Degree - University of Bradford

Employability Skills Course – Higher National Diploma (Pearson BTEC, UK): The objectives of this HND module are to hone employability skills required for effective employment; to understand own responsibilities and performance at the workplace; to learn skills required for general employment – interpersonal and transferable skills, dynamics of working in teams including leadership and communication skills. It also deals with problem-solving at workplace.

Mode of assessment	Grades: Pass, Merit, Distinction	Details
1. Individual Assignment 1	Academic assignment with reference	Be able to determine: own responsibilities and performance; interpersonal and transferable skills
2. Individual Assignment 2	Academic assignment with reference	Understand the dynamics of working with others; be able to develop strategies for problem solving
3. Individual Presentation	Communication Style	To comment on the personal communication style
Soft Skills embedded	<i>Professionalism; Responsibility; Time Management Communication – (Oral & Written) Integrity in academic assignment Interpersonal Skills; Planning for future/workplace</i>	

Table: Employability Skills embedded in Employability Skills Course – Higher National Diploma (Pearson BTEC, UK)

On successful completion of HND - Employability Skills module, a learner will be able to determine own responsibilities and performance; be able to develop interpersonal and

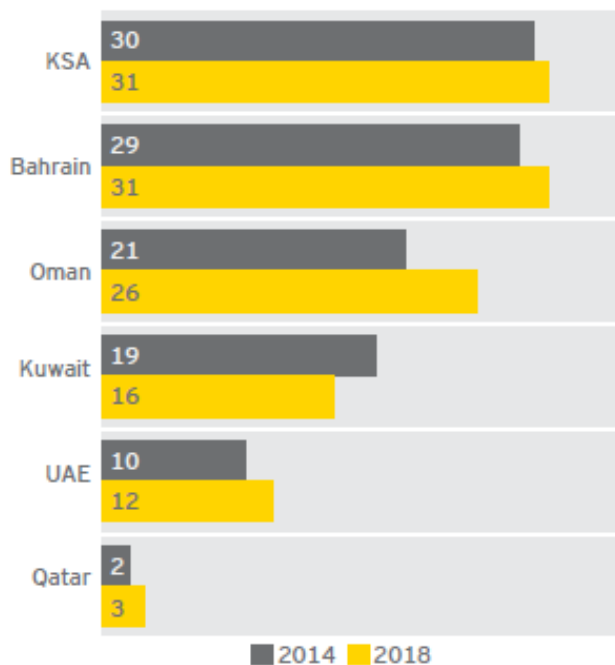


transferable skills; understand the dynamics of working with others and be able to develop strategies for problem solving.

Having examined the industries' hunger for graduates with the right skills, the case study of CBFS programmes in the context, let us now have a look at the performance of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) higher education institutes. The findings of a seminal report by Ernst and Young (EY, 2015), *"How will the GCC close the skills gap?"* is quoted here. It is observed that the governments of GCC countries are heavily investing in the education sector, giving one of its main priorities of educating their young nationals. However, the high investments are met with alarming findings of their disproportionate outcomes: GCC students lag behind their international counterparts in core subjects. And when comes to recruitment, there is a severe mismatch between the expectations of graduates vis-à-vis the employers.

As revealed in the report, employers look forward to recruiting the local workforce since there are several advantages. These include, local knowledge and language, local networking and connections which the expatriates do not possess. However, the report identifies huge skill gap between what the demands of the job market and what the candidates have. This is cited as the reasons for increasing youth unemployment rate and its projections as shown in the table below.

GCC: Youth unemployment 2014 and 2018 (ILO projections in %)



In the light of the EY survey conducted among GCC employers and students, the challenges to retain GCC nationals (% of GCC residents) are clearly seen. It can be seen that the biggest challenge is the high salary expectations followed by lack of work experience, communication skills and work discipline of the GCC nationals.

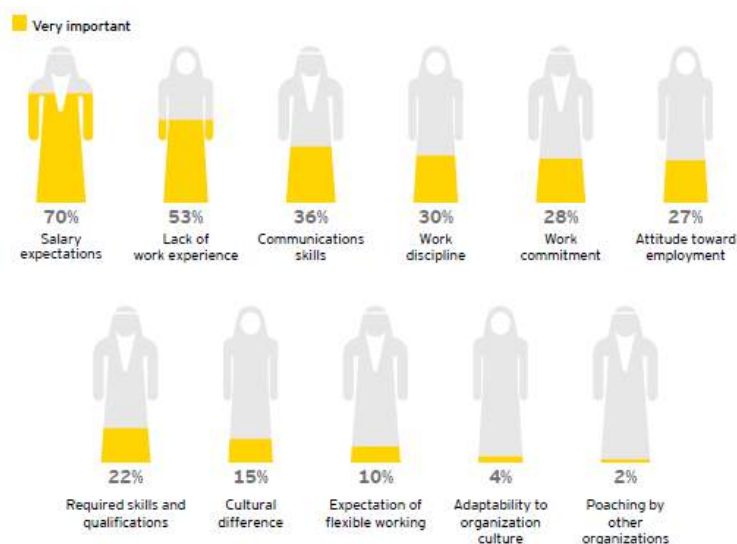
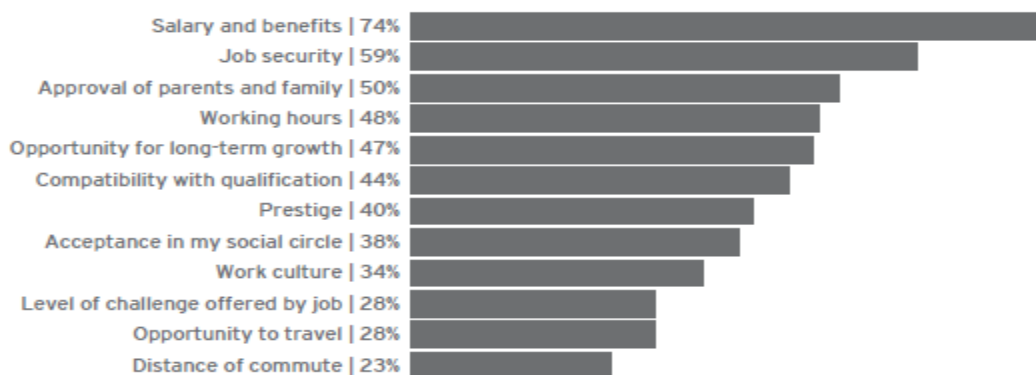


Image: Expectations of GCC youth

However, the young candidates expect salary and benefits as the most important criterion in job, whereas challenges in job are least preferred, as shown in the chart below.

Criteria for choosing a job assessed as "very important" by young people





Although the study was not specifically focusing on the GCC region, the report was relevant on two areas: (a) lack of employability skills among the graduates and (b) CBFS' objectives of Omanization of the banking sector.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study has raised the issue of employability skills and verified how educational institutions deal with the demand of the employment market. 'Soft skills can be included into the curriculum easily by spreading the content throughout the semester,' says Evenson (1999). However, despite embedded skill development attempts by universities, are the students ready for their graduate destinations? Besides perhaps the IT and networking skills (due to mobile telecom boom), students lack core skills that are pivotal for their career success. So, universities should have compulsory internship

On the other hand, are the students aware of the importance of transferable skills at early stages at university? Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, UK, advises students to 'take responsibility for [their] own employability.' (Jackson, 2011). Graduates will find jobs only if they plan developing the generic skills right from their early period of study at higher education. This is by actively involving in extracurricular activities, voluntary work or internship, along with their specialization studies. Inside or outside university, there are plenty of opportunities like various clubs, societies, sports and cultural activities, events, workshops and competitions for students to organize and participate, besides becoming a part of the digital networking. Companies are continuing to rate their employees' interpersonal skills as more important than their analytical abilities. It is often said that hard skills will get you an interview but you need soft skills to get (and keep) the job (Klaus 2010).

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