



Perceptions of Challenges Associated to Develop Employability Skills In Business Management Students

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Abstract:

Higher education in the United Kingdom is increasingly expected to be further involved in the process of students' development beyond the requirement of the discipline in terms of knowledge and is demanded to be an active contributor to skills development to further meet the needs of the labour market. The purpose of the study is to provide an understanding of perceptions of key challenges associated with employability skills development in business management studies degrees. This understanding would be generated through the literature and collection of data based on focus group including small number of female students at the final year of their studies based in the UK. To further enhance this understanding this study included several key themes and subthemes in the literature review, data collection, and discussion of findings as the following: Perception of challenges to be employable. The study identified and explored key considerations to overcome students' perceived challenges of employability. The study suggested that the curriculum could further focus on the identification of suitable employment opportunities in relation to offered programmes, development of an understanding of key employers' expectations, and development of the understanding of key trends in the employment market.

Keywords: Employability skills, employment, higher education, business management, females



Introduction

Higher education providers in the United Kingdom are challenged to enhance the quality of their overall education offer continuously further, with higher expectations to further match with key employability requirements in the labour market (Helmi *et al.*, 2018a,b,c). HE providers have growing responsibility to equip graduates with the needed skills to contribute in the supply of talent to the labour market (Pollard *et al.*, 2013), with consideration of different external and internal challenges such as economic and social changes.

The nature of the British economy is different from other developed economies worldwide, considering the major reliance on the services sectors such as finance, insurance, and entertainment. Furthermore, the British economy can be considered as more knowledge based rather than being physical or industrial based. Therefore, it is imperative for higher education institutions to continuously aim to enhance different set of employability skills to serve the needs of the economy such as creativity and innovation (Harvey *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, there is a need to further understand employers' expectations (Pius *et al.*, 2020a,b)

It is important to stress on the point that students in British universities are very diverse considering different factors such as the following: 1. Internationalisation of the British higher education system. 2. Prior experiences and age range of students. 3. Differences in students' drive and interests to have a degree (Usmani & Alharahsheh, 2020; Sarfraz *et al.*, 2018; Helmi & Pius, 2018a,b; Alharahsheh, 2019a,b). Furthermore, expectations and perceptions of employers are also different considering the external and internal challenges they face (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019b; Harvey *et al.*, 2002) such as the need to remain competitive through innovation and creativity, and economic changes at the global level. Therefore, there is a growing need for higher education institutions to be further focused on those internal and external challenges to develop an inclusive curriculum that can serve the requirements of the labour market, and develop key employability skills required (Harvey *et al.*, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to provide understanding of students' perceptions of challenges facing them to be employable during their studies at the undergraduate level. This understanding is mainly focused on female's point of view considering the challenges they face after graduation such as



lack of experience. This understanding would be generated through the literature and collection of data based on focus group including a small number of female students at the final year of their studies based in the UK. To further enhance this understanding, this study has included several key themes and subthemes in the literature review, data collected, and discussion of findings as the following: perception of challenges to be employable.

Literature review

Challenges to be employable:

It is important to note that employers are having increasing pressure to demand for more skilled and equipped graduates with key skills. While leadership is one of these key skills required, it is no longer adequate to have traditional notion of leadership skills and capabilities, rather employers are looking for leaders oriented with creativity (Rampersad and Patel, 2014). Furthermore, the study conducted by Abbas *et al.* (2018) resulted that overall graduate employability skills reflected a gap based on the comparison expected by managers working in workplace. Furthermore, the study resulted in that there is significant skills gap exists between graduate skills and what is demanded in workplace, such as problem solving, communication, listening skills, leadership, critical and analytical thinking, self-management, and interpersonal skills. This was reflected as an area of further development higher education institutions to pick as in the study of Jackson and Wilton (2016) indicated clear areas for further development due to several factors which can be summarised as the following: Firstly, students' ability to identify suitable employment opportunities that match their key skills and subject knowledge. Secondly, students' ability to understand the expectations of employers in workplace. Thirdly, students' ability to develop further awareness of key trends in employment market. Other challenges were also reflected on the employers' side instead such as lack of access to different businesses due to their size and capacity in different regions in specific sectors such as creativity-oriented sectors (Fleischmann, 2015).

In the case of work placements during or after studies, several challenges were perceived as students' limitation to development of employability skills during work placements, such as working with very experienced professionals resulted in development of feeling to be isolated and



inadequate, lack of support from experienced professionals made it harder for students to understand key expectations and protocols in workplace, and difficulties to work in very diverse workforce backgrounds. Furthermore, in some cases students experienced bullying amongst co-workers. This has supported the feeling to have less self-confidence and inexperience (Jackson, 2015). While the research above agree that students made considerable development in employability skills, it is crucial to point out that these developments were not enough to meet employers' and managers' expectations. These discussions clearly show a gap in skills expectations between students and employers. In some cases, students faced challenges to develop key skills such as leadership and creativity out of the non-traditional notion of skills. Students lacked ability to identify future employment opportunities due to lack of understanding employers' expectations in workplace and lacked awareness of key trends in employment market. Students at higher education levels are not only challenged by the existing gap of expectations but also lacking support when involved in workplace, making the gap of expectations wider and more challenging to overcome. These findings would serve the purpose of the study and would outline key considerations by the author to investigate ways of overcoming those challenges.

Methodology

Focus group is commonly used as a qualitative approach to enable further depth understanding of particular social issues. Focus group aims to select appropriate and in-depth data from group of individuals rather than statistical representation of a broader population sample (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020b; Nyumba *et al.*, 2018; Greenwood *et al.*, 2014; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Several studies, which were focused on embedding employability skills within higher education, have also used focus group to enable further understanding of key issues associated (Alharahsheh, 2019a; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019b; Simatele, 2015; Dinning and Ünlü, 2017; Deeley, 2014). Furthermore, those studies provided in depth quality of insights and findings relating to specific contexts. Therefore, the author has determined focus group to be the most suitable to collect the required data due to several factors as the following: Firstly, it would further clarify students' views on employability as a group with various responses rather than viewing different responses individuals with limited ability to interlink between responses. Secondly, it would stimulate deeper engagement and discussion between participants leading to deeper understanding and reflection of



their views in relation to questions raised by the facilitator. Thirdly, it would enable further research consistency as questions are raised to all participants at the same time and using the same methods by the researcher. Fourthly, the questions developed were nondirective questions. Therefore, they required further discussion between participants, which would enhance quality of responses (Hennink, 2007).

The following provides brief clarity of researcher's epistemological Position developed:

- Epistemology: Interpretivism
- Methodology: Qualitative
- Method: Interview
- Technique: Focus group

One online focus group was conducted between April and May 2019, using an interactive platform through Google. The participants were all in their final semester of their business management undergraduate studies and were in the process to apply for either postgraduate studies or looking for work opportunities. The online focus group lasted around 15 – 20 minutes and was led by the researcher in which he has acted as the facilitator of the focus group, using semi structured interview guidelines.

Different prompts were applied during the process to enhance understanding and develop comprehensive response around the questions raised during the process. The focus group data was recorded at the end of the process to be used for in depth analysis.

The focus group guide has included four key questions: Those key questions were determined as central to support the research focus and question during the early phase of the research development. Those questions were simplified to enable comprehensive understanding and response.

Several factors determined the decision of adopting online focus group (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018), this can be summarised as the following: Firstly, time constraints as the students were at the end of the semester, and was a bit difficult to get full attendance if they were out of study time. Secondly,



considering the various locations of participants from the institution, this enhanced the opportunity to reach absent participants that are unable to physically attend for the focus group. Thirdly, it offered the same benefits as the face to face focus group. Fourthly, the online focus group enabled the facilitator to capture further depth in data as participants were typing their responses in most cases. Fifthly, the online focus group has enabled conversation between participants themselves and the facilitator. Considering the nature of the research question, this depth in conversation would serve the purpose as it enables deeper reflection and discussion of the participants' own views and perspectives. Sixthly, the online focus group was viewed as more comfortable and convenient for the participants to contribute to the process. Seventhly, participants had the opportunity to remain anonymous to the other participants if they wanted as they could reply in private messages which can be only viewed by the facilitator. Ethical considerations have been assessed and have communicated with the participants of the aim of the research and they were consented. However, during the online focus groups the researcher have encountered several challenges such as poor connectivity and lack to capture of verbal or written communication in some cases (Dubrovsky *et al.*, 1991).

Table 1: Background of the participants in the online focus group

Gender	Number
Male	0
Female	4
Age	20 – 30
Subject/Discipline	4 = Business Management/ Business Studies

Source: Author developed

Participants came from various backgrounds based in the United Kingdom due to their undergraduate studies, with further planning to commit for postgraduate education or employment to enhance workplace experience. However, as shown above in the table participants were all females.



Data collected were coded and further analysed to generate key themes (Christians and Carey, 1989). Findings were also synthesised to contribute to the report results and discussion. Furthermore, quotes were captured from the participants to be used within the discussions to support the themes generated.

Results

This section sets out the main themes developed of the feedback collected through the online focus group discussion with four students at their final stage of their business management studies at the undergraduate level. Notably, it is essential to indicate that this was coming from mainly female representation rather than mixed. The discussions were centred on participants’ own views and perceptions towards employability.

Table 2: Themes, subthemes and codes

Theme	Subthemes and Codes
Perception of challenges to be employable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of experience - age and experience (It is a running gag in our generation) - young people don't get respected - Young people are often belittled. - time management - networking - social skills - not an easy-going person

Source: (Author developed and derived from participants responses).

Theme: Perception of challenges to be employable

It was illustrated in the comments from the participants that there are several key challenges encountered to be employable in the labour market including lack of practical experience, age, respect by employers and professionals in workplace, time management, and networking and



social skills. It is interesting to observe that one of the participants stressed on the point of lack of respect and belittling when being involved in workplace due to several reasons such as age. Furthermore, two out of three responded indicated work experience as the main challenge, whereas the third had a more focus on skills of networking and social skills as well as time management. Therefore, those comments outlined a gap in the curriculum to further match the needs of the labour market with employability skills development during the journey of higher education while considering key challenges encountered by students like the ones indicated above. Furthermore, the comments also reflected gaps in understanding how employability is affected by several factors such as ongoing change in external environment.

Discussion

Perception of challenges to be employable:

Students participated in the focus group who commented on key challenges experienced to be employable in the labour market such as “*Lack of experience*”, “*age*”, “*time management*”, and “*Networking and social skills*”. These challenges identified in the study match with other key challenges identified in studies conducted by Rampersad and Patel (2014) and Abbas *et al.* (2018). These challenges present gaps in the curriculum to match with needs of the labour market and reflect ongoing change in external environment. These gaps would provide scope for further development in embedding skills within curriculum through several key considerations such as enhancement of students’ ability to identify suitable employment opportunities that match their key skills and subject knowledge, students’ ability to understand the expectations of employers in workplace, and students’ ability to develop further awareness of key trends in employment market (Jackson and Wilton, 2016). More importantly, one challenge indicated by participants as the following “young people don't get respected and often belittled”, this reflected a worrying challenge faced by students. Further, this was confirmed by Jackson (2015) as highlighted challenges experienced by studies involved in work placements such as working with very experienced professionals resulted in development of feeling to be isolated and inadequate, lack of support from experienced professionals made it harder for students to understand key expectations and protocols in workplace, and difficulties to work in very diverse workforce backgrounds. Furthermore, in some cases students experienced bullying amongst co-workers.



Therefore, it can be established that focus on development of self confidence as well as other skills associated is essential to overcome such challenges in workplace.

Conclusion and implications

To conclude, this study has considered the student's perceptions in terms of ways to embedding employability skills in the curriculum of business management studies degrees and to achieve this, the study has included several key themes in the literature review, data collected, and discussion of findings as the following: Students' Perception of employability and employers' requirements, Student' perception of the role educational institutions should play, embedding employability into the curriculum, and perception of challenges to be employable.

Finally, the study has also explored key considerations to overcome students' perceived challenges of employability. The study suggested that curriculum could further focus on identification of suitable employment opportunities in relation to offered programmes, development of understanding of key employers' expectations, and development of understanding of key trends in employment market. Furthermore, the study has suggested the curriculum should aim to focus development of self-confidence and other associated skills to overcome negative feelings while involved in workplace during studies and after completion.



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