



## **Students' Perception Of Employer's Requirements In Business Management Studies Degrees: Female Students' Viewpoint**

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### **Abstract:**

*Students' employability has several challenges to link with perceptions and expectations of employers externally. It was found by Jackson and Wilton (2016) that generally students perceive themselves as proficient to be employable in the labour market as they have developed several key skills such as communication skills. However, there are several key gaps existing. The purpose of the study is to provide an understanding of students' perception of employer's requirements to be employable in the labour market . 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 focused on a key theme in the literature review, data collection, and discussion of findings as the following: Students' Perception of employers' requirements. The study identified key gaps existed between students' perception and reality in the labour market, the study called for several developments to further match with the labour market. The study and the literature review included stress on the importance for students to understand that labour markets are experiencing ongoing change, increasing complexity and interdependence with external environments.*

**Keywords:** Employability skills, employers, perception, business management, females



## **Introduction**

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. It has been expected to be active contributor to enhancement of talent to serve the demands of external factors such as economic and social changes (Pollard *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, this is considered as a public policy focus, and higher education institutions are expected to ensure its execution to ensure adaptability to the rapidly changing condition of national and international markets and to the nature of the British economy due its focus on more knowledge based offering rather than physical offering in comparison to other leading economies worldwide. Therefore, there is an increasing pressure to enhance skills development such as creativity and innovative thinking through the journey of higher education (Harvey *et al.*, 2002).

It was argued that challenges of students and new graduates can be viewed as diverse due to several factors such as prior experiences and differences in backgrounds (Sarfraz *et al.*, 2018). Equally, expectations and perceptions of what employers are looking for are also diversified (Pius *et al.*, 2020a,b; Harvey *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, there is an increasing pressure to further embed key employability skills with the overall offering of higher education institutions with more focus on the curriculum delivered to students (Harvey *et al.*, 1997).

The purpose of the study is to provide an understanding of ways to embed employability skills in the curriculum of business management studies degrees to meet the changing market conditions as indicated above. 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 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, Students' perception of the role educational institutions should play, embedding employability into the curriculum, and perception of challenges to be employable.



The changing and challenging conditions of labour markets as discussed above are increasingly requiring higher education institutions to be actively aiming to develop students' and graduates' skills to serve those changes and challenges. However, higher education institutions should aim to further understand the students' perspectives regarding the way they view employability due to the increasing diversity in students' body as discussed (Usmani & Alharahsheh, 2020; Alharahsheh, 2019b; Helmi & Pius, 2018a,b; Helmi *et al.*, 2018a,b,c). This is viewed as a gap and is underreported in the current literature. Therefore, the focus of this study would serve this purpose, and provide new insight to further clarify students' perspective toward ways of embedding employability skills in the curriculum of business management studies' degrees. However, participants would be only representing female students' viewpoints.

The study is organised in six key sections as the following: Introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion including indication of future implications for higher education institutions.

## **Literature review**

### **The meaning of employability:**

Employability in the context of business management studies is defined in different ways depending on the view or perspectives of researchers. Employability was defined by Jackson (2013) as a combination of different factors including academic achievement, ability to manage own career prospects, and enhanced awareness of the labour market. It was also defined as set of transferable skills viewed to be accepted in the labour market; those skills include knowledge and understanding based skills related to the field of the study, and practical skills required in workplace (Mohamad *et al.*, 2018). However, other definitions of employability were broader to be as social responsibility including individuals such as graduates, employers (as they check and clarify key skills required), and educational institutions including public bodies (as they are responsible to bridge those expectations and maintaining quality) (Hillage *et al.*, 2000). Considering the different definitions included, the author viewed employability as the following: skills developed through academic, professional, social, and practical aspects during education that are required for employment in the labour market and to manage career prospects. This newly



formed definition would serve as a base for the study to further investigate ways of embedding employability skills in the curriculum.

### **Students' Perceptions of their employability:**

Students' employability has several challenges to link with perceptions and expectations of employers externally (Alharahsheh, 2019a; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019a; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020a). It was found by Jackson and Wilton (2016) that generally students perceive themselves as proficient to be employable in the labour market as they have developed several key skills such as communication skills. However, it was argued that self-belief was viewed as one of the key aspects to enhance employability in the labour market; it provides belief in ability to achieve own goals, plan and execute actions, and understanding of the environment to achieve goals (Turner, 2014). Nevertheless, several studies indicated that there is a gap existing between the perceptions of key skills between students and employers in the labour market. This was evidenced by Abbas *et al.* (2018) as they found that there is an overall skills gap exists between recent graduates and what managers expected to have in terms of workplace day to day activities. However, this could be argued to be only focused on the banking sector rather than generic. What all this means for students, is that there is an increasing gap existing between their perception and what employers and managers are expecting. This gap indicated would serve as one of the key points to be further investigated in the study, and would be considered to further embed employability skills in the curriculum.

For employers, the key consideration found in the study conducted by Jackson and Wilton (2016) that employers should provide enhanced opportunities for students to develop key skills to further their career related aspects through work integrated learning. Furthermore, today's businesses require recent graduates to have high level skills where they can be reflected during daily practices in workplace such as communication, teambuilding, and leadership skills rather than developing knowledge of technical aspects required for the job (Winstead *et al.*, 2009). This means further actual practical engagement with employers externally may be viewed as essential to develop the required employability skills.



## **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 & 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
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Students' perception of employers' requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- people with vast skill sets and experience</li> <li>- someone who has fresh ideas</li> <li>- preferably quite young</li> <li>- everyone wants someone who is young and yet experienced.</li> </ul>
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Source: (Author developed and derived from participants responses).

Theme one: Perception of employability, employers and their importance

The responses above reflected that students were generally aware of what is constituting employability, and reflected awareness that employability means the following: Attributes needed by employers to be eligible for jobs, key skills required including communications and time management skills as well as knowledge, ability to match employer's expectations starting from interview's process, and understanding of what relevant jobs to their studies included in terms of key tasks. The responses also reflected an interesting observation as all participants directly related employability to what the employer's and jobs were looking for rather than being more generic. The study has indicated that students' perceptions of employability were mainly focused around employer's expectations as all participants directly related employability to what the employer's and jobs were looking for rather than being more generic. However, it was observed that there is a gap existing between employers' and students' perceptions due to lack of experiential and practical learning during their studies. Furthermore, this finding has reflected further gaps of students' understanding trends in employment market, and understanding the increasing demand for skills development beyond the non-technical skills attained through knowledge to reflect understanding of daily skills required in workplace.





## Discussion

Perception of employability, employers and their importance:

Consistent with the work presented by Jackson and Wilton (2016) on employability perception of students to be ready for the labour market by reflecting key employability skills such as communication, and self-belief to enable personal goals achievement, and progression at different levels (Turner, 2014). While the findings of the study have indicated that students' perception of employability were mainly focused around employer's expectations as all participants directly related employability to what the employer's and jobs were looking for rather than being more generic. It is important to take into consideration that there is a gap existing between employers' and students' perceptions of employability required (Abbas *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, further engagement between higher education institutions and employers enable mutual understanding of the trend in the employment market (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). Furthermore, firms are increasingly looking for graduates equipped beyond the key technical skills attained through knowledge development and should reflect understanding of the daily skills required in workplace such as teambuilding and leadership (Winstead *et al.*, 2009). This was supported by several statements made during the focus group such as "*people with vast skill sets and experience*", "*someone who has fresh ideas*", and "*everyone wants someone who is young and yet experienced*".

The findings of the study and the literature review included stress on the importance for students, higher education institutions and employers to understand that labour markets are experiencing ongoing change, increasing complexity and interdependence with external environments. Therefore, it is essential that higher education institutions further engage employers in the process of curriculum development to overcome the rapid change, and to bridge the gaps existing between employers' and students' perceptions of employability (Mohamad *et al.* 2018). Further, it was argued that qualifications only are no longer being considered as the main requirement for employers, rather there is more focus on skills such as teamwork, problem solving, and resilience (Scott *et al.* 2017). This is fully matching with a statement provided by one of the participants as the following "*enough life and people skills as well as knowledge*", "*abilities such as networking, communication, commitment and time management*", and "*series of requirements for people's skills to do certain jobs*". Therefore, higher education institutions should further develop their



curriculum and overall offering to develop key technical skills related to daily skills required 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.

The study has identified several gaps existed between students' and employers' perceptions of employability which can be summarised as the following: gaps of understanding trends in employment market, gaps in understanding the increasing demand for skills development beyond the non-technical skills attained through knowledge to reflect understanding of daily skills required in workplace such as teambuilding and leadership, and gaps in understanding how employability is affected by several factors such as ongoing change in external environment. Therefore, the study calls for higher education institutions to bridge this gap of expectations through further development of their offer generally and embedding further employability skills within curriculum. The study has suggested several key methods to this process such as engagement with employers in the process of curriculum development to understand and overcome changes. Curriculum should focus on embedding key factors such as professional practice and standards as well as integration of theory and practice. Higher education institutions should provide further advise to students on the benefits of work experience in relation to employability skills development, and understanding of key inhibitors for employability engagement during studies should be well considered by higher education institutions such as information availability about planned activities, students' beliefs about the value of participation, management with the formal academic requirements as well as employability requirements to bring a balance.



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