Students' Perception Of Employability In Business Management Studies Degrees: Students' Viewpoint

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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 understanding of female student's perception of employability within business management disciplines. 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.The study identified key gaps existed between students' perceptions of employability and what can be expected in the outside world. The authors also could establish a new combined employability definition 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

Key words: *Employability skills, employment 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 (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 (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020b; Harvey et al., 1997), and on assessment strategy (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2019; Alharahsheh, 2019a). Furthermore, educators are being challenged to further develop their practice in both professional and academic settings to further match with rapid changes beyond the classroom (Alharahsheh, 2019b; Helmi and Pius, 2018 and Helmi et al., 2018a).

It is vital also to consider the way human resources departments within different sectors are considering recruitment an selection activities, with the rapid development of technology (Pius et al., 2020b). It is argued that strategic decision makers within organisations are ore considerate of

key employability skills trending in the labour market (Pius et al., 2020a) as they have more access to data shared based on different sources such as public, education, and competition reports. Furthermore, it is highly important to consider global developments such as affects of globalisation and mobility of people Adekunle et al., 2020; Pius et al., 2020), considering their influence on how graduates can compete within the domestic and global labour markets based on their skills and attributes.

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 (Helmi et al., 2018b; Helmi et al., 2018c). 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. 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

Contextual Background

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.

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 (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 (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

(Derived from: Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020a)

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.

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DISCUSSION AND 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
Students' Perception of employability	- attributes one needs to be eligible for a job - enough life and people skills as well as knowledge. - in order to "pass" the interview - figure out what your job actually is - better people and life skills. - how capable they are to communicate - It is about how hard the person works - series of requirements for people's skills to do certain jobs - abilities such as networking, communication, commitment and time management. - people with fresh new takes - Vast knowledge - Communication and IT skills - hard-working attitude - determination - multitasking - speaking many languages

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

Theme: 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.

. RECOMMENDATIONS

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. Therefore, further engagement between higher education institutions and employers enable mutual understanding of the trend in the employment market, 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.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has considered the student's perceptions of employability skills based on the curriculum of business management studies degrees, the study has included key theme in the literature review, data collected, and discussion of findings as the following: Students' Perception of employability and employers' requirements. The outcomes of the study will serve educators, managers, students, and employers in understanding key perceptions expressed by female students in relation to employability skills. Further research is certainly required in this field to establish key gaps existing between all stakeholders with main focus on the students' as they are the main recipients of the academic offer by higher education institutions. This paper is part of a serios of papers based on the field of employability skills communicated by the author in different academic and professional journals nationally and internationally.

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