The Role Of Educational Institutions In Embedding Employability Skills 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 ways to embedding employability skills in the curriculum of 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 in the literature review, data collected, and discussion of findings as the following: Students' perception of the role educational institutions should play. The study identified several gaps existed based on students' perceptions..

Key words: *Employability skills, curriculum development, business management, females*

INTRODUCTION

The role educational institutions should play:

Higher education institutions face an increasing pressure to play a more active role in employability skills development to further meet the changing demands of the labour market. While the study conducted by Smith et al. (2016) argued that curriculum design should embed six key factors to enhance employability of students; these factors can be summarised as the following: professional practice and standards, collaborations, informed decision making, lifelong learning, integration of theory and practice, and commencement readiness. Furthermore, Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to be able to provide further support and advice for students on the benefits attained through work placements during studies, and the way that would positively impact on their employability skills (Jackson and Wilton, 2016). Therefore, it is important to note that higher education institutions should actively work internally and externally to enhance this for further success (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020b; Alharahsheh and Pius, 2019; Alharahsheh, 2019a). However, it was argued that universities should be play key role in terms of embedding extracurricular activities to enhance students' employability through further understanding of key inhibitors for their engagement with the process such as students' employment commitments, 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, and overall organisation of associated activities (Nghia, 2017). What all of this means for higher education institutions, is that students' development of employability skills can be largely dependent on the active engagement of higher education institutions internally and externally to enhance students' awareness of employability and practice (Usmani and Alharahsheh, 2020; Helmi et al., 2018a;2018b;2018c).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextual Background

Higher education institutions play an active role to connect students with employers during their studies, and to enhance development of skills required in the labour market. While the study of

Fleischmann (2015) suggested that higher education institutions should have further focus on formalizing learning through project-based activities and further client involvement as an integral part of the learning journey. For example, This could be embedded through various initiatives at various levels of the journey such as learning through observation and simulation at the year one level, project-based activities and external engagement in both second and third years of programmes, and capstone projects and experiences in the final stage of programmes (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2019). Furthermore, Higher education sector should further consider the aspects of students' learning in curriculum design and development, points of interactions with students, and cognitive and skills development (Turner, 2014). Additionally, Higher education institutions should play a key role in enhancing the competitive edge of student's learning through innovation and creativity in teaching and learning (Winstead et al., 2009). For higher education institutions, this means that focus of developing employability can be challenging with several variables such as openness of graduates for global competition (Adekunle et al., 2020). These authors, however, point out the importance of considering employability enhancement as a formalised process to develop learning while considering various aspects of students learning to enhance skills and competitiveness of students to meet the needs of the labour market. Educators as well as other key individuals within HE sector should give further consideration of students' learning experience during their regular engagements (Alharahsheh, 2019b; Helmi and Pius, 2018), as this would enable personalisation of the learning experience, and enhance application to practice based on students' backgrounds and interests. Furthermore, there should be regular consideration of key trends in how employers are changing their recruitment practices (Pius et al., 2020a;2020b), enabling students to have further understanding of such requirements during their studies..

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

(Source: 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

MANAGEMENT STYLES

This section sets out the main themes and subthemes 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 on the role of educational institutions should play and embedding of employability skills.

Table 2: Themes, subthemes and codes

Theme	Subthemes and Codes
The role of educational institutions and embedding employability	1. Subtheme: The role educational institutions should play. - more practical learning - opportunities to get work life experience. - to best prepare them for the future - universities don't change the processes (engagement with industry and employers). - introduce more practical studies into all courses. 2. Subtheme: Positive experiences of employability into the curriculum. - theory is necessary to understand the practical aspect of things - Presenting in front of an audience - time management through assignments - working for/by ourselves - team work - working with people with different mind sets - real life training relating to self motivation to attend and do work instead of sleeping. 3. Subtheme: Negative experiences of employability into the curriculum. - in general academics rely too much on the facts. - only consider theoretical concepts. - Focus on theory only leaves student unemployable in the real world.

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

Theme: The role of educational institutions and embedding employability

The comments of the participants have shown that their curriculum included several positive experiences and opportunities to develop key employability skills through presentations, time management, and working with others as an integral challenge of the formative and summative assessments. Furthermore, comments continued to be positive on self-motivation to continue commitment towards studies as this was described as real-life training that would be required in workplace. However, the comments particularly from the first participant indicated a gap in the curriculum to develop their employability skills, while the participant praised the importance of theoretical concepts. This was also criticised to be lacking linkage with practice and was viewed as a barrier to be employable. Furthermore, the negative experiences reflected in responses such as "*in general academics rely too much on the facts*", "*only consider theoretical concepts*", and "*focus on theory only leaves student unemployable in the real world*". Therefore, this indicated that curriculum design should embed several factors to enhance employability and fitness for the labour market. Perceptions in the responses towards the role played by higher education institutions reflected that further clarity on employability should be provided.

Several responses reflected positive perceptions of students towards the fitness of the curriculum to develop their employability, as it focused on both theory and practice. However, there is a clear scope for further development to make it more practical and linked with employers' expectations.

Discussion

The role of educational institutions and embedding employability:

The study presents several worrying findings if higher education institutions had the commitment to ensure their graduates' employability and readiness for workplace. Whilst students have reflected several positive experiences to enhance their employability such as development of skills through working with others and presentations as integral element of their studies. An increasing perception of students existed that their educational institution could have done more as captured from their statements such as "*more practical learning*", "*opportunities to get work life experience*", "*to best prepare them for the future*", "*universities don't change the processes (engagement with industry and employers)*", and "*introduce more practical studies into all*

courses". Furthermore, some responses reflected negative experiences of embedding employability into the curriculum such as "*in general academics rely too much on the facts*", "*only consider theoretical concepts*", and "*Focus on theory only leaves student unemployable in the real world*". Therefore, the findings of the study agreed with Smith *et al*. (2016) that curriculum design should embed several factors such as professional practice and standards, collaborations, lifelong learning, and integration of theory and practice. Higher education institutions should also provide further advice to students on the benefits of work experience in relation to employability skills development (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). Also, 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 (Nghia, 2017).

The findings of the study also call for further inclusion of practical studies into educational programmes "*introduce more practical studies into all courses*", this agreed with the suggestion made by Fleischmann (2015) to formalize such practical activities such as project-based delivery.

Findings of the study reflect positive perceptions of students towards the fitness of the curriculum to develop their employability. Participants have used several examples and experiences that support their employability such as theory and facts focus "*theory is necessary to understand the practical aspect of things*", presentation and communication skills "Presenting in front of an audience", self and time management "*time management through assignments; working for/by ourselves*", working with others "*teamwork and working with people with different mind sets*", and training rather than education only "*real life training relating to self-motivation to attend and do work instead of sleeping*". These findings match with the suggestions made in several studies to further enhance employability skills within the curriculum (Gu *et al*., 2018; Rampersad and Patel, 2014; Abbas *et al*., 2018). Nevertheless, there is scope for further development derived from the literature included as well as the data collected. There is an increasing call to enhance employers and industry links through work integrated learning (Jackson and Wilton, 2016), embedding extra employability activities and initiatives such as social media training and cv development workshops (Rattenbury *et al*., 2018). However, making it a compulsory part of the offered courses remains controversial as argued by Fleischmann (2015) due to issues expressed by students involved in workplace during their studies as part of the curriculum requirements such as lack of feedback provided by professionals in workplace, and more stress and pressure in comparison to traditional learning in classroom environment.

Additionally, other area of development could be around the mode of students' assessment in both formative and summative to enhance employability skills other than the required technical skills (Winstead *et al*., 2009), and this was explored and confirmed by Hooker and Whistance (2016) as the study suggested that non-traditional types of assessment had positive correlation with further improvement of employability skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

Enhancement of industry links can be achieved through embedding work integrated learning and other extra curricula activities such as social media training and cv development workshops. However, proper consideration should take place prior development of such initiatives to ensure that this brings the required employability skills development.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has considered the student's perceptions in terms of the role higher education institutions should play to further enhance the quality in the curriculum of business management studies degrees and to achieve this, the study has included several key themes and subthemes in the literature review, data collected, and discussion of

findings centred as the following: Student' perception of the role educational institutions should play.

This was supported in arguments indicating increasing dissatisfaction amongst students regarding adequacy and integration with experienced professionals in workplace in comparison with normal classroom environment. Additionally, the study has indicated that employability skills can be further enhanced through the way students are being assessed at both formative and summative levels, and innovative assessments have suggested to have positive correlation with further improvement of employability skills.

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