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A PRAGMATIC RESEARCH ON THE ASSORTED DIMENSIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY

Ranbir Singh

Research Scholar

Department of Management

Shri Venkateshwara University

Uttar Pradesh, India

Dr. V. P. S. Arora

Professor

Department of Management

Shri Venkateshwara University

Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

In the current changeable work environment, employers continue to face increasing competition from a globalised economy. For many businesses, the current economic climate presents a very challenging environment where they are increasingly reliant upon a knowledgeable, skilful and enterprising workforce. Employers therefore demand a skilful population from which to recruit new employees. With increases in technological developments, greater access to knowledge and a globalised economy, employers are seeking graduate recruits with the right skills, competencies and abilities to flourish in an ever demanding business environment. Given this ever-changing and demanding business environment, employers are well placed to identify the skills necessary for success in industry. The skills employers require for future business success,

form the criteria against which potential recruits are assessed and therefore go some way to determining what makes a graduate employable. As employers undertake the recruitment of graduates, they play an essential role and as such, their opinions on what constitutes an employable graduate have been researched extensively over the decades. Consequently, the employer perspective of graduate employability is one of the main voices depicted in the employability literature.

Keywords – Employability, Employer Perspectives, Global Employability Dimensions

FOREWORD

Much research into the topic of graduate skills was conducted with employers during the 1990s (Nabi & Bagley, 1999; Farwell, 2002). This research revealed that many employers were dissatisfied with the skills graduates demonstrated and as a result employers were experiencing difficulties in recruiting graduates with the desired skills (Nabi & Bagley, 1999). Employer dissatisfactions with graduate skills has led to further research undertakings as each researcher aims to ascertain what it is employers are looking for and the extent of the skills gap. As a result of this continued attention on employer views, an expanse of literature is now available on the employer perspective of graduate employability.

However, most studies in the field of employer perspectives have focused on the viewpoints of large national or multinational employers (Brown et al. 2003). This is largely because it has previously been the larger employers who recruited graduates and include for example the companies listed in The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers (High Fliers, 2012). With such dominance of the large employer viewpoints, perspectives of the small to medium sized employers have often been overlooked. This oversight is a significant weakness given that there were an estimated 4.4 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the UK at the start of 2009 and SMEs are the main UK employers' accounting for around 60% of private sector

employment (Davidson, 2011; Shaw, 2011). Neglecting SMEs therefore means that the research is omitting a huge voice within the employer perspective literature.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND RESULTS

Firstly however, the graduate data findings will be presented before moving on to address the result Graduate levels of awareness of PDP, study skills and employability sessions varied according to both the institution and the session. For example, 68.1% of Alpha graduates were aware of PDP sessions on offer, whilst only 47.6% of Beta graduates had an aware of these.

Beta graduates were the most aware of employability sessions available, with 66.7% reporting awareness of these sessions, whilst Alpha graduates had the lowest awareness of these. With regards to study skills sessions, Pi graduates were the most aware of these sessions, with 62.2% aware of these being provided. No institution, therefore, has the monopoly on graduate awareness of sessions with Alpha institution receiving the most awareness of PDP, Pi University experienced the highest awareness of study skill sessions and Beta University yielding the highest awareness for employability workshops.

Graduate Feelings on Enhanced Employability

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	Alpha	Beta	Pi
	Graduate %	Graduate %	Graduate %
Yes	82.2	76.2	70.1
No	4.4	4.8	11.2
Unsure	13.3	19.0	18.7

Table above shows, that Alpha graduates agreed the most that their degree had enhanced their employability. This was closely followed by reports from Beta graduates and Pi graduates agreed the least that their employability had been enhanced by their degree

Employability Enhancement according to Degree Classification

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	Degree classification obtained (%)			
	1st	2.1	2.2	3rd
Yes	79.5	80.7	58.3	44.5
No	5.1	5.7	16.7	22.2
Unsure	15.4	13.6	25.0	33.3

Almost 80% of graduates, who undertook work experience during their degree, felt their degree had enhanced their employability. In comparison, only 68.2% of graduates who did not undertake work experience, felt their degree had enhanced their employability. This supports a trend that those graduates who had undertaken work experience during their degree, were more likely to feel that their degree had enhanced their employability.

Whilst the quantitative data discussed above, suggests trends in graduate views of employability enhancement, analysis of the qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of these viewpoints. The mind map below illustrates the results of the thematic analysis which was performed on the graduate comments provided in the questionnaire.

As already reported, the majority of graduates (74.1%) felt that their degree has enhanced their employability

For those who outright agreed that their degree had enhanced their employability, the majority of graduates assigned this to the skills developed on their degree and the job opportunities now available as a graduate:

Overall therefore, the quantitative results showed that graduate views on employability enhancement depend upon a range of issues, such as: the university attended, the degree classification obtained and prior work experiences. The qualitative results highlight the importance of additional factors in how graduates view employability enhancement, such as: how successful one can be in the current economic climate, the levels of competition for jobs and the added-extras graduates can provide

Employment in the Current Economic Climate

The qualitative data was analysed to obtain a deeper understanding of the graduate's view on this matter. Thematic analysis of the qualitative responses revealed several issues which explained graduates' views on securing employment in the current economic climate. These are detailed in the following mind map:

A wide range of issues were raised by graduates as they enter the labour market in this current economic climate. Graduates expressed a variety of ways in which the economic conditions have impacted on them so far: increased competition for jobs, unclear expectations for the workplace, geographical flexibility and the likely option of having to „make do“ with any available work whilst seeking their desired employment

graduates provided a selection of reasons explaining their views over whether the degree had, or had not, prepared them for entering the workplace. For the 41.6% of the graduates who either felt the degree had not prepared them or were unsure over this, comments reflected uncertainty over how their education would be applied to a work context:

Given the references made to prior work experience as being instrumental in helping graduates feel more prepared to enter the work place, further analysis was carried out. A cross-tabulation was performed to determine whether a trend was present.

The Graduate Chi-Square Results

IV	DV	Pearson chi-square	df	p	Cramer's V or Phi value	Effect size
University	Critical Thinking skills	3.119	2	0.210	0.129	Not Sig
University	Problem Solving skills	8.892	2	0.012*	0.219	Small

University	Decision Making skills	12.723	2	0.002*	0.262	Medium
University	Oral Comm skills	0.132	2	0.936	0.027	Not Sig
University	Written Comm skills	0.317	2	0.853	0.041	Not Sig
University	Presentation skills	0.493	2	0.782	0.051	Not Sig
University	Numeracy skills	11.740	2	0.003*	0.251	Medium
University	IT Skills	11.560	2	0.003*	0.249	Medium
University	Self-management skills	0.446	2	0.800	0.049	Not Sig
University	Team work skills	1.776	2	0.412	0.098	Not Sig
University	Leadership skills	2.353	2	0.308	0.112	Not Sig
University	Project mgmt skills	7.027	2	0.030*	0.194	Small
University	Interpersonal skills	0.459	2	0.795	0.050	Not Sig
University	Research skills	2.854	2	0.240	0.124	Not Sig
University	Self-Reflection skills	9.959	2	0.007*	0.231	Small
University	Diversity skills	1.204	2	0.548	0.080	Not Sig
University	Degree Classification	6.694	2	0.035*	0.191	Small
University	Work experience	10.257	2	0.006*	0.246	Medium
University	Been offered a job	13.061	2	0.001*	0.289	Medium
University	Worried about climate	22.260	2	0.000*	0.259	Medium
University	Awareness of Skills	0.610	2	0.737	0.059	Not Sig
University	Enhanced employ.	2.482	2	0.289	0.120	Not Sig
University	Feel prepared	10.116	2	0.006*	0.247	Medium
Degree class	Enhanced employ.	9.933	1	0.002*	0.240	Small
Degree	Feel prepared	1.863	1	0.172	0.106	Not Sig

class						
Degree class	Work experience	2.931	1	0.087	0.131	Not Sig
Degree class	Worried about climate	1.807	2	0.405	0.104	Not Sig
Work exp.	Enhanced employ.	2.869	1	0.090	0.131	Not Sig
Work exp.	worried about climate	2.184	2	0.336	0.118	Not Sig
Work exp.	Enhanced employ.	2.869	1	0.090	0.131	Not Sig
Work exp.	Feel prepared	4.633	1	0.031*	0.170	Small
Work exp.	Aware of skills	0.383	1	0.536	0.048	Not Sig
Enhanced employ.	Feel prepared	18.672	1	0.000*	0.336	Medium
Enhanced employ.	worried about climate	11.555	2	0.003*	0.269	Medium

(* indicates a significant result)

Table details which IVs were analysed against which DVs. For each analysis, the following figures are provided: the Chi-Square figure, the degrees of freedom (df), the level of significance (p) and either the Cramer's V value or the phi value for the effect size. The Cramer's V value is reported for 2x3 analyses and the phi value is reported for 2x2 analyses. The final column in the table translates the Cramers or Phi values into an effect size, if a significant result was found. As is detailed further, once a significant difference is found, the effect size gives an indication of the strength of this association. A weak effect is present if the effect size figure is closer to zero and a stronger effect is apparent if the effect size figure is closer to 1.

Of the thirty-four analyses listed in table, fifteen significant results were found. A significant result means that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups within the variables, which is not likely to have occurred by chance. A significant result is not the only aspect to consider, the effect size (i.e. the strength of the association) also needs to also be

assessed (Pallant, 2007; Field, 2009). These significant findings will now be discussed in turn with summaries provided from the SPSS graduate Chi-Square outputs

The University Attended and Demonstrating the Sixteen Skills

The graduates had to state which of the sixteen QAA (2007) skills they felt they can now demonstrate as a result of their degree. The Chi-Square analysis compared these results according to which institution the graduate had attended. Of the sixteen skills analysed, significant differences were found ($p < 0.05$) between the university from which the degree was obtained and the demonstration of six skills; problem solving, decision making, numeracy, IT, project management and self-reflection. Whilst a significant relationship was found, a closer look at the SPSS data is necessary to ascertain the direction of this significant relationship, which is detailed in the table below:

Degree Classification and Enhanced Employability

The next independent variable implemented in the Chi-Square analyses, was the degree class obtained by the graduate. The Chi-Square tests were performed using this IV to establish whether or not this had any significant association with other variables. Apart from the association with university attended (which has already been discussed in the previous section), only one other significant effect was found with this IV. This occurred with graduate views on how their degree had enhanced their employability ($p < 0.05$).

Degree Classification and Enhanced Employability

Degree Classification		Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
1st or 2:1	Count	102	25
	Expected count	94	33
2:2, 3rd or ordinary	Count	26	20
	Expected count	34	12

As the table overleaf shows, the actual count of those who achieved either a first or upper-second class degree and felt their degree enhanced their employability, was higher than expected. Furthermore, lower than expected counts for employability enhancement, were observed for graduates who achieved either a lower-second, third or ordinary degree

Work Experience and Preparedness for the Workplace

During your degree did you undertake any work experience?		As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
Yes	Count	51	26
	Expected count	44.3	32.7
No	Count	41	42
	Expected count	47.7	35.3

The figures in the table above show that higher than expected counts of graduates, who undertook work experience, felt prepared to enter the world of work. Additionally, lower than expected counts of graduates, who did not undertake work experience, reported they felt prepared for the work place. The direction of this association follows that those who undertook work experience during their degree, were statistically more likely to feel prepared to enter the world of work.

Degree Enhanced Employability and Preparedness to Enter the Workplace

The penultimate variable implemented as the IV in the graduate Chi-Square analyses, was graduate views on how their degree has enhanced their employability

A statistically significant association was found between employability enhancement resulting from their degree and graduate preparedness to enter the world of work. This significant result was also found to have a medium effect size and therefore holds moderate strength.

Degree Enhanced Employability and Preparedness to Enter the Workplace

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?		As a result of your degree, do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?	
		Yes	No/Unsure
Yes	Count	83	39
	Expected count	71	51
No	Count	13	30
	Expected count	25	18

As the figures in table show, there are differences between the actual counts and expected counts.

Degree Enhanced Employability and Concerns about the Economic Climate

The final Chi-Square analysis performed on the graduate data, looked at graduate views on how their degree had or not, enhanced their employability against their concerns about securing employability in the current economic climate. A significant association was found between these variables as $p < 0.05$, which supported a medium effect size.

Degree Enhanced Employability and Concerns about the Economic Climate

Do you feel that your degree enhanced your employability?		Are you worried about securing employment in the current economic climate?		
		Yes	No - I already have a job	No - I do not have a job yet but I am optimistic
Yes	Count	44	47	29
	Expected count	53.3	41.3	25.5

No	Count	27	8	5
	Expected count	17.8	13.8	8.5

The table overleaf shows the direction in the relationship between graduate views of enhanced employability and their concerns over securing employment in the current economic climate. Those graduates who felt that their degree enhanced their employability were less likely to feel concerned about securing employment. However, for those who did not feel their degree had enhanced their employability, these graduates were more likely to feel concerned about securing employment

This Chi-Square section has provided further analysis on the graduate perspective of their employability and has tested the trend identified earlier in this section. These analyses have produced a set of graduate results, which have proved to have either significant or non-significant findings. An interpretation of these findings will be presented in Section Six.

Concluding the Graduate Results

The graduate qualitative and quantitative data analysis has revealed much depth to the graduate perspective of employability. The results have uncovered how graduates have viewed elements of their higher education and student experience, and whether or not this has contributed towards the enhancement of their employability.

The main findings comprise of five main areas; skill development, work experience engagement, preparedness for the work place, the impact of the economic climate and institution graduated from. A full and detailed interpretation of these results will be given in the next section, instead, this results section now moves on to report the results of the curriculum developers perspective.

Curriculum Developers Results

As interviews were undertaken, qualitative data was produced by the curriculum developers. The analysis of this qualitative data involved conducting a thematic analysis of the interview

transcripts. This section will detail the results of the thematic analyses performed on the curriculum developer's interview transcripts, to produce a set of results from this employability stakeholder.

Firstly, an overall look at the views of curriculum developers, on employability provision within curricula will be looked at. These views are depicted in the mind map below, which highlights the range of themes raised by all three curriculum developers regarding the provision of employability on their programmes. For an extract of the curriculum developer's thematic analysis, including definitions and typical quotes,

the interviews with the curriculum developers raised an assortment of issues regarding the provision of employability in curricula's. These six elements will now be discussed in turn.

Firstly, the curriculum developers all stated that employability skills were delivered by a combination of both embedding skills and providing bolt-on modules. When embedding employability provision, programmes had a list of skills which needed to be delivered within the course. For bolt-on modules, the universities either offered PDP, employability skills or work-based learning modules, which students either took as a compulsory or optional module:

Secondly, whilst all institutions delivered employability through embedded and bolt-on formats, this was not without difficulty. The reported complications comprised of four main areas; academic staff, students, particular degree courses and employers.

Amongst the academic staff, curriculum developers expressed that some conflicting viewpoints were present. Not all academic staff saw it as their role to deliver employability skills, especially given the research pressures. Staff also voiced their concern that employability skills assume valuable time in the curriculum:

The final difficulty in delivering employability skills, which all curriculum developers encountered, came from the employers themselves. It was questioned whether employers really did know what skills they wanted graduates to exhibit

Despite such problems however, employability remained high on each business school agenda. The third point raised by the curriculum developers, emphasised new developments for enhancing employability provision at their institutions:

The fourth point concerned student placements and curriculum developer reports of increasing the number of sandwich courses raised an interesting finding. Whilst in previous year's, curriculum developers highlighted that student demand and enrolments on sandwich degrees had declined, two of the institutions noted an increased interest in these courses in very recent years:

Concluding the Curriculum Developer Findings

The findings from curriculum developers reveal that there are many conflicting issues facing business school employability provision. The interviews highlighted that in delivering employability skills, difficulties were encountered with staff, students, courses and employers alike. Placements also were problematic, as these could not be guaranteed to students despite an increasing demand in recent years for sandwich degree programmes. Regardless such issues, employability remains high on the agendas of business schools, with continued implementation of courses and initiatives, which have an emphasis on employability enhancement.

The employer data will be analysed next, to determine this stakeholder's viewpoint on graduate employability.

Employer Results

As outlined in Section Four, the employer data collection methods involved both a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire held two purposes, firstly, to ascertain a broad data set on the employer perspective of graduate employability and secondly, to obtain contacts for follow-up interviews. The main focus here was upon the in-depth information to be obtained from the interviews and therefore, the quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive and cross-tabulation analysis, rather than detailed statistical analysis. Instead, more extensive analysis took place with the employer qualitative data obtained from the interviews, to obtain a depth to the employer perspective.

Although the emphasis is placed upon the interview findings, a brief overview of the employer questionnaire findings will be reported first. This will provide a foundation of descriptive statistics, before delving deeper into the employer qualitative findings.

Graduate Skills

The second section of the employer questionnaire, sought employer views on the skills they felt business graduates should be able to demonstrate upon completion of their degree. There is much in the literature already about the types of skills employers seek from graduates, therefore this question asked employers to be more specific about the level at which they feel graduates can demonstrate skills. Using the same sixteen QAA (2007) skills, employers were asked to select whether graduates could demonstrate these to either a high, acceptable or poor level.

Employer Quantitative Data Analysis

Employer Sample Demographics

The first section of the questionnaire requested information on the employer cohort. A total of 35 employers responded to the questionnaire. Employer job titles revealed that all respondents held some form of managerial role (CEOs, directors, managers, supervisors). Additionally, all of the employers had either recruited graduates or had managed graduates in some capacity.

The employers were also asked if they preferred to recruit graduates from a particular degree discipline. Over half (53%), stated that they did have a preference. Of those, 52% favoured graduates from Business disciplines, 30% sought graduates from STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and 18% felt those with a Humanities background were best suited to their industry.

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Conclusion

Overall, a wealth of data has been collected from the employability stakeholders, which most importantly focused on the graduate perspective. Given the under-researched nature of the graduate viewpoint, the data gathered by this study is both interesting and valuable. Furthermore, little exists on how the graduate perspective correlates with other employability stakeholders, thus the information generated by this research also contribute towards these debates.

Researching graduate employability within the context of the current economic climate, presents a timely and unique piece of research into this concept. However, the economic situation is not static, especially long-term, and therefore the labour market conditions are subject to continuous change. Continued research into this area is vital to keep abreast of contemporary perspectives and developments relating to the graduate employability concept.

Finally, this section has revisited the original aims and objectives devised by this thesis and detailed how these have been achieved. The key findings were also discussed along with the contributions made and the impact of these. This section has also reminded of the limitations experienced by this research, which provides a basis upon which future research could be developed.

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