

EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMMES AND GRADUATES' ASSESSMENT OF THEIR EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

Discourse on graduate employability issues has centered on issues relating to the “quality” or rather the lack of quality of graduates. In this light, Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) and other agencies have taken heed to enhance students’ competencies through the implementation of graduate employability programmes (EP). This paper presents the finding of a study on the perceived impacts of graduate employability programmes on their work-related knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs). A set of questionnaire was developed and distributed to a sample of participants who attended an EP. Based on the responses of the participants, the paper discusses among others, the different perceived competencies amongst participants. The findings could be used to guide the EP providers, trainers, and HLIs in reviewing and improving the existing EP.

Key Words: graduate, employability programme, employers

JEL Classification: - Higher Education and Research Institutions

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Graduate employability

The discussion on graduate employability addresses the issues of graduates who have difficulties to secure employment after completing studies at university or higher learning institution (HLI). This phenomenon could be attributed to the low level of employability amongst graduates, evident in the claim made by employers who have been very vocal in registering their dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates. To them, the quality of graduates is low, characterized by the inadequacy of required competencies such as self-confidence, soft-skills, English language proficiency, and positive work attitudes (Morshidi, Heng, Munir, Shukran, Seri Rahayu, and Jasvir, 2012). They argue that the rising unemployment phenomenon among graduates were primarily due to a mismatch between supply and demand in that employers are not getting what they want from the available workforce. Stated another way, employers are of the view that the graduates of HLIs are not the competent workforce who can be absorbed into the job market. Mindful of the need for competent workforce in today innovation-driven economy, the lack of “quality” among local graduates is an important issue that deserves attention and explanation.

Review of literature shows that the concept of employability does not refer to an individual's employment status, but more of his or her level of job competencies. In the career literature, the term employability is being used interchangeably with other terms such as core skills, key skills, common skills, competencies, essential skills, key competencies, employability skill, generic skills, employability skill, basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how, critical enabling skills, transferable skills, key qualifications, trans-disciplinary goals, and process independent qualification (Shukran & Munir, 2011). Saterfiel and McLarty (1995) refer employability skills as the skills required to acquire and retain a job, including vocational or job-specific skills, academic skills, a variety of attitudes and habits. Besides that, communication, personal and interpersonal relationship skills, problem solving and management of organisational processes are also important. Employability is also referred to as the outcome of education process, when it is referred to as the ability to (a) gain initial employment, (b) maintain employment, (c) move between jobs and roles within the same organization, (d) meet new job requirements, or (e) obtain new employment (Hillage & Pollard, 1999). In short, employability could be associated with the readiness of an individual to be employed. Thus, an employable graduate is an individual who has completed studies, is currently available for work, has job-related competencies and makes arrangements to start a job (Godfrey, 1986), underscoring the notion that employability is not only explained by a graduate's employment status, but the competencies he or she graduate possesses.

1.2 Graduate employability programmes (EP)

The need to implement EP is justified by the findings of graduate employment studies which indicate that there has been high level of unemployment and underemployment amongst graduates. Research on graduate employment patter, such as by Shukran, Saodah, Hariyati, Azlan, and Ainol (2004) indicated that students of HLIs have lack relevant knowledge, skills, abilities and other desirable work characteristics (KSAOs), necessitating the need for interventions that help equip or enhance graduate competencies to perform duties; hence being relevant to their job. The data gathered from employers also support the strategies to develop or enhance soft skill amongst HLI students, either by embedding them in university curriculum, or introducing special EPs for them to acquire work-related competencies (Shukran & Munir, 2011). Hence, in producing more competent graduates for the job market, employability programmes (EP) have been introduced to the Malaysian HLIs few years ago, aimed at enhancing work-

related competencies amongst graduates. Various EP modules have been designed to include activities that enable participants to acquire knowledge, personal and professional skills.

In this paper, EP is referred to as an effort to equip individuals with work related competencies (Brown, 2006). It is the efforts that enable individuals to acquire knowledge, personal and professional skills; and to encourage them to develop the attitudes that will support their future development and employment. EP equips students with necessary knowledge, and skills; as well as develops their attitude.

1.3 Statement of Problems

Many types of EPs have been conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in collaboration with various EP providers, mainly to provide trainings that develop new skills or improve existing skills amongst graduates. The programmes involve huge allocation of budget, which in turn are expected to have brought about positive impacts to graduates, and employers. However, no studies have been conducted to check the return of investment of EPs, suggestive of the essentiality to investigate whether EPs have brought about positive impacts to their participants. It is important to know of whether participants have acquired the competencies they learn during EP.

Objectives

- a. To study the perceived impacts of graduate employability programmes on graduates' acquisition of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

262 respondents from public and private HLIs participated in the survey. The selection of respondents was made based on mixed sampling approaches such as stratified and cluster sampling methods.

2.2 Design

Quasi experimental method was used to assess the perceived impacts of EP. It compares those who participated in the EP with those who did not. The collection of data was made through online survey, involving the administration of mainly

close-ended questionnaire to a cross-section of participating graduates from employability programmes.

2.3 Instrument

The primary data consists of a set of newly developed employability questionnaire (EEG-Q). The EEG-Q was designed to look at the perceived impacts of the selected employability programmes among the participants of the programmes. Based on document analysis conducted earlier, as well as Focus Group Discussion held with training providers, EEG-Q questionnaire was set to contain items (n =21) which specifically assess perceived impacts of EP on participants' KSAOs. These items retrospectively assessed participants' perceived works related KSAOs before attending the EP and after attending the programme. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement to each item based on a scale from ranging from "1" = not at all to "4" = a lot. An example of the item is "Before attending the programme, I had work related knowledge" and "After attending the programme, I had work related knowledge". EP would be considered impactful if participants rate an item after attending the programme higher than before attending the programme.

2.4 Data analysis

Data collected from the survey was analyzed using SPSS 16 software and the content of the output include both descriptive and inferential statistics.

3. Result

3.1 Perceived Impacts of EP on KSAOs amongst participants.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to gather information on participants' perceptions of the impacts of the EP they attended. Percentages of participants endorsing "a lot" to each item 'before' and 'after' attending the programme were obtained and compared. An increase in the percentage of participants endorsing "a lot" to an item suggests the impact of the EP in the knowledge, skills, attitude and other characteristics among participants.

Next, paired-samples t-tests were performed to assess changes in participants' scores obtained 'before' and 'after' attending EP. EP is seen as impactful if the score for each item after attending EP is significantly higher compared to the scores before attending EP.

Results in Table 1 show that, apart from the three items, “using information technology”, “developing values and ethics” and “seeking knowledge continuously”, significant differences were observed in the scores for all other items. EP participants perceived that, in general, the programme had improved their KSAOs. The largest difference was obtained for item assessing “work-related knowledge”, followed by “English language proficiency” and “understanding people of different cultural backgrounds”.

Table 1: Perceived impacts of EP on participants’ knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs)

No	Item	N	Mean (SD)		t (df)	P
			Pre	Post		
1	Work-related knowledge	55	2.49 (0.81)	3.04 (0.69)	-4.14	<.001
2	English language proficiency	55	2.78 (0.66)	3.15 (0.49)	-3.83	<.001
3	Writing effectively in English	55	2.78 (0.72)	3.00 (0.39)	-2.20	0.03
4	Speaking effectively in English	55	2.75 (0.65)	3.04 (0.54)	-2.93	0.05
5	Thinking critically	55	2.76 (0.69)	3.15 (0.65)	-3.33	0.002
6	Thinking creatively	55	2.84 (0.69)	3.11 (0.60)	-2.59	0.01
7	Analyzing quantitative problems	55	2.69 (0.81)	3.00 (0.67)	-2.74	0.008
8	Using information technology	55	3.04 (0.69)	3.13 (0.64)	-0.96	0.34
9	Working effectively with others	55	2.91 (0.67)	3.18 (0.61)	-2.32	0.02
10	Learning effectively on my own	55	2.87 (0.64)	3.13 (0.64)	-2.70	0.009
11	Understanding people of other cultural backgrounds	55	2.78 (0.66)	3.18 (0.72)	-3.78	<.001
12	Solving problems	55	2.80 (0.65)	3.11 (0.60)	-2.90	0.005
13	Developing values and ethics	54	2.89 (0.72)	3.11 (0.69)	-1.90	0.06
14	Contributing to the welfare of my community	55	2.89 (0.63)	3.13 (0.70)	-2.36	0.02
15	Understanding of the workplace environment	55	2.78 (0.71)	3.13 (0.70)	-2.82	0.007
16	Understanding different social contexts	55	2.76 (0.69)	3.02 (0.68)	-2.30	0.03
17	Ability to lead	55	2.76 (0.74)	3.04 (0.82)	-2.30	0.027
18	Being proactive	55	2.75 (0.82)	3.04 (0.77)	-2.75	0.008
19	Seeking knowledge continuously	54	2.93 (0.70)	3.09 (0.71)	-1.50	0.14
20	Having a sense of urgency	54	2.91 (0.65)	3.22 (0.69)	-2.75	0.008
21	Ability to adapt to different situations	54	2.85 (0.74)	3.22 (0.69)	-2.79	0.007
22	Challenging status-quo	170	2.67 (0.84)	2.98 (0.76)	-2.61	0.012

Next, descriptive statistics comparing percentages of EP participants endorsing “a lot” to each item assessing KSAOs, ‘before’ and ‘after’ attending the EPs were obtained. Results show that 12.3% of EP participants reported that they had strong work related knowledge before attending the programme but after attending the programme the percentage increased to 21.8%. As for English language proficiency, 18.2% of the respondents viewed that they had strong English competencies after attending the programme compared to about only 12% before attending it.

A significant increase in the percentage of participants who viewed that they were able to understand people from other cultures was also observed, from 12% before attending the programme, to 34.5% after attending the programme. In general, more participants endorsed or rated “4” to items assessing KSAOs after attending the EP programme compared to before attending it. This suggests that the programme has, to varying degrees, impacted their knowledge, skills, attributes and other characteristics.

Lastly, descriptive analysis was performed to assess participants’ responses to items assessing their general perceptions on the extent to which EP has had impact on their knowledge and other attributes or characteristics. Results indicate that the programme had increased participants’ knowledge and improved their attitudes and values. Two thirds (64%) of EP participants rated “7” and above on the item assessing increased knowledge while 49.5% rated “7” and above for the item assessing enhanced attitudes and values. These results indicate that, about half of EP participants found that the programme had somewhat impacted their knowledge and values positively.

4. Conclusion

The effort to equip individuals with job-related competencies involve training designs that enable students to acquire knowledge, personal and professional skills; and encourage them to develop the attitudes that will support their future development and employment (Brown, 2006). The findings show that EP has brought about positive impact on its participants, indicative of its significant functions in enhancing graduates employability. The findings would be used to help policy makers to make informed decision about the future of EP, as they echo the view that the opportunity to attend EP should be provided to more graduates. The findings from this research would also provide input on the areas of EP that needs improvement.

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