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## Key Employability Skills

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### Abstract

There are suggestions that employers are usually dissatisfied with the lower levels of skills graduates have before starting employment. There also appears to be a debate among different stakeholders about how teaching and learning institutions prepare graduates. The aim of this paper is to identify what employers perceive employability to mean and what are appropriate work skills that correspond with it. Empirical analysis done by famous researchers was analyzed and the results indicate that while employability skills could be identified, there was no clear what universities need to provide in order for graduates to gain important employment.

The findings suggest that while the stakeholders are concerned that graduates starting employment may lack certain employment skills, they still base their hiring decisions to take on graduates upon an historical perspectives of employment skills developed overtime, without taking into account the future requirements of 'employment', the possible challenges of an increasingly competitive economy and other possible labor changes which could be considerable and as yet, very much unknown. This study tries to make a contribution to research on employability by recognizing the gaps that may exist between employers and graduates and any incongruence in understanding of what 'employability' means and which employability skills might take significance.

**Keywords:** *Employability; work; selection criteria; critical theory; skilled graduates.*

### Introduction

The concept of employability became an important aspect in work practices (Knight & Yorke, 2001; Haug & Tauch, 2001; Cranmer, 2006) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a huge role to play in terms of employability skills (Fallow & Steven, 2000). Much of the research and stakeholders on employability sustained the view that graduates lack generic workplace skills (Green, 1990; Nabi &

Bagley, 1999; Yorke, 2004; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; BBC News, 8th December 2011),

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do a lot in terms of aiding graduates to develop certain skills. Browne (2010) states that it is now the responsibility of all staff in HEIs to consider the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of employer organisations with a view for improving graduates' chances of getting employment. Other studies also show some good practices in the development of employment skills and attributes (Dearing Report, 1997; Knight & Yorke, 2001; Yorke, 2001; Harvey et al., 2002). This article provides an empirical research into what employers understand as employability and thoughts they have about graduates starting their career. In particular the article points out the conflict and the settlement between what is perceived as employability and what are the key skills which are required by employers. It concludes by making recommendations of what HEIs should do to enhance graduates performance.

While main emphasis is placed on what skills graduates have and do not have in the terms of getting employment, firstly employability needs to be defined and some explanation provided. Before we explore the notion of employability, an understanding of the term 'work' perhaps is required. The whole question of what is work, what individual need for that work and boundaries of work remain central to individual's social and economic settings. Watson (2003, p.41) concludes that "the meaning attached by individuals to their work predisposes them to think and act in particular ways with regard to that work". Therefore 'employability' is to be questioned and could be discussed from many perspectives. Harvey & Knight (2005) view employability as acquiring a job and as developing characteristics of graduates in employment. The increased competition in the labor market among job seekers (CIPD, 2011) has seen a change in emphasis, involving some factors from employers in inspiring the young potential job seeker to be involved in voluntary work just for their CV's. Securing a job is often the rough test of employability, but that can be subjective; questions such as; how useful is particular work to society, how long will the employment last, how candidate matches ultimately for that work, etc. Those questions not always put into the equation in calculating employment, unemployment and/or employability levels.

Employment has always existed but its nature is constantly changing over time. Traditionally survival forced most people to work and/or search for a type of employment. Employability, in more liberal times has come to cover more Transformational concepts such as 'team-player', 'Intelligent', 'self-motivated', 'problem solver' etc. What 'employability' will come to underline in thirty years' time nobody knows? perhaps more creative thinking, intuition, willingness to accept robotic 'leadership', and adjust with almost non- stoppable change.

The term Employability has to be adaptable enough to include those who work for payment (skilled and semi-skilled) and those who work for no free (volunteers) and/or those prepared to work either financially or voluntary based work placement (Students) and who work across cultures, countries and organizations formally and informally. Employability criteria involve knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills and psychology that come from a wider meaning of the word "education" and qualification.

We claim that the nature of work is changing, the reality of much employment too and thereby what is meant by 'employability' is changing consequently in line with macroeconomic and societal factors and the changing nature of work and employment e.g. temporary contracts, periods of self-employment, cooperative associations, volunteer work and other hybrids of type of work. Definitions

of work/employment and employability and cultural attitudes are followed by regimes of subsequent education and training priorities (Rae, 2007) but they have not always changed in favor of those speedier shifts in society.

Today's 'employability skills' may not apply for tomorrow, indeed in a way they may be pledge to 'employability' and even employment requirements. Employment history begun by hunter gatherer to farming, then to heavy industry, moving to services with industries, currently pursuing path towards hi- tech, digital, nano-technology, genetic engineering and so on. Which field will be the next stop? Who knows? We are already seeing drastic changes in short time periods; mass industrialization by developing economies and wholesale changes of the services to 'virtual' trading.

### **Institutional changes**

Employment skills mostly mentioned by organizations are about their requirements such as having "problem solving abilities", "team player", "understanding the business and self-managing effectively" etc; much of these, is what society and the individual needs to address in the rest of their careers.

Robotics and automation advance the need for 'team work' and 'decision making' areas often are considered main job selection criteria, but advanced technological changes are altering the emphasis regularly, those job criteria' may totally disappear in some areas. When it comes to 'Problem solving', along technological advances, artificial intelligence will be able to solve its own problems and those of decision makers, therefore what should be taught in that area becomes hard to determine. For example; Nowadays students are required to solve complicated formulas for stock decisions or inventory control. Meanwhile plenty of software are programmed that can do it better.

Question here is to find out how important is it to know basic concepts and understanding when relatively soon robots with voice recognition system can answer most of the things after working them out in a mille second? We have some insights with the growth of search engines, data drilling, and artificial intelligence devices. What higher education institutions teach students about " how to use numbers effectively", "use informational technology effectively" those areas are typical as today's selection criteria but future graduates will need different set of skills applicable to new world.

Today's' definitions of employability will definitely shift. They may move from ones about skills and aptitudes which hold employers' needs to ones more about of self-development and then to unknown area such as intuition, and perhaps about non- employment (which is not the same as unemployment). Probably questions asked of job applicants today won't be the same as in ten or more years' time or even over a shorter period and yet we may not suspect what the future questions will be.

In the meantime that leaves us with the problem of what to educate the workforce of the future.

### **Hypothesis about Key Skills**

Traditional categories of skills that determine employability highlight the practicalities and didactic nature of who should get a employment, typically; Qualifications, Experience, I.Q, References, Motivation, Personal Circumstances (Rodgers, 1952; Munro-Fraser, 1954). Authors consider that the nature of employment and employability will reflect growing complexity and ambiguity. We have already seen a trend of using team approaches by modern organizations with employees who also need

to be risk averse and cope with constant changes without having a total picture of why. Regular employees are required to read situations quickly and stay focused on details in the midst of even more growing uncertainty. Much of the current staff selection process is reactive and where we have to argue what is really important for a potential job and which people with what set of qualifications will best fit. The employer finds themselves selecting on criteria which is often didactic (Cox & King, 2006) and full of a need for conformity. Even if job interviewers are not necessarily very conformist there's always the anxiety for what other stakeholders might think; customers, coworkers even employers about who will be hired. Most employers like conformers, but that's not where we could find the source of creativity.

We shouldn't forget that employability is not one sided and job seekers are looking for a package that best suits them, which is not always consistent with an employers' interest. Candidates' self-perception and commitments (Rothwell et al., 2009), and expectations (Gedye et al., 2004) are but two of the many things to be considered alongside the approaches to employability today.

According to World Economic Forum's (WEF) published Future of Jobs Report of 2019, were predicted the top ten employability skills for 2020. Report established the top three appropriate workplace skills at the start of a new decade would be "complex problem-solving, "critical thinking," and "creativity." "Emotional intelligence" and "cognitive flexibility" were also in the top 10 list. While those surveyed at that time certainly didn't expect a pandemic such as COVID-19 would occur and the significant interfering it would have on the global workforce, it is indeed telling that recent valuations of the key employability skills needed for a postcoronavirus world certainly align closely with those earlier predicted skill requirements.

These skills will be crucial as the world continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-lasting impact on future work practices. Those who improve these skills while at university and can apply them in real life will be best placed to find important employment upon graduation.

Many factors contribute to employability, starting from the range of skills and personal attributes that recent graduates need to hold in order to find meaningful employment. It includes a strong foundation of discipline-specific knowledge and skills, and the cognitive, interpersonal skills that enable productive working relationships. Skills for employability can be stated to as "hard skills" (including knowledge and technical proficiency) and "soft skills" (such as interpersonal skills and personal qualities. Soft skills are hard to measure in traditional university assessments, yet they are essential components of an employability attitude.

### **Conclusion**

'Employability' is a very complex and subjective matter. The short term view about job skills is an ongoing debate and has to align with the longer term broader needs of individuals.

It would not be reasonable from this article to suggest a number of changes to higher education, particularly one that necessarily recommends more emphasis on today's employment skills. Somehow institutions might emphasize a need to introduce some work element to their learning courses, especially it becomes a must in today's competitive labor market.

However there are other findings that suggest that work placement alone can't increase chances of gaining employment to such an extent in all circumstances; (Rothwell et al., 2009). There is an emphasis on what employers needs are e.g. questions asked in interviews were often around; "What do (graduate) bring that is useful? "What are you best at?", "Why should we choose you?", "What can you do as an applicant that can help us?"

Since the new normal would be full of ambiguity and distraction, structured learning programs should be the part of the curriculums. Therefore, problem-based learning (PBL) programs would be the most suitable alternative. PBL programs also help the workplace to adopt 'learner centered approach' faster without disregarding the educational and training requirements. The combination of both learner-centred and problem-based learning approach has been proving to be effective in medical sciences and engineering fields. These experiences could also be applied to other disciplines in the new normal to develop the capacity and viability towards newly realized life and livelihood challenges.

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## ძირითადი დასაქმების უნარები

ანი კალანდია

ქუთაისის უნივერსიტეტის ავილირებული ასისტენტ პროფესორი.

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### აბსტრაქტი

არსებობს მოსაზრება, რომ დამსაქმებლები როგორც წესი უკმაყოფილოები არიან კურსდამთავრებულთა დაბალი დონის უნარებით. სხვადასხვა დაინტერესებულ მხარეს შორის მუდმივი დისკუსიაა იმასთან დაკავშირებით, თუ როგორ უნდა მოამზადონ კურსდამთავრებულები უმაღლესმა საგანმანათლებლო დაწესებულებებმა დასაქმებისთვის საჭირო უნარ-ჩვევების დასაუფლებლად.

სტატიის მიზანია გაარკვიოს რას აღიქვამენ დამსაქმებლები დასაქმებისთვის საჭირო უნარებად. სხვადასხვა ცნობილი მეცნიერის მიერ ჩატარებული ემპირიული კვლევები იქნა გაანალიზებული და წარმოდგენილია შედეგები. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ შედეგები მიუთითებს დასაქმების უნარების იდენტიფიცირების შესაძლებლობაზე, არ შეგვიძლია მკაფიო დასკვნები გამოვიტანოთ თუ როგორ უნდა უზრუნველყონ უნივერსიტეტებმა კურსდამთავრებულების უკეთ მომზადება დასაქმების პოტენციალის გასაზრდელად.

დასკვნები ვარაუდობენ, რომ მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ დაინტერესებული მხარეები შეშფოთებულნი არიან, რომ დასაქმების მსურველ კურსდამთავრებულებს შეიძლება არ ჰქონდეთ დასაქმებისთვის აუცილებელი გარკვეული უნარები, დამსაქმებლები კურსდამთავრებულების სამსახურში მიღებაზე გადაწყვეტილებებს აყალიბებენ წარსული გამოცდილების გათვალისწინებით იმ უნარების გარშემო, რომლითაც წარსულში ხელმძღვანელობდნენ, „დასაქმების“ მომავალი მოთხოვნების გათვალისწინების გარეშე. დამსაქმებლის მხრიდან ძირითადად არ ხდება გათვალისწინება მზარდი კონკურენტუნარიანი ბიზნეს გამოწვევების და სხვა შესაძლო შრომითი ცვლილებების, რომლებიც შეიძლება იყოს მნიშვნელოვანი და ჯერჯერობით უცხო ფენომენი.

ნაშრომი ცდილობს თავისი წვლილი შეიტანოს დასაქმების კვლევაში დამსაქმებლებსა და კურსდამთავრებულებს შორის არსებული ხარვეზების ამოცნობით და ნებისმიერი შეუსაბამობის დადგენით, რაც შეიძლება დასაქმების პერსპექტივის სხვადასხვაგვარი აღქმით იყოს გამოწვეული.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** დასაქმება; მუშაობა; სამსახურში შერჩევის კრიტერიუმი; დასაქმებისთვის აუცილებელი უნარები.