

PERCEPTIONS ON EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS NECESSARY TO ENHANCE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT GRADUATES PROSPECTS OF SECURING A RELEVANT PLACE IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Kelebogile Paadi

North West University, South Africa

Abstract

Orientation and purpose – Different types of skills are explored to determine which type of skills are most attractive to the employer and which ones are essential to enhance employability of HRM graduates

Motivation of the study- HR is a broad field and the practitioners have a lot to deliver seeing that they are the custodians of human capital in the workplace. The type of skills they should have and how they are to achieve them must be explored.

Research design, approach and method - The study used a qualitative method and data was collected using semi structured interviews with open ended questions. A list of questions was drawn up for different respondents and the sample was made up of academics, employers and HRM graduates.

Main findings - generic skills are the most sought after in the workplace; there are different levels to HRM employability and different knowledge, competencies and skills for each level.

Contribution/value-add – Having the knowledge of what skills, competencies and abilities are key for HRM graduates can help shape their skills base before they even graduate and assist higher education in producing employable graduates.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Employability skills, Soft Skills, Hard Skills, Human Resource Management

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) produce many qualified graduates in different fields of study annually; almost half of them become frustrated or desolate because they cannot secure jobs in the labour market and some have huge student loans to settle. South Africa is no exception. Given the country's slow and unsteady economic growth, high and increasing levels of unemployment especially among the country's youth, many graduates find it almost impossible to find a suitable place in the labour market. It is no longer a problem for those with low levels of education, nowadays even university and college graduates struggle to find employment. South African Graduates Development Association (SAGDA) CEO Thamsanqa Maqubela said graduate unemployment – defined as that among people with a minimum three-year academic or vocational qualification – had escalated since the global economic recession. The South African Graduate Development Agency (SAGDA) believes that South Africa has between 255,000 (Statistics South Africa Labour Force Survey 2009) and 600,000 (Adcorp labour market analyst Loane Sharp 2011) unemployed graduates. The SAGDA database reflects that 9.7% of unemployed graduates received their qualifications via universities; 16.2% via universities of technology; 60.3% via private and further education and training colleges; and 13.8% via sector education and training authority

(SETA) learnership programmes.(SAGDA Graduate Employability Assessment Report : 2011).

There is no correlation between the skills needed in the labour market to contribute to the development of the country's economy and those that are being produced by the HEI's. There is a shortage of skills in South Africa in certain areas like the engineering field, however human resource management is not among them yet workplaces are crumbling / not performing well or not utilising their human resources to their maximum potential, because of improper execution of human resource management practices. This study wants to determine the extent to which Human Resource Management (HRM) is taken seriously as a profession and how can human resource professionals, employers, universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) use Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programmes to equip graduates with the necessary workplace skills that will make them employable and improve their productivity in the workplaces.

Objective number four of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) focuses on assisting designated groups, including new entrants to participate in accredited work integrated learning and work based programmes to acquire critical skills to enter the labour market and self-employment (Coetzee, Botha, Kiley & Truman. 2007:12). Work integrated learning programmes include among others learnerships and apprentices and they can assist graduates gain entry level positions in the workplace. They expose students and graduates to the workplace and they have the opportunity to put into practise what was learnt in institutions of higher education.

Recent shifts in education and labour market policy have resulted in universities being placed under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates. However, contention exists regarding exactly what constitutes employability and which graduate attributes are required to foster employability in tertiary students (Bridgstock.2009:31).

Graduates especially those from university have high expectations after completion of their studies, the view is that their degrees should be able to open employment doors for them and they should not struggle like those who have lesser qualifications whereas employers feel that the return to employing a graduate is low, given that graduates require substantial on-the-job training before they provide any returns to the firm. It is necessary for graduates to have a more realistic view of what they can offer and what they can expect from their first jobs, given their limited experiential training(Pauw,Oosthuizen & Van Der Westhuizen.2008:56).The reality is that university graduates mostly have text book theoretical knowledge which is not supported by sufficient practical work expereince. in a country where the economy is not growing at a speed that allows for massive job creation projects, graduates find themselves faced with extended periods of unemployment.

Graduate Employability

Jackson (2013:271)is of the view that if graduate employability is measured in simpluistic terms such as whether or not a graduate has secured a job within the first six months of graduating, then the measurement is not accurate because we do not understand clearly what the graduate has gained. He further goes on to say we need to know if the graduate is in fact using the skills, knowledge and understanding gained in their degree studies. Gradaute employability is multifaceted and encompasses academic performance, career management skills and labor market awareness.

This view is supported by Pool & Sewell (2007) that there is so much more to employability than gaining employment, and first destination statistics do not take into account the fact that some graduates may have taken lower level jobs in order to deal with financial pressures, particularly after incurring debts through their studies. Hillage and Pollard (1998, p. 2) suggest that: In simple terms, employability is about being capable of

getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.

According to Schreuder & Coetze (2011:48) employability refers to an individual's capacity and willingness to become and remain attractive in the labour market, also the individual's capability to be successful in a wide range of jobs. It is about being capable of getting and creating and keeping fulfilling work and having the knowledge, understanding, skills, experience and personal attributes to move self-sufficiently within the labour market and to realise one's potential through sustainable and fulfilling employment experiences throughout the course of one's life. Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.

Graduate employability is the ability of graduates to secure jobs in the labour market, being equipped with most of the skills most envisaged by the employer and the ability to participate and contribute to the knowledge economy by applying what they learned in higher education and also improve their social standing and the country's economy. Being career resilient also increases one's level of employability, being able to adapt to the changing working environment given rise to by globalisation and technology and many various factors like the political climate and the country 's economy. Continuous learning and development and generic skills increase one's employability prospects.

Career resilience plays an important part in one's employability, Collard et al. (1996:33) defines career resilience as "the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive" and characteristics of those who are career resilient reflect the characteristics identified with employability. Teamwork, effective communication, adaptability to change, positive and flexible attitudes, continuous learning, self-confidence, willingness to take risks, and a commitment to personal excellence are all characteristics identified with employability

Graduate Employability Models

The USEM account of employability

The USEM account of employability model (Yorke and Knight, 2004) is the most known and used model in this field. USEM is an acronym for four inter-related components of employability:

- Understanding;
- Skills;
- Efficacy beliefs; and
- Metacognition

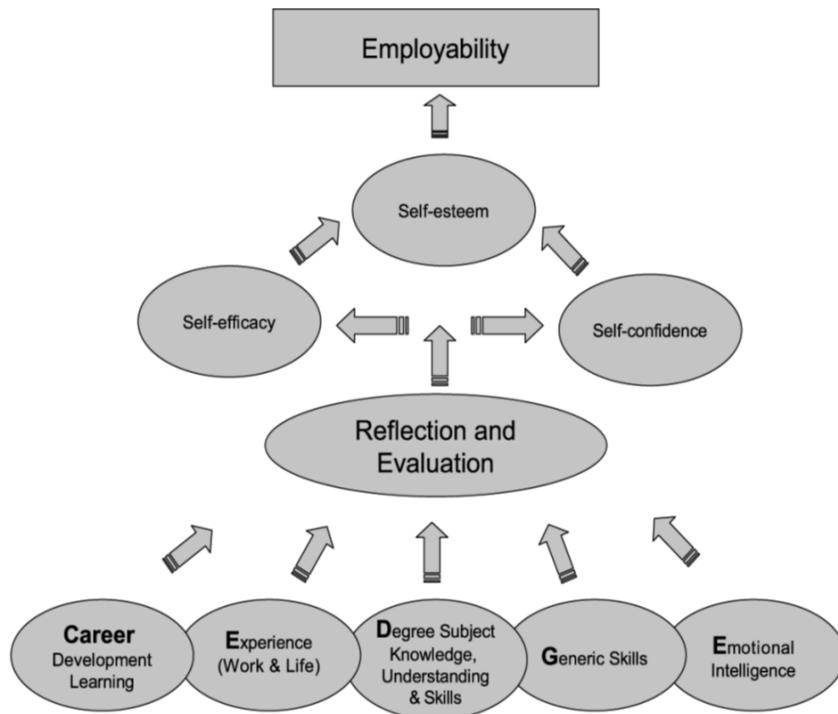


Figure 2-1: Essential Components of Employability (Pool & Sewell.2007).

This model is based on scholarly work on employability; it is designed to reflect that each component is very important and if one is missing it actually compromises a graduate's employability. A model concerning graduate employability should be something that can be explained with ease to students and possibly their parents, as well as academics. This model allows lecturers, personal tutors, careers advisors or anybody else involved with the promotion of employability within higher education to do so without clouding the issue in complexity. Third, the model will be a valuable tool for knowledge transfer activities. It can be used to demonstrate to employers how the roles of HEIs and business can both contribute to graduate employability with the resultant benefits for both parties. Finally, it would be useful to have a model of employability that could be adapted for use with groups other than students and new graduates. It would be possible to adapt this model for use at any life stage, for example with mid-life career changers or people dealing with a redundancy situation (Pool & Sewell: 2007).

People need to develop a culture of lifelong learning, not only in the workplace or in universities but also in their communities. Developing employability assets can happen also in different communities in informal settings. This contributes to the uplifting of communities social standing and also helps individuals to gain more experience in different situations. Communication skills can be enhanced because you will have to learn to communicate with people from different backgrounds and societies and classes in society, you will learn to be a quick thinker and also creative, because at times you will be working with communities with limited resources so creativity will have to come into play.

The term "generic skills" has been used for the purpose of this model and is used to represent the skills which can support study in any discipline, and which can potentially be transferred to a range of contexts, in higher education or the workplace (Bennett et al., 1999:76). Generic skills are high-order, transferable skills that are common to almost all complex endeavours. They include skills such as communicating, problem-solving, , curiosity, patience, flexibility, purpose, persistence, resilience, courage and creating — that apply across all specific fields. They enable us to organize, adapt, and strategically apply our specific skills in new situations and circumstances

DOTS Employability Model

The Centre for Employability (CfE) at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in the UK has been developing practical solutions to enhance the prospects of students and graduates for over ten years. As a consequence of the careers service origins of this unit, the main theoretical model that has underpinned this work has been the DOTS model (Law and Watts, 1977), which consists of planned experiences designed to facilitate the development

Decision Learning • <i>Decision making skills</i>	Opportunity Awareness • <i>Knowing what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are</i>
Transition Learning • <i>Including job searching and self presenting skills</i>	Self awareness • <i>In terms of interests, abilities, values</i>

Figure 2.2. DOTS Employability Model (Watts, 2006, pp. 9-10).

The value of this model lies in its simplicity, as it allows individuals to organise a great deal of the complexity of career development learning into a manageable framework. However, the model has recently attracted some criticism. McCash (2006) argues that the model is over-reliant on a mechanistic matching of person and environment, and therefore underplays other critical issues such as social and political contexts. He also points out that there is an implication that failure to secure a “self-fulfilling” occupation can be presented, or experienced, as the fault of the unsuccessful individual. These criticisms overlook the fact that the elegant simplicity of the DOTS model is precisely why it has proved so enduring and popular. They also seem to suggest that students introduced to basic concepts of career development through DOTS would be incapable of developing and learning about more sophisticated analyses through this simple introductory structure.

According to the Model of Career Management by (Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk.2010:46) it is important to plan your career as it can also enhance your employability. Like the DOTS employability model they also place more emphasis that career success is most achieved by finding and creating a fit between the self and the environment. Most of the time it almost impossible to find a job that is totally pleasing to the individual and their needs, which can result in poor performance and easily lead to unemployment. Career management enhances employability as students will have knowledge about the market demands and the new trends in the labour market, in this way labour supply and demand can match. at the moment the greatest problem leading to graduate unemployment is the mismatch of the market demands and the labour supply.

Employability Theories

Consensus Theory

It places emphasis on what social groups have in common, often relating to what the social norms or cultural shared beliefs (Brown et al. 2003). It is based on the belief that human capital injection by way of instilling generic skills at tertiary level will ensure employability of graduates and their eventual fast acceleration/leap frog in the corporate ladder. Consensus theory tends to blame the academia or university environment for not instilling sufficient skills through curriculum design and implementation through appropriate pedagogical methods. The theory is somewhat attuned to a normative utilitarian explanation which is rather simplistic. Perez et al. (2010) have referred to the challenges related to the multidimensional nature of the employability concept, especially the difficulty of disentangling the role of education and training systems from other factors in evaluating labour market outcomes (Selvadurai, Choy, Maros.2012:296).

Conflict Theory

It emphasizes the fact that different groups, namely employer, academia, employees, have varying access to power and opportunities (Brown et al. 2003). In the capital-labour conflict there has been a continuous debate in terms of the employer's role in imparting generic skills and employees not acquiring adequate skills through training offered by employers. Meanwhile, there is the employer-academia conflict where the employers feel that the academia have not been providing adequate acquisition of generic skills to the graduates. The Conflict Theory argues for the employers to take responsibility in providing work place experience to the graduates and not directing the responsibilities to the universities alone.

The consensus theory and the conflict theory have their own limitations in view of the historical evolution of generic skills acquisition, where not only university environment provides avenue for such skill development but it also entails pre-university environment such as school, family, social, neighbourhood and workplace (Selvadurai, et.al. 2012:296).

Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory (Schultz 1961; Becker 1964) argues that education increases individuals' productivity, which consequently enhances job performance. As such, education provides marketable skills and abilities relevant to job performance, and thus the more highly educated people are, the more successful they will be in labour markets in terms of both incomes and work opportunities (Yuzhuo.2013:459). This theory does not lean much towards the acquisition of generic skills to succeed in the workplace, it focuses more on the educational knowledge acquired through higher education to be successful in work. this is true you cannot apply HR functions in the workplace if you do have the technical or theoretical knowledge of it, but the point is you do not apply them in the air, you deal with people because that is the nature of the HR profession, you will need both set of skills for success.

Graduate Employability Skills

In Coleman (2000:12) skills are broken down into three categories. There is Job skills which are the skills needed for a specific job. For example a mechanic needs to know how to fix faulty brakes and an accountant should be able to draw up a balance sheet. There are also adaptive skills, these skills help you function in a new situation, for example flexibility,. they are enthusiasm, honesty and getting along well with people. Employers usually look for certain qualities and skills before hiring any staff member. These qualities and skills include punctuality, efficiency, and willingness to follow supervisor instructions, ability to get along with fellow workers, hard work and honesty.

Lastly there are transferable skills, these are personal abilities, characteristics or skills that transfer or can be used from one job or situation to another. For example interpersonal communication skills used in group work in class can be used to function effectively in a team in a work situation. In the workplace transferable skills are important. If you want to receive greater levels of responsibility and pay, having these transferable skills are crucial, meeting deadlines, supervising others, accepting responsibility, public speaking, solving problems, efficient planning, good budgeting and improving sales output. It will be beneficial to every job seeker in every profession to possess a balanced mix of these skills in order to succeed in the job market and to be employable and remain employable (Coleman.2000:12).

Employability skills are sometimes referred to as professional, core, generic, key, and nontechnical skills and are inherent to enhancing graduate work-readiness (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Employability skills typically considered important in developed economies are team working, communication, self-management, and analysis and critical thinking (Jackson.2013:271)

Employability skills are the skills that are directly pertinent to obtaining and maintaining work (Harvey, 2001; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). They are comprised of the generic and discipline-specific skills required for performance in a work situation; and career management skills, divided into two categories of competence: self-management and career building. Career management skills and knowledge are essential to employability in that they play a large part in determining which, to what extent, in what manner, when and where generic and discipline-specific skills are learned, displayed (e.g. in applying for a job) and used (Bridgstock.2009:31)

Comparing Soft Skills and Hard Skills

Robles (2012:457) describes soft skills as character traits that enhance a person's interactions, job performance, and career prospects the greatest feature of soft skills is that they are intangible and are not discipline specific, that is the application of these skills is not limited to one's profession. Soft skills are continually developed through practical application during one's approach toward everyday life and the workplace, teachable graduates develop their soft skills quicker. Soft skills are not easily measurable like hard skills they are more of who we are than what we know and hard skills are those achievements that are included on a résumé, such as education, work experience, knowledge, and level of expertise. Examples of hard skills include job skills like typing, writing, math, reading, and the ability to use software programs

Generic skills are sometimes referred to as "meta-skills," "character skills," or "learning how to learn" skills. The word "generic" comes from the Latin "genus." It has the same root as "generate." Pop and Barkhuizen (2010: 76) suggest that the lack of soft skills, workplace readiness and practical experience are some of the challenges associated with employability. Soft skills, in particular, are the main reason why many graduates are unsuccessful in the recruitment phase. Examples of soft skills include friendliness, team spirit, team cohesiveness, understanding of different cultural and historical differences, motivation, observance of rules, procedures and company etiquette, showing interest, problem solving skills, politeness, concise language, solid relations with diverse personality types, sociability, good interpersonal communication skills and similar traits.

Hard skills are the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job. Soft skills are interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills, and personal attributes that one possesses. The value of soft skills has been highlighted by a growing body of research and evidence over the past three decades. Soft skills have become an essential quality for managers to effectively manage their team and job in the corporate world irrespective of the sector. Along with professional qualification and domain knowledge, today's professionals need to possess a high soft skills quotient in order to succeed in this competitive era (Jessy, 2009). Hard skills contribute to only 15% of one's success, while the remaining 85% is contributed by soft skills (Watts and Watts, 2008). Research shows that individuals with good interpersonal and self-management abilities have better career success and contribute far more to their organizations rather than people with only excellent technical skills (Bush, 2012). (Samta,J. & Syed,A.A. 2013:32)

Most employers value graduates who are willing to learn and the ability of a graduate to display this in the early days of their careers give them better chances at success than those who are not willing to learn. A graduate can be very intelligent and actually pass their degree with distinctions but if they do not display a fair amount of the necessary soft or generic skills they can jeopardise their chances of employability. Both sets of skills are essential for success, the only difference is hard skills or discipline specific skills can be learnt as opposed to soft skills that have been referred to as character skills, they are to a certain extent dependant on the personality types of individuals.

Soft skills are very crucial and much research has shown that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge (Klaus, 2010). Another study indicated that hard skills contribute only 15% to one's success, whereas 85% of success is due to soft skills (Watts & Watts, 2008, as cited in John, 2009). As employers are progressively looking for employees who are mature and socially well adjusted, they rate soft skills as number one in importance for entry-level success on the job (Wilhelm, 2004).
(Robles.2012: 454).

Specific Skills for Human resource Management Graduates

Workplaces are changing and the role of HRM professionals has to change as well in order to adapt to the changing work environment. The macro and micro factors affecting how organisations function contribute also to the changing role of HRM professionals. The diverse and constantly changing composition of the workforce, introduction of team work, international deployments, flexi time workers, contract workers, globalisation, technology and many other factors need to be taken into account and organisations must have competent people who will be able to deal with these issues in an efficient and effective manner to ensure success and sustainable competitive advantage for organisations and government departments. The tasks undertaken by HR professionals can vary from basic administrative procedures right through to involvement in board level strategic decision making, requiring HR professionals to have a broad skill set and to operate within complex and often competing frames of reference. (Truss, Mankin & Kelliher. 2012:63).

The future HR professional is expected to hold a university degree or equivalent diploma and the most preferred is business management with major in Human Resource Management modules and useful academic courses include organisational behaviour and change, training and development, employee selection labour management relations and compensation. (Grobler et al, 2011:34). This will be the technical requirements of the job, these are skills that graduates acquire from higher education and they can apply them within a specific discipline or specialisation of the HR profession. Grobler et al, expands further that as much as academic knowledge is important recruiters are also looking for HR graduates who can demonstrate the following competencies interpersonal skills, creative innovative thinking, teaming skills, leadership and planning skills, communication and persuasion skills, flexibility/adaptiveness, intellectual independence and general business skills. The SABPP stresses that HR professionals should be able to adhere to ethical codes of the profession which are responsibility, integrity, respect and competence (www.sabpp.co.za).

The strategy of the SABPP is to promote, direct and influence the development of the Human Resources Profession, to review competency standards for the education, training and conduct of those engaged in the profession, to advise involved parties on the development and attaining of those competencies and to evaluate such attainment (Swanepoel, Erasmus & Schenk. 2012:83).

Levels of Human Resource Management Graduate Employability

Most Human resource departments are often made up of clerical (support), professional and managerial jobs (Grobler et. al, 2011:20). The lower level which is made up of clerical or support staff includes clerks, typists, receptionists and lower level administrative assistants they provide support services to the professional and managerial staff. Professional employees are specialists in their fields like counseling, benefits, employee development and labour relations just to name a few and they have business degrees and majored in human resource management. The top level which is management they coordinate the organisation's personnel activities, they formulate personnel policies and programmes

and most importantly they oversee the clerical and professional employees. Most HR graduates have the chance of being employed as second level employees in the HR department, they have a degree and some are already working towards their postgraduate degrees.

Hesketh and Hird (2010:105) as appearing in Armstrong (2012:34) support that Human Resource Management operates on three levels, the foundation level, which was known as personnel, here it's where they deal with pay and rations, recruitment. It is mainly transactional administrative duties. The second level is tools that involve rewards, development, labour relations and the last third level is strategic engagement and it takes place on management level, here are the HR executives who manage the entire human resource function.

Research questions arising from the literature:

- **Research Question 1 – What is graduate employability?**
- **Research Question 2 – What graduate attributes are most valuable, what skills are needed by graduates entering the HR profession?**

Research Design

Research approach

This study follows a qualitative research design to explore graduate and HRM graduate employability and the skills necessary for their success in the labour market. Cresswell (2013:44) defines qualitative research as follows “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. to study this problem qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. the final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and its contributions to the literature or a call for change”

Research Method

Research Setting

The study used academics in the HRM field from a South African university and an HRM manager from a local municipality and one HRM graduate in an internship placement in a provincial government office.

Sampling

The qualitative researcher usually obtains individuals with whom to conduct unstructured interviews or focus groups by means of purposive or snowball sampling, preference is given to key informants who on account of their position or experience have more information than regular group members and are better able to articulate this information (Welman et.al. 2006:204). Purposive sampling was used and the sample consisted of five academics from a local university in the HRM field and an employer who is an HR manager at a local municipality and an HRM graduate intern at a local government department.

Data collection method

Data are basic material with which researchers work. Data come from observation and can take the form of numbers (numeric or quantitative data) or language (qualitative data). To

draw valid conclusions from a research study, it is essential that the researcher has sound data to analyse and interpret. Data should be valid and capture the meaning of what the researcher is observing (Terre Blance, et.al. 2006:51). The data for this study was collected through face to face interviews with the participants. The researcher set up interview with the different participants at the times and places that would suit their schedules not to interfere with their daily work routines. The researcher used semi structured interview style with open ended questions allowing room for more discussion, some answers from the respondents led to the researcher asking more questions. Some of the data was collected by means of recording different speakers at the business forums at the 6th International Conference on Engineering and Business Education (ICEBE) in Namibia Windhoek held from the 7th to the 10th October 2013. In qualitative research an important step in the process is to find people or places to study and to gain access to and establish rapport with participants so that they will provide good data (Creswell.2013:147).

Recording and data analysis

Qualitative data analysis means making sense of relevant data gathered from sources such as interviews, on site observation, and documents and then responsibly presenting what the data reveals (Caudle.2004:417). Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organising the data i.e. text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photography for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes and finally representing the data figures, tables or a discussion (Creswell.2013:180). Data was collected using interviews and they were being recorded, later transcribed and analysed manually identifying codes and themes for analysis.

Research Question 1 – What is graduate employability?

Responses relating to defining graduate employability and levels of HRM graduate employability

The responses relating to defining graduate employability are reported in the table below

Table 2.1. Responses relating to graduate employability

Graduate Employability	Participants
Technical skills and soft skills	AP1,AP4
Readiness	AP3
Job sustainability and growth	AP2
Lifelong learning	CS1
Three levels of HRM graduate employability	AP2

“you get your basic administrative level, which is payrolls, personnel systems and record keeping, this level is operational and its important because it’s at entry level, then you get the intermediate level, this is the specific functions of HR for example selection, performance management, these are people with a high order acumen they have a specialisation like honors or master’s degree attached to them, then you get your professional level, these are your absolute experts in HR, they can do HR management, they know how to deal with human capital in terms of employability and they also do strategic human resource management” (AP2)

“graduate employability means not only preparing the student for one workplace, we need broad education for the students so they can solve problems and understand problems from the industry, we have to prepare them for lifelong learning and we have to prepare them to be citizens of the global world” (CS1)

“How does change work in business, how long does it take, every minute business is changing” (CS6)

“It is how ready are the people to take on the job that is needed, that has job sustainability. It’s not about a specific job it’s about the growth and the capability of moving as the needs are occurring” (AP2)

Interpretation of results

Most academics agreed that graduate employability is the application of the combination of technical and soft skills, being able to sustain a job and grow in it amidst changing environments and one of the employers note that it is also about lifelong learning, graduates should develop a culture of lifelong learning in order to succeed and adapt in the workplace and that will enhance their employability assets. This is because business changes every minute and they have to respond to that through continuous development and learning. Most representatives from industry want graduates who can adapt and be flexible to the changing needs of the business world. If you are to be employable you need to adopt the culture of consistently up skilling oneself to enable yourself to respond to market needs. This builds up career resilience and makes one more attractive to employers.

Research Question 2 – What graduate attributes are most valuable, what skills are needed by graduates entering the HR profession?

Responses' relating to desirable graduate attributes

Responses relating to desirable graduate attributes are reported in the table below

Table 2.2. Responses' relating to desirable graduate attributes

Soft Skills	Participants
Communication	AP1, AP2, AP3, AP4, EP1
Teamwork	AP3, IP1
Problem solving skills	AP1, AP4, CS2
Critical thinking	AP2
Emotional intelligence	AP3, AP4
Cultural intelligence	AP3, AP4
Individual growth	IP1, AP4
Interpersonal abilities	AP4, AP1

“Computer skills and knowledge skills” (AP5)

“the students must be teachable, be someone that is willing to adapt, a dynamic student that is willing to learn anyone who is set in their ways I don’t want them around, if you have a stuck up attitude you and your master’s degree mean nothing because you will not add value to the company” (AP3)

“You need to be able to work in a team because work is not in isolation” (AP4)

“Give me a student with the right attitude and I will teach him” (AP3)

“The way you present yourself, positive attitude, work ethics, these are extremely important” (AP1)

“emotional and cultural intelligence are crucial, organisations today are expanding the whole time and you are going to work with people from other cultures and that is why you need to have an open mind set, we cannot be narrow thinking today” (AP4)

Interpretation of results

Many participants agreed that graduates must be able to communicate in the workplace and have problem solving skills, cultural and emotional intelligence also came up as important because they basically guide people on how to respond and deal with situations in the workplace. Individual growth and independence was a common view shared by an academic and an intern. Independence is very important, one has to learn to initiate in the workplace and not always wait for supervisors to tell what must be done, going an extra mile always works and its one of the strategies for career growth. Teamwork is also important

because most organisations are run on projects and one has to learn to work with many different types of individuals to complete projects on target thus embracing diversity in the workplace.

Responses relating to specific skills and attributes necessary for HRM graduates

Responses relating to specific skills and attributes necessary for HRM graduates are reported in the table below

Table 2.3. Responses to specific HRM graduates

HRM graduate skills and competencies	Participants
Labour Relations Act	AP2
Fair and Consistent	AP2
Business acumen	AP1,AP2,AP4
Talent management	AP4
Compensation Management	AP4
Basic administrative and HR functions	AP1,AP2,AP3,AP4

“Understanding the basics of HR, HR acumen from entry, how you get the right person for the job and keep them, they must understand what is Human Resource Management and the system processes in HRM. It is an integrated process, so if you select the wrong person you are going to have problems with labour relations, performance management and its application. Graduates must understand how they can enable the organisation to attract and retain the right people necessary for employability” (AP2)

“They must understand how recruitment fits into the business strategy and be able to deal with the administrative aspects of recruitment. They must know the Labour Relation Act. They must be able to know what is fair and consistency. They must know how to deal with difficult people and know how HR fits into the business” (AP2)

Interpretation of results

Human Resource Management is a very broad field with many concepts integrated to make it a whole and they do not really operate in isolation, so it is important that HR graduates know the basic HR functions like recruitment and selection, and then they can go on to specialize later when they reach the professional or managerial level of Human Resource Management (HRM). On this note many respondents agreed that basic HR functions are a technical skill that every HR graduate should possess. Business acumen is also a critical skill because HR operates in a business context and they have to have knowledge on how the businesses they operate in works, application of HR practices differ from one organisation to the next in different contexts. Today the HRM profession is changing and there are new concepts that have been coming up like talent and compensation management, graduates have to familiarize themselves with these concepts as they can be the doorway to their careers.

Discussion and conclusion

Two research questions were created to guide the study in order to find the right answers and to guide the focus of the literature review. The discussion is carried out as per research question –

- What is graduate employability and what are the different levels of HRM graduate employability?

Graduate employability is about the ability of graduates to secure a job in the labour market in the specific sector or industry of what they have studied in tertiary education and be able to apply that knowledge successfully in the workplace. This would require some mentoring through work integrated learning programs like internships to give the graduates exposure of the real work place environment. They should be competent in their technical

skills required to do the job and also have good generic skills that will enable them to communicate, work in a team and relate properly with other people in the workplace. The study revealed that employers want graduates who are teachable and creative, people who can solve problems and adapt to the changing business world. They want people who can be turned into gold in no time and this requires the right attitude from graduates and willingness to learn.

The USEM model of employability rests on four components that are perceived to be critical for graduate employability. They emphasize understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs and metacognition. Having knowledge and understanding skills is critical, one should always understand the context of the environment that they are in and have the technical knowledge, having the generic skills will definitely compliment the technical skills and emotional intelligence is also very essential part of this components. Efficacy plays a big role in graduate employability, understanding how far one can go in terms of the skills that they have and how to use them to be successful is very important hence self-confidence and self-esteem are part of these employability components. (Pool & Sewell.2007)

Human resource management is a very broad discipline made up of many components. Most of the time one starts as generalist especially at entry level with graduates straight from tertiary. They perform basic HR and administrative functions, they can enhance their skills by doing job rotations in organisations to enable them to be exposed many areas of HR before they choose one or two fields to specialize in, one can either be a training officer, a compensation specialist or a labour relations expert and with this they can become part of middle management., then the higher level will be in senior management. This the most professional level where one now manages human capital in an organisation, has the business technical skills to carry out the management of human resource management in an organisation. at this level the basic HR functions are important but not really necessary because at this position you will not be conducting interviews or training workshops, here you need problem solving skills, critical analysis skills, communication and negotiation skills, cognitive thinking to be able to manage the human resource function effectively

This is supported by Hesketh and Hird (2010:105) as appearing in Armstrong (2012:34) that Human Resource Management operates on three levels, the foundation level, which was known as personnel, here it's where they deal with pay and rations, recruitment. It is mainly transactional administrative duties. The second level is tools that involve rewards, development, labour relations and the last third level is strategic engagement and it takes place on management level, here are the HR executives who manage the entire human resource function.

- What graduate attributes are most valuable, what skills are needed by graduates entering the HR profession?

Generic skills are not confined to one workplace or discipline they are transferable from one workplace to the other. They are mostly about how a person carries themselves in terms of their behavioral patterns especially in the workplace. A person's attitude is one of the most important assets that can work for them or against them. Most employers say they want graduates with the right attitudes so they can mould them into what is relevant to their industry. A willingness to learn attitude makes you gold to employers because then you can be taught new things as business trends change from day to day. HR trends also change from one organisation to the other; they vary in application so HR graduates need to know how to adapt to different situations even when applying the same HR principles. Soft skills are continually developed through practical application during one's approach toward everyday life and the workplace (Robles.2012:463)

HRM graduates need to possess a balanced mix of soft and hard skills. This will make them employable and also help them attain greater success in their professions. Employability

is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required. Human Resource Management is made up of different disciplines that are interrelated, and HR professionals need to have conceptual skills to enable them to look into these practices as a whole and incorporate them and be able to look at the organization as a whole. Some say it is better to be an HR generalist rather than being an HR specialist where one specializes in one area of Human Resource Management, for instance some people choose to be labour relations experts, others to be training and development specialists other specialize in remuneration or compensation. In that way you become employable quickly if you are a generalist because most organisations will be looking to employ an HR professional and the expectation is that you know many areas of HR in order to function properly in the HR department of a large organisation.

The demands made on HR professionals in terms of skills and expected behaviours are considerable although, nowadays as Keegan and Francis (2010:884) commented, “success in HR roles is measured in terms of developing effective business rather than people skills”. (Armstrong: 2012:42). Yes business skills are important HR professionals need to be able to link overall organisational strategies with the HR strategy to meet organisational and business objectives, but people skills are also very important for HR professionals, they are the link between humans and their work environments, they ensure performance, development and well-being of employees. They assist employees to be able to develop effective business. The two cannot operate in silos there needs to be a link for successful business.

Business skills are required to adopt a business-like approach to management one that focuses on allocating resources to business opportunities and making the best use of them to achieve the required results. (Armstrong: 2012:484). Analytical and research skills deal with your ability to assess a situation, seek multiple perspectives, gather more information if necessary, and identify key issues that need to be addressed. Highly analytical thinking with demonstrated talent for identifying, scrutinizing, improving, and streamlining complex work processes. Analytical skills are used to gain a better understanding of a complex situation or problem; they are a means of gaining insight into issues that affect the success of the business and which influence business and HR strategy.

Conclusion

It is evident from the findings of the study that graduate employability is not only about a graduate securing a place in the labour market but it is also about the student being able to apply that what they have learnt and acquired from higher education. Soft or generic skills are the most sought after in the workplace but not ignoring the hard/technical skills as they are also necessary but most research has shown that soft/generic skills contribute more to job success and job satisfaction. Some of the most sought after skills or desirable graduate attributes in the workplace as per the findings of the study are team work, communication, analytic and critical thinking and computer skills. Most employers’ desire graduates who have developed their soft/generic skills through work integrated learning programmes (WIL) and this will be discussed in the next article.

References:

Armstrong, Michael. *Armstrong's Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice*. 12th Ed. London: Kogan Page. (2012).

Bridgstock, R. *The graduate attributes we've overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills*, Higher Education Research & Development, 28:1, 31-44, DOI: 10.1080/07294360802444347. (2009).

Coleman. *Developing Workplace Skills – How to get your first job and keep it*. Juta & Co.Ltd: Cape Town.(2000).

Denise, Jackson. *Business graduate employability – where are we going wrong?* Higher Education Research & Development, 32:5, 776-790, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2012.709832. (2013)

Grobler, P., Warnich, S., Carrell,M., Elbert,N.F., & Hatfield, R.D. *Human Resource Management in South Africa*.3rd Ed. London: Thomson Learning. (2006).

Denise, Jackson. *Student Perceptions of the Importance of Employability Skill Provision in Business Undergraduate Programs*, Journal of Education for Business, 88:5, 271-279, DOI: 10.1080/08832323.2012.697928. (2013).

Kraak, A. The collapse of the graduate labour market in South Africa: evidence from recent studies. Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 15:1, 81-102.(2010).

Pool, L. D. & Sewell, P. *The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability*. Education& Training Journal, 49(4), 277-289.(2007).

Pop, C. & Barkhuizen, N. *The Relationship between Skills Training and Retention of Graduate Interns in a South Africa Information, Communication and Technology Company*. Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ), Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 78 – 83. (2010).

Robles, M.R. Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace. Business Communication Quarterly 75(4) 453– 465 ©. (2012).

Schreuder, A.M.G., &Coetze, M. *Careers an organisational perspective*. 4th Ed. Claremont: Juta& Co. Ltd.(2011).

Selvadurai, S., Choy; E., & Maros, M. *Generic Skills of Prospective Graduates from the Employers' Perspectives*. Asian Social Science. Vol. 8 Issue 12, p295-303. ISSN 1911-2017 E-ISSN 1911-2025. (2012).

Yuzhuo, C. *Graduate Employability: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Employers' Perceptions*. The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning (2013).

Pauw, K., Oosthuizen, M. & Van der Westhuizen, C. *Graduate unemployment in the face of skills shortages: a labour market paradox*. South African Journal of Economics, 76: 45–57. Doi: 10.1111/j.1813-6982.2008.00152.x. (2008),

Maree, K., Creswell, J.W., Ebersohn, L., Ellof, I., Ferreira, N.V., Ivankova, J.D., Jansen, J., Nieuwenhuis,,J., Pieterson,. J., Plano, Clark, V.L.,& van der Westhuizen, C. *First Steps in Research*. 11th Ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers. (2012)

Kraak, A. The collapse of the graduate labour market in South Africa: evidence from recent studies. Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 15:1, 81-102.(2010).

Samta, J., Afreen, A., & Syed, S. *Facilitating the Acquisition of Soft Skills through Training*. Journal of Soft Skills., Vol. 7 Issue 2, p32-39. 8p.(2013)

Bridgstock, R. *The graduate attributes we've overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills*, Higher Education Research & Development, 28:1, 31-44, DOI: 10.1080/07294360802444347. (2009).

Creswell, J.W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design. Choosing among five approaches*. 3rd Ed. London: Sage Publications. (2013).

Welman, C., Kruger, P.,& Mitchell, B. *Research Methodology*. 3rd Ed. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.(2012)

Caudle, S.L. *Qualitative Data Analysis. Handbook of practical program evaluation*. (2004)