

## Preparing graduates for the world of competition: A normative role of higher education

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### Abstract

Employability is high on the educational and political agenda; engaging students and employers with employability remains a challenge and defining what is meant by employability is as much of an issue today as it was 30 years ago. Much of it comes as a challenge to the young graduates who fail to inculcate the skills that are related and included in employability. There is inequality in terms of support and provisions for enhancing their employability quotient from their institutions. Without having enough employability skills, it will be more challenging for the economy to achieve its productivity goals, individuals will find it harder to obtain and progress in work and many other important issues related to lack of skills will crop up. It is no longer sufficient for a graduate to have academic subject knowledge only in today's challenging economic situation but it is increasingly important for students to gain employability skills that would enhance their prospects of employment. Graduates should be proactive and should effectively make transitions in the world of work and manage their careers. Higher education is expected to inculcate values and skills of employability among students. Higher education system can play an active role for development of career management skills which have been overlooked. All this would ultimately build graduate employability which is considered to be a key influence on economic growth in the global knowledge economy. The present study aims to make the concept of employability enhancement much clearer by extensive literature on the subject and also the expected role of higher education in preparing graduates for the world of work.

**Keywords:** employability, higher education, graduates, employers, skill

### Introduction

One of the widely debated issues of accrediting and determining world class higher education institutions which could go a long way in systematically improving the performance of an institution as well as an individual is *Employability*. Employability is an issue of concern in many areas of the economy. The term employability is used to refer to the ability of an individual to gain employment appropriate to his/her educational standards (Dearing 1997) <sup>[6]</sup>. Employability is about much more than just getting one's first job- it's about having a positive self image and presenting oneself successfully, both as a new graduate and throughout its life. Its skills, knowledge and personal attributes and the ability to convey them effectively all contribute to its employability as do its personal circumstances and labour market conditions. High quality talent needs to be available across the globe. Unfortunately, this is not currently the case and employability crisis is becoming a global crisis, while there are good examples of some countries putting emphasis on changing their education systems to be more business-ready in most parts of the world, education and employability are not in step with each other. Therefore employability challenges are universal. This includes countries like India and China where there isn't a dearth of education institutions, but *employability* issues persist. It has been seen in Global ranking of higher education institutions that India does not figure in the emerging good rankers. (Yeravdekar, Tiwari 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. The concern about India's poor representation in global

rankings leads to a useful discussion. We have 30,500 institutes of higher learning and not one in top 200 globally. Something is going horribly wrong. To break the vicious cycle, we will need to start with the gardener, who must sow the virtuous seed - the teacher. This transition from teacher centric teaching is not just imminent but an unstoppable reality. It limns the global positioning of premier institutions and is an inducement to academic excellence. There lies a vast distance between the Indian academic system at present and one that can spawn world class universities, much less the resources that would be required. Literature suggests, the notion of world class university is determined by utilising four distinct pillars, such as, i) Research quality, ii) Teaching quality, iii) Graduate employability and iv) International outlook (Rauhvarges 2011).

India currently has 600 million youth below the age of 25 years of which 340 million students are in more than 1 million schools, 30,000 colleges and 540 universities. The gross enrolment ratio in colleges is merely 12.4%. Moreover, the shocker, less than 25% of them are employable (Industry standards). It is expected that about one million people will look for jobs to be a part of the work force over the next 10 years. Given the present scenario if majority of these people who are not properly trained to be employable join the country's work force, it is going to affect the stability of the country. Experts from the industries say that the education institutions in India are severely affected by bureaucracy and dependence on rote learning rather than critical thinking and

comprehension. It is no longer sufficient for a graduate (Fallows & Steven 2000) <sup>[8]</sup> to have academic subject knowledge only in today's challenging the economic situation but it is increasingly important for students to gain employability skills that would enhance their prospects of employment.

### Literature review

There is a vast skills gap in India, with several surveys showing that half of all graduates are not employable in any sector based on industry standards. This has sparked growing concern about the mismatch between universities and the needs of the job market. Among some disciplines the skills gap appears to be staggering – 75% of IT graduates are deemed 'unemployable', 55% in manufacturing, 55% in healthcare and 50% in banking and insurance. (Rajalakshmi 2013) <sup>[14]</sup>. The economic development of any nation, without equipping the youth with the skills they are supposed to put on, undoubtedly will lose its charm in the progress of lifting up the nation.

Employers want graduates with relevant subject specific skills, knowledge and understanding, but in addition to this are looking for well developed generic skills in a number of areas (Harvey *et al.*, 1997) <sup>[9]</sup> Employers are often reluctant to provide training or skill development to short term contract employees because they do not expect a good return on their investment over the duration of the contract (Connell as Burgess, 2006) <sup>[5]</sup>. Where short-term contracts are offered there is a preference to employ people who already have necessary skills and experience and who will therefore not incur training costs. Therefore, this mismatch between the needs of employers in terms of being able to access job ready employees, and the needs of employees, in terms of maintaining and enhancing employability, is creating a gap in both expectations and behaviours on the part of organisation and individuals. In some other past research studies, some mismatch was found between the competence of higher education graduates and the demands encountered at their workplaces. However, according to (Hesketh 2000) <sup>[10]</sup> "employers are generally satisfied with the key skills brought by the graduates of universities". But graduates lack other employability aspects which could be attributed to deficiencies. In higher education curricula, all of this boils down to a student centric learning. Only the effective teacher can start the virtuous cycle with an inspired student wanting to be like his teacher, leading to better student outcomes, better life skills and employability skills. Therefore, the search for excellence in Indian education system must start inside the classroom with the teacher.

India being a country with varied interests and huge population it has been found that only 35% of the workable age group have been able to get absorbed in different industrial sectors after coming out of their educational streams. There is a clear cut variance between what an industry requires and what our educational institutions produce. It has also been found that our employable graduates whether professional or non professional are not able to stand up to the expectations of the employers and due to lack of skill requirement and mismatch for industry, many people fail to

enter into the job market. This issue of lack of employability and skills points out towards lack of proper higher education system and development of soft skills at institutional level. Various organisational practices have to be kept in view giving a special reference to Academic leadership, Training and development, Career planning, Setting academic priorities, Performance management, Evaluating faculty, Succession planning, making the transition from faculty to administrator, the issues and leadership responsibilities are many, and seem to grow daily. Various academicians have given their view in different papers regarding status of employability and higher education system recorded above giving special reference to quality teaching. The concern with respect to quality refers to the sub-par standard of education across a number of dimensions, most importantly: contribution to skill-development, job-preparedness and research. It has been widely contended that the higher education system does not result in a large enough skilled workforce. The role of higher education in the construction and development of the employability of the future workforce has been the subject of debate for nearly as long as the universities have existed. Formal education increases an individual's formal and/or actual competence and has a central role in defining and shaping one's employability (Baker 2009). However the new conditions have consequences for institutions of higher education and the construction of curricula for professional Programmes. The demands made on universities by students regarding each student's post graduation employability have become increasingly instrumental and market adapted (Bennett *et al.* 2000) <sup>[3]</sup>. Higher education Programmes are expected to prepare students for future professional work experience. Students are expected to learn how to become effective professionals ready to handle the demands associated with his/her job shortly after graduation.

Taking a look at our own country, which is considered as the fastest growing economies in the world in the last decade, its workforce is unable to stand with the demands of 21st century economy due to low quality education which is hampering India's overall growth. The more a country invests in quality education the more will be the transition into an innovative economy but to our surprise our efforts have just been on enrolment and not on learning. It is hardly surprising that despite 97% enrolment in class 1 only 35% reach to class 12 and less than 20% enrol into higher education. Even for those who complete graduation nearly half of our graduates are employable in any sector. The UPA government established NSDC in 2008 with the target of skilling 500 million youth by 2022. To unlock the true potential of youth, we must look in and transform our higher education system to prepare students for work place and the world of competition. For quality education, a system wide education transformation is the need of the hour, which is the basic motive of this research, to analyse the efforts and practices adopted by our higher education system to transform our input i.e. students into a quality output. The success of quality education must not be determined by input as the number of students in class rooms

or number of libraries, but we must hold our higher education system accountable to high standards of student achievement.

### **Employability enhancement - normative role of higher education**

Employability is high on the educational and political agenda; engaging students and employers with employability remains a challenge and defining what is meant by employability is as much of an issue today as it was 30 years ago. Much of it comes as a challenge to the young graduates who fail to inculcate the skills that are related and included in employability. There is inequality in terms of support and provisions for enhancing their employability quotient from their institutions. Without having enough employability skills, it will be more challenging for the economy to achieve its productivity goals, individuals will find it harder to obtain and progress in work and many other important issues related to lack of skills will crop up. Graduates should be proactive and should effectively make transitions in the world of work and manage their careers. Apart from generic competencies, it should encompass notions of career and self management to have positive effects on learning outcomes and employability. Higher education system can play an active role for development of career management skills which have been overlooked. They should include career building and self management skills in curriculum in order to remain competitive, involving partnership between faculties, career services and employers to develop and implement programs addressing the issue of career management competence and self management skills. All this would ultimately build graduate employability which is considered to be a key influence on economic growth in the global knowledge economy. It is no longer sufficient for a graduate (Fallows & Steven 2000)<sup>[8]</sup> to have academic subject knowledge only in today's challenging the economic situation but it is increasingly important for students to gain employability skills that would enhance their prospects of employment. Higher education is expected to inculcate values and skills of employability among students.

HE prepares future professionals to understand new situations and recognise which areas of knowledge are relevant to a particular situation, and provides the capacity to transform previously acquired explicit knowledge when solving relevant problems (Eraut, 2006)<sup>[7]</sup>. In this context, the impact of education on socio-economic outcomes has been surveyed and discussed for decades and in different ways. Early human capital researchers, such as Schultz (1961)<sup>[12]</sup> or Becker (1962) proved that (higher) education creates a more productive workforce and greater salaries. (Thurow 1975)<sup>[13]</sup> questioned these claims and showed that productivity depends more on the specific job than acquired competencies. Credential theory (Collins, 1979)<sup>[4]</sup> advocated that the main role of education systems lies in regulating access to the labour market.

To understand the complexity of the overall logic of the role of HE institutions in preparing graduates for work, it is important to consider differences and similarities: first, the concept of professional knowledge and its disciplinary particularities; second, the determinants of graduates' career success (e.g. past education and work experiences, type of HE

qualification and study, educational characteristics, modes of teaching and learning, international experiences, study success); and third, career success components (e.g. status, skill and qualification matching, autonomy, innovation and satisfaction) among study fields or professional domains.

In the education and teaching domain, it is generally agreed about the importance of practical training being the key element of preparing graduates for work. Practical training is described as the necessary tool that makes the difference between content-centered and learner-centered curricula and also as an empowering tool for the development of soft skills. It is stressed that there is a need to support lifelong learning activities and there is a great relevance of the internationalization of Programmes. As for future challenges, it is emphasized that a further strengthening of relations with stakeholders and developing practical work and problem-based learning is needed. In the future autonomy of curricula development, in order to make regular updates in line with emerging student needs is also stated. It is emphasized that a practical orientation, cooperation with industry and internship are key tools for enhancing graduates' employability skills which should also be properly combined with research.

### **Conclusion**

Lack of employability skills or employable talent among Indian graduates is the current problem in Indian job market. The reasons found are lack of skills, obsolete syllabus, poor academic delivery, lack of work culture exposure and emphasis on just scoring marks instead of gaining knowledge. We are, thus, surviving with a mediocre higher education system. As it has already been discussed in the literature review that in (Yeravdekar & Tiwari 2014)<sup>[15]</sup>. Global ranking of higher education institutions that India does not figure in the emerging good rankers. The concern about India's poor representation in global rankings leads to a useful need of research in this area. There lies a vast distance between the Indian academic system at present and one that can spawn world class universities, much less the resources that would be required. The percentage of employable Indian graduates is declining at an alarming rate every year and it calls for urgent attention. This issue should be addressed immediately and effectively to ensure that India can maintain its competitive advantage in terms of qualified graduates. Bad signals about graduates' labour market employability can result in reduced enrolments. HE institutions have a very limited impact on labour market trends. Any implementation of processes supposed to improve graduates' employability is largely questionable without supportive empirical data. With some exceptions, most leaders of HE institutions do not feel responsible for tracking or collecting information on their graduates' careers. Their knowledge of the components of the careers of their own graduates, such as for example skills and education match, progression possibilities or job satisfaction and their determinants is surprisingly limited. Despite the general lack of employability surveys and their utilization, HE leaders generally do have some individualized experiences that help graduates with work. On this basis they assume they can contribute to graduates' employment with processes like, for example, the implementation of more practical Programmes, cooperation with employers, or supporting

internationalization.

Information on graduates' careers is also important for developing areas related to supporting graduates' employability. Career centers, for example, need this information in order to properly inform new entrants as well as to help orient graduates at the time of their graduation. Lifelong learning activities and developments, for example, particularly require information about typical graduates' career paths five or ten years after graduation. Moreover, trends in graduates' careers are vitally important for strategic decision making on programme implementation when an HE institution is considering entering a new area, or enhancing an existing one. So far, only a few HE leaders have access to reliable and longitudinal data on this subject. It might be worth considering that HE institutions should focus more of their attention on promoting the importance of its own professional role in society. Focusing only on graduates' skill improvement cannot always help. Curriculum development, deepening cooperation with employers, developing lifelong learning activities, supporting internationalization of students, developing research activities, establishing career centres and safeguarding the autonomy of professional domains can, to a greater extent support employability of graduates in labour markets.

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