Importance of Employability Skills for Technical and Vocational Students

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ABSTRACT

Research on employability skills were conducted nationally and internationally, found that many technical graduates lacked employability skills. This article reports on the study of employability skills that technical and vocational students should acquire to be employed and sustain in manufacturing industries. The study investigates the importance of employability skills as perceived by 107 manufacturing industries employers. The findings of the study showed that employers place great importance to interpersonal skills, thinking skills and personal qualities that student need to be emphasized to be employed in manufacturing industries. Indicators such as work safety, integrity, customer service, creative/innovative thinking and problem solving, and exercise leadership got the highest mean score.

Keywords: Employability Skills, Manufacturing Industry, Employers, Employees, Technical and Vocational Students

INTRODUCTION

Employability skill is often defined as a preparation for graduates to successfully get jobs and to develop in their careers (Fugate et al., 2004). In Australia and internationally, employability skills are known by a number of terms including core skills, key skills, essential skills, basic skills and workplace know-how. In some countries they are specifically employment-related, while in others, greater emphasis has been placed on the social relevance of employability skills. As Kearns notes:
“It is desirable to find agreement on terminology that is acceptable to all stakeholders—schools, Vocational Education Training (VET), higher education, employers, individuals, and communities and which recognises that the new agenda of employability skills for the 21st century is about essential life skills as well as enterprise and employability skills.”

(Kearns 2001, p.85)

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia undertook a comprehensive study of ‘employability’ skills in Australia. This study defined as employability skills:

“... skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one’s potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions. Employability skills are also sometimes referred to as Employability skills, capabilities or key competencies “


Industry analysts reported that for success in the workplace, employees needed to possess entry-level employability skills. These skills were often viewed as a company’s most important raw material (Wesselink, 2009) and graduates with employability skills will have an advantage in getting jobs in the industry (Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010).

ISSUES ON EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS
Research has shown that some countries have integrated the employability skills into higher education. Throughout the world what is expected of a graduate to possess is similar but how it is planned differ to ensure the goal is achieved (Harvey and Bowers-Brown, 2004). How higher education institutions view graduate employability differ from one another, some considered a first degree is sufficient, whilst others integrate measures into the curriculum for example work-based learning.

Research on the role of vocational and technical education in Malaysia and United States on developing employability skills among technical graduates, found that technical graduates had mastered their technical skills but employers however felt dissatisfied with their employees motivational skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving and entrepreneurship skills (Ramlee & Greenan (2002); Cotton (2005).)

The study for the Higher Education Funding Council for England on the impact of employability skills teaching and learning on graduate labour market prospects by Cranmer (2006) showed that the finding discover a mismatch for some graduates between the skills acquired at university and the skills they are required to use in employment.

A study conducted to explore the importance of employability skills of engineering graduates through employers' perspective in various fields of engineering in Peninsular Malaysia shows that the employers put high level of interests in employability skills as an essential skill to have (Husain, et al., 2010). Meanwhile investigation on the undergraduates’ core competencies ability to meet with the requirements set by the employers and to analyse the effectiveness of personal qualities and employability skills development in private university in Malaysia, showed that the undergraduates were highly competent in possessing the personal qualities and
skills. However, such skills as critical analysis, planning, problem solving, oral communication, decision making, and negotiating reported a slightly higher level of mismatch between employers’ and undergraduates’ perception on their importance and development in the University (MOHE, 2009).

Ahmad Zaini (2005) in his research for technical graduates stated that 80,000 technical graduates who are still unemployed, largely depend on academic qualifications to get a job but with less non-technical skills (employability skills) which is required by employers making them look for competent workers from abroad. In order to ensure that graduates are able to survive in the arena of employment today they must have employability skills for continuous development of new skills and adaptation to changes (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001; Kearns, 2001).

The concept of graduate identity was developed by Hinchliffe and Joll (2011) through their research with over 100 employers in East Anglia. The findings suggest a composite and complex graduate identity, depending on employer size and sector. A four-stranded concept of identity that comprises value, intellect, social engagement and performance question the traditional model of graduate employability comprising skills, competencies and attributes. Performance is not the only criteria that employers take into account when assessing the potential of graduates. The four elements of identity are expected to interpenetrate producing a composite identity, with different employers emphasizing different facets of this identity.

Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) (2006) outlined eight learning domains in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), to be mastered by students. The learning domains, including non-technical skills and techniques as follows: knowledge in the areas studied,
practical skills, social skills and responsibility, the value, attitude and professionalism, communication skills, leadership and teamwork, scientific problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial and management skills, lifelong learning skills and information management. Meanwhile MOHE (2006) with his soft skills model includes generic skills across multiple domains of learning and skills group of personal aspects. University graduates should possess these skills to meet labor market needs and challenges of everyday life.

From the review spanning 15 years of study the employability skills issues is still not been settle. What is obvious is the different between graduate’s employability skills being produced by the institution and what employers need. The reason that might contribute to this happening is that higher institution assumes all aspects of employability skills needed by employers are the same for every field in the industry or job. Adequate employability skills are needed by every field or industry. Thus identifying indicators for employability skills from the employer’s perspective is crucial to develop technical and vocational student’s employability skills.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive research design with quantitative approached. Quantitative data for this study were obtained through questionnaires. The items in the questionnaires included most of the elements of employability skills perceived necessary by industries which were adapted from Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills or SCANS (1991). The employability skills questionnaires contained seven constructs which are: 1) basic skills, 2) thinking skills, 3) resource management skills, 4) informational skills, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) system and technology skill, 7) personal quality skills. Each employer chosen as the research
sample was categorized into particular categories-traits of manufacturing industry. The objective in choosing these categories was to investigate the extent to which employability aspects were identified as important to employers in the manufacturing industry - according to these categories. 107 employers were given a set of questionnaires on employability skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed that employers in all five categories of manufacturing industry are in agreement on the importance of all seven of the employability skills.

In relation to basic skills, employers felt that understanding instructions, listening, and verbalizing are important in the work place. Employers felt, given the need to be able to communicate effectively in work, institutions should place great emphasis upon in their curricula. McLeish (2002) mentioned that employers placed different emphasis on different forms of communication. Sometimes verbal communication was emphasized, others written communication; employers need employees who could not only read and write but also be able to explain in a manner easily understood for complex concepts.

Thinking skills is a set of skills related to creative/innovative thinking, decision making, problem solving, seeing things in the mind’s eye, knowing how to learn, reasoning. Problem solving skills is important to enable a person to discuss and to make overall conclusion. Employers suggested the mix of problem solving skills required would vary according to the level of complexity of the job and the types of problem employees would encounter (Emery, 1999). Employers indicated problem solving skills were essential for both entry level and existing employees.
Relating to resource skills, employers indicated that the ‘financial management’ is important. Technical students are encouraged to get involved in financial management and these skills should be included in program in order to expose students to the business and industrial world. Aspect of resource skills (manages time, manages money, manages materials and resources, manages human resource and manage risk) viewed by employers has high mean score from 4.21 to 4.46. The employers suggested that employees must no longer relied on managers to take initiatives in developing the business or identifying new approaches.

Aspect of informational skills, ‘organizes and maintains information’ showed moderate mean score (mean = 3.73). However according to Fitrisehara et al., (2009) employees need to be able to manage time, manage self and work alone, be resourceful, make decision because they might be required to manage projects from conception to completion.

Interpersonal skills is related skill set participates as a member of a team, teaches others, serves clients, exercises leadership, negotiates, work with cultural diversity which have the highest mean score. High ability in problem solving skills will give the high quality of work, service and product. The skill to be able to transfer between individual work and team work is an advantage (McLeish, 2002) and Alston et al (2009) found that employers felt that team work and dedication were extremely important.

Apart from that, the item in the aspects of system and technology achieved a high mean score. The application of technology to perform tasks among employees who serve in the production field is very significant as contemporary industries used various latest technologies from foreign countries to simplified works. Employers indicated that all aspects of system and technology are important.
As for the aspect of personal quality, employers feel that personal values such as self-esteem, sociability, self-management, responsibility, integrity, work safety, and conscientiousness is important no matter how good their academic qualification they have. These values are seen to contribute to harmony and productivity within workplace and to developing good relations with customers. Bennet (2006) clarified that employer’s need workers who are able to face any challenge in workplace besides able to motivate themselves to get through those challenges.

CONCLUSION

Employability skills are important because there have been significant changes in the economy and in the way organisations operate which require employees to have these skills. The results of these findings can be a useful guide for technical and vocational instructors to plan to inculcate or emphasis employability skill to students. The results also showed that employers rated the importance of the employability skills at a high level. Given the high value of these skills perhaps employers would like to see these skills incorporated more into the curricula and will give more impact to the working work. Like the other education sectors, the technical and vocational has an important role to play in ensuring that a wide range of people gain and develop employability skills. Training programs which emphasis’ these skills offer their students a comparative advantage in the labour market.

REFERENCES


