

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Graduate Employability and Transferable Skills: A Review

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to underline the significance of transferable skills in relation to the employability. Employability currently plays an important role in labor market policies. The concept of 'employability' is widely accepted as economic strategy promoted by key supranational institutions and labor market policy at the national, regional and local levels. One of the definitions is related to the individual's employability skill and associated with the individual needs of employers. At present, there is growing concern on the lack of skills to meet the key positions, especially at higher skill levels. In general, the skills shortage is not only focused on specific technical skills; it also includes personal skills and attributes. In other words, this can also be called transferable skills. Hence, this paper attempts to review the needs of transferable skills for employability of graduates.

Key words: transferable skills, employability

Introduction

Employability concepts have different meanings and interpretations since the emergence in the early twentieth century. According to the European Community's terminology, it is defined as the capacity to integrate into the work environment. Since then, the European Commission has made it a priority employment strategy. A special summit meeting held in Luxembourg in 1997 on employment identified employability as the first guideline for employment in 1998 (Bollerot 2001).

Employability is defined as the relative ability of an individual for employment, with account being taken of the interaction between personal characteristics and the labour market (Weinert 2001). However, employability is rarely obvious and clear. In most cases, the core ideas related to the tendency of students or graduates to get jobs. Yorke (2006) defines graduates' employability as "... a set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy".

Employability is also closely related to the perspectives and demands of employers. Bollerot (2001) considers employability as a means of analysis and understanding of the selection process of job seekers in the labor market, and as an element in human resource management in enterprises (based on the knowledge required to perform tasks) internally. Various definitions of the above agreed to get a job related to the development of the individual to the job, especially for "job readiness" graduates.

Transferable Skills and Graduate Employability:

The importance of transferable skills is increasingly emphasized in recent times. The pressure of global competition means that graduates need to offer an employer more than academic skills traditionally represented by the subject and degree class. Since the 1990s, there were numerous reports from government, industry, higher education agencies and researchers urged the higher education sector to bring transferable skills into the students' learning experience (Mason *et al* 2003). The reports suggest that the universities and colleges should plan to support graduates in developing the skills of employability, which represent graduates' work readiness.

However, it is not an easy task to prove that graduates have relevant employability skills and at the same time to identify the skills needed by employers. Dearing Report (1997) acknowledges the message from the employer which is not consistent in identifying skills needs. This is supported by study undertaken by Bracey (2006) stated that if it is hard to identify what skills are required by industry, then it is difficult to determine whether there is a gap between what skills are needed and received from employees.

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In traditional industries most jobs require employees to learn how to perform routine functions, which remain constant over time). Most learning occurs when an employee started a new job. In today's economy, change is so rapid that workers need to acquire new skills. Thus, firms can no longer rely solely on new graduates or newly entering the labor market as a major source of new skills and knowledge. Instead, they need employees who are willing and able to update their skills throughout their lives. Therefore, all countries need to respond to these changes by creating education and training system that can equip people with the right skills.

There is an argument that conventional education is no longer adequate to prepare people for working life. The traditional emphasis on *know what* and *know why* knowledge is too far removed from practical knowledge (Ducatel 1998). Formal education and training need to be included and complemented by experiential learning in acquiring *know how* knowledge, which can only be gained from hands-on learning and experience. Additionally, there is an increasing emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of skill: the *know who* side of knowledge. It is based on the insight that key vectors of innovation and growth lie in the dynamic interactions between codified (mainly know what and know why) and tacit (mainly know how and know who) knowledge. This basic insight reinforces the idea that effective learning takes place through a combination of experiential learning (mainly tacit) and formal learning (mainly codified), which places a large question mark over current systems of education and training which still tend to separate these phases of learning.

Dissemination of new technologies such as ICT requires a fundamental shift in the ability of some workers. Basic skills is a multidimensional concept that requires placement of an integrated range of physical ability (hand-eye co-ordination, dexterity, and strength) and cognitive abilities (analytical and synthetic reasoning, numerical and verbal abilities) to interpersonal skills (communication, supervisory, leadership, work team, etc.) (Wolff 1995). There is an increasing demand for the ability to engage in formal reasoning and manipulation of symbols, which implies a change in the composition of skills with physical skills losing place to cognitive skills.

As formal education tends to focus on developing cognitive skills, rather than physical skills, new technology is often associated with the growing demand for highly qualified people (Ducatel 1998). Therefore, formal education has become increasingly important signal to employers that workers have the cognitive ability to perform well in the work environment, while the physical characteristics may decline in importance.

However, cognitive abilities alone are not enough. Ability to do work depends on the effective assimilation of various skills that go beyond their immediate needs to the technology used or the task in hand. The need for a flexible workforce which can be adapted to meet the constantly developing and changing work place has turned attention to the development of transferable skills, the skills and abilities considered to be used in more than one context. Various terms have been attached to this concept, for example, key skills, core skills, generic skills, soft skills, lifelong learning skills and employability skills.

Fallows and Steven (2000) define transferable skills as: ".....a term in common use within education. The implication is that skills developed within one situation (education) are also useful when transferred into another situation (employment). This mean as considering what is needed in a work situation and applying it back into education, that is "reverse transfer". For example, it is recognised that the skill of writing reports, rather than essays, is valued by employers; so some assessments should be based on report writing".

There are variations in the categorization and there is no one definitive list of transferable skills, but overall the main emphasis on the development of written and oral communication skills (both input and output), interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, computing, information technology and related skills to the business world and in some models of self- management and foreign language capabilities (Jessup 1991; Bennet *et al* 2000). There is significant research into what employers want in terms of employability skills, despite each of the individual organisation having its own specific requirements. For example, many employers always want a raft of other personal skills, not least adaptation, flexibility and willingness to learn, other than specific technical skills (Yorke & Harvey 2005). Meanwhile, Longworth and Davies (1993), in their book on lifelong learning, said that changes in the work regime involve not only individuals who have several jobs in a lifetime, but also having several careers. The implication is that individuals need to be continuously updating and upgrading their skills throughout their working life. They sketch the scenario of large firms employing highly educated and highly paid productive core staff to run the business, and outsourcing all their other requirements to specialist providers. The staff of the large companies and those supplying specialist services will employ people who are adaptable, flexible and versatile. The skills which Longworth and Davies identify for a lifelong learning age are as follows: learning to learn, putting new knowledge into practice, questioning and reasoning, managing oneself and others, managing information, communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills, adaptability and flexibility, understanding the responsibility of updating and upgrading one's own competence.

In relation to graduate employability, various studies have indicated the employer is not satisfied with the development of such skills in students (Tolley 1991), and recognition by students of their weakness in this skill (Brennan & Mc Greevor 1987). Presently, employers want to recruit graduates not only with technical skills, which can be identified by their qualifications, but also with their transferable skills. Business skills also increased in line with business activity in any sector. Connor (1995) stated that in terms of graduate recruitment, many employers remain concerned by the lack of communication skills, business awareness, leadership and

team-work skills among graduates. Graduates are expected to be able to work effectively in a team, because there is a tendency, especially in private companies, for much work to be done in the project teams. Therefore, graduates must have good communication skills and team working skills in interpersonal behavior. Employers also stressed the importance of problem-solving skills; recently have tended to become creative problem solving, focusing on imaginative solutions, with employers looking for risk taking as part of the problem-solving strategy (Yorke & Harvey 2005).

Conclusion:

Overall, most employers want employees who will be effective in today's changing economy. They prefer to hire people who can manage change and thrive on it, flexible and adaptable workers who are quick to learn. Increasingly, graduates' attributes are more important than the graduates' degree subjects. For some employers, the degree subject is not as important as graduates' ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively (Knight & Yorke 2002). Graduate recruiters want a variety of other skills, personal qualities and intellectual, rather than specialist subject knowledge. Oral communication, teamwork, personal management, problem solving, leadership skills, i.e. employability skills, are all important (Warn & Tranter 2001). Although the specific subject knowledge is no longer a major factor, there are exceptions in certain sectors such as medicine and engineering, but even here employability skills are necessary.

Therefore, it is increasingly important that higher education equips graduates for the labor market. It has been argued above that conventional education focused on what and know why knowledge (mainly codified knowledge) and not in the know how and know who knowledge (mainly tacit knowledge). Tacit knowledge is embodied in the individuals and has the same characteristics to most of the transferable skills. Employers can be seen to place priority on transferable skills, including adaptation, flexibility and willingness to learn and keep learning. In general, the literature agrees on the need to produce graduates with a work ready attitude and on the importance of transferable skills for employability. The perceptions that a degree will guarantee a job are no longer applicable. At present, graduates need to demonstrate the more attributes and quality in securing jobs as employers look for various qualities above degree qualifications.

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