



Perception of Employers about the Employability Skills of Fresh Graduates: A Case Study of Distt. Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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In this modern age, the dramatic change in economic trends is creating a high demand for employability skills in the job market. Employability skills play a significant role in the placement of graduates in the job sector. Job markets are progressively highly competitive and rely on quality learning and abilities. The employers have elevated the requirements for the newcomers to do their work from the earliest starting point. The purpose of this paper was to explore the perceptions and satisfaction levels of employers about the employability skills of fresh graduates in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. A case study design using the qualitative method was conducted to explore the different aspects related to the study. An in-depth interview was used for the data collection. The data was gathered from the 10 purposefully selected managers or owners of companies and NGOs where graduates are most likely to find jobs. Coding and themes were used for the analysis and to make the data meaningful. The findings indicated that the employers' expectations were usually not met by the fresh graduates. According to the point of view of employers, the students of public universities did not perform well or performed less than students of more well-known private universities on many skills such as communication, creativity and critical thinking.

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Introduction

One of the main functions of higher education institutions is to provide students with the cognizance and skills needed to adapt to the job market. While the theoretical form of erudition is provided to students by universities, it also perceives the consequentiality of the practical experience and skills required by employers. In this age of knowledge, an immensely huge number of graduates are working efficaciously to meet the authoritative ordinance for workers with a high caliber of skills and cognizance. This is not a facile task, as labour market needs and priorities are fluctuating and difficult to predict in the short term. More than 70% believe their employees will need to acquire incipient skills in the next year (Winterbotham, Vivian, Shury, Davies, and Kik, 2014), according to the most comprehensive UK employer survey. Research additionally shows that liberal vocations (mainly graduates) are most affected by employers for "professional development".

Universities and organisations should consequently collaborate to achieve a good balance between the skills acquired by university students and employees in the workplace. Collaboration between universities and organisations is essential to ascertaining that the inculcation and training provided by both are complementary and satisfying (Fawcett, Fawcett, Watson, & Magnan, 2012). Universities must inculcate and provide people with general erudition and skills that may be applicable in most vocations and industries. They should also provide the theoretical and practical skills categorical to the graduate's field of study (Thakar & Mehta, 2017). Businesses and organisations should complement the edification of graduates by facilitating the practical application of the acquired theoretical knowledge and the acquisition of skills concrete to the working world and providing training in categorical sectors of the industry (Neşțian, Vodă, Tiță, Guță, & Turnea, 2021).

Universities are under pressure to meet the criteria of employability since it is necessary to prepare graduates for the workforce. The basic premise of policymakers is that higher education ought to play a significant role in society and contribute to the sustainable expansion of the economy and the creation of jobs in the nation (Zguir, Dubis, & Koç, 2022). Employers use direct and indirect tactics in two distinct ways to convey their preferences. While the direct technique aims to gather data on hiring preferences and qualification standards, the indirect approach visually assesses employers' contentment with higher-education products, categorically graduate skills.

In addition to a minuscule consensus, there are several different conceptual frameworks for defining these features of employability skills. In contrast to professional, technical, or difficult talents, skills are sometimes referred to as general or soft skills. The literature also provides a range of generic competence values for key abilities, core competencies, transferrable competencies, and employability competencies (Bridgstock, 2009). In contrast, Awayiga, Onumah, and Tsamenyi (2010) categorized the skills needed by employers into five main categories, including fundamental skills like written and oral communication, problem-solving, and critical analysis; adaptability, which refers to the competency to acclimatize to novel situations and a perilous workplace; teamwork and interpersonal skills; computer skills; and employability to deal with impending changes.

Suleman (2018) examined employers' perceptions of the employability skills required in the labour market and the employability of fresh graduates. The results of this study showed that employers preferred to hire graduates from public universities. In integration, graduates and employers ranked the ranking of employability skills in a homogeneous way, with employers and graduates appreciating that the order of paramount employability skills was equipollent. However, there was a distinction between the perception of employers and that of graduates, with employers ranking graduates much lower in terms of average ranking. The results of this study additionally suggest that immature employers are inclined to strengthen the employability of graduates. The higher the employer's position within the organisation, the higher the prospects for skilled graduates.

Khan (2013) described the perception of university students in Pakistan in terms of their skill development. However, it is still unclear how Pakistani businesses view the caliber of graduates from public universities. The study stressed the value of employability skills and the demand for quality fresh graduates. The objective was to examine employers' perceptions of student employability at Pakistani universities and discuss the implicative indications of these employer conceptions for faculty development. To achieve these goals, the study answered the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of employers about the students of Pakistani universities in terms of employability skills?
2. What kinds of skills do employers expect from the fresh graduates?
3. What are the current policies or strategies of the employers for recruiting new employees for the organisation or company?
4. What are the implications of employer's perceptions of the quality of students at Pakistani universities in terms of employability skills?

2.0 Literature Review

The themes that serve as the foundation for this study are introduced in the literature review that follows. Included are employability skills, how companies see graduates and what they expect from them, the causes of a lack of employability skills, and the challenges that educational institutions face in helping students develop such abilities. The literature review provides details on how employers evaluate new graduates' employability skills. The evaluation comprises works that address the skill shortages of recent graduates and come from previously published works. According to recent research on employers' perceptions, talents are more highly valued by businesses than degrees. The current research on skill gaps and other barriers to youth employment is reviewed in this part, with a special emphasis on studies done in Pakistan and on policies intended to increase youth employability, productivity, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness through skill upgrading. The examined literature served as the foundation for creating the interview guide, the estimation technique, the results interpretation, the policy implications, and the current study's limitations.

The skills and characteristics that employers look for are generally accepted. Researchers Eldeen, Abumalloh, George, and Aldossary (2018) conducted a study to find out what businesses

wanted from the display of development graduates. They oversaw a customer loyalty analysis that was used to determine the advancement of general skills through degree programmes in professional authorization development. This investigation revealed that employers frequently portray graduates as lacking in beneficial and quick-cost procurement talents. This is a belief shared by many scientists who focused their research on a subject related to the work of the analysts described before. The businesses evaluate the alumni's goals and disparities in their achievements in the following ways (Chan and Fong, 2018).

Ahmed and Azim (2017) thought about the skills Texas graduates needed to work in the assembly industry. Businesses served as the study's respondents. The responders highlighted a few skills during the test by emphasizing them. These skills included reading, writing, figuring, communicating, and basic intuition, as well as group participation, self-improvement, computer skills, specialized skills, initiative, and employability. Employability, participation in groups, and self-improvement were determined to be the three most important skills that supervisors look for (Kazilan, Hamzar, and Bakar, 2009).

According to Raza, S. An., and Naqvi, S. A. (2011), the issue of Pakistani university graduates' subpar character becomes more unexpected when they must compete in both local and international activity marketplaces. This isn't just a matter of bosses being satisfied; it also illustrates the expected inability of Pakistani college graduates to play a significant role in the overall monetary advancement of the country and of educational institutions, for which their workforce is specifically responsible.

The writing analysis mentioned above demonstrates that, like other developing countries, Pakistan's educated youth have a lot of concrete evidence of significant skill gaps. Studies have identified ability confusion as a crucial factor in the high rate of young unemployment and low profitability. When hiring, managers tend to value aptitudes above information. Since bosses believe that specialized talents may be learned, delicate aptitudes are seen as being more important than specialized abilities. In Pakistan, closing skill gaps is perceived by the general public as being hampered by a lack of focus on youth advancement programmes, a lack of college industry-proficient linkage, inadequate temporary employment initiatives, and a disregard for educational plans as display requests.

3.0 Methodology

A qualitative case study design was implemented for this research. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with ten purposively selected managers and owners of companies and NGOs, where graduates are most likely to seek employment. The interviewees comprised two CEOs of large companies, two individuals from a recruitment agency, three senior managers, and two private business owners. To facilitate the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was employed, featuring open-ended questions derived from the literature review. Additionally, after discussions with some interviewees, clarifications were added to certain responses. Official written permission was obtained from all research participants, and their consent was secured for audio recording. To ensure confidentiality and protect identities, audio recordings were preserved.

The interview transcripts were consolidated into a single document, and the data analysis

process commenced. Initially, coding was performed in alignment with the research questions to identify recurring themes. Subsequently, a recoding process was executed to amalgamate these themes into a more comprehensive data analysis. Table 1 presents key characteristics of the interview participants, and the emergent themes from the coding process are discussed next.

Table 1 Characteristics of the interview participants

Employers	Company Type	Position in Company	Age	Gender	Work Exp. years
1	Public Health and Engineering Department	Community Development Officer	31	Male	3
2	Construction company	Recruitment officer	27	Male	2
3	NGO working for child care	Executive-in-charge	35	Male	5
4	NGO working for education and health care	Manager operations	30	Female	6
5	Working for the children education	HR executive	27	Female	2
6	Population welfare department	Population Welfare Officer	36	Male	2
7	Working for Social welfare (Nageena)	Chief Executive	45	Male	10
8	Supervise the mines and minerals	Labor welfare officer	28	Male	2
9	News caster	Recruitment officer	26	Male	1
10	NGO related to prevention of drug addiction	Chief Executive	40	Male	4

4.0 Results

Recruitment Policies for Fresh Graduates

Interview data indicates many similar findings. While most companies have their own standard policies and procedures for recruiting fresh graduates, some have the policy of not taking any fresh graduates. The more organized and large companies utilize the services of recruitment agencies by providing them with a list of required levels of knowledge, skills and abilities, and hence only pre-screened candidates go on to the stage of formal interviews. There are times when these companies also hire fresh graduates through recruitment agencies. Common findings include the following: Some weight is definitely given to high academic qualifications or achievements

but this is only for an initial screening at the level of recruitment agencies or for applying for a particular position directly to the company. One of the participants, when talking about recruitment policy, explained it in the following words:

"Our recruitment policy for recent graduates is founded on principles of meritocracy and diversity. At our institution, we place a high priority on academic achievement while also considering the significance of extracurricular involvement, leadership aptitude, and other relevant competencies and qualities."

Initial judgements are based on the resume or CV of candidates. Once the degree qualification requirement, especially in the case of public jobs, is met, other things become more important. The information provided in the CV is not taken for granted, as interviews provide greater and deeper information about the potentials of fresh candidates; here, employability is embodied within the personal capital of each candidate and implies the level of integration of academic abilities with personal, interpersonal and behavioural attributes. Most often, only initially screened candidates are called for interviews. One of the company managers also points out similar experience in the following words:

"Our policy for recruiting fresh graduates is in accordance with the values and culture of our organization. We are in search of individuals who align with our core values and possess the ability to make meaningful contributions towards the realization of our company's mission and vision."

Employers look for and generally prefer individuals with self-confidence, good communication skills, motivation for work, adaptability, agreeableness and the ability to learn and work within teams. Company policies vary with the nature of the company. NGO jobs mostly require a different set of skills as compared to other jobs. Private employers give greater preference to experience than academic qualifications. CGPA or marks are never considered except for initial information where the candidate must write their academic qualifications, especially for government jobs. In the view of most employers, inexperienced recruitments cause problems and 'valuable time is lost in providing training when work needs to be started immediately'; on-the-job training takes time and valuable company resources. A few employers said that they also select candidates on the basis of references or 'Sifarish' in the local language, along with some basic skills required for the job. There were also employers who specifically preferred fresh graduates for the reasons that they bring new ideas and put in new and fresh blood into the work stream while being hired on less pay as compared to experienced candidates.

Once candidates are selected, their performance is regulated and measured against the set performance criteria of companies, depending on the nature and quality of tasks and the time involved to achieve targets. However, a few employers said that they also evaluate employees based on their specific ways of approaching and handling a task. Some companies do not have

specific or documented performance criteria, except that the assigned job gets done on time and is of the required quality. A general assessment is done while the candidates work for the company.

Expectations from Fresh Graduates

Almost all employers have similar or common expectations from fresh graduates, which can be divided into general expectations and specific skill-based expectations. A certain level of knowledge and skills is expected, such as a basic degree qualification and the ability to understand and perform according to requirements. Another employer, while discussing fresh graduates, said, *"Employers seek to recruit fresh graduates who possess both technical and soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and adaptability"* Confidence, communication, motivation, problem solving, customer handling, teamwork, social exposure and an agreeable interactive personality were among the most common expectations from fresh university candidates. Computer literacy is often a basic skill required, as are skills in writing good English. Planning and organizing, skills for social networking, creativity in ideas and the ability to adapt to new situations are also expected. In current research, one of the HR managers talked about expectations from fresh graduates in the following words:

"Recent graduates must demonstrate their ability to be proactive, self-motivated, and capable of working independently. The ideal candidate should possess proficient problem-solving abilities and demonstrate critical thinking skills."

A few employers expect fresh graduates to have the qualities of initiative and independent decision-making, flexibility in behaviour, and awareness about global trends. Other discipline-specific skills are also important, but as this study mostly involved companies that hire general master degree qualifications, such as MSc Sociology, the most common skills expected related to computer literacy, the English language and confidence

Fresh Candidates' Position on Expectations

The employers were quite satisfied with the freshmen students of some famous universities, especially the private ones. In the opinion of most employers, fresh candidates from public universities display a low level of the knowledge and skills mentioned above. Another employer shared her experiences in the following words:

"We recognize that fresh candidates may not have extensive work experience, but we expect you to have solid foundational skills and the ability to pick up new information rapidly. Creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking are highly valued by us."

The NGO sector was especially concerned with the writing skills of candidates and their ability to analyse reports and organize work as required. But the fresh graduates were weak in the skill of report writing. The fresh candidates were not fulfilling the requirements of the non-formal

organizations. The communication skill was also very important in the NGO section of the job. The employers showed their dissatisfaction with the fresh graduates from public universities in communication and report-writing skills.

5.0 Discussion

The current chapter provides a discussion of the qualitative results of the study, emphasizing the study's findings in the context of previous literature pertaining to university education and employability. The study's primary focus was on the concerns surrounding the employability of new graduates. Its overarching objective was to uncover how companies perceived the efforts of educational institutions in preparing recent graduates with employability skills. The study delved into the roles of universities and the expectations companies held for recent graduates. Among the skills employers demanded were mastery of the subject matter, effective communication skills, creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, and decision-making abilities. Employers, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the skill sets possessed by recent graduates of public universities. Consequently, it can be inferred that the public university under examination in this study fell short of meeting employer expectations.

A notable discrepancy emerged between the perceptions of fresh graduates and the expectations of employers in various aspects, including discipline, positive attitude, punctuality, writing skills, time management, and oral communication. According to the majority of employers, fresh candidates from public universities displayed a low level of knowledge and skills. The NGO sector, in particular, expressed concerns about candidates' writing skills, as fresh graduates demonstrated weaknesses in the area of report writing. The quality of education in Pakistan has faced criticism on multiple fronts due to its perceived ineffectiveness in providing students with a fundamental understanding of key concepts. Over the past few decades, there has been a discernible decline in the quality of education across all sectors in Pakistan. This decline is exemplified by the recent report published by the Chairman of the Federal Public Service Commission concerning the results of one of Pakistan's most prestigious exams, the CSS. The report highlights that in the past several years, the success rate of candidates has remained at a mere 2 to 3 percent. The Chairman recommended a review of the curriculum within educational institutions, with a specific focus on the higher education system (Pasha, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that employability skills are vital for the successful employment of fresh graduates. The consensus among employers is that universities are not effectively contributing to the development of these essential skills among their students. It is also evident that students' demands for employability skills must be met through enhancements in the teaching and learning processes and the integration of relevant courses into the curriculum. Colleges should emphasize providing a comprehensive education to their

graduates, going beyond conferring degrees. Considering the significance of a Master's degree, certain skills should be made obligatory for all degree recipients. Practical skills are of paramount importance, often lacking among students.

Furthermore, fostering stronger connections between colleges and businesses is deemed beneficial. Employers suggest that if colleges consult with them to outline job expectations, students will be better prepared to compete and meet employment requirements. International NGOs can play a role in providing training to university students while they are still enrolled in their academic programs. It is also recommended that colleges implement internship programs into their courses and establish closer relationships with the businesses that host these internships. Increased opportunities for engagement can enhance students' confidence. To address the substantial issue of English language proficiency, curriculum and instructional methods should be modified accordingly.

Mudasar Ali Nadeem: Problem Identification and Model Development

Dr. Falak Sher: Data Collection, Results and Analysis

Shoaib Liaqat: Research Model and Hypothesis testing

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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