

RESEARCH

ASSIST STUDENTS IN FINDING JOBS BY DEVELOPING THEIR EMPLOYABILITY QUALITY

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As part of my role coordinating student internships in an HR department, over the last five years I have interviewed approximately two thousand internship applicants and communicated with and trained around 305 selected interns, including recent undergraduate and post-graduate students and university graduates. It has become obvious that increasing communication channels between employers and universities will positively affect graduate employability.

The concept of linking colleges and corporations to improve educational training is not a new one; rather, college-supported employment initiatives were introduced in the early 20th century, for example, the University of Cincinnati Cooperative Education Programme of 1906 (Thiel et al., in Gault et al., 2000).

However, in studying the relationship between corporations and higher education institutions (HEIs), Isaxanli concludes that the need to design a policy for youth transitioning from higher education to working life requires serious consideration in Azerbaijan (Isaxanli, 2006).

In Azerbaijan, having good relationships with enterprises is a quality indicator for HEIs (Isaxanli, 2004) but only a few articles mention the importance of internships and other university-business relations (Isaxanli, 2006). It is evident from the reports of the UNESCO Conference of 2005 that several facets of education in Azerbaijan were extensively discussed; however, the preparedness of youth for their careers was not part of the discussion. The topic was only briefly taken into account with respect to vocational education. This seems to suggest that technical and vocational education (TVE) alone require a closer relationship between employment and industry (Nurmammadov, 2013).

The study conducted by Isaxanli (2008) shows that there are few studies on the relationship between HEI and the labour market in Azerbaijan and it is imperative that this field be examined in greater detail.

It has been found in various studies that around the world, students and families are increasingly worried as they question whether the four years of extremely expensive education they undertook was sufficient preparation for employment (Gault et al., 2010).

The case study of Lithuania concluded that the labour market no longer receives the desired professional competence it expects and this proves the existence of a gap between educational systems and the labour market (Braziene and Dorelaitiene, 2012).

On the other hand, universities do not have any requirements either on the individual or group level to provide students with degree programs that will improve their employability skills (Rae, 2007).

Graduate peculiarity and the quality of graduate employability have been core elements of some research. For example, Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) concentrate on graduate identity and the quality of graduate employability in their research. A graduate's identity is formed by social and economic practices that are not in his/her control, while an employer is the main agent responsible for forming this identity due to its economic authority. Nevertheless, it has been found that graduate identity is still certainly possessed by the graduate.

Employability is introduced by Moreland (Rae, 2007) as a blend of skills, knowledge and personal qualities as a result of which the individual becomes more likely to succeed in his/her future and do well in his/her work life. This is to his/her personal advantage and also benefits the labour force, society and economy.

Consequently, employers expect that graduates possess good job-related soft skills, which will help them easily adapt to the new workplace. Employers also emphasise that it does not matter to what extent the graduates' technical skills are developed; they may fail to get the job if they do not have good soft skills (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011).

This confirms that employers are interested in graduates' soft skills, which are gained during their university years and work experience rather than degree-specific study alone. Demand for these skills will vary as employers and existing vacancies differ. (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005).

This concern about graduate employability exists in both developed and developing countries. The results of a survey carried out in Vietnam show that employers completely recognize the fact that the problems of skill deficiencies would not end any time soon. When they were questioned about the future skill requirements, most of the respondents stated that a huge increase in the demand for technical, managerial and highly skilled employees is expected (Goodwin et al., 2014).

After introducing the proposed employability model of Bennett et al (1999), Law and Watts' DOTS and Yorke and Knight's USEM models, Pool and Sewell (2007) suggest a more comprehensive 'Career EDGE' model which could be a valuable benchmark for Azerbaijani society, though with a few changes to consider the culture, values, and perceptions of parents, employers, educators, and students. The models can ease communication with society and direct parents, educators, employers, and students.

The 'Career EDGE' model (Figure 1 and Figure 2) depicts the core factors of employability and suggests methods to improve the quality of employability.

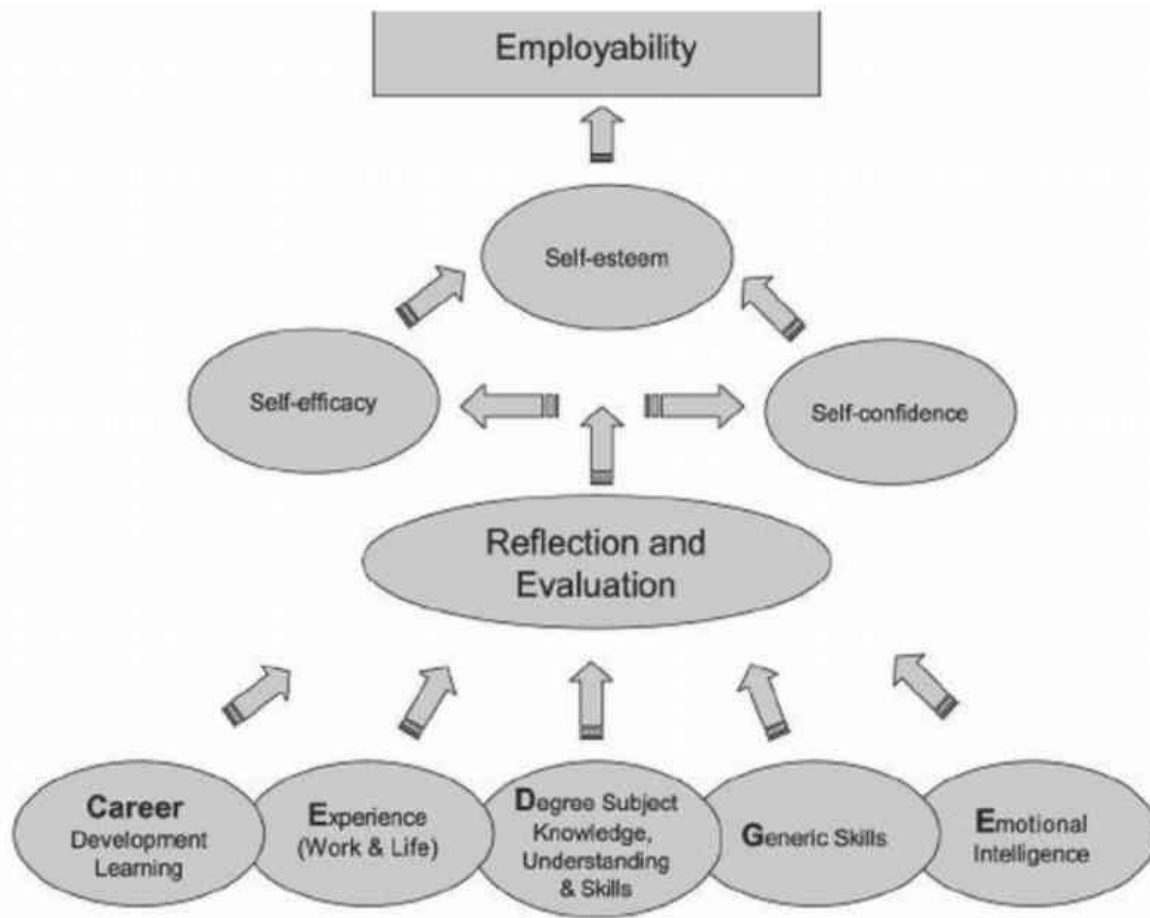


Figure 1. The essential components of employability

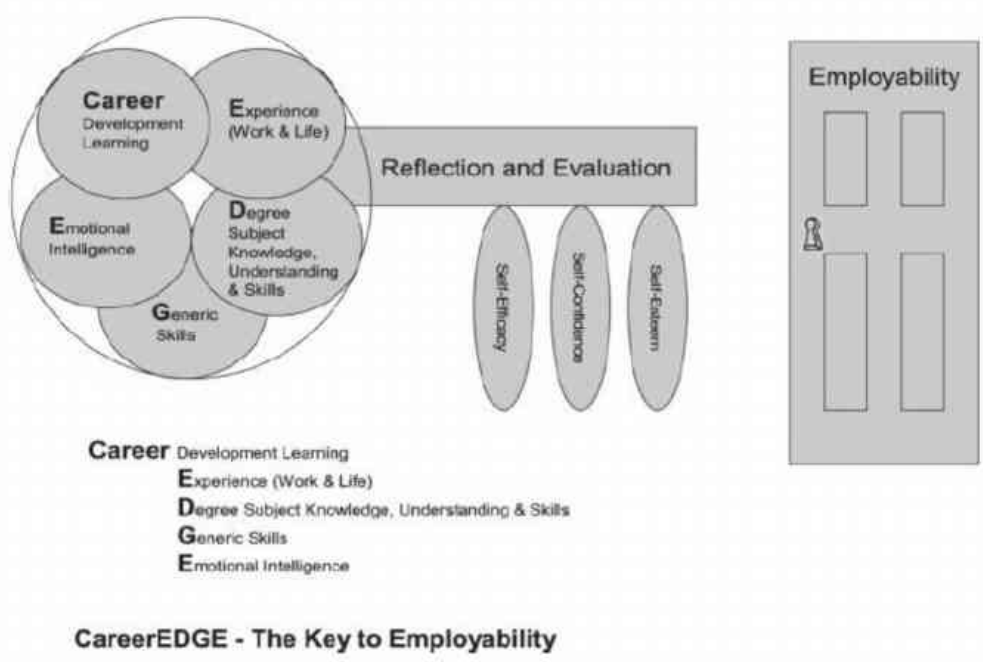


Figure 2. A metaphorical model of employability

It has been suggested that the employability of graduates can be increased through internship programmes, which are an important tool for several reasons. Firstly, undergraduates with internship experience possess required knowledge and skills that provide them with opportunities to obtain their initial employment position faster than non-interns. Secondly, through internship programmes, employers can carefully assess the interns' abilities and consequently create a reserve of potential employees which brings about substantial savings in their hiring. Lastly, through these programmes, relationships between universities and corporations can be developed (Gault et al., 2000).

It has been deduced from observation and experience that internship programmes should be structured not only to provide work experience for students, but also to teach them the skills required by employers. Research has found that young people are clever and increasingly becoming aware of the fact that holding a degree alone is not enough, as other qualities are also required in gaining employment (Rae, 2007).

Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBAR) has remarkable experience in its student internship program. This program provides interns not only with on-the-job trainings, but also seminars on banking where graduate students get valuable information about activities of separate units of the CBAR. In addition, the HR department arranges special soft-skills seminars for interns. It embraces Communication skills, Time management, Change management, Presentation skills, Strategies for increasing positive emotions, Emotional intelligence, etc. Each year the HR team reviews the soft skills seminar list and replaces them with more relevant ones.

CBAR adds selected interns to its labor pool as well as assists them in getting entry level jobs in other

companies.

Unfortunately, in the literature review, useful information could not yet be found about the activities of University Career Centres (UCC), which are defined as a bridge between universities and enterprises. In future research, more emphasis should be placed on studying other experiences regarding career centres. Observations of the internship selection process show that graduates from universities where UCCs operate effectively are more successful in job interviews. In addition, a special procedure could be developed to encourage all students to attend programme events. For example, before graduation, they could be asked to submit not only academic scores but also a required number of credits acquired from soft skills seminar attendance within the relevant programme. The prestige of the university is therefore measured using both academic and soft skill indicators of graduates.

For the purpose of identifying graduate students' approach to define attitudes of respondents to developing their employability and the role of UCC, students and graduates were asked to score on a 5-point Likert-type scale. 300 graduate and undergraduate students from 15 state and 5 private universities responded to the survey.

There were 165 females and 135 males among the respondents. 159 applicants confirmed that they had a Career Centre at their university, while 72 respondents had none, and 69 said they were unaware of such a service. Answers regarding the question on University Career Centres' support in developing their employability skills were as follows: UCC conducts training (78), arranges meetings (80), does nothing (46), I do not know about UCC activity (101).

The following table shows further results of the survey:

| Questions | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Theoretical knowledge is enough for to get a job easily | 8 | 38 | 45 | 112 | 97 |
| It is the university's responsibility to prepare students for working life | 46 | 143 | 35 | 27 | 49 |
| Universities and enterprises should prepare students for work together | 142 | 129 | 17 | 4 | 8 |
| It is hard for graduates to get a job without soft skills (communication, team-working, presentation, etc.) | 134 | 121 | 23 | 10 | 12 |
| Personal positivity is one of the main factors in building a good career | 126 | 132 | 21 | 6 | 15 |

The survey verifies that today's youth realize the importance of equipping themselves with other skills, to which employers give importance. They also emphasize the necessity of university and enterprise collaboration. The majority of respondents found personal positivity to be a key factor in successful career building.

After a literature review, seminars for developing graduate employability quality were defined. A list of those workshops includes Project Management, Time Management, Commercial Awareness, Team-Work and Team-Building, Presentation Skills, Effective Communication, Negotiation, Financial Business Analysis, and Customer Service. (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). Organizing those courses for graduate students would add value to the activity of University Career Centres (UCC).

Additionally, it was found that Alliant Credit Union, Chicago (Study tour, 2011), has a strong power-based culture. They introduce this concept to newcomers and complete a strength assessment during the orientation programme. HR staff provides the newcomer with a unique access code to take the Clifton Strengths Finder and discover his/her strengths on www.bucketbook.com.

Having observed this, it is believed that UCC could better utilise this tool to help undergraduate students define their career direction. Currently, schools may be the best place to conduct this assessment, as research shows that Strengths Explorer tests are now available for ages 10-14. In addition, Alliant implements positive strategies that focus on employees' positive attitudes. (Rath and Clifton, 2005). In developing a new model for graduates, other factors such as emotional intelligence (EI) and self-esteem should also be considered along with this approach.

Observations prove that encouraging students to improve employability quality will be more effective if both enterprises and universities are interested in qualifying students. Employers have opportunities to realize this goal by adding soft skills and other corporative seminars for graduates through internship programs or graduate programs.

Studies show that detailed policy prescriptions for the transition from universities to enterprises are becoming more essential. Educators and employers should combine forces to increase employability quality and resultant youth employment levels. Particular attention should be paid to what must be done in civil society in order to raise awareness of the importance of preparing youth for working life.

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DOKTORANTIN MƏQALƏSİ ÇAP OLUNDU

2015-ci ilin aprelində Xəzər Universitetinin doktorantura tələbəsi Ceyhun Karimovun "F.Denisin tematik proqressiyası" adlı məqaləsi Qafqaz Universitetinin "Gənc tədqiqatçıların 3-cü elmi konfransının materialları" məcmuəsində çap edilmişdir. Məqalədə müəllif Denisin tematik proqressiyasını araşdırmış və izahını vermişdir.

ƏMƏKDAŞIMIZIN KONFRANSDA ÇIXIŞI

Aprilin 30-dan mayın 2-dək Azərbaycan Dövlət Pedaqoji Universiteti, Hacettepe Universiteti (Türkiyə) və Qafqaz Universitetinin birgə təşkilatçılığı ilə "V Beynəlxalq müəllim hazırlama siyasəti və problemləri" mövzusunda konfrans keçirilmişdir. Qafqaz Universitetində keçən konfransda Xəzər Universiteti Təhsil fakültəsinin dekanı, fəlsəfə doktoru Elza Səməddi "Azərbaycanda pedaqoji kadrların hazırlığına təsir edən amillər və müəllim hazırlığı proqramlarının keyfiyyət göstəriciləri" adlı məruzə ilə çıxış etmişdir.

DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR AT BRITISH COUNCIL FORUM

On May 26, Development Director Raziya Isayeva participated in the Graduate Employability Forum organized by British Council Azerbaijan. The Forum took place in World Face format from 10:00 to 14:00. Mrs. Isayeva was one of six moderators of the Forum. This Forum was the follow up of the previously organized Employability Conference organized by British Council in October 2014. More than 70 representatives of higher education institutions and businesses came together to improve graduate employability.