INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH
2023, Vol. 4, No. 6, 2038 – 2044
http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.04.06.28

Research Article

Students' and Employers' Perceptions of Employability Skills in Uganda

Elvaida Agnes Tagulwa*, Philip Owino, Francis Muwonge, Maria Goretti Kaahwa

Kyambogo University, Kyambogo, Kampala, Uganda

Article history:
Submission June 2023
Revised June 2023
Accepted June 2023

**Corresponding author:*
E-mail:
agnes.elvaida@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The study evaluated employability skills as they were perceived by students of Kyambogo University and employers. The population comprised of students and employers. Students were from the faculty of science and the sample size consisted of 226 students from six departments. The employers were from organisations where these students do their industrial training. The sample size of the employers consisted of 19 participants from thirteen organisations. The specific objective of the study was to evaluate students' and employers' perceptions of employability skills. Employability skills were evaluated basing on their categorisation: professional skills, personal skills, and interpersonal skills (Byrne, 2022; Yorke & Night, 2007; Chowdhury & Miah, 2019). Quantitative results revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of important employability skills between students of Kyambogo University and employers ($P=0.00 < 0.05$). Statistical and qualitative analysis gave important employability skills as theoretical knowledge and skills, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, positive attitude, and collaboration and team work. Strategies to enable students acquire employability skills include: job market analysis, collaboration and partnerships with local industries to do research; provide enough practicals and field studies. It was therefore recommended that Kyambogo University should develop collaboration and partnerships with local industries to do research.

Keywords: *Employability, Skills*

Introduction

The current global economic transformation and use of new technologies have significantly made national economies to demand for workers with high level skills, knowledge and competences to meet the needs of the current industrial world. Industry is seeking for innovative, adaptable and resilient graduates with the capacity to navigate shifting workplace dynamics (Ferns et al., 2019), and this has affected job security. Higher education is acknowledged as central to the national

How to cite:
Tagulwa, E. A., Owino, P., Muwonge, F., & Kaahwa, M. G. (2023). Students' and Employers' Perceptions of Employability Skills in Uganda. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. *4*(6), 2038 – 2044. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.04.06.28

innovation system and growing a knowledge economy through educating highly skilled workers (Walker 2015). This implies that the key role for economic stability and progress is the utilization of the human resource.

Employability in this study means that individuals have a combination of a set of skills that enable them to adapt to changes in the world of work and maintain employment throughout their career. Employability is shaped by many factors, but education is the major determinant of employability in particular for students. However, several studies (e.g. the OECD Skills Strategy report, 2011; a Manpower Group survey on global talent shortages, 2012; Lisa et al., 2019; Chowdhury & Miah, 2019) have reported a gap between the perceptions of students regarding skill requirements and expectations of employers, which is likely to be a contributing factor, along with other explanations such as economic downturn and an increase in the supply of graduates, to the high rate of graduate unemployment in different countries and especially in developing nations (The Economist, 2014). Limited research in Uganda has been done regarding skills mismatch (UBOS, 2017, incompatibility of education and occupation-skills mismatch), and UBOS, 2018, Labour Underutilisation (LU), but these studies did not focus on students' and employers' perceptions of important employability skills.

Review of Related Literature

Employability is an issue of concern in many areas of the global economy, but in this context the focus is on students and graduates in Ugandan higher education. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability consists of four main elements. These are: a person's employability assets which consists of his/her knowledge, skills and attitudes; deployment which includes career management skills, presentation which is concerned with job getting skills, and work experience. Hillage and Pollard (1998) continue to point out that for a person to be able to make the most of his or her employability assets, a lot depends on his/her personal circumstances and external factors such as the current level of opportunity within the labour market. The concept of employability has different theoretical models that try to explain it. These include: the USEM model. USEM is an acronym for the four related components of employability understanding; skills; efficacy beliefs; and metacognition (Yorke & Knight, 2004). But because of its inability to explain to non-experts in the field, particularly the students themselves and their parents, exactly what is meant by employability, another theoretical model, the DOTS model (Law and Watts, 1977) was developed. DOTS stand for: Decision learning, Opportunity awareness, Transition learning, and Self-awareness (Watts, 2006). The DOTS model introduces students to the basic concepts of career development which include :decision making skills, knowing what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are; job searching and self-presenting skills; and interests, abilities, values. However, it was evident that the DOTS model has shortcomings when it is applied beyond careers education to the broader concept of employability because it does not incorporate the element of "satisfaction" (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). Thus another theoretical model, the key to employability was developed based on the definition of employability by Dacre Pool and Sewell, (2007) as having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful. This model explains the concept of employability and indicates that it is the "key" to choosing and securing occupations in which the graduate has the opportunity to achieve satisfaction and success. Jackson (2013) observed that **s**kills development in higher education is considered a significant contributor to employability because it features prominently in models attempting to interpret and define the precise meaning of students' employability.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2013) states that in order to secure that first job as well as navigate in the labour market, young women and men need the technical skills to perform specific tasks as well as core work skills for lifelong learning and capability to adapt to change. This implies that employability skills are not job specific, but are skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs. Similarly, Donald et

al., (2018) argue that given the importance of understanding the factors that can enhance the student career transition from higher education into to the labour market, there is now a greater impetus on students gaining other skills whilst at university, relating to both their employability and what skills can realistically be transferred to the workplace from an employers' perspective. Research that clearly indicates lack of employability skills among the graduate population include: the OECD Skills Strategy report (2011); a Manpower Group survey on global talent shortages (2012); Lisa et al., (2019); Chowdhury & Miah, (2019). All document a mismatch between the skill levels of graduates and the expectations of their graduate employers, but it is predominantly focused on developed countries perspective, and there is limited research reporting on students' employability in developing nations such as Uganda. It was equally important to identify the perceptions of students of Kyambogo University (KyU) and employers in Uganda about employability skills, as this would help in identifying strategies to help students plan a clear future career and life path.

Theoretical Review

Human capital theory developed by Becker (1962) guided the study. The current growing importance of students' employability stems from the disappearance of traditional jobs to a demand from business and employer organisations for graduates to possess both hard skills and generic skills due to economic and technological advancements. Employability is concerned with the development of an individual student's hard skills and generic skills in order to be employable. This implies that a student who is able to sell his/her own personal identity, brand, and profile, is the most employable graduate, hence the human capital theory. Human capital theory is one of the most considered theories used to address students' employability (Al Hinai, et al., 2020). Human capital refers to the collection of knowledge, skills, attitudes, social and personality attributes embedded in the ability to perform tasks so as to produce economic value (Al Hinai, et al., 2020).

Human capital theory explains that education is a form of individual investment aimed at obtaining explicit returns regarding the individual's career path, with the purpose of ensuring that individuals, by investing in their education, develop their knowledge and skills to increase their competitiveness in the labour market. Human capital theory (Becker, 1962) is based on the assumption that education and training is important because it involves acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competences which are acquired formally through institutionalised and planned specialised curricula for professional training (Marginson, 2019), and informally through a variety of experiences that an individual acquires by undergoing regular practice and observing others (Rajabhat & Humanit, 2017). Thus, human capital theory adequately connects education with the world of work.

Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive mixed research design to evaluate employability skills as they were perceived by students of Kyambogo University and employers. This research used a mixed methods research approach because the study objective, hypothesis and research questions required the depth (qualitative) and breath (quantitative) of the two methods which strengthened validity of the study. The study used explanatory sequential approach which allowed quantitative type of data to provide a basis for the collection of qualitative type of data (Creswell, 2009).

Population and Sampling

The population of the study consisted of students from the faculty of science at Kyambogo University and employers. The study population was 524 students from faculty of Science in the departments of Chemistry, Biological Sciences, Food Processing technology, Computer Science, mathematics, Physics; and 20 employers from organisations where these students do their industrial training from. A sample size of 226 students and 19 employers were selected from the population with the aid of cluster and purposive sampling techniques.

Data Collection Methods and Instrument

This study used quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to achieve high levels of reliability of gathered data due to mass surveying (Merriam, 2009; Miles, et al., 2014; Yin, 2014; Mckim, 2017). Quantitative methods included the use of self-administered questionnaires. Qualitative methods included interviews. The research instrument on employability skills was adopted from the employability development profile (Dacre Pool, 2020). The reason for adapting this tool was because it had been used before and its validity had been tested and proved. Reliability of the instrument on employability skills was determined using the Cronbach alpha method as provided by statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The results had a reliability index of 0.81. Means and standard deviations were used to analyse data at descriptive level. Research questions were answered thematically while the hypothesis was tested using a t-test.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 1. Comparison of the Perceptions of Employability Skills between Students and Employers (Level of Significance=0.05)

Indicator Variables	Participants Students	Mean	SD	*T*	*P-value*
Professional Skills	***Students*** *(Theoretical knowledge and Skills)*	*2.84*	*0.23*	*49.76*	*0.00*
	Employers *(Theoretical knowledge and Skills)*	*2.94*	*0.39*	*31.74*	
Personal Skills	***Students*** *(Creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship)*	*2.62*	*0.26*	*40.77*	*0.00*
	Employers *(Positive attitude towards work)*	*3.78*	*0.41*	*39.43*	
Interpersonal Skills	***Students*** *(Collaboration and team work)*	*2.98*	*0.28*	*41.84*	*0.00*
	Employers *(Collaboration and team work)*	*3.78*	*0.4*	*39.43*	

Comparison of the Perceptions of Professional Skills between Students and Employers

The results reveal that there was a significant difference in the way students perceived and ranked professional skills as compared to employers since the p-values from the paired t tests independent samples showed the p-values of 0.00 which was less than the test value of 0.05 (p-values, P=0.00 < 0.05). However, students perceived and ranked professional skills slightly lower than the way the employers perceived and ranked professional skills. The employers were on the higher side of the ranking as compared to the students μ students = 2.84 < μ employers = 2.94. This can be partly explained by the programmes being overloaded with too much theory while practical work is not given sufficient time.

Comparison of the Perceptions of Personal Skills between Students and Employers

The results show that there was a significant difference in the way students and employers perceived and ranked personal skills since the p-values were 0.00 which was less than the hypothesized value of 0.05 (p-values, P=0.00 < 0.05). However, students perceived and ranked personal skills on a lower side as compared to the employers who were on the higher side μ (students) = 2.62 < μ (employers) = 3.78. This means that partly students are not very much exposed to learning experiences that develop personal skills.

Comparison of the Perceptions of Interpersonal Skills between Students and Employers

The results show that there was a significant difference in the way students and employers perceived and ranked interpersonal skills. This is because the p-values for the t sample tests were 0.00 which was less than the hypothesized value of 0.05 (p-values, P=0.00 < 0.05). However, students perceived and ranked interpersonal skills low as compared to the employers μ students = 2.98 < μ employers = 3.78. Overall, there was a significant difference in perceptions of important employability skills between students and employers thus rejecting the null hypothesis: there is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of important employability skills between students and employers. The alternative hypothesis: there is a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of important employability skills between students of Kyambogo University and employers was upheld.

Discussion

Overall, students' ratings of employability skills were proportionately lower than employers' ratings. This demonstrates a low level of confidence in students' preparedness to join the world of work after graduation. This creates a gap of the understanding of employability skills that are needed between students and employers. The gap between skills demand and supply leads to negative employment outcomes such as working for less than expected income rates and lower job positions. Consistent with these findings, Muyako and Seedwell, (2015); Naveed et al., (2014); Philips Consulting, (2014); Messum et al. (2017) found out that there was a difference between employers and students' perceptions of employability skills and this was attributed to lack of careers services in Universities in developing countries. Similarly, Hennelova and Newman (2019) asserted that the skills gap between students and employers calls for careers services to be provided to students by higher education institutions to bridge this gap. This is because careers services provide labour market information which can be used to develop relevant study programmes to meet the national needs of the country.

Secondly, the findings of this study indicate that employers expect students to have theoretical knowledge and competences from their degrees but also require them to demonstrate a range of broader personal and interpersonal skills. This is consistent with the European Commission (2011) which describes employability skills as the combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards getting into employment. These findings are further in agreement with World Bank, (2021) which asserts that a comprehensive skill set is needed for the success of the labor market of the twenty-first century for developing a relevant chain of the supply and demand of skills, to fulfill countries' developmental needs so that students' employability increases to create a better future.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This section answered the research questions:

1. Which employability skills are required to make students employable?
2. What strategies can be adopted in order to enhance students' employability?

When employers were asked about which employability skills are required to make students employable, they gave the following skills: subject knowledge and skills, practical skills, inquiry and research skills, collecting, analysing and organizing information, resourcefulness, critical and analytical thinking skills, adapting skills learnt to new situations, ability to work independently, willingness to learn, positive attitude towards work, collaboration and team work, and ability to engage with others, as important employability skills in determining students' employment outcomes. Some of the suggested skills are embedded in creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship as already mentioned in quantitative analysis. However, regardless of their significance in enhancing students' employability, employers reported that team work 26.3% and willingness to learn 26.3%, need further attention by faculty of Science of Kyambogo University.

The focus on students' employability add value to the education provided to students by

the University. Consequently, employers' perceptions of significant employability skills provided insight into the need for the University to collaborate and develop partnerships with employers so that Universities can make significant contributions to education through research that would develop high quality human capital to address the needs of the country. University-industry collaborations provide opportunities for experiential learning while monitoring labor market trends in order to develop programmes that match the needed employability skills of the 21st century.

Employability Skills

The findings of this study have generated a list of significant employability skills which are: Subject Knowledge and Skills, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, positive attitude towards work, and collaboration and team work. According to Barman and Das (2020) and Okoye and Nkanu (2020) employability skills are important because employers are more interested in soft skills than hard skills. Recent research findings suggest that getting a degree is just not enough to land a graduate with employment and remain employed (Majid et al., 2020). Ngulube (2020) argued that the twenty-first century is a knowledge-based economy characterised by the information age which advocates generic skills. Majid et al., (2020) stated that students should therefore be taught how to learn since the work environment is always subject to a variety of uncertainties.

Strategies to enhance Students' Employability

When employers were asked to identify strategies to enhance students' employability, they gave the following strategies: The University should expose students to work places as they study; Students should be encouraged to do volunteer work; The University should develop collaboration and partnerships with employer organisations within Uganda and beyond; The University should work with organisations to identify the required employability skills; The University should introduce short courses for particular identified skills needed.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study established that there was a significant difference in perceptions of important employability skills between students and employers, and this identified an employability skills gap between students and employers. Also, the findings of this study indicate that employers expect students to have theoretical knowledge and competences from their degrees but also require them to demonstrate a range of broader personal and interpersonal skills. Employers pointed out that the quality of practical training, time given for practicals, team work, and willingness to learn need further attention by faculty of Science of Kyambogo University. Employers' perceptions of significant employability skills provided insight into the need for Kyambogo University to ensure learners engage with skill provision which can be used as a standard for students' self-evaluation and self-improvement. This also enables students to articulate their capabilities to potential employers and to facilitate the transfer of acquired skills. It was therefore recommended that Kyambogo University should collaborate and develop partnerships with employers so that it can make significant contributions to education through research to develop high quality human capital to address the needs of the country.

References

Barman, A., & Das, K. (2020). Whether B-Schools Care Spencer & Spencer's workplace competency framework in the 21st century? Revalidating through reliability. *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology*, *29*(11), 2910-1920.

Becker, G. (1962). Investment in human capital: A theoretical analysis, *Journal of Political Economy, 70 (5): 9-49.*

Byrne, C. (2022). What determines perceived graduate employability? Exploring the effects of personal characteristics, academic achievements and graduate skills in a survey experiment. *Studies in Higher Education,* 47(1), 159–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1735329

Chowdhury, T. A. and Miah, M. K., (2019). Perceptions of students and employers regarding employability skills for entry-level positions

in marketing and sales, *Australian Journal of Career Development* 28 (1), 3-13

Dacre Pool, L., and P. Sewell. (2007). The key to employability: Developing a practical model for graduate employability. *Education & Training* 49 (4): 277–289. DOI:10.1108/00400910710754435.

Dacre Pool (2020). Revisiting the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling* 44(1) 51-56

Donald, W, E., Ashleigh, M, J., Baruch, Y, (2018). "Students' perceptions of education and employability: Facilitating career transition from higher education into the labor market", Career development International, https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-09-2017-0171

European Commission. (2011*).* Commission staff working paper on the development of benchmarks on education and training for employability and on learning mobility. SEC, 670 Final. Brussels: EuropeanCommission.

Ferns, S. Dawson, V. & Howitt, C. (2019). A collaborative frame work for enhancing graduate employability. *International Journal of Work Integrated Learning, Special Issue*, 20 (2): 99-111

Jackson, D. (2013). Student perceptions of the importance of employability skill provision in business undergraduate programs. Journal of Education for Business, 88(5), 271-279.

Hennelová, L. and Newman. (2019). Employers' and students' expectations of graduate employability skills *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning,* 20(1), 71-82

Hillage, J., and E. Pollard. (1998). "Employability: Developing a framework for policy analysis, Department for education and employment." London. Accessed 10 March 2021.

Majid, M. Z. A., Hussin, M., Norman, M. H., Kasavan, S. (2020). The employability skills among students of public higher education institution in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space,* 16 (1), 36-45. https://doi.org/10.17576/geo-2020-1601-04

Marginson S. (2019) Limitations of human capital theory. *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 44, no 2, pp. 287–301. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2017.1359823.

McKim, C. A (2017). The value of mixed methods research: A mixed methods study *Journal of Mixed Methods Research,* 11 (2): 202–222

Messum, D., Wilkes, L., Peters, C., & Jackson, D. (2017). Senior managers´ and recent graduates´ perceptions of employability skills for health services management. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 18*(2), 115-128.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M. & Saldana, J. (2014). Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Muyako, S., & Seedwell T. (2015). Quality in accounting graduates: Employer expectations of the graduate skills in the bachelor of accounting degree. *European Scientific Journal, 11*(22), 165-180.

Naveed, T. A., Jabeen, T., & Ullah, S. (2014). An appraisal of mismatch between employers' expectations and graduating students' perception about employability skills: A case study of Gujrat (Pakistan). *The Pakistan Journal of Social Issues, 5,* 88-109.

Ngulube, B. (2020). Undergraduate economics curriculum and employability skills in South Africa. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 78 (6), 1000-1013. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/20.78.1013

Okoye, K. R. E., & Nkanu, S. M. (2020). Employers' identification of skills needed by technical and vocational education graduates for industrial work effectiveness. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, *33*(2), 32-41.

Phillips Consulting (2014). Education and employability survey report. Retrieved on 20th January 2022

. UBOS, (2018). The national labour force survey 2016/17.

Watts, A. G. (2006). Career development learning and employability. Higher Education Academy. Retrieved on 20th June 2018 from: http://aces.shu.ac.uk/support/staff/employability/resources/id592_career_development_learning_and_employability.pdf

World Bank. (2021). Skills development. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/skillsdevelopment#1

Yin, R. K. (2014). Case study research: Design and methods. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2006) Embedding employability into the curriculum. (Learning and employability series 1. York: Higher Education Academy.