

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

## A Review of Literature on Graduate Employability

**Dr. Seetha Nesaratnam**

Senior Lecturer, Asia Pacific University of Innovation and Technology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**Sharon Gayen**

Performance Management Consultant, Deloitte Pte Ltd, Telangana, Hyderabad, India

### **Abstract:**

*Skills shortage among graduates is a serious constraint in today's workforce globally as more and more university graduates face a growing trend of unemployment. To ensure a productive workforce, there needs to be a high-quality flow of talent supply as skilled talent is a critical factor in driving the economy. This has mounted increasing pressure from governments, funding organizations, and graduates on universities globally since graduate employability is a key objective of higher education. Regulatory authorities such as accreditation bodies also measure quality of education through the contributions made towards employability. Therefore graduate employability is a scope of study that needs much clarity through research and demands urgent attention of all key stakeholders. This renders the need for a thorough and comprehensive review of literature on graduate employability summarising major and current findings*

**Keywords:** Employability, graduate, university, skills

### **1. Introduction**

University graduates around the world are facing the challenge of a growing trend of unemployment (Rae, 2008; Thern, et.al, 2017). Samkin and Stainbank (2016) raise the argument that, the curriculum of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) fail to enable its students in meeting employers' expectation in terms of skills, attributes and professional qualities needed for performing the specific job. Hence, in order to be employable, graduates need to be equipped and fully prepared for a working environment that is dynamic and global (Ahmad, Zainal and Rahmat, 2012; Raybould and Sheedy, 2005; Sangwan and Garg, 2017).

The topic of employability has been researched in many parts of the world over the last five decades but many have focused their study on the employers' perspective or to a specific industry hence the findings could not be generalized to other contexts of varied industries and other stakeholder perspectives (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). The complexity of employability is further exacerbated in that the different stakeholders involved on this scope of study have formed a different understanding of the concept of employability (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). Literature suggests that governments and HEIs need to address the graduate employability problems and take initiatives to integrate key attributes and much sought-after skills in the course curriculum (Huq and Gilbert, 2013).

Building on the above-given background of the study, this paper takes an in-depth look at the available literature that relates to employability to expound the meaning and context of employability in the contemporary and highly competitive labor market. Additionally, a summary of the most relevant studies relating to graduate employability is presented to build a global view of what constitutes an employable graduate. The next section will first appraise the definitions of this concept and discuss employability models and frameworks to expound and add clarity to graduate employability.

### **2. Defining Employability**

Over the last decade the concept of employability has gained increased attention and mounting significance, however, a universal single definition of the concept is still not established (Yorke, 2010). Govender and Wait, (2017) argue that the volume of research and debate through varied stakeholder perspective on employability over the last five decades still cannot offer a clear definition on the subject matter. Govender and Wait, (2017) describe employability as the ability of graduates to start work as effective professional employees from the first day of employment. The need for a clear understanding of this concept is incredibly helpful to graduates so that they can be clear about their future career and know what is expected of them. Copps and Plimmer (2013); Govender and Wait, (2017), argue that employable graduates are easily distinguishable from the rest because they have work needed skills, distinct attributes and characteristics. Employability skills were identified as; lifelong learning, professional development, ability to apply and integrate theory and practice, decision-making, work readiness and collaboration.

A well accepted definition of employability is given by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007, 2010) 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" (p. 280). Boden and Nadeva's (2010) perspective of employability can be explained as the graduate's propensity for exhibiting skills and attributes required by the employers to be a fully functioning employee. Hillage and Pollard (1998), describe employability as person's ability to gain and sustain employment, shift to other functions within the same firm, gain new employment if needed and function in a work capacity that brings fulfillment and satisfaction. McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005 p. 191), however indicate that, "employability remains a contested concept in terms of its use in both theory and practice, and throughout the past century has been used as both a predominantly labour supply and demand concept." According to Minochi, Hristova and Reynolds (2017) employability is the graduates' ability to use their specific skills set in a way that is expected by the employer for the benefit of the organization. Harvey (2010) rejects the notion that, employability is limited to the understanding of a set of skills needed to gain employment. According to his later study in 2010, employability is a process of learning and acquiring new experiences and attributes through a higher learning. A rather more sophisticated approach to developing employability according to Harvey's research involves three steps: Firstly, the HEIs should provide a range of opportunities for their students such as job-seeking knowledge, like employment market intelligence, popular interview methods and resume writing. Secondly, is to the development of a range of higher level attributes, such as evaluation and critical analysis, synthesis, interactive skills such as team working, communication and inter-personal skills; and personal characteristics, which range from flexibility and adaptability, through self-organisation and time-management to risk-taking and problem solving. Thirdly, is to encourage students to develop a free agent learning attitude. Caudron (1999) defines free agent learners as individuals who are highly motivated who undertake to be responsible for their own actions and outcomes and for their own continuous improvement through learning and development.

From the definitions presented above it is evident that a universally accepted definition of employability does not exist which has led to many different interpretations by scholars who have studied employability and understood it through different perspectives and contextual situations. These arguments and perspectives demonstrate that the concept of employability is complex and multi-dimensional. It is because of this particularly challenging nature that a variety of graduate employability models have emerged and been recognized in literature. These frameworks aid to bring clarity into this multi-faceted concept and will be discussed in the next section.

### 3. Graduate Employability Models

In this section, various models of employability will be reviewed. The purpose here is developing a thorough understanding of the development and conceptual knowledge that underpins graduate employability. Four employability models are reviewed: the USEM model, the Career Edge model, the Bridge stock model and the JET model. The USEM and CareerEdge models are said to be relevant to business studies in higher education. Pond and Harrington (2011), itemize these two models as recognized by the Higher Education Academy, which is a Centre for Business Studies in the UK. In addition, Bridgstock proposed a model in 2009, which highlights specific attributes needed by graduates for employability. In this model, career management was identified as the key construct influencing graduate employability. The fourth employability model, which is the JET model, views employability from the graduate perspective.

#### 3.1. USEM Employability Model

Hillage and Pollard, (1998) in a pioneering study summarized all past and current philosophies about employability uncovered four main elements of employability which are; assets, deployment, presentation and contexts. This study, whilst pivotal in bringing together all key philosophies of employability was however, deficient in identifying the multi-dimensional nature of employability. Their study focused on a narrow scope of 'employability skills' instead of a broader scope of employability dimensions, which is beyond just skills. Overemphasis on just soft skills is the weakness of this model and more recent literature on this has offered evidence to suggest that soft skills is just one dimension of many that contribute towards a successful career (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2002). The researchers presented a 'soft skills plus' approach of employability making it inclusive of concepts such as capability, social and psychology. Knight and Yorke (2002), dedicated their early studies in highlighting their 'skills plus' approach emphasizing the fact that employability spans beyond skills. They presented the USEM model, USEM being the acronym for Understanding, Skills (subject-specific and generic), Efficacy, professional qualities and beliefs (self-theories generally), and Met cognition (including reflection). The USEM model showcases employability as an integration of a few constructs such as understanding, individual attributes and key skills. The USEM model has been broadly accepted as a huge breakthrough in employability studies. For the first time, the philosophy of employability was extended to include other factors apart from just soft skills.

The USEM model was aimed at drawing out a guideline for curriculum developers to embed employability development components into the curriculum in order to improve the graduates' employability. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), critique the usefulness of the model saying it has more of a theoretical value without much research justification and practical application. Notwithstanding these limitations, the USEM model has been used in many subsequent studies gaining much significance in literary reviews in this area (Thern, et.al, 2017).

### 3.2. Career EDGE Employability Model

The Career EDGE model was developed to build on the USEM model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). The Career EDGE Model on employability is a significant contribution to the body of knowledge as it offers clarity, simplicity and practicality (Govender and Wait, 2017). The Career EDGE model removes the ambiguity of the previous models and adds clarity by identifying five lower order traits, such as; career management, experiential learning, subject matter comprehension, generic skills, and emotional quotient making it more effective for practical application. The model recognizes three psychological constructs that impact employability. The three being, self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. In this regard, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) describe employability as "set of skills, knowledge, understanding and graduate attributes that makes a graduate more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they are satisfied and successful". According to Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) Career EDGE model approaches the concept of employability with the intention of creating a model for practical application. It therefore, adds the social construct elements and offers a more usable and simplistic perspective of employability. Govender and Wait, (2017) argued however, that the Career EDGE model lacked depth and richness in data collected. It was argued as being superficial and a cursory view of employability. Despite this, the Career EDGE model is said to be comprehensive and supported by other scholars (Smith, et al., 2014; Pool and Sewell, 2007).

### 3.3. Bridgstock's Employability Model

For compensating the above-given models' limitations, Bridgstock (2009), proposed her model at a different level focusing on graduate attributes and career management. The researcher argued that the rapidly changing business environment required graduates to have skills and abilities of self-management and career building. She stated the career management skills are important for employability because they play a key role in determining when, where, which, to what extent and in what manner discipline-specific and generic skills are displayed, used and learned. The Bridgstock model is centered on career management and its impact graduate employability. The model identifies the many aspects of skills and attributes that are elements of career management.

### 3.4. JET Employability Model

The transition from school to the workplace is a challenging time in a student's life. To be work-ready, the graduate needs to develop a range of personal assets, skills and experience. The JET model attempts to understand young graduates' by understanding their journey to employment. The model isolates certain factors that influence a young graduates' journey to work and offers a framework that can be used by firms to assist the graduate in that journey and methods that can be employed to enhance employability. This model helps the employer understand the graduate perspective and enables them to offer training and socialization to compensate for the lack of employability skills.

The JET model explained that the outcome of the job is not only related to sustainability and availability of the employability but also it is related to job satisfaction and quality of work (Harvey, 2010). Smith, Ferns and Russell (2014), favor this model and stated that while different complex explanations of employability are discussed in the past studies there should be a new perspective representing a clear and simple view of employability.

## 4. Conclusion

The review of literature on employability of university graduates strongly suggests that the concept has several interpretations owing to the varying stakeholder perspectives. It further emphasizes that there is a need to be aware of the changing nature of the employability landscape, since definitions can vary. The concept and understanding of employability is, to some extent, contentious and implies that something more than a skills-based approach is required. Whilst graduates have an understandably vested interest in this concept, other employability stakeholders also need to be considered. Enhancing graduate employability involves a multi-pronged approach, including initiatives by HEIs, government and private sector, all aimed at assisting graduates' transition from education into work. Further study is therefore, needed on specific employability stakeholder viewpoints.

## 5. References

- i. Ahmad, K., Zainal, N., & Rahmat, M. (2012). Relationship between Employability and Graduates' Skills. *International Business Management*, 6(4), 440-445. doi: 10.3923/ibm.2012.440.445
- ii. Boden, R., & Nedeva, M. (2010). Employing discourse: universities and graduate 'employability'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(1), 37-54. doi: 10.1080/02680930903349489
- iii. Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(1), 31-44. doi: 10.1080/07294360802444347
- iv. Caudron, S. (1999). Free Agent Learner. *Training And Development Journal*, 26 - 30.
- v. Copps, J., & Plimmer, D. (2013). The Journey to Employment (JET) Framework.
- vi. Dacre Pool, L., & Sewell, P. (2007). The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 49(4), 280. doi: 10.1108/00400910710754435
- vii. Dacre Pool, L., Qualter, P., & J. Sewell, P. (2014). Exploring the factor structure of the CareerEDGE employability development profile. *Education + Training*, 56(4), 303-313. doi: 10.1108/et-01-2013-0009

- viii. Govender, C., & Wait, M. (2017). Work integrated learning benefits for student career prospects - mixed mode analysis. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31(5). doi: 10.20853/31-5-609
- ix. Harvey, L. (2010). Defining and Measuring Employability. *Quality In Higher Education*, 7(2), 97 - 102.
- x. Hillage, J., & Pollard, E. (1998). *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis*. Institute for Employment Studies. Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).
- xi. Huq, A., & Gilbert, D. (2013). Enhancing graduate employability through work-based learning in social entrepreneurship. *Education + Training*, 55(6), 550-572. doi: 10.1108/et-04-2012-0047
- xii. Knight, P., & Yorke, M. (2002). Employability through the curriculum. *Tertiary Education And Management*, 8(4), 261-276. doi: 10.1080/13583883.2002.9967084
- xiii. McQuaid, R., & Lindsay, C. (2005). The Concept of Employability. *Urban Studies*, 42(2), 197-219. doi: 10.1080/0042098042000316100
- xiv. Minocha, S., Hristov, D., & Reynolds, M. (2017). From graduate employability to employment: policy and practice in UK higher education. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 21(3), 235-248. doi: 10.1111/ijtd.12105
- xv. Samkin, G., & Stainbank, L. (2016). Teaching and learning. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 24(3), 294-317. doi: 10.1108/medar-05-2016-0062
- xvi. Smith, C., Ferns, S., & Russell, L. (2014). The impact of work integrated learning on student work readiness..
- xvii. Thern, E., de Munter, J., Hemmingsson, T., & Rasmussen, F. (2017). Long-term effects of youth unemployment on mental health: does an economic crisis make a difference?. *Journal Of Epidemiology And Community Health*, 71(4), 344-349. doi: 10.1136/jech-2016-208012
- xviii. Wickramasinghe, V., & Perera, L. (2010). Graduates', university lecturers' and employers' perceptions towards employability skills. *Education + Training*, 52(3), 226-244. doi: 10.1108/00400911011037355
- xix. Yorke, M. (2010). Employability: aligning the message, the medium and academic values. *Journal Of Teaching And Learning For Graduate Employability*, 1(1), 2. doi: 10.21153/jtlge2010vol1no1art545
- xx. Yorke, P., & Knight, M. (2004). *Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education*.. London: Routledge Falmer.