

## STUDY OF EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS OVER EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF OMANI FRESH GRADUATES

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### Abstract

*The motive for the study came from the soaring unemployment rate among fresh graduates in the sultanate. On the contrary, there is the presence of unfilled vacancies, especially in the private sector. In spite of the incentives offered for recruiting Omani graduates, the industries were sourcing their talents from other countries, and this puts the employability of Omani fresh graduates in question.*

*Higher educational institutions have been constantly trying to enhance the employability of their graduates. The gap between the skills acquired in the HEI and those required in the industry is widening this study attempts to bridge the gap by identifying the employers' perspective on the employability of Omani graduates. The study will also enlighten the HEI s to view their program contents in light of industry requirements.*

*Hence, it was decided to meet key employers at the location of HEIs from where the majority of Omanis graduate. Ten branches of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences were chosen for study. The branches are located in ten different regions of the Sultanate. This makes the study bring a cross-sectional view of the issue at hand and possible solutions.*

*The methodology adopted was to collect qualitative data using structured and semi-structured interviews with Employers, HR professionals, Recruiters, and higher educational institutions, the interviews were conducted with different respondents on their availability at the designated locations suitable for them. Even Though there were, structured interviews the respondents were allowed to respond freely.*

*First stage Included a review of literature was carried out with the view to understand the current status of employability skill issues related to Omani fresh graduates. Based on past research on the similar topic interview schedule and survey questionnaire were created. These instruments were reviewed and finalized by an expert panel consisting of HR specialists, Academic experts, and representatives of the local administration. Stage one was completed with the survey-supported questionnaire. Stage two included in-depth interviews with representatives from employers and representatives from HEIs.*

*The employer interviews revealed that there is a gap between the job requirement skills in*

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*various jobs and learning outcomes and course contents offered in HEIs. Students often take up additional skill studies in external training institutions to gain employability skills.*

*The study found that wherever the course content and design were governed and guided by professional bodies such as ACCA, CISCO, and IEEE there the employability skills gaps were identified thin. The ACCA organization stated that they were aware of the needs of the employers and has a good idea of the learning requirements of the graduates. Employers' participation in HEI committees and council should not be superfluous but they should be permitted to facilitate meaningful inputs. Our study found that employers' impact was limited because their contributions are not fully absorbed.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Oman Statistical Year Book– (*OSYB 2021*), indicates increasing trend in the unemployment rate of fresh Graduates in the Sultanate. Despite the many programs and drives from government, industry and institutions, Omani fresh graduates find it difficult to secure a job matching to their education. On the other hand, the industries have unoccupied job vacancies but face difficulties in finding applicants with matching skill sets. According to NCSI 2020 the fresh graduate unemployment rate in Oman in was reported as 11 percent and it continued to remain in double digit (10.5%) since 2019 as per the *Oxford Economic Forecast for Oman*.

This study aimed to unravel the causative factors that lead to this situation in the industry. According to Ministry of Labour official statistics published in Oman Observer the total number of job seekers is 65,438 including 24,866 men and 40572 women. In addition, the same statistic represented that the average waiting period for jobs was about 3.5 years (*Rajab, 2017*). Unemployment on one side and non-employability on the other side. Apparently, there is a gap. This study aimed to unravel the gap. Specifically, the study mapped the missing skills of the fresh graduates at each stage of the recruitment process such as CV screening, Employment Written Tests, and Job Interviews. The mapped missing skills needs to be bridged.

The study covered fresh graduates from the disciplines of Engineering, Information Technology and Business Studies, in the previous academic years (2018- 19, 19-20) ie, passed out students from various higher educational Institutes from different regions of the Sultanate. (Muscat, Dhofar, AdhDhahirah, Al Dhakliya, Al Batina, Ash Sharqiah. Missing skills of all nature (technical or others) were taken for analysis. All major sectors of the economy of public and private was covered which including, Oil and Gas, Services such as Banking, Insurance, Medical, Tourism etc., Government Departments, Other Trading and Manufacturing.

The data relating to skill gaps were drawn from secondary and primary sources. The secondary sources included, past HR recruitment and selection records, rejection reports from recruiters. In addition, primary data relating to skill gaps were collected and analysed from employers, manpower specialists, HR recruitment personnel, etc. Such data were analysed using appropriate statistical tools such as:

The findings of this project would be highly significant to multiple stakeholders in Oman:

1. for Graduate Job Seeker:

This project would spell out the missing skill sets, knowledge base among the graduates. Once the graduates acquire these missing skills, they would find it easier to secure jobs.

2. For Educational Institutions:

This project would provide a clear agenda for the educational institutions on the kind of skills/knowledge that are expected in the job market. It will help them to prepare their graduates with right type of skill sets.

3. For Ministry of Manpower & Higher Education:

This project would provide report of the status quo of the job market and unemployment factors in the region. This will help them to make policies and guidelines related to the issue of unemployment.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To analyze the employers' expectations regarding the employability of Omani fresh graduates.
2. To understand the cause of skill gap among the fresh graduates in Oman.
3. To identify measures that will help HEIs to improve employability of their fresh graduates.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Background of the Study**

There is a significant gap existing in the employability of Omani fresh graduates in the present times. While there is a high rate of unemployed graduates, there is also significant number of vacant jobs due to non-availability of matching skill sets among the fresh graduates.

The gap between the fresh graduate's skills and employer's requirement is the central issue focused in the study

### **Approaches to the Research Study**

The methodology adopted was to collect qualitative data using structured and semi structured interviews with Employers, HR professionals, Recruiters, higher educational institutions, the interviews were conducted with different respondents on their availability at the designated locations suitable for them. Even Though there were, structured interviews the respondents were allowed to respond freely. Each interview lasted for 1 hour or one hour thirty minutes depending on the significance of data provided by the respondents, If the responses were given common pattern which is already with the researchers such interviews were for short period of time, Else most interviews were conducted for 1 hour 30 mins. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. In order to enable team participation some interviews were conducted using Microsoft teams and participants were from different locations. In the semi structured interviews, a questionnaire was used to guide the responses towards the researchers' requirements. The respondents were allowed to speak freely. The interview schedule for employers consisted of questions relating to factors which influence Omani fresh graduate employability in various stages of the recruitment process such as job posting, curriculum vitae screening, application scrutinization, skill requirements analysis, the skill gaps leading to rejection and suggestions for reducing rejections.

### **Phases of the Study**

The research project was carried out in two major stages.

#### **Phase 1**

Review of literature was taken as the starting point and based on the experiences and observations survey questionnaire and interview schedule were prepared these research instruments. These instruments were reviewed and finalized by expert panel consisting of HR specialists, Academic experts and representatives of the local administration.

#### **Phase 2**

In this stage companies were approached for the survey, experts were met and scoping interviews were carried out, had discussions with HEIs Representatives. Two recruiting companies from each of the ten regions were the chosen HEIs were located in addition to that at least one HEI was included in the study from each of the regions. The research methods were intended to draw out the employability skills gaps among the Omani fresh graduates for the previous three years. The research followed a case study-based approach, which focused on:

- employers view on fresh graduate employability
- Job requirements of fresh graduates

- Methods of assessment of fresh graduate employability skills
- Past three years observations on the skill gaps present among the Omani fresh graduate.
- The types of employers were
- Companies from Oil and gas sector
- Engineering and manufacturing companies
- Services sector like banking, Insurance, tourism, hospitality
- Trading and retail sector
- Tele communication and networking companies.

Omani fresh graduates from ten branches of University of Technology and Applied sciences were covered for the study. The representatives of graduate follow up department, OJT department; Alumni associations were included in the study.

#### **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA**

The employer interviews revealed that there is a gap between the job requirement skills in various jobs and learning outcomes and course contents offered in HEIs. Students often take up additional skill studies in external training institutions to gain employability skills.

Some employers stated that graduates meeting the laid-out learning outcomes from professional bodies such as ACCA, ISACA, CISCO ACADEMY, IEEE such graduates were more employment ready. However, for others they viewed that the skills acquired from higher education degrees were less significant to the set of other employable skills such as work-related learning, group projects and team assignment.

The corporates that employ in large numbers of fresh graduates were interested to provide comprehensive training to impart the relevant knowledge and skills required by graduates while joining their first job. This could be interpreted, as the course curriculum was less significant than other employable qualities that graduates possessed.

Large corporates gave more importance to the students' behaviour in the interview to identify the motivation of the graduates during the recruitment process. The generic skills were assessed using presentations, group discussion and interviews. Some of the employers offer fresh employee training post recruitment.

Moreover, the employers stated the need for specific attitude and approaches including job motivation, mental strength and loyalty. Overall, these correspond with the findings of literature

review.

Few employers emphasized the importance of recruiting Omani fresh graduates who could demonstrate the required technical and non-technical skills using practical employment tests.

Employers emphasized that the academic and technical skills of Omani fresh graduates were usually high, but there were converse views concerning the broad attitudes required and possessed by fresh graduate employees.

Another point of similarity from the literatures and the interviewed employer's opinion is that, promoting employability skills and attributes are more important than the traditional definitions of employability. Employers saw course works such as assignments, graduation projects, On the Job Trainings, as very significant in advancing these employability skills. Few employers included in the study opined that certain specialization was required of fresh graduates for certain job positions but added little value to the employability of fresh graduates in the long-run.

Employers claimed that training given to Omani fresh graduates in the higher educational institutions in CV preparation, mock interview drills and presentations were very useful but many graduates lacked these skills and motivation to make strong impression during the initial stages of recruitment. The commonly observed lacuna from the graduates is that they do not pay adequate attention in drafting their CV for specific employer. Some other employers stated that the student lacked interview skills and they generally do not carry out employer background search before appearing for job interviews.

### **Effective Strategies to develop Graduate Employability:**

The industry and academia are found to have a complementary role in developing the employability skills of the fresh graduates. The basic skills and training are offered by the Higher Educational Institutions and the employers offer work opportunities and specific job-related skills to the fresh graduates. Practical learning acquired from such programs as, On-the-job training, Practical laboratory learnings, graduation project works, case studies, academic assignment and course works are more effective in enhancing employability skills among the graduates. This scenario is prevalent in many sectors and levels of employers. The deciding factor however was the effectiveness of on-the-job training program. The employers recommended extending the duration of on-the-job training from the present 8 weeks to 16-24 weeks.

The industrial supervisors are seen to be serious, made the learning experience of the graduates as authentic as possible, and ensured that students benefitted from OJT experience. Employers valued the extra-curricular activities at the Higher Educational Institutions more highly

than the curriculum contents except in few cases. The study also revealed that course work related learning such as group projects and assignments were more of an opportunity for the curricula to impart generic skills.

*“Our company require employees to work in teams, while doing such teamwork the fresh graduates referred to the group project that they experience during their higher education studies.” - Stomo Electronics Company*

***Adequacy of HEI is with regard to fresh graduate employability:***

Majority of employers included in the study observed that HEIs could do more to address employability.

The research interviews conducted showed that the employers believed that HEIs were less than responsive to the needs of employers and the wider industry. The study found that there was a lack of systematic approach to enhance employability across the HEIs except for few specialized courses and faculty.

The relationship between employer and HEIs were dependent more on people rather than on institutional systems.

“Certain academic supervisors showed enthusiasm to impart value added job specific learning; however, this was not an institutional initiative”

The study found that wherever the course content and design were governed and guided by professional bodies such as ACCA, CISCO, IEEE there the employability skills gaps were identified thin. The ACCA organization stated that they were aware of the needs of the employers and has good idea of the learning requirements of the graduates.

The employers observed that the requirement of the industry should be linked from beginning to end of the academic program. There was a significant demand for such skills as initiative, flexibility, leadership, communication skills from the employers. The respondents of the study stated that the HEIs were performing well in their theoretical teaching content but lacking in applied knowledge and employability skills. Some employers expressed that graduates could be taught about job interviews.

Oil and Gas corporations in Oman were seen to be having closer links to technical universities for graduate career services.

The interviews carried out with the employers revealed the employability of fresh graduates include characteristics, competencies, and intellectual capabilities for the related job roles. Certain skills that could be transferred from higher educational institutions to the industry

were also deemed important. They are; Team working, Problem solving, self-management, business knowledge, computer literacy and arithmetic competencies, effective interpersonal and communication skill. The capability of initiation and the ability to follow instructions, and leadership skills.

### **Employers' Views on HEI' Career Services**

The employers emphasized that the course contents in HEIs should be designed and developed in consultation with industry representatives. The respondents opined that the skill development should begin from early phases of educations such as from schools.

There were not adequate systematic approaches from HEIs to engage with employers. Some employers recommend that HEI should conduct collaborative research along with the industry. In the employer interviews, the HR managers were of the opinion that academic grades were not aligned with the employability skills among the fresh graduates.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

As per the aims and objectives of the study, this is a qualitative and explorative research project. A careful collection of data from various sources relating to employability of fresh Omani graduates have been carried out. A comprehensive review literature also has been conducted and detailed insights are drawn. The experiences, processes and opinions of key stakeholders from both HEIs and the Industry relating to employability of fresh Omani graduates was analysed. Based on insights derived from the above the following are the conclusive points and suggestions:

#### **Conclusions**

The skills, knowledge, qualities and characteristics that are included in the term employability are not the same across the industry and HEIs. The industry demands the fresh graduates to possess the technical and specialisation related competencies from their graduation. They also expect the graduates to acquire broader skills and attributes that include communication skills, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, problem- solving, managerial abilities, discipline. The varied understanding of term employability skills is rather less important than accepted focus on approaches, which promote transferrable skills and attributes that will help graduates to find relevant employment, development in their career and thus facilitates the success of their organizations and contribute to social and economic development.

In comparison, little is known about the impact of HEIs programs and measures to promote graduate employability skills and attributes. There is scarcity of systematic evaluation of such measures. This is particularly true in understanding the longer-term benefits to graduates.



## **Remarks & Recommendations**

As revealed in the study majority of employers have reported existence of skill gap between the required skill of the companies and the available skills among the fresh graduates. However, a minority of employers have reported satisfaction over the fresh graduate employability skills.

It is noted that there is increase in fresh graduate unemployment during the study period, in addition to this impact of pandemic and a sharp fall in global crude oil price mean that we cannot be complacent about the capacity of graduates to secure and maintain employment to develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to new sustainable employment if required. With the above background the following recommendations are proposed.

It is recommended that employers' requirement may be mapped and it may be embedded in the curriculum of the HEIs in Oman.

## **The Importance of Job Placements and Recognizing Practical Learning**

- These experimental opportunities require careful planning built in if they are to be an effective way of providing HEIs students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of industrial working conditions. They will also require effective, constant and justifiable MoUs between HEIs and industries.
- Other systematic initiatives to develop and endorse student experiential and work-related learning are recommended. For example, On the Job training program appear to be highly valued by both graduates and employers. These programs are observed as significant because they enable student's access to work related learning activities in HEIs and work-based opportunities such as placements, but also allow these experiences and relevant reports and certificates to be documented as a source of evidence to present to employers.
- The training industries may provide evidences for student learning and participation and output because of the training program that students can use to demonstrate their employability skills to employers.
- The components of education that involves fieldwork, project works and assignments should be strengthened. One of the most important measures HEIs can adopt to promote employability is the scope for joint-placement, On the Job training, and graduation project may undergo extension of duration than they are currently practiced. Some of the Engineering courses already make use of these approaches but Business and other courses could benefit from greater use of such measures.

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