

The Impacts of Integrating Real World Employer-Relations Project in the Classroom Activities and Assessments: A Case Study

Intan Syafinaz Mohmad Rozee¹, Nadia Athirah Jamaludin¹

¹Centre of Liberal Arts & Languages, INTI International University
Persiaran Perdana BBN, Putra Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

Email: intan.mohmadrozee@newinti.edu.my

Abstract

Nowadays, the industry expects graduates to be skilled from problem solving initiative to entrepreneurial skills, soft skills to communication and critical thinking to innovative mindset. These expectations have necessitated higher learning institutions to revisit the curriculum; thus redesigning teaching and learning processes to enhance graduates' employability (MOE, 2015, 2017). To achieve the goals, an employer-relations project is conducted to determine as to whether employability skills can be enhanced through classroom activities and by tying up the course assessments with the "employer's" expectations. This study uses mixed method to collect the evidences: journal entries, questionnaires and focus group discussion. The results show that the employer project helps to promote employability skills, in which the implication holds useful pedagogical impacts to teaching and learning in higher education.

Keywords

Employer-relations project, Employability skills, Graduate attributes, Students' experiences

Introduction

According to the QS Global Skills Gap in the 21st Century report, it is suggested that there are gaps between prospective employer expectations and graduate employability skills (2018). It is revealed that the gaps are not limited to certain countries, but it is a global phenomenon across countries and companies of various sizes. The gaps are also consistent across all skills in the labour markets, in which the top three most desirable employability skills that most graduates are lacking are communication skills, teamwork and problem-solving skills. Thus, one of the current key challenges faced by higher education institutions is the fact that employers generally expect graduates' capabilities to extend beyond what they have learned in the actual learning activities that they engaged in university degree programs.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2015 generally reflects the necessity to address this issue between employer expectations and graduate employability. It is reflected in some of the

International Conference on Innovation and Technopreneurship 2019
Submission: 24 July 2019; Acceptance: 6 September 2019



Copyright: © 2019. All the authors listed in this paper. The distribution, reproduction, and any other usage of the content of this paper is permitted, with credit given to all the author(s) and copyright owner(s) in accordance to common academic practice. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license, as stated in the website: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

primary attributes of student aspirations, which are anchored on not only knowledge, but also leadership skills and thinking skills. These attributes aspire to produce holistic graduates who are emotionally intelligent, able to work across cultures, effective communicator, competitive, resilient and confident. On top of that, the attributes appreciate students who have diverse views, able to think critically and innovatively, have problem solving initiative and an entrepreneurial mindset (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Graduate Employability

For the past five decades, a lot of studies have been done related to the concept of employability (Sumanisiri et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2014; Finch et al., 2013; Wickramasighe & Perera, 2010, Chandrasiri, 2008 & Pool & Sewell). According to Mason et al. (2009, p.1), graduate employability refers to “work readiness”, in which graduates possess “the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organisational objectives soon after commencing employment”. In other words, graduate employability emphasizes the dispositions and skills of an individual that attract potential employers to hire him or her.

There are several main theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain the concept of employability of university graduates. Cotton (1993) develops the “employability skills model”, as he categorizes graduate employability into three types: basic skills, higher order thinking skills and affective skills and traits. Cotton’s model is considered as one of the pioneer models of employability, as he argues that employability depends on the skill levels of an individual. Nonetheless, Cotton’s model has been criticized for its over-reliance on skills and it does not consider any other factors such as behavior, attitude and experience (Knight & Yorke, 2004, 2002).

Alternatively, USEM model (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy & Metacognition) has been presented to conceptualize in relation to constructs other than skills, such as, subject understanding, meta-cognition and personal qualities. However, this model is largely theoretical-based and it lacks of research evidence; thus making it difficult to explain the concept to stakeholders (Pool & Sewell, 2007).

To address the gaps in USEM and employability skills models, Pool and Sewell (2007) presented a practical and simple overview of the relevant factors that are included in the employability process. The combination of these two models has produced CareerEDGE model, which explains five lower order factors: career development learning, experience, subject knowledge, understanding and skills, generic skills and emotional intelligence that permit students to reflect and evaluate these experiences. This model, which employs quantitative testing to allow generalization of findings, claims that employability of an individual is achieved through his or her complex interaction with social concepts: self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence. This interaction is enhanced through the use of evaluation and reflection, which permit students to assess their learning experience and to understand on what is to be done further. Pool and Sewell’s CareerEDGE model is considered comprehensive and it is a widely accepted model of employability (Smith, et al., 2014; Pool & Sewell, 2007). Nevertheless, many theoretical frameworks are only theoretical-based in nature and there is no clear agreement about the most

suitable theoretical framework to be used in measuring and identifying factors that contribute to graduate employability (Smith et al., 2014).

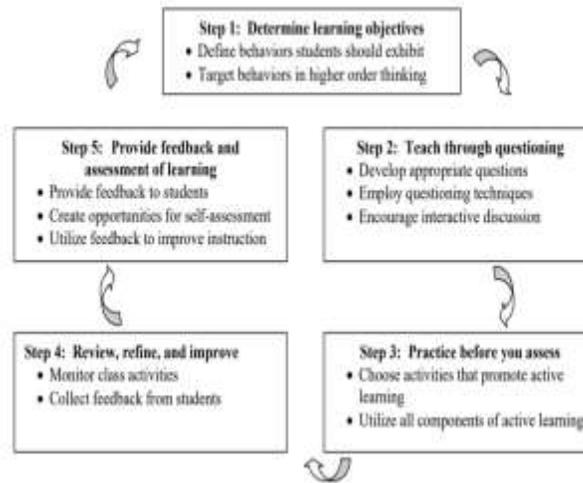
A more recent research suggests that improvements to graduates employability at higher education institutions are necessary by focusing on learning outcomes which are linked to soft-skills development and problem solving skills (Finch, et al. 2013). To support, Finch et al. (2013) in his study identifies employability factors which are important for graduates: listening skills, interpersonal skills, verbal communication skills, critical thinking skills, professionalism, written communication skills, creative thinking skills, adaptability, confidence, leadership skills, job specific technical skills, academic performance, program reputation and institutional reputation. These factors demonstrate the importance of soft skills to be integrated in academic programs, in which Finch's study also reveals the increasing gap between content and skills developed in educational programs in higher education institutions.

Integrated Classroom Activities and Assessments to Support Graduate Employability

The integrated approach between classroom activities and academic assessment and workplace performance appraisal practices are necessary to enhance students' employability skills. Classroom activities can include group discussions, brainstorming sessions, and presentations. On top of classroom activities, academic assessment is also important as it allows judgment and evaluation of students' work or performance, and "...therefore by inference, making a judgment about their learning that have taken place" (Sadler, 2005, p. 177, McDonald, 2017). Learning employability skills can take place if there is deliberate practice, such as problem-solving based assessments (Al-Atabi & DeBoer, 2014). McDonald (2017) supports this notion as he argues that problem-based learning, especially related to real world problems, will provide a significant impact on students' entrepreneurial intentions. Also, Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE, 2017) believes that exposing students to the industrial context, increasing the use of experiential learning and leveraging technology-enabled models are necessary to enhance 21st century skills, in which the skills are very much needed when getting a job.

The following is a 5-step framework model which is a relevant model that can be utilized in a classroom to move towards employability skills, as suggested by Duran, Limbach and Waugh (2006, p.161). Besides classroom activities, assessments are also embedded in the suggested steps, which are used to evaluate students' learning experience.

Figure 1: 5-Step Model to Move Students towards Employability Skills



Thus, this paper seeks to answer the question, “what are the impacts of integrating real-world employer-relations project in the classroom activities and assessments?”. This paper will also suggest other possible areas for future research on how to integrate the employability skills into students’ learning. This study will consider project-based learning through The Picha Project and how they perceived learning experience.

Methodology

Design of the project

To answer the research question, a project is designed based on the ‘5-Step Model to Move Students towards employability skills’ (adapted from Duran, Limbach and Waugh, 2006), as mentioned in the Introduction (refer to Table 1 for description). It is worth noting that students will be partnered with an employer, The Picha Project in order to achieve the learning objectives.

The Employer

The Picha Project is a sustainable social enterprise to help marginalized refugees in Malaysia, particularly in catering food to the public. The founders, Suzanne Ling, Kim Lim and Swee Lin, serve as ‘employers’ to the students in hopes to inspire students to focus on the graduate attributes; thus contributing to their learning experience at the university.

Table 1: The description of the 5-step model, adapted from Duran, Limbach & Waugh’s model

No	Steps	Details
One	Determine learning objectives	Students are to evaluate entrepreneurial problems faced by The Picha Project and generate solutions to the problems.
Two	Teach through questioning	Students are to respond to employers and instructor’s question. “As a start-up company, what are the possible problems faced by the

		<i>Picha Project in sustaining their business venture?''</i> . Students utilized Toyota's 5Why's problem solving tool to discover the root cause of the problem.
Three	<i>Practice before you assess</i>	Students are to brainstorm and generate solutions to help boost the Picha Project's sales. Students are to present their action plan.
Four	<i>Review, refine, and improve</i>	Prior to the execution of the action plan, students are to further refine their ideas by giving feedback to other groups' action plans. Students are to choose the best and the most practical plan to be executed. Also, this step includes the execution of the plan (students are given 3 weeks to execute the plan).
Five	<i>Provide feedback and assessment of learning</i>	Students are to write individual reflection to evaluate their learning experience. The reflection will be assessed by instructors based on their evident contribution reflected in the journal writing and during the execution of the project.

Data Collection

This research gathers responses from 117 Diploma in Business students of INTI International University using mixed-method data gathering processes. The methods include:

- i. Online questionnaire: A Likert-scale online survey of twenty questions are distributed via Google form to gather students' feedback. The questionnaire was designed based on three categories: Problem Solving Skills, Communication Skills & Technology and Entrepreneurship.
- ii. Individual Journal Entries: Journal entries serve as the project's assessment to evaluate students' personal experiences that can relate to employability attributes.

Results and Discussions

Problem Solving Skills

The survey shows that 58.9% of the students agreed that the project has taught them to effectively overcome difficulties. Students encountered various difficulties, including:

"I [had difficulty] in taking orders from lecturers who do not even want to listen [to] what I am talking about"
"...we didn't have enough time to promote our product and reach the customer[s]."

These verbatim responses are examples of real life problems that most people will encounter when they are given a task to complete. In order to succeed, students had to find the best possible ways to solve the problems. The problem solving initiative apparently test students' critical thinking, reasoning skills and their leadership roles as they had to generate alternatives when facing the problems. Based on the survey, 71.8% of the students agreed that the project helped to improve their critical thinking and reasoning skills.

Communication Skills

Effective communication is one of the most important graduate attributes that enhances graduate employability. Through the project, students had the chance to improve their communication skills by communicating with the employers, team members and customers. 74.4% of the respondents agreed that the project taught them to communicate more effectively.

Teamwork

According to the survey, 72.7% of the respondents claimed that working in groups is more effective than working individually. Working in groups allows them to understand different people and different personalities thus making them a better team player when they join the workforce.

Creativity through the Use of Technology

This project also allows students to be creative, which was demonstrated through the use of technology. The technology was used not only for communication purposes, but also in designing websites and placing orders of the food items requested by customers. 74.3% of respondents agreed that technology helps them to communicate. On top of that, students use social media platforms to advertise their products or services; hence, students were pushed to be creative to attract customers. 76.1% of the students agreed that social media is important in marketing and expanding a business.

The Impact

From the survey, 64.1% agreed that they learn more by executing a real-world project as a classroom activity compared to theory-based learning; thus making employer-relations project a great platform to acquire employability skills. To conclude, this study has provided us a deeper insight on students' experiences and how they perceived learning that relate to employability skills. The employer-relations project has proven to promote problem solving skills, critical thinking, reasoning, leadership skills, teamwork, creativity and effective communication, which can only be obtained through hands-on experience. Nonetheless, further research may be useful to determine more effective ways to integrate employer relations projects into students' learning experience in higher education institutions.

References

- Al-Atabi, M., & DeBoer, J. (2014). Teaching entrepreneurship using massive open online course (MOOC). *Technovation*, 34(4), 261-264.
- Chandrasiri, S. (2008). The Labour Market Experience of University Graduates in Sri Lanka. *Higher Education Policy*, 21, 405-423, retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300164>
- Cotton, K. (1993). *Developing Employability Skills*. Portland: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

- Duran R., Limbach, B. & Waugh, W. (2006). Critical thinking framework for any discipline. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 17(2). Retrieved from <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE55.pdf>
- Finch, D. F., Hamilton, L. K., Riley, B. & Zehner, M. (2013). An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability. *Education + Training*, 55(7), 681-70.
- Knight, P. & Yorke, M. (2004). *Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Mason, G., Williams, G. and Cranmer, S. (2009), "Employability skills initiatives in higher education: what effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes?". *Education Economics*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 1-30.
- McDonald, S. D. (2017). Enhanced critical thinking skills through problem-solving games in secondary schools. *Interdisciplinary Journal of e-Skills and Lifelong Learning*, 13, 79-96. Retrieved from <http://www.informingscience.org/Publications/3711>
- Ministry of Education Malaysia (2015). *Executive Summary: Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)*, Putrajaya. Retrieved from https://www.um.edu.my/docs/default-source/about-um_document/media-centre/um-magazine/4-executive-summary-pppm-2015-2025.pdf?sfvrsn=4
- Pool, L. D. & Sewell, P. (2007). The key to employability: developing a practical model of. *Education + Training*, 49, 277 - 289.
- Sadler, D.R. (2005), "Interpretations of criteria based assessment and grading in higher education", *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 175-194.
- Smith, C., Ferns, S. & Russell, L. (2014). Conceptualising and measuring 'employability' – lessons from a National OLT Project. *Gold Coast, Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited*, pp. 1-10.
- Sumanasiri, E. G. T., Yajid, M. S. A. & Khatibi, A. (2015). Conceptualizing Learning and Employability "Learning and Employability Framework". *Journal of Education and Learning*, 4(2), 54-63, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/jel.v4n2p53>
- Wickramasinghe, V. & Perera, L. (2010). Graduates', university lecturers' and employers' perceptions towards employability skills. *Education + Training*, 52(3), 226-244.