

Increasing employability through higher education-fact or fiction

[Education](#)



Employability in the world is increasingly being scrutinized by scholars, especially its relationship with the potential employee; whether one has to have higher education or not. The concept of employability plays a crucial role in dictating the role and need for higher education. McQuid and Lindsay, (2005, p. 197) note that the concept of employability continues to be applied within a range of different contexts and to both those in work and those seeking work. Contention exists regarding what constitutes employability and which graduate attributes are required to foster employability for tertiary students. Bridgstock, 2009, para 2)

This study intends to find literature relevant to ways of increasing employability with a focus on the relevance of higher education. The purpose of higher education is also being questioned, whether it is to impart knowledge to students or to furnish them with job skills. Kruss (2004, p. 63) puts it as having two mandates; the core focus being on general education and a secondary focus on professional education, also called “employability with an indirect link to the labour market model”; a model that assumes that graduates would proceed immediately upon qualifying to the workplace. Kruss, 2004 pg 63)

A comprehensive review of literature dealing with the concept of whether employability can be increased through higher education or not will be done. Different perspectives on higher education and employability will be looked at, as well as their impact on each other. Although literature on the above-mentioned concepts is there, that which relates to South Africa exclusively is limited. Definition of terms Employability; Higher education; Employability skills

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Employability refers to a graduate's achievements and his/her potential to obtain a graduate job, and should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a graduate job, which is subject to influences in the environment. Yorke, (2006, 5); Brown,(1996) as cited in Kruss, (2004p. 63) note that with employability, the focus is on skills formation to develop a highly educated workforce that is equipped for greater occupational mobility and flexible work patterns. McQuaid et al, (2005, p. 98) relates employability to those in work and seeking to improve or sustain their position in the labour market, in education and out of work.

The Confederation of British Industry as cited in (McQuaid et al, 2005 pg 205) views employability as primarily a characteristic of the individual. "Employability is the possession by an individual of the qualities and competences required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help [employee] to realize his or her aspirations and potential in work. For Harvey, (2001, p. 10) employability is concerned with the marketability of cumulative personal skills. Higher education is an educational level that follows the completion of a school providing a secondary education such as a high school. (Wikipedia, n. p)

Employability skills are basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job. (Robinson 2000, p. 1) He divides them into three skills set; basic academic skills, higher order thinking skills and personal qualities. Wilton, (2008, p.) views it as transferable skills gained at undergraduate level with broad applicability to the workplace. Literature review According to Knight and Yorke (2003 pg 3) "...higher education will foster the learning outcomes that employers value. " Expectations of higher education have <https://assignbuster.com/increasing-employability-through-higher-education-fact-or-fiction/>

grown higher. The subject matter has become complex, and it is expected to contribute to the development of a variety of complex skills than those proposed by the proponents of core, key and transferable skills.

Knight et al,(2003); Brown,(2001) as cited in Kruss (2004, p. 4); Bridgstock, (2009, para 3) concur that the focus for teaching is increasingly on the preparation of a highly skilled, flexible, adaptable labour force to meet changing economic and social needs. Bridgstock's (2009, para 1) narrow definition of employability concurs, emphasizing on skills and dispositions that might make an individual attractive to potential employers. The tacit skills, knowledge and attitudes formerly developed through work experience are now expected to be part of the higher education curricula so as to provide soft skills. (Kruss, 2004, p. 1) With this in mind, graduates have to come out able to work in any environment.

It is possible to improve employability through higher education as noted by The U. N's Youth Employment Network as noted in McQuaid et al (2005 pg 198) " All countries need to review...their education...to facilitate the school to work transition and to give young people...a head start in working life. " Tomlinson, (2008, p. 55) agrees, noting that the U. K. government is calling upon higher education students to see their learning as an investment which will give direct benefits in the labour market.

Wilton, (2008, p. 2) notes that undergraduate business education has been promoted in UK to address skills shortage and employers' criticism over the work readiness of graduates. More so, his study reflects that graduates in general acquire the required skills for broad employability and leave higher education as " jacks of all trades. "(pg 2) Fallows and Steven, (2000, n. p) <https://assignbuster.com/increasing-employability-through-higher-education-fact-or-fiction/>

mention that the University of Luton has established an initiative to ensure that students engage with employability skills and has embedded this within the academic curriculum of all disciplines.

It can thus be argued that it is possible to improve employability through higher education. Bridgstock, (2009, para 4) raises sentiments that the U. K. government has made available public funding to Universities that churn out work ready graduates who are competent in their disciplinary fields and possess negotiating abilities in the world of work. As per his study on the skills developed in higher education and skills used in employment, Wilton, (2008, p. 4) showed that some degrees do not universally prepare graduates for specific roles but for employment in general.

Graduates in Wilton's study (2008) valued personal development and growth as important transferable skills that can be acquired in higher education. These skills can be acquired on any program of study in higher education. Notwithstanding the importance of the academics learnt in higher education, many employers are not satisfied with the skills graduates bring to the workplace. Thus in a way higher education is shortchanging graduates who look forward to being fully competent upon completing their higher education.

Yorke, (2006 pg 4) notes that, " whereas the world of employment has... been satisfied with the disciplinary understanding and skills developed ...in higher education, it has been less happy with the...generic skills, such as communication, team working and time management. " Harvey, (2000) comments that employers in the U. K. tend to value generic skills more

highly than disciplinary-based understanding and skills. Students that participated in Tomlinson's, (2008) study concur.

They perceive their academic qualifications as having a declining role in shaping their employment outcomes. Whilst academic credentials are still ... significant...[in] their employability; students increasingly see the need to add value to them in order to gain an advantage in the labour market. " (Tomlinson 2008 pg 49-61) Employers expect more from the graduates (Yorke, 2006, para 2). According to Tomlinson, (2008) cited in Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough,(2009) ; Kruss,(2004) students are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of soft skills and attributes; thus higher education only prepares graduates for later employment, pending professional specialisation.

Finding workers with employability skills that help them fit into and remain in the work environment is a real problem. (Robinson, 2000; Archer and Davison, 2008). Yorke(2006) says that employers generally see a graduate's academic achievement as necessary but not sufficient for them to be recruited, calling instead for achievements outside the boundaries of the subject discipline, such as the possession of ' soft skills' is considered important in the recruitment of graduates. However, Robinson, (2000, p. 2) highlights that, " basic academic skills are still essential for high job performance.

More important to job success than having good academic skills is having good higher -order thinking skills... ". The findings of Ehiyazaryan et al's study (2009 pg 292) reflect on the value of ' real world experience to learner employability,' which can be brought into the workplace by older graduates. <https://assignbuster.com/increasing-employability-through-higher-education-fact-or-fiction/>

It is often assumed that graduates are young people, with no experience to offer, except for their academic credentials, yet older graduates are also in the employability market, able to bring in a wealth of experience gained through the years.

Given that employability is a lifelong commitment, with candidates continuously upgrading themselves on the job thus enriching their soft skills bank to enable them to keep their jobs. Yorke (2006, p. 4) supported this theory pointing out that, " Employability is not an attribute of the new graduate. It needs to be continuously refreshed throughout a person's working life. " Tomlinson, (2008) concurs with these sentiments noting that educational credentials are primarily pursued for their perceived positional value and advantages in securing employment, even though they might not have any direct, immediate or transferable value to the employer.

Yorke, (2006, p. 2) notes that students can develop marketable skills in higher education through work experience and extracurricular activities. Archer et al, (2008); Kruss (2004) and Wilton (2008) raise their concerns on the limited extent to which higher education is able to adequately prepare graduates for employment. Kruss, (2004) notes that degree programs provide a ' foundation' , ' a general grounding or basis' for subsequent skills.
pg 7)

Whilst employers demand multi-competent graduates, some employment-related capabilities can only be developed in the employment setting, thus the need for work placements to complement skills acquired in higher education. Yorke et al, (2003 pg 15) augments this argument noting that," student learning that makes for strong claims to employability comes from <https://assignbuster.com/increasing-employability-through-higher-education-fact-or-fiction/>

years, not semesters and through programs not modules. “ Drawing from the afore-mentioned sentiments it can be argued that there is need for more training to augment the academics learnt so as to improve employability.

Drawing from the above discussion it can be argued that the two concepts, employability and higher education cannot be polarized as two concepts independent of each other. Non academic skills are gained through nature and nurturing employees. A holistic approach to learning and training should be adopted; learning that specializes in learning by doing and academic education so as to increase employability. Employers and higher education institutions should work in solidarity. This will also aid each of the two to know the expectations of the other and to work towards meeting them.

The educational system must work at incorporating the skills and competences identified by employers as part of the skills gap, whilst the employers must develop the theoretical knowledge gained at higher education institutions pragmatically. Tomlinson, (2008, p. 14) notes , “ adding value to formal credentials is seen as an important issue of their, [students] employability” a graduate who masters both the theoretical subject knowledge and the practical knowledge would be highly sought after by employers.