

EMPLOYABILITY OF THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, FREE STATE GRADUATES: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The problem statement to be proposed in this article is that student employability suffers as a result of the fact that students do not make use of the available employment skills training, offered by the CUT, which will enable them to present themselves in a professional manner to prospective employers when entering the labour market. Certain suggestions will be offered in this publication of how the CUT could go about creating opportunities for students to enable them to successfully enter the labour market, after the completion of their studies.

Key words: Employment of graduates; Employability of graduates; Job preparation for graduates; Employment skills for graduates; Career preparation for graduates.

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Plan for Higher Education clearly states that as a result of labour market needs, more graduates should be produced by Institutions of Higher Education. To produce an adequate supply of high-level human resources for social and economic development, an increased participation rate of 20% of the age group 20-24 in public higher education should be the target over the next 10-15 years (National Plan for Higher Education, 2001:20). In an effort to sustain the supply of employable graduates the Minister of Education capped student numbers for purposes of improving the efficiency of higher education institutions. (Cele and Menon, 2006:24). An assumption could therefore be made that efficient higher education institutions would produce more employable graduates.

The Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka identified, in her response to questions posed to her in parliament, a number of factors that could lead to the current high level of graduate unemployment. Quoting research from the Human Sciences Research Council, she blamed, amongst others, non-responsive academic programmes and poor job preparation programmes for the problem (Department of Education, 2005:24-25). The comment of the Deputy President supports the mission of the CUT that includes the advancement and integration of knowledge with professional career education and training skills, entrepreneurship, innovation and technology. The mission also stresses the fact that students should be able to reach their full personal and professional career potential (CUT, 2006:2).

2. THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENTRY PROCESS

It seems clear that, institutions of higher education have no option but to get involved in the delivering of graduates that are ready for the labour market. The two crucial areas, as outlined in the introduction, are on programme level, as well as on employability skills level. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the organizational entry process be scrutinized for anchors that would guide this process.

Competencies are either technical or personal. Technical competencies are the specialized primary and highly related knowledge and skills that employees must possess to enable them to do their job, while personal competencies are of the soft or abstract variety. This article proposes that the former competencies would largely be acquired by the student through his or her studies, while the latter could be acquired through additional skills training in the art of competence-based employment. Dubois and Rothwell (as quoted by Dubois, 2005:9-10); (Human Capital Management, 2005/6:88).

Irrespective of the mission of the CUT, that graduates should be enabled to reach their full personal and professional potential, they still experience difficulties to cope with the realities when entering the world of work. Perrone and Vickers (2003:69) highlight the fact that few studies have addressed the experiences of a graduate's transition from university to the world of work properly. Four themes emerged from a case study, conducted in Australia by these authors: firstly, an uncertain feeling of unpreparedness for the life-impacting decisions of the labour market and secondly, inflated expectations of finding an excellent job easily. Thirdly, the work experience paradox where employers insist that graduates should have experience as well as a qualification to be able to secure an entry level position, while graduates actually need to get a job to gain the required experience and lastly, the disappointment of his unrealized expectations. Those, however, who procrastinate toward job-seeking might eventually feel unemployment stress, financial pressure, and negative emotions such as a higher level of anxiety, which could lead to negative views of the self, which in turn plays an important role in the development or maintenance of depression (Senecal and Guay, 2001:270-271).

There are arguably, various ways to go about supporting students to try and cope with the anxiety of entering the labour market. The postulation is that a wise realistic career choice is only possible if two major prerequisites have been met, namely a careful self-analysis by the candidate in terms of his/her physical, mental and emotional state, as well as information that concerns the world of work (Margie Ogilvy promotions cc, 2006:10).

According to Greenhaus *et al.* (2000:155) research has identified four phases in the organizational entry process, with each phase having different but related tasks for the job candidate and the organization doing the hiring. These four stages are:

- *Recruitment* is regarded as the stage where the individual locates information on job sources and firms, whereas the organization is concerned with finding and attracting job candidates.
- *Selection* involves the process of mutual choice. Individuals must deal with job interviews, assessments and making choices among job offers. For the hiring organization, the key task is an assessment of candidates for future job performance and retention.
- *Orientation* is defined as the period of initial adjustment.
- *Socialization* is termed the process of mutual adjustment.

For the purposes this article *recruitment* and *selection* will form the focus point of the investigation. *Experiential learning*, that usually form part of the programme curriculum, as well as *learnership* programmes, currently run by various public and private sector institutions, will not be implicated when referring to *recruitment* and/or *selection*.

3. ENHANCEMENT OF EMPLOYABILITY AT THE CUT

3.1 Background

The gradual increase of financial pressure on universities and competitiveness in higher education markets, make employment rates of graduates one of the most important performance indicators of institutional quality. Insofar as funding has become related to performance outcome, and students have become 'customers' or 'clients' of higher education, guidance services are urged to offer programmes that aim to develop job-search skills and competence in order to reach higher employment rates (Villar et al. 2000:390).

Findings of a study that was done recently in Spain, suggested that since unemployment has increased among graduates and a degree is no longer a guarantee of a full-time professional job, the availability of information about job opportunities in the labour market has become critical in job-search processes (Villar et al. 2000:390).

3.2 Problem statement and goals

The problem statement to be proposed in this article is that student employability suffers as a result of the fact that students do not make use of the available employment skills training, offered by the CUT, which will enable them to present themselves in a professional manner to prospective employers when entering the labour market. Students should be attractive to employers, not only in terms of their academic background, but also in terms of their attitude, skills, knowledge, and experience.

The goal of the employment skills training is to enhance the marketability of the CUT students for the labour market. To be able to assess successes reached with such an initiative, follow-up studies focusing on the improvements in the employability of graduates would be the ideal. In order to be able to accomplish the latter goal, substantial financial resources should be made available, which is not presently the case at the CUT. It was therefore decided that the root to go was to acquire contemporary information from the literature,

on what is globally regarded as the fundamental issues to be addressed to prepare graduates for the labour market. Information gathered formed the basis for the compilation of the employment skills training sessions offered from 2004 up to 2006.

Since the content of the employment skills training programme was regarded as scientifically sound, the focus of the empirical survey was on how many students could be reached with the marketing strategy followed, as well as the actual participation by the target population.

3.3 Collaboration between academia and support services

Realizing the importance of quality outcomes, as far as graduates of the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT) are concerned, a Careers Office was established at the beginning of 2004, as part of the Workforce Development Centre. It was decided to start with employment skills training, with a vision of “more and better” as the unit grows. The executive dean of the Faculty of Management Sciences, which expressed his concern regarding the employability skills of our graduates, at several occasions in the past, saw this as an opportunity and decided to provide a representative from the Faculty of Management Sciences to collaborate with the Careers Office in this regard.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Academic year 2004

It was decided to implement the initiative on the main campus in phases, starting off with the School for Entrepreneurship and Business Development, as well as the School for Accounting, as the only two units to be involved during 2004. The first phase involved the division of academic third year diploma students in their respective study programmes, which resulted into the creation of five groups. The study programmes in question covered Marketing, Human Resources Management, Import and Export Management, Management and the different accounting related programmes.

The marketing of the employment skills training involved two distinctive methods. Firstly, advertisements on all the notice boards of the Faculty of Management Sciences on the scheduled employment skills training sessions to be conducted. Secondly, class visits to all full time and part time students of the two schools in question.

The actual employment skills training sessions consisted of four modules of one and a half hour each. In the first module the covering letter was dealt with, in the second module students were taught how to compile a curriculum vitae. The third and fourth modules consisted of guidance of how students should prepare themselves for an interview. In the third module the theory of interviewing was covered which also included a video, while in the last module students had the opportunity to participate in role playing a typical interview

situation. A weekly consultation session was scheduled for students offering support on any aspect of the instruction sessions that were offered up to that stage.

Questionnaires were handed out after each training session for completion by students, reflecting their satisfaction rate with the sessions. The questionnaire consisted of structured questions, as well as an open ended question. The close ended questions had to be rated according to the following four categories: dissatisfied, satisfied, excellent and uncertain. The questions were: Was the presentation done in a professional manner? Did the presenter(s) showed adequate knowledge of the topic? Did the presenter(s) made use of multiple lecturing aids? Was the session informative enough? The open ended part of the questionnaire invited students to write down any comments and/or needs regarding any aspect of employment skills training that they want to bring under the attention of the presenter(s).

4.2 Academic year 2005

During 2005 all the other schools in the Faculty of Management Sciences where included. All final year students, for diploma and degree qualifications, were invited to participate in the employment skills training sessions. The marketing strategy was done according to the 2004 model. Students were also divided into different groups according to programmes, as was done during 2004. The fourth practical module, on interviewing skills, as described in paragraph 4.1, was discarded of to cater for the more substantial target groups that had to be reached.

4.3 Academic year 2006

During 2006 a decision was taken to involve all the final year CUT students. As a result of capacity limitations (staff members involved were still the same) marketing of the employment skills training sessions could not be done by means of class visits, as was the case in 2004 and 2005. Electronic marketing strategies were followed, as well as advertisements all over campus by way of posters on notice boards. Employment skills training sessions had to be scheduled during lunch breaks, resulting in shorter sessions of one hour each.

5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Analysis

5.1.1 Quantitative

The number of students who participated each year was determined by students who attended the different employment skills training sessions [covering letter, curriculum vitae and interviews]. Since the purpose of the study was not to determine the attendance of students per topic, but rather per training cycle, only students who attended all the training sessions, as a package, were included in the annual figures.

The target population was determined by enrollment figures captured from the Integrated Tertiary Software System of the CUT. As already indicated in paragraph 4.1, the 2004 target population consisted of the School for Entrepreneurship and Business Development and the School for Accounting third year full time, as well as part time, enrolments that amounted to 1840 students, of which 326 [17,7%] attended. The 2005 target population consisted of all third and fourth year enrollments in the Faculty of Management Sciences as indicated in paragraph 4.2, that amounted to 3713 students, of which 462 [12,4%] attended. The target population for 2006 included all final year student enrolments for the CUT, as indicated in paragraph 4.3, which amounted to 6073 students, of which 386 [6,4%] attended.

The analysis of the close ended questions, outlined in paragraph 4.1, indicated an overall satisfaction rate with the competence of the presenters and the content of the training material of 98,7% for 2004, 98,4% for 2005 and 96,9% for 2006.

5.1.2 Qualitative

The qualitative analysis showed that two distinctive categories could be identified, namely students' experiences on issues other than those reported on in the structured questions, and suggestions how the training could be improved for the future.

Responses from the survey, summarized for 2004, 2005 and 2006, showed that these sessions were, as far as student experiences are concerned, motivational to the students, with remarks such as "happy and excited to be part of this seminar and wish it didn't end, keep up the good work, some of us was in complete darkness, thanks for taking time to motivate us" It also showed positive responses in terms of acquiring more information, with remarks such as "information is power, it is an eye opening session, learned a lot, very informative" Responses in terms of the ability to compile own covering letters, curriculum vitas' and to shape in interview situations, with a remark such as "hope to do you proud in my applications and interviews" Responses on how the students experienced the practical part of the interview session were downright positive, with remarks such as "we were able to express ourselves, more mock interviews, the role play was very informative and helpful"

Suggestions that came out of the responses from the open ended question were: a) that the training should be incorporated into the curriculum of all the programmes offered at the CUT or recognition should be granted by way of a certificate; b) an effort should be made to bring prospective employers to campus so that students could have the opportunity to meet them; c) training sessions should be scheduled more often and more information on employment agencies should be made available to students; d) a need was also expressed that examples of possible questions, that could be expected during interviews, should be made available to students.

5.2 Interpretations and recommendations

Is employment skills training a priority for the academia and/or the senior students at the CUT? Data shows that irrespective of what kind of marketing strategies used [from personal class visits, e-mail advertisements and posters on notice boards, as well as on lecturing room doors] the best attendance rate from the different target populations [refer paragraph 5.1.1] could not exceed 17,7%. The statistics clearly indicate that employment skills training is not a priority at the CUT.

The close ended questions, formulated in the questionnaire, could be narrowed down to two distinctive focus areas namely, the *competence of the presenters* and the *content of the training material*. The surprisingly high satisfaction rates recorded implies that quality training has taken place, which is reassuring. Continuous developmental initiatives, to ensure contemporary training, should however not be dismissed.

The suggestion, from the open ended question, that students who completed the employment skills training should be granted a certification to this effect is regarded not viable because the skills acquired in this manner should not be revealed to prospective employers by way of an attachment to a candidate's curriculum vitae, but rather by performance during the interview.

The idea posed by students that employment skills training should form part of the formal curricula of all programmes offered by the CUT is regarded an idea for consideration for the future. The magnitude of such a project implies either funding from the National Foundation of Research or grants from other sources, or even an investigation that could be done through post graduate studies.

The need expressed by students that examples of possible questions, to be expected during interviews, should be made available to students were followed up and questions to this effect were included in the employment skills training sessions as from 2005 onwards.

The suggestions that employers should be brought to campus so that students could have the opportunity to meet them, as well as the need spelled out for information on employment agencies, was taken to heart and a careers fair was organized by the Careers Office during 2006.

Experience has shown that one and a half hour sessions per module was perfect, because the half hour extra included the practical module on interviewing skills, and diverting back to this practice could only benefit students.

Besides services presently offered, which entails employment skills training, assistance to students in job search ventures; guidance in the completion of an application form, covering letter and curriculum vitae. A further recommendation is the expansion of the employment skills training to include career management elements as well. In this way a more strategic approach

could be established which will benefit the students on the long term. The literature support this proposal, as will be proofed in the next paragraphs.

University guidance services are faced with the fact that transitions to uncertain occupational destinations have extended. Even for graduates obtaining a job has become more difficult. Uncertainty about prospects has spread and the future is no longer predictable (Roberts as quoted by Villar et al. 2000:390).

The new generation, of first-time employees, realize that they have to be more self-sufficient and cannot rely on a benevolent employer to guarantee their jobs irrespective of what is happening in the business environment in which they operate (Truch, 2001:104).

Greenhaus *et al.* (2000:4-8) propose that economic, political, technological and cultural changes have a profound impact on the world of work. These changes gain acceptance in areas such as job losses, globalization, technology, changing structure of organizations, the changing nature of work, a culturally diverse work force and in work and family life.

The extension of the employment skills training, as previously referred to, should entail the career anchors as established by Schein (1994:84) in his long-term research on Sloan School of Management (MIT) alumni, where career anchor groups were identified as a set of needs, values, and talents which a person is least willing to give up if forced to make a choice. These anchors could serve as pointers for graduates when entering the labour market. The groups in question are technical/functional competence, managerial competence, creativity, security or stability and autonomy.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper supports the hypothesis, that was proposed in the problem statement, that students should not just be exposed to high quality programmes, but also be groomed for employability. The outcome of the investigation suggests that there seems to be a lack of support at the CUT from either the academia and/or the students in employment skills training.

It is therefore argued, that the ultimate solution, for the CUT, would be to make more resources available for the enhancement of employability of graduates. Should it not be the case, the involvement in employability skills training, by the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, as well as the Faculty of Engineering, Information and Communication Technology, becomes a necessity.

Finally, the question could be asked whether the access with success requirement of the National Plan for Higher Education should not include employability?

7. LITERATURE

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