


11-1-2018

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### Recommended Citation

Elsayad, Elmohanad (2018) "Employability Education: The Nexus between Education and Market Needs," *Young African Leaders Journal of Development*: Vol. 2 , Article 23.

DOI: 10.32727/24.2018.48

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/yajlod/vol2/iss1/23>

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## EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATION: THE NEXUS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND MARKET NEEDS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to focus on the literature of employability skills education. The research done investigates the compelling reasons behind the need for employability skills education as a means to achieving economic development. First, the research shows us evidence that there is a gap between education and market needs. It uncovers how the phenomenon of a massive increase in enrollment rates did not actually achieve the desired outcomes in terms of economic development. Following this, the research shows us that the need for a new strategy to connect studying with reality has become pressing. Next, the research further digs into the meaning of employability, employability education, its importance, and the need for its provision. It also looks at some examples of employability education provision in the developed world and highlights the western trend to consolidate employability education through public policy and International Conventions. Finally, the research sheds light on some critiques of employability education as well as further discussion and recommendations for ways to measure and apply the concept of employability.

### THE NEED FOR A NEW MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Strategies of development for international education policies are mostly driven by a focus on educational stages, whether it is primary, secondary or tertiary education. Most development efforts are concerned with increasing enrollment rates at schools, providing the so-called “good quality” education, ensuring equality in terms of access and provision of education, etc. However, there is still a profound need to bridge the gap between education and economic needs within various countries, especially developing countries (Mohamed Bhai, 2014). The policy emphasis on schooling has become controversial because measuring education quality by the number of years attained at school has not guaranteed any improvements in economic conditions (Hanushek, 2013). Hanushek further argues that, even though education does not directly cause economic development due to the effect of other confounding factors that contribute to the equation, he believes that the relationship between economic prosperity and education systems is strongly correlated (2013). The need for integrating education with employment through employability education is crucial for economic development.

Although a number of developing countries are achieving better results in the gross enrolment rates of students in all education phases, they still confront exacerbating development issues such as unemployment and declining GDP (Mohamed Bhai, 2014). According to Bhai, enrolment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa and West and South Asia doubled within approximately a decade in the period from 2000 to 2011. In Central Asia and Eastern Europe, enrolment increased by 25%, in Latin America and the Caribbean by 19%, and in North America and Western Europe by 17% (Mohamed Bhai, 2014). This massification of education, however, had severe negative consequences on graduate employment. One of the reasons for this increasing unemployment is the lack of skilled graduates. Mohamed Bhai (2014) further emphasizes the close relationship between the proportion of skilled workforce laborers and economic development.

This investigated imbalance between education and workforce needs has made it crucial to foster employability skills education to meet the pressing needs of the economies in the developing world. The challenges faced by developing

countries require a behavior and orientation toward work that go beyond step-by-step mission performance. Workers at all levels, not only managerial, are expected to solve problems, generate ways to improve the procedures they use and engage effectively with their associates to diminish poverty (Overtoom, 2000). Problems manifest themselves differently each time. The solution cannot only be provided by high-level managers, it needs all levels of employees and worker's inclusion. In order for all-level employees to solve problems, however, they should be prepared to do so through employability education. The next section of this paper will take us through the meaning of employability from researchers and employers perspectives.

### **THE DEFINITION OF EMPLOYABILITY**

There is no one common or a single universal definition of employability. Yet, there is a consensus or an agreement that the concept is positioned around work and the aptitude to be employed or create employment opportunities through entrepreneurship (Moore, 2009). A person's capability to gain employment is defined as employability and depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of this person (Lindh, Jan & Gunilla, 2012). Employability skills are transferable core skill groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace. (Overtoom, 2000). They are essential for any career success at all levels of employment and for all levels of education. In the global university employability survey 2016, a sample of more than 800 global employers and recruiters were asked to state whether they agree or not with the different definitions of employability that they had to choose from. According to the survey, 90% of the respondents' strongly agreed with defining employability as a set of job-related aptitudes, attitudes and behavior; around 65% of respondents agreed with defining employability as the graduates' capacity to land a job immediately after graduation with a sufficient salary (Minsky, 2016). Scholars and professional experts tend to agree that the concept of employability is centered around the graduate's ability to get hired within a short period after his/her graduation. This ability to get employment is not an innate quality that some people are privileged with over others. Yet, it is a set of employable skills that students acquire through employability education. This next section will discuss how schooling and university education should help students acquire these skills. It will also present the importance of employability education to overcome the problem of unemployment and match economic needs.

### **EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATION**

Swings in economies throughout the world, promoted by globalization, rapid change in technological advances, amplified competition, and the increasing sophistication of consumers and clients mean that recruiters are constantly looking for a set of common skills to complement technical skills. Researchers at the University of Nottingham (2007) stated that this combination of generic and technical skills is sought as a means of developing a workforce that is able to cope with progressively complex work practices, greater job flexibility, increased interaction with consumers and minimal work supervision.

The importance of education does not lie anymore on equipping students with technical knowledge and theoretical information about subjects. The need for teaching students the necessary soft skills, such as communication, business-oriented and flexibility skills, shall be solidified through policy to ensure education compatibility with market needs (Greatbatch & Lewis, 2007).

Employability education should not be exclusive to tertiary education, it should be integrated into the curriculums of high school systems and vocational schools. By assessing students' needs based on their skill levels, they can be given structured learning programs tailored to their needs that will help them secure sustainable employment after graduation. Greatbatch & Lewis (2007) developed a guide-set of skills that students should learn in certain stages in their life in order to

become employable upon graduation. Students aged between 14-16 years should learn communication skills, working to deadlines, project planning and improving their own learning (Greatbatch & Lewis, 2007). Students who are aged 16 plus years, should learn interviewing skills, problem-solving skills and how to manage others. Following this strategy in learning outcomes, this model expects that graduates will increase their chances of getting the job they want after graduation (Greatbatch & Lewis, 2007).

Moore (2009) also developed a framework for employability education attainment. Moore believes that there are four basic broad interlocking constructs that distinguish employability education. First, students should be taught to understand how the world works through doing capstone projects in their senior years at university in partnership with professional companies and organizations (Moore, 2009). They should follow a set of interdisciplinary skillful practices in context. They should also be exposed to efficacy beliefs (under which are subsumed a range of personal qualities and attributes), as well as practicing metacognition (including the capacity for reflection and self-regulation) (Moore, 2009).

Having explained the concept of employability education and its application, these next two sections will discuss the impact of employability education on a micro and macro level analyses.

#### **EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATION IMPACT ON A MICRO LEVEL**

The need for employability education is a priority for economic prosperity and individual well-being as well. A study made by Jessie, Ute-Christine & Annelies (2014) showed that the most important factor to help unemployed people find job opportunities is that they should have internalized motivation. This motivation could be acquired by receiving employability education training. If people were given the chance, without having a prior perceived usefulness of this chance, results would be detrimental. For this reason, instilling the culture and education of employability raises people's awareness of the perceived usefulness of jobs and this, in turn, helps decrease unemployment rates.

#### **EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATION IMPACT ON A MACRO LEVEL**

A number of studies found that the skills acquired by students during their schooling years are much more important than the number of years they spend at school (Guison, 2012). The importance of these skills is reflected and measured by the increase in a country's GDP and the decrease in unemployment rates. The results of the Innovative Secondary Education for Skills Enhancement (ISESE) project found that the national returns to skills are notably larger than those of quantity of schooling and adding cognitive skills to econometric models helped explain a larger variance in cross-country growth gaps (2012).

#### **EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATION PROVISION IN THE DEVELOPED WORLD**

There has been a laudable movement by governments in the west for emphasizing the importance of employability skills education and entrepreneurship. In the UK, the government has placed greater emphasis on the wider scope of higher education to encourage entrepreneurship (Crayford, Fearon, McLaughlin & Vuuren, 2012). The following decade, according to Crayfor, et al, (2011), saw an increase in number and frequency of policy initiatives at both UK national and European levels which have influenced the provision of entrepreneurial education across the sector.

The European Initiative "Euro-Education: Employability for all (EEE4all)" inspired by the United Nation's Slogan "Education for All", to eradicate illiteracy, places equal importance of employability education with primary education. The overall evaluation of the EEE4all project by the EU commission showed that the project had thrived in creating

innovative educational models that may be of great support to institutions and practitioners throughout Europe (Lindh, et al, 2012). Hence, it is crystal clear that employability education has become a necessity of equal importance and value to eradicating illiteracy, as a required effort to overcoming socio-economic and development challenges.

The world declaration on Higher Education in the twenty-first century emphasizes the importance of higher education institutions as main providers of skills for populations. The declaration implies the importance of employability education to bridge the gap between developing and underdeveloped countries. Article 1 under the framework for priority action for change and development of higher education states:

Consideration should be given to making budgetary provisions for that purpose, and developing mutually beneficial agreements involving industry, national as well as international, in order to sustain co-operative activities and projects through appropriate incentives and funding in education, research and the development of high-level experts in these countries.

### **CRITIQUES OF EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATION**

The objective reality is that not everybody is in favor of employability education. Skeptics of this type of education believe that it is meant to make people qualified enough to get job offers but not knowledgeable enough to innovate in the business world. Lakes (2011) believes that vocational and employability education are sort of a conspiracy made against the working class for those in control to remain powerful. In his article, “Work-Ready Testing: Education and Employability in Neoliberal Times”, Lakes stated, “Times have changed, but the basic principle remains: Capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on” (2011, P.22).

There still are critiques against employability education that accuses it of working for the interest of those in power to maintain a social working class that is sufficient and able to work properly without the proper academic education. Yet, the fact that employability education shapes the nexus between education and market needs, places huge significance on researchers and policy makers to develop a solid strategy to improve graduates' knowledge as well as their employability.

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

National priorities and economic needs of any country always influence how education policy is shaped. The link between education, employability skills, and economic growth has been studied through a large body of literature in the past decades. The need for employability education, especially in the developing world, appears to be significant for confronting the current challenges. Graduates shall learn how to be flexible against the changes that occur in the economy. Also, at times when the market requires certain skills, graduates shall be ready to adapt to market needs.

For the reasons mentioned above, research and policy making shall be directed towards investigating effective ways of providing employability education. There is a decisive need for accurate data gathering across developing countries to encompass inter-related aspects between employability skills and economic progress. It is also tremendously important for researchers, policy makers, educators, government officials, parents and all stakeholders within countries to form an employability education commission to discuss the necessary skills that students should learn. These discussions about the necessary skills development strategies need to include not only an exhaustive reflection around the type of skills needed but also effective ways of pedagogical methodology for them.

There is also a need for international organizations such as UNESCO to adopt and develop a tangible framework for how employability education should be applied. On a large scale, countries have to agree upon the most important skills students have to learn in schools and that shall be solidified through an international convention or policy.

Since one of the main aims of education systems is to prepare a skillful workforce and good employees who can perform job tasks efficiently, one of the questions that need more research is whether employers shall have their input in curriculum making. And if they are allowed to have a significant input in preparing the curriculum, specifically for tertiary education, what ramifications and implications could be anticipated to manifest?

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