

Enhancing Graduate Employability through Knowledge Management

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Introduction

In the recent 9th Malaysian Plan, one of the key thrusts focuses on Human Capital Development to increase the nation's capacity for knowledge and innovation among the workforce. To achieve this, the Malaysian government has allocated over RM18 billion to increase access to higher education among youths from 29 per cent to 40 per cent by the year 2010 (Munir and Shukran, 2006). At the same time, the government intends to reduce the current unemployment rate of an estimated 3.4 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2007) by offering more job opportunities to fresh graduates and the unemployed. By managing knowledge that is taught in various higher education institutions (HEIs), graduates can be equipped with the right kind of knowledge and capabilities to make them employable.

In order to increase the employability of graduates, HEIs need to conduct a knowledge audit that would analyse the knowledge, skills and abilities already being taught within the institutions while discovering any gaps in the capabilities required by the industries.

Knowledge Management

Researchers have defined knowledge management (KM) as the efficient process of acquiring, utilising and transferring knowledge, information and expertise within an organisation as well as to gain value from their employees (McKinlay, 2000; Scarbrough and Swan, 2001). Basically, managing knowledge is how an organisation

acquires, modifies, creates, applies, stores and disseminates knowledge from their employees as well as within the organisation itself (Wickramasinghe and Mills, 2002; Ellingsen and Monteiro, 2003). In the context of higher education, it is a service industry (McQuade and Maguire, 2005), and KM can be used to increase the knowledge base and assist HEIs to be in a better position to respond to unexpected changes in the market and help meet the expectation of stakeholders i.e. students and parents, with the support of top management of the respective HEIs (Sharimllah et al., 2007).

Employability

Employability has been referred to as determining and attaining personal attributes, skills, abilities and knowledge that would assist people in marketing themselves in obtaining employment (Yorke and Knight, 2004; O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005); continuous development and retraining (Hawkrigde, 2005); the ability to use skills and knowledge in different areas of organisations (Civelli, 1998; Raybould and Sheedy, 2005) and add value to the company (Patrickson and Ransijn, 2003).

Currently, researchers have stated that academic qualification is not the sole weighing factor in employability, as it may not establish if the workplace activities are implemented successfully (Civelli, 1998). Soft skills such as human relation skills, communication skills, cognitive skills, personal skills and ethical behaviour skills (Scholarios and Lockyer, 1999; Patrickson and Ransijn, 2003; Shukran et al., 2006) are being regarded as a more important criterion in evaluating employability over degree qualifications (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). Therefore, HEIs need to provide students with the opportunity to develop these skills to cater to the demands of employers who wish to recruit 'work-ready' individuals (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005).

KM and Employability

In order to increase the employability of graduates, HEIs need to conduct a knowledge audit that would analyse the knowledge, skills and abilities already being taught within the institutions while discovering any gaps in the capabilities required by the industries (O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005; Mihail and Elefterie, 2006). The information gained from this knowledge audit would help HEIs determine the training that should be provided to students to create employable graduates (McQuade and Maguire, 2005; Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). Therefore, the knowledge audit could be considered as a needs analysis

and would help to ascertain the existing knowledge as well as gaps in the knowledge base of the HEIs. These gaps can be filled through effective acquisition of knowledge from the right parties.

...HEIs can improve the employability of graduates through active collaboration with industries, retirees, alumni and among staff. The KM process would assist in acquiring the right kind of knowledge from the respective parties and modifying it to suit the current and future requirements of the relevant industries.

The people that could assist HEIs in enhancing their knowledge database as well as create more employable graduates include industry representatives, retired members of the workforce, alumni, staff as well as students of the respective HEIs. Industry representatives would be able to supply information on the skills organisations are expecting in graduates (Hawkrigde, 2005; O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005). Furthermore, retirees have years of experience and they would be a major source of information (Patrickson and Ranzijn, 2003) for HEIs. Also, the alumni would be able to provide information on the needs of the industry while matching it to the existing culture of the HEIs. The academic staff of the HEIs could also assist in creating more employable graduates as well as improve their own lifelong learning by gaining more practical knowledge to enhance their theoretical knowledge (O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005) while the students themselves should be responsible for their own skills and knowledge development towards becoming more employable graduates (Estienne, 1997; Mallough and Kleiner, 2001).

In the KM process of HEIs, acquisition of knowledge could be achieved through collaboration between HEIs and industry representatives, retirees and the alumni (McQuade

and Maguire, 2005; Sharimllah et al., 2007); research among academic staff (Yusof and Suhaimi, 2006) as well as practical training for staff and students (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). It is suggested that both staff and students try to conduct their practical training in smaller organisations as it would allow them to learn a variety of work related tasks (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). By encouraging active collaboration, learning and sharing of knowledge among the various parties, the knowledge and skills of the HEIs would be more industry oriented (Sharimllah et al., 2007).

The knowledge gained could then be used to modify and enhance existing course modules within the HEIs to be more practical - based learning (Hawkrigde, 2005; Noor Hidayah et al., 2006). Besides increasing the know-how of a particular area of work, HEIs can apply the modified knowledge to increase the soft-skills training to suit the demands of the industry (Patrickson and Ranzijn, 2003; Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). In addition, participation in industry challenges and corporate games also helps train students to become more employable as these challenges are based on actual work situations (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). Furthermore, students should be strongly encouraged to participate in co-curricular activities, training programmes and other activities that may assist in enhancing their competencies (Shukran et al., 2006).

Once the knowledge base has been enhanced, the KM process then requires it to be shared and retained within the HEIs so that it could be beneficial to other staff. The knowledge can be shared through discussions with staff members and training junior staff and retained through writing detailed course outlines and teaching manuals (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). HEIs have to promote and support this sharing and retention of knowledge among their faculties to improve lifelong learning within their organisations beyond degree qualifications (O'Donoghue and Maguire, 2005) to make graduates more employable (Estienne, 1997).

Conclusion

To summarise, we can see that the HEIs can improve the employability of graduates through active collaboration with industries, retirees, alumni and among staff. The KM process would assist in acquiring the right kind of knowledge from the respective parties and modifying it to suit the current and future requirements of the relevant industries. This knowledge is then applied, shared among staff and retained in the HEIs through adapted course offerings and practical lessons. The KM process within HEIs would help in improving the knowledge base and become the foundation of how knowledge should be gained and utilised to achieve employable graduates for the continuous growth of the nation.

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