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Significance of Employability Factors: Bangladesh Perspectives

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and
Joanna Crossman

Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore the employability literature and examine its relevance to the context of private university business graduates in Bangladesh, a developing country in South Asia. Given the rapid rise of private universities in Bangladesh and the consequent number of graduating business students, this is an opportune time to explore graduate attributes from these institutions. Such an investigation would serve to guide discussions between employers and business education curriculum developers in Bangladesh and should ultimately have a positive impact upon graduate employability.

Introduction

Graduate employability has recently attracted some interest within business literature (Cranmer, 2006; Duoc & Metzger, 2007) though most research in the area has been undertaken within a Western rather than Asian context. Expanding economies, universities, industrial and social development in Asia however would suggest a need to consider employability factors and give rise to further research within the Asian context. This paper therefore responds to the circumstances described by highlighting current work in the literature and considering the implications for the Bangladeshi context in South Asia. More specifically, the aim is to discuss the benefits of identifying employability factors for employers, tertiary education providers and business graduates in Bangladesh. Since no research in this context appears to exist, a position paper of this nature would appear to be timely and add value to the existing employability literature by identifying issues that arise from within non-western contexts. It is hoped that the paper will give rise to discussions amongst key stakeholders including employers and universities that will be of interest not only to a Bangladeshi audience but to other countries within Asia experiencing similar developments.

The article is organized in three sections. The first section will identify relevant literature on employability; explore some of the theoretical understandings of the concept and the implications amongst Bangladeshi stakeholders (tertiary education providers, employers and graduates). Secondly, the paper situates the discussion about employability against a backdrop of the rapidly rising business education programs in Bangladeshi private universities. Finally, some conclusions and

recommendations for future research directions in this area are discussed.

Employability and Cultural Context

Employability can be defined from employers' and graduates' perspectives (Cranmer, 2006). From an employers' perspective, employability relates to a new graduate's possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and commercial understanding to be effective in achieving organizational objectives (Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2006). Employees view employability as the skills which they need to manage and continue learning throughout their careers (Harvey & Morey, 2003).

Students learn two sets of skills throughout their academic life. Firstly there are those skills that are subject specific or technical that are related to a specific career (Cassidy, 2006; Cox & King, 2006; Pool & Sewell, 2007;) in accounting, statistics or banking, for example. Secondly, non technical skills or employability skills are also relevant across various jobs or professions and are used throughout graduates' working life. Communication, willingness to learn, networking, team-working and ability to work under pressure (Cassidy, 2006; Duoc and Metzger, 2007; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005) serve as examples. Thus, some employability skills are not specific to a particular career but cut horizontally across all industries and vertically through hierarchies of positions within organizations (Sherer & Eadie 1987, p. 16). Employability skills have also been termed as, 'graduate attributes', 'graduate qualities', 'transferable skills', 'core skills', 'generic skills' and 'key competencies' (Cassidy, 2006; Pensiero & Mellveen, 2006;) and all basically refer to those skills required for graduates to be employed

within the community.

Employability factors are found to be contextually different. A cross-cultural study on employability factors by Harvey and Bowers-Brown (2004) revealed that the US, Canada, Finland, Denmark, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand have accepted rather different graduate attributes necessary for employability. To illustrate, within the USA and Canada, universities use critical skills deemed to be required for their workforce. In South Africa, Denmark, and New Zealand, graduate employability factors are measured by a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In Australia, graduates fulfill a 'generally accepted' set of attributes (Cranmer, 2006). Duoc and Metzger (2007) have classified professional competencies, business skills, and personal attributes as important employability factors in Taiwan.

Until very recently, limited research had been undertaken to find out about generic competencies in Asian countries, particularly amongst business graduates. However, Quek (2005) empirically identified generic competencies for successful work performance among Malaysian graduate employees in the field of banking, communication, production, engineering, and computer science. Duoc and Metzger (2007) have also identified 19 variables as important indicators of quality amongst business graduates in Vietnam. The Kember and Leung (2005) study concerned with graduate qualities in Hong Kong was able to isolate 'critical thinking, adaptability, communication skills, problem-solving ability and the capability of working productively in teams'. More specifically, Chisty, Uddin and Ghosh's (2007) paper emphasized improving business graduates' presentation, communication, and analytical and problem solving skills in order to increase employability opportunities in Bangladesh. However, the authors did not make clear the basis upon which these employability criteria were selected. They did nevertheless suggest that universities need to restructure curricula and teaching material, develop linkages between industry and tertiary education to enhance student employability in order to address unemployment within Bangladesh. Similarly, Gupta and Gollakota (2005) observed that within neighboring India there was some evidence to suggest that amongst Indian business graduates further development in communication, critical thinking, information technology and teamwork was needed.

Asian nations are rapidly developing in a climate of increased industrialization, multinational investment

and mass education. Globalizing forces have also contributed to the rising mobility of both career expatriates and students giving rise to new international perspectives in the literature on graduate qualities suggesting that a shift in focus from the merely national is required (Harvey & Bowers-Brown 2004). Existing literature has also illuminated specific lines of interest running through employability research. These include, the transition of graduates to the workplace (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Holden & Hamblett, 2007; Pensiero & Mellveen, 2006), employer expectations of business graduates (Rothwell, Herbert & Rothwell, 2008) and models of employability (Pool & Sewell, 2006). To date, there would appear to be plenty of scope in terms of exploring these lines of enquiry within the Bangladesh setting. However, it is first necessary to identify what employability means to the business graduates, employers, and tertiary education providers in Bangladesh.

The Stakeholders of Employability

As stakeholders, universities, employers and students benefit from knowing about employability skills (Cox & King, 2006). The assessment of employability skills is important for the universities' ongoing commitment towards enhancing graduate employability skills. The identification of graduate attributes assists university management in introducing new courses, modifying existing ones and enhancing strategic relationships with the employers. Individual academics do perceive graduate attributes differently however and as a result, varied perspectives will impact on the curricula development as well as the teaching and learning of the respective programs and these differences have given rise to calls for dialogue between universities and employers to identify mutually agreed core graduate attributes (Barrie, 2004; Barrie, 2006). Much less research has been conducted on student perspectives on employability attributes as opposed to other stakeholders involved (Shah, Pell & Brooke, 2004).

Western researchers have identified varied attributes believed to be associated with graduate employability (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). Graduates able to embrace change are highly regarded by employers, for example (Duoc & Metzger, 2007). Context in terms of nations, cultures and particular industries will however influence perspectives on desirable employability skills. The challenge for universities lies in the fact that learning for graduate attributes cannot be entirely undertaken in classrooms

(Cranmer 2006) and the consequent perceived limitations of current curriculum is a matter of some concern (Cox & King, 2006; Wanken & DeFillippi, 2006, p. xi). Essentially, universities need to develop graduates able to make connections “between theory and practice, between knowing and doing, and between rigor and relevance” (Wanken & DeFillippi, 2006, p. xi). In other words, there is a perception that only experiential learning in Business education can adequately prepare graduates for working life. Despite these reservations, evidence suggests that students opt for a business degree expecting varied career options, advancements, and greater earning potential (Cox & King, 2006; Inderrieden, Holtom & Bies, 2006, pp. 3–5) and indeed there are good reasons for them to hold these perceptions given that the Inderrieden et al. study (2006) undertaken in the US found that graduates with an MBA degree did indeed command higher salaries and a greater chance of promotions than non-MBAs. In other words, it appears that a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) is positively associated with graduate skills, employability, compensation, and career advancement in the Western context (Mihail & Elefterie, 2006).

Business Education through Private Universities in Bangladesh

Amongst the great changes that have occurred within university education landscape of Bangladesh over the last two decades (Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO, 2004), the rapid growth of private universities is perhaps the most salient. A number of factors have contributed to their emergence. Firstly, heightened demographic pressure has affected the number of people who aspire to higher education (Ahmad, 2004, p. 137; IUB, 1997). Secondly, private universities have been viewed as an alternative to ‘session jams’ (Ahmad ed, 2000; IUB, 1997; Lamagna, Sharif & Islam, 2004) and a perception of deteriorating quality (Ahmad ed, 2000, pp. 19-26; IUB, 1997; Mahmud, 2002) within public universities. The term “Session jams” refers to a situation where the students cannot complete their degree on time (Alam et al., 2003; Ahmad ed, 2000, p. 33; IUB, 1997) in public universities because of student and teacher strikes (Ahmad ed, 2000, p. 35), political unrest (Ahmad ed, 2000, p. 34; IUB, 1997), and failure to conduct classes, examinations and publish exam results on schedule (Ahmad ed, 2000, p. 35). Alam et al., (2003) for example, have noted attractiveness of private universities as a result of better student-teacher ratios (1:10), effective physical resources, computer (internet) access, close academic supervision, well organized approaches to orientation

for both new students and staff and most importantly these institutions are free of session jams.

Thirdly, the delivery of business programs in private universities has been implemented as a strategy to reduce the ‘brain drain’ from Bangladesh to largely western education systems (Ahmad, 2004, p. 46; IUB, 1997; Lamagna et al., 2004). Certainly, private universities in Bangladesh follow the North American model of university education in that they are based upon a semester and credit system (Ahmad, 2004, p.140; Alam, Haque & Siddique, 2003; Huq, 2002; Islam, 2007).

Of interest to employers in Bangladesh is the widespread delivery of business programs within these universities (Alam et al., 2003) that are able to cater to the rising number of prospective students in this field (Ahmad, 2004; p. 138; Islam, 2007; Rahman, 2004). Some satisfaction with the quality of graduates amongst employers may be assumed from reports of the relative ease business graduates have in finding employment (Ahmad, 2004, p.138; Karim, 2006; Kim, Markham & Cangelosi, 2002). Shahjahan (2002) too has indicated that multinational banks and other business organizations are increasingly recruiting private university business graduates. The relationship between the quality of private university business programs and employability has not yet been thoroughly established however and signals of the level of quality in business programs of private universities appears to be a matter of ongoing discussion.

A handful of studies have been undertaken on the operations of private universities of Bangladesh (ADBI, 2000; Alam & Haque, 2002; Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO, 2004; Hopper, 1998; World Bank, 1999). One of the major issues that have been identified in these studies relates to the quality of education provided by the private universities. In recent years, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the regulatory authority of the universities in Bangladesh initiated the process of assessing the quality of education provided by the private universities in response to constant criticism of the operations of the private universities.

Whilst private universities are perceived as bringing an international standard to tertiary education at a reasonable tuition fee for the masses (Lamagna et al., 2004), it in fact comes with a high price tag (Hopper, 1998; Rahman, 2004) and is reputedly dogged by a shortage of qualified faculty members (Islam, 2007; Rahman, 2004), insufficient resources (Islam, 2007), and an ambiguous attitude of the government towards

these universities (ADB, 2000). In addition, concerns about poor governance of private universities in terms of recruitment, management and the development of departments (Shahjahan, 2002) may not be adequately monitored within the remit of the existing 1992 Private University Act (Islam, 2007).

Employment opportunities are no doubt also related to the economic development of the business sector in Bangladesh over the last two decades with increased operations of multinational companies, growing investment in private sector enterprises, and expansion in the service sectors. A perception also exists that business-educated students from private universities demonstrate highly developed communication skills compared with non-business graduates (Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO, 2004; Karim, 2006; Rahman, 2004). Unsurprisingly, intensive economic development has also led to a higher demand for market driven subjects such as business administration, computer science and engineering (Alam et al., 2003) given what appears to be a positive employment environment for graduates of these programs.

Conclusion

Whilst the current buoyant economy in Bangladesh has encouraged high levels of employment for business graduates, it cannot be assumed that this happy state of affairs necessarily reflects an alignment between graduate qualities and employer needs. Establishing the relationship between the two would require an in depth research. The perspectives of graduates, employers, and tertiary education providers as stakeholders would need to be sought in order to provide a holistic view of complex employability factors. Pursuing an enquiry along these lines may also throw some light on perceptions of quality in the business programs of private universities and prove timely given the rapid rise of private universities in Bangladesh and increased numbers of graduates who require guidance when making decisions about the programs and universities that would best serve their learning and long term career plans.

Whilst the call for the development of international graduate attributes has much to commend it in an age of globalization, no nation can adequately assess the applicability or relevance of any model developed on these lines unless there is sufficient information about what local employers currently expect from graduates and the extent to which they perceive local universities are able to provide it. Understanding the

requirements of local employers is of course not only a matter of concern for private universities but also for all institutions charged with the higher education of a nation. In other words, the outcomes and implications will be directed to the interests of a broader educational community beyond that of private higher education providers.

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