

# UNIVERSITIES' ROLE IN ENHANCING GENERIC COMPETENCIES IN MULTICULTURAL STUDENTS

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The current competitive economic environment implies that graduates should have besides the area specific academic knowledge a range of transferable skills. This study investigates the transferable skills that graduates should acquire to enhance their chances in the employment market. The study also touches on the contemporary challenges facing universities. The primary research was conducted throughout a set of semi-structured interviews involving key staff from the technology transfer units in two Scottish universities as a proxy to employers. In Addition, a questionnaire was sent to a sample of 100 multicultural postgraduate students in Scotland, Dubai and Russia. The findings display a ranking of the transferable skills portraying the students' perception about the effectiveness of the university's role in preparing graduates for the employment market. The results reflect a gap in perceptions between students and employers. Also the three groups surveyed had different expectations regarding the skills students should acquire through higher education to enhance their employability. Finally the paper concludes by suggesting that universities still need to take actions to narrow this gap in expectations and perceptions by further strengthening the links between the academic world and the industry meanwhile involving students in this bilateral context.

Keywords: culture, employability, graduates, transferable skills.

## INTRODUCTION

In the past universities primarily fulfilled two functions; to prepare students to occupy managerial positions and to provide resources for research. Now-a-days preparing students for future careers has become a priority (Cox and King, 2006).

In 1965, approximately 30,000 graduates joined the labour market. Forty years later, this number increased to 300,000. This pool of graduates is also more diverse in character (Perryman, 2003 and Nabi *et al.*, 2006). These figures are set to continue to grow given the UK government's announced policy aiming to reach a target of 50 per cent of young people joining higher education (HE) by 2010.

There seems to be a common perception that the well being of a University depends on the successful marketing of its core competence: developing and teaching new courses and producing quality research that is valued by the industry. Universities are encouraged to innovatively exploit research ideas by becoming more market oriented. Licensing, patenting, and looking for commercialization opportunities involve scrupulous market research, sensitive information handling and many other aspects. The inclusion of students into such activities can add value to both students and university alike.

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This study focuses on identifying the graduate skills as well as the role the university plays to enhance graduates' employability meanwhile facing the contemporary challenges. The study embraces both graduates' and employers' view point with more emphasis on the students perception of the effectiveness of the university in providing graduates with the essential transferable skills required in the employment market.

## **GRADUATE SKILLS AND THE EMPLOYMENT MARKET**

The current competitive economic environment implies that future managers should have the knowledge of an academic subject, as well as a range of portable skills that harness growing knowledge, technology, and engineering advances. Management education, therefore, needs to overhaul not only its content and delivery modes, but also the way in which it is used to promote the knowledge management process in organizations (Liyanage and Poon, 2003). Moreover, a wide acknowledgement of work based learning is a vital and legitimate aspect of Higher Education's (HE) future development. A wealth of research in educational literature (Nabi and Bagley, 1999; Fallows and Stevens, 2000; Morgan and Turner, 2000, Stewart and Knowles, 1999) indicated the following:

- A deficit in graduate skills, emanating from a mismatch between the skills set of graduates and the general skills valued by employers.
- The high importance assigned to work experience by a growing number of graduate recruiters who no longer see academic competence alone as sufficient.
- The likelihood that many graduates will discover that a degree by itself does not guarantee candidature for a desired job.
- The likelihood that many graduates will find the transition from education to employment an easier one to make when the pools of knowledge acquired in an academic discipline are matched with appropriate technical, communicative, administrative and interpersonal skills.
- Employers are starting to expect a degree as a "must have" requirement when applying for a job.

Research into vacancies posted on the web by companies which recruit graduates indicated that they expect graduates to have at least a 2:1 degree, a relevant work experience and demonstrate analytical thinking, competence in organizing, problem solving, managing information, IT, numerical interpretation and research. According to Fallows and Steven (2000), employability skills include: the retrieval and handling of information; communication and presentation; planning and problem solving; and social development and interaction. Cox and King (2006) articulated a point of view that employability is valued differently by different stakeholders. The success of university graduates in the employment market results in a better reputation for a given university thus attracting a higher calibre of prospective students. For employers, employability skills reflect the abilities of recent graduates to perform work immediately without further training. However, Bennett (2002) argues that this is not the case anymore and employers being more responsive to changing market needs and seeking to employ "flexible and adaptable workforce" have to provide further training.

Students are mostly looking for a degree which provides them with a wide knowledge base thus improving their employment opportunities (O'Brien and Deans, 1995). Employability for students means to get higher education and increase their possibility of getting their desired job. The more they stay in university, the more additional costs they incur and hopefully the more they enhance their chances in the employment market. This can only be seen as a rational decision in the expectation to enhance earnings later (Woodley, 2001). There is no common view on the employability skills. Stewart and Knowles (1999) provide their three-way classification as shown in Table 1. A more comprehensive list of transferable skills or employability skills was provided by Stewart and Knowles (1999) as shown in Table 2.

**Table 1:** Source: Department for Education and Skills, Labour Market Skills and Trends, 1997/98

Skill Heading	Definition
Key (or core) Skills	Very general skills needed in almost any job. They include basic literacy and numeracy and a range of personal transferable skills such as the ability to work week with others, communication skills, self motivation, the ability to organize one's own work and, often, a basic capability to use information technology.
Vocational skills	Needed in particular occupation or groups of occupations, but are less useful outside of these areas. While they are less general than key skills, they are nonetheless highly transferable between jobs in a given field.
Job specific Skills	The usefulness of these is limited to a much narrower field of employment. They are forms of knowledge rather than skills as traditionally defined and could be specific to individual firms.

**Table 2:** Transferable Skills Source: Career advice and Employment Service, (1997b, p.18)

Transferable skills and qualities	Definition
Communication Skills	Ability to communicate clearly and persuasively, both verbally and in writing.
Creativity	Ability to generate ideas and options and to initiate new ideas when necessary
Initiative	Ability to see difficulties and act upon them. Willingness to make things happen and to take an independent stance when necessary
Interpersonal/Social Skills	Capacity to establish good working relationship with customers, clients and colleagues is important for most work roles.
Leadership	Having self-confidence, impact and the ability to influence others, willingness to take an independent line and the ability to earn the respect of others.
Motivation	Drive and determination to achieve results and the tenacity and perseverance to attain goals in difficult circumstances.
Organizational ability	Ability to establish appropriate course of action, to achieve goals anticipate needs and set priorities.
Problem Solving	Identifying problems, recognizing important data, making logical decisions
Teamwork	Willingness to work as an effective team member, involving others to forward your own ideas and solve problems, utilizing the skills of tem members and being open to ideas and suggestions of others.

Johnston and Watson (2004) discussed both *hard* skills and *soft* skills and stated that employers demands stipulate skills in numeracy and information technology as well as soft skills mainly “communication” and “team working”. Cox and King (2006) distinguish two types of skills a recent graduate can offer; transferable skills and

subject skills, arguing that both of them are equally important to the successful job hunt.

## **CORPORATE UNIVERSITY**

A number of initiatives aimed at improving graduate employability have been developed throughout the HE sector. Work based learning degree programmes which see existing HE programmes either translated into a form that can be delivered in the workplace, or mapped against the learning in a specific job role, now permeate the HE landscape. Also flexible programmes were developed and tailored to meet the needs of particular organizations. (Thomas and Grimes, 2003)

Gibbs and Constanti (2004) suggest viewing higher education as a workplace that operates 'in the managerialism paradigm, and that the present (UK) Government's discourse is that of the market. Within this discourse, academic institutions can be conceptualized as service providers aiming at satisfying the needs of their customers; students and businesses alike.

Globalization coupled with both the knowledge-based economy and the rapid technological advancement play a significant role in transforming the traditional role of universities. Knowledge creation and dissemination of information are now becoming more fragmented. The university is no longer an autonomous self-contained system and some scholars argue that the university has lost its intellectual monopoly (Hagen, 2002).

Universities are facing a number of challenges (Hoorebeek and Marson, 2005) such as:

1. Universities are no longer funded from traditional sources to the same level as before;
2. The government expects universities to become self sufficient;
3. The range of competitors has increased;
4. New technologies are changing the conventional way of teaching;
5. Charitable donations to the higher education sector are decreasing.

Therefore, finding alternative revenue sources is becoming an important factor in higher education and university departments are continually looking into various alternatives to increase institutional funding.

There is a strong need for traditional universities to operate as independent businesses and to investigate a range of novel income generating and fund raising activities to supplement their core activities. The term "corporate university" has been coined recently to reflect the fact that traditional universities are more concerned with issues of profit and loss and competing in the marketplace than they were in the past. A corporate university tends to 'align corporate learning to business strategies, develop strategic learning alliances with external providers, create a learning environment through technology, develop and implement innovative marketing and branding techniques and measure the value of an organization's investment in learning' (Walton 2005).

Commercialization in university may take a "spin-off" form; that is a new company whereby the intellectual capital originates from a university or public research institution and is created for the purpose of commercially exploiting knowledge, technology, or research results developed within a university. (Gübeli and Doloreux, 2005).

Looking at a broader picture of how universities contribute to the prosperity of the country, commercialization of a technology encourages competition and provides an opportunity to competitors to improve their own efforts to introduce new products (Bose and Oh, 2004).

Universities explore opportunities in innovation, commercialization and technology transfer and look into ways to develop and improve transferable skills of graduates. The efficiency of such a transformation of universities into business oriented entities is not unanimous. However, it is being encouraged that universities should have a role in the economic development, in collaboration with government and industry (Hagen, 2002).

## **DATA COLLECTION**

The data collection was conducted through two phases. The first phase comprised semi-structured interviews with 4 members of the staff in technology transfer centres within two universities in Edinburgh and the second phase was to distribute a graduate skills questionnaire to post-graduate students in Edinburgh (U.K.), Dubai (U.A.E.), and Siberia (Russia). Initially 6 members of staff were approached for interviews to address the issue of transferable skills and their importance to enhance the employability of students on postgraduate courses upon their graduation. However, two were not available and only four interviews took place. The purposive sampling of the interviewees was a proxy to employers' perception meanwhile ensuring the awareness of the challenges that face both universities and students hence providing realistic and practical view and recommendations. The information gathered in the interviews provided useful guidance for the construction of the questionnaires.

The interviews started by asking the interviewees to identify the most important soft skills that students should acquire in order to obtain a competitive advantage in the employment market. As part of their job, the interviewees are either responsible or take part in the recruitment of required staff for the technology transfer units. In all four interviews, the skills identified were either some or all of those included in Stewart and Knowles (1999) list as shown in Table 2 thus validating the use of this list as the basis for constructing the questionnaire. At the end of each interview, interviewees were asked to rank the skills in the aforementioned list to reflect the interviewee's perception on the relative importance of different skill from an employer's point of view. The results are shown in Table 3. In addition the interviews shed some light on the applicability of utilizing the technology transfer units in enhancing students' transferable skills of students especially those studying post-graduate courses during the period they spend in university and whilst working on their postgraduate degrees. Based on the interviews, a questionnaire that included the 9 factors was constructed and distributed to students.

The sample included 100 students on postgraduate courses mostly in management in Edinburgh, Dubai and Russia. The sample mostly comprised students with work experience in management in general and project management in particular. However, it is worth noting that students included in the sample come from different disciplines with regard to their first degree including; construction, IT, engineering, management and languages

**Table 3:** Results of interview: Ranking of skills

Interviewee (1)	Interviewee (2)	Interviewee (3)	Interviewee (4)
1. Initiative	1. Initiative	1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Creativity	2. Motivation	2. Motivation	2. Interpersonal skills / Team working
3. Problem solving	3. Problem solving	3. Creativity	3. Creativity/ Initiative
4. Communication	4. Team working	4. Interpersonal skills	4. Motivation
5. Motivation	5. Communication	5. Initiative	5. Problem solving
6. Interpersonal skills	6. Organizational ability	6. Team working	6. Organizational ability/leadership potential
7. Organizational ability	7. Interpersonal skills	7. Problem solving	
8. Team working	8. Creativity	8. Organizational ability	
9. Leadership potential	9. Leadership potential	9. Leadership potential	

Students were asked to categorize the skills on the list in Table 2 into two main categories important or not important for the employment market. Students were also asked to pinpoint which of those skills are not provided by the university based on their experience in studying undergraduate and post graduate courses. Last, students were asked to rank the skills on the list to reflect on their perception of the relative importance of different skills.

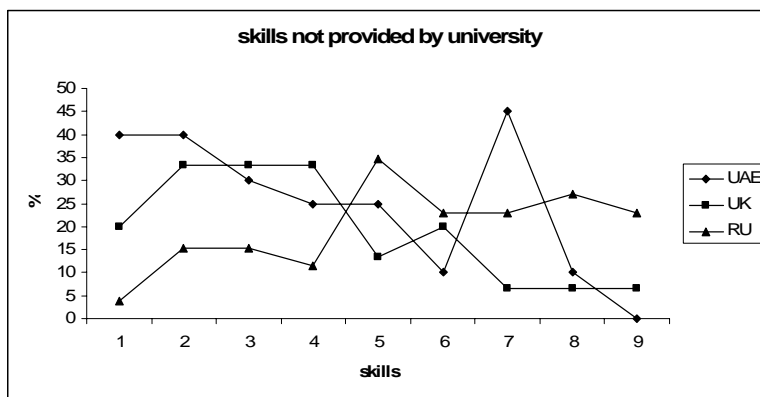
Only 61 students responded classified as follows: 20 from U.A.E; 15 from U.K. and 26 from Russia. The data collected were tallied in percentage frequency tables and plotted graphically as shown in figures 1,2 and 3 where the X- axis represents the skills in the same order as in the list in Table 2 and the Y-axis represent the percentage of frequencies. For example, in Figure 1 the first point shows that 100% of the respondents in both U.A.E. and U.K. see (1) that is communication skills as important for employability whereas less than 40% of the respondents from Russia regard (2) that is creativity in Table 2 as an important skill for the employment market. The third question where respondents were asked to rank the skills served in testing the consistency of the answers provided for the first question asking about the importance besides being more focused on the relative importance of different skills from the students' perspective.

## DISCUSSION

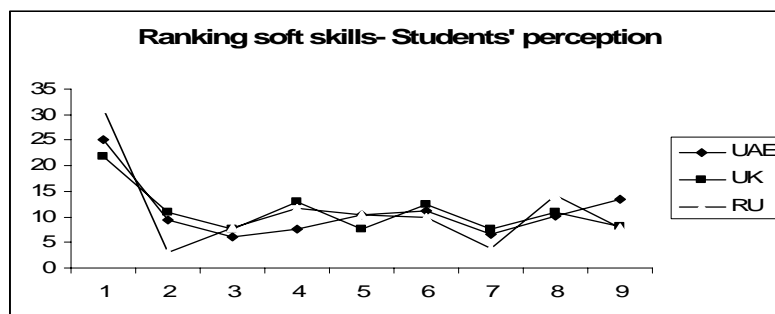
The interviews reflected on the different perspectives regarding the relative importance of transferable skills amongst employers despite the apparent commonalities being in the same industry and moreover the same business environment that is research commercialization in the UK and in Scotland in particular. If projected to the wider context of business in a global multicultural market, it is reasonable to assume that the variation will be significant. However, the interviews portrays a consensus about the whole package of skills graduates should acquire in order to enhance their chances in the hyper-competitive employment market.



**Figure 1:** Skills perceived by Students as important for employment



**Figure 2:** Skills that are not provided by university – Students’ Perspective



**Figure 3:** Ranking Skill from Students Perspective

All four participants ranked leadership potential at the bottom of the list conveying a common view that the business will still survive even if employees lack the potential to become effective leaders unlike other skills such as communication, initiative, motivation and interpersonal skills. It is worth noting that all four participants being key members of staff in the technology transfer units are working in close proximity to the academic world that emphasizes the importance of leadership through a wide range of modules and active research on this area. Hence it might be a reasonable assumption that this view will be shared amongst other employers in different market sectors.

The interviews discussed the applicability of utilizing the technology transfer units in developing and furthermore enhancing the post graduate students’ transferable skills. The respondents highlighted the following reservations: 1- this process has to be

factored in the design and aligned with the post graduate courses on offer 2- the variable capacity of technology transfer units over time due to the variation in projects hence this may result in a gap between the demand and supply at least in the short term 3- the nature of the activities undertaken by those units that mostly requires high levels of confidentiality thus limiting the participation of students and leading to lesser numbers needed.

On the other hand, where those reservations can be overcome, there is no doubt that students will benefit out of the experience by enhancing their transferable skills in a practical context meanwhile in a learning set up and under academic supervision and assessment coupled with valuable feedback.

The results from the questionnaire reflect the students' perception on the important skills that should provide them with competitive advantage in the employment market. There are three main significant findings that need discussion; 1) the variation amongst different cultures about the relative importance of the identified transferable skills for the employment market; 2) the comparison between what is provided and what is needed for the employment market and 3) the significant difference in perspectives between students and members of staff about the relative importance of the transferable skills identified.

On the first finding, there seems to be a consensus among the three groups on the significant importance of communication, interpersonal skills, motivation, problem solving and team work being the most important skills for employment with more than 50% votes. However, the sample from Russia unlike U.A.E. and U.K. see creativity (innovation) as less important for employment.

The second finding illustrates a relative gap between skills that are perceived as important by students and the level of enhancement attained through university courses. In Dubai for example, nearly 40% of respondents do not see that university fulfilled its role in enhancing their communication, organizational ability and innovation skills. In Edinburgh, more than third the respondents highlight the shortage in developing their creativity, initiative and interpersonal skills despite the growing attention towards innovation management portrayed in dedicating complete modules to address this topic. In Siberia, the respondents reflected on the lack of emphasis on leadership, motivation, organizational ability, problem solving and team work skills unlike the case in Dubai and Edinburgh where minimal percentage portrayed their dissatisfaction with regard to problem solving and team work as skills provided by the university.

The third finding reflects that over and above the above mentioned disparity among different cultures, there is a significant difference between employers and students' perspective about the relative importance of the identified transferable skills. Leadership that is identified by all four interviewees as the least important is perceived by the sample from Dubai as more important than initiative, organizational ability, creativity and interpersonal skills. Also the sample from Russia rank leadership as more important than creativity, initiative, organizational ability and team work skills. The sample from the UK on the other hand seems to agree with the interviews results with regards to leadership amongst the least important skills for employment thus highlighting another dimension of the cultural effect. However, the three samples despite any cultural differences agree to the dominant significance of the importance of communication skills being the most important amongst the



identified skills for employment in contradiction with the interviews where the first two interviewees ranked communication as forth and fifth respectively.

## CONCLUSION

The study investigates the different perceptions about transferable skills that are essential to provide students with competitive advantage in the employment market. The literature review leads to identifying a list of the most important skills and their definitions set by Stewart and Knowles (1999). The primary research highlights the disparity in perception of the relative importance of different transferable skills; 1) among students from different cultures, 2) between students in general and employers and 3) amid employers even within the same discipline. However, there is an agreement on the overall set of skills needed to enhance students' employability in congruency with the literature as per the list in Table 2. The multicultural sample of students who took part in the survey draws the attention that despite the apparent advancement and development in delivery methods such as problem based learning, projects, team-based assignments and peer review, still a considerable percentage of graduates believe that the university did not provide them with the transferable skills essential in the employment market. This seems to prevail across different cultures despite at various levels.

The study suggests the need for further actions to be taken by the university towards narrowing the gap in expectations primarily by reinforcing the links between the academic world and the industries meanwhile involving students in this collaborative bilateral relationship. Also by delivering skills development sessions across the different disciplines and tailored for the progressive needs of students at various levels during their study in conjunction with the industry. The useful utilization of activities such as internships, professional guest speakers and company visits will develop the students' awareness of the needed skills for their pursued career later on from as early as their first year at university. This should contribute to more effective learning and a better match between what should be acquired and what is actually gained at the end of the students' journey in HE. The study suggests that universities may need to show more enthusiasm on such activities in linkage with the industry similar to the persistent pursuit of research funds and projects.

## LIMITATION AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS

The study draws the attention to the need for further detailed studies to explore this multivariable topic. There is a need to test and furthermore discuss the hypothesis that there is discrepancy between students and employers' perception about the relative importance of transferable skills across different disciplines and cultures. Also students across different cultures seem to have different expectations about the skills they acquire during their higher education which inflicts on their perception about the effectiveness of the role of universities in preparing them for employment. The samples size for both interviews and survey limit the findings of this study as creating awareness and setting direction for further detailed studies aiming for generalizable results.

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