

Innovate Higher Education to Enhance Graduate Employability

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ABSTRACT

The Researcher Links Workshop was designed on how to innovate higher education to enhance graduate employability. A total of 34 early career researchers consisted of 20, 13, and one from Thailand, United Kingdom, and Vietnam respectively was selected as workshop participants. Researcher employed focus-group interview as a means of qualitative data collection amongst participants. These participants came to share and discuss scientifically what should be done to secure win-win solutions for improving the quality of higher education, increasing graduates' employability, and boosting the economy. The 34 participants were identified as influential change agents in transforming their teaching, learning environments, and research that reflecting on their pedagogical practice in working with students and industries. Thematic analysis was used to analyze individual data, as well as focus-group data. Since the workshop was planned to achieve the main aims including forming networking, knowledge transfer and change, research

skills development as well as spreading effects related to innovative research, teaching, and industrial links, a study was carried out to measure the impacts from this workshop. The results revealed that there were five different mechanisms by which to enhance graduate employability, namely employers' involvement in course design; using technology to enhance employability; preparing graduates to apply theory in practice, educational challenges to the global manufacturing industry, and soft skills development to enhance employability. In conclusion, the results

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contribute significantly to knowledge with regard to the development of the employability agenda in practice.

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INTRODUCTION

University graduates' employability has become a major concern of higher education institutions, their graduates, and society. Employability is referred as a multi-dimensional concept. Knight (2002) and Yorke (2003) defined employability as a synergic blend of personal abilities, skills of numerous types and subject understanding. Many previous researchers showed evidence that there was a vibrant association between graduate employability and their participation in authentic learning undertakings (Finch et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2014; Sumanasiri et al., 2015). In other words, once lecturers learn of their students' learning potential through a series of knowledge-exchange learning activities and relevant systems theories and practices, in return, they will work collectively to transform the higher education institutions innovatively toward enhancing their students' employability.

Mason et al. (2009) referred 'employability' as 'work-readiness' in term of skills, acquaintance, assertiveness, and viable understanding proprietorship thus supported university graduates to create fruitful aids to organizational intentions immediately after initial employment. The

construction between higher education and the economy is long-lasting and it is considered as a global issue. Therefore, the principal role of higher education is to convert graduates by improving their acquaintance, skills, approaches, and abilities and simultaneously permitting them as life-long, critical, and reflective learners (Harvey, 2000). This attention in employability is allied with innovative human capital theories and economic enactment. The higher education system is, therefore, being navigated to channel greater prominence on the graduates' employability (Maharasoia & Hay, 2001).

A Researcher Links Workshop titled as 'Innovate Higher Education to Enhance Graduate Employability' was aimed at how to innovate higher education for graduate employability in the knowledge economy which was conducted from 31st July to 3rd August 2017 at Asia Hotel Bangkok, Thailand. A total of 34 early career researchers consisted of 20 from Thailand, 13 from the United Kingdom, and one from Vietnam joined the workshop to share and discuss scientifically what should be done to secure win-win solutions for improving the quality of higher education, increasing students' employability, and boosting the economy. Since this Newton Fund Researcher Links Workshop was aimed to build the United Kingdom and Thailand collaborations centered on shared research and innovation challenges, the immediate benefit of the workshop is to provide higher education and policy makers a big picture of the interconnected

among research, teaching, and industrial partnerships that has been neglected in Thailand for so long. In addition, the long-term benefit of the workshop is to promote further collaborations between the United Kingdom and Thai researchers in connection with industries in the area of higher education innovation for sustainable development.

Literature Review

Holmes (2001) found that there was a necessity for an unconventional method to recognizing the complication of human conduct because most of the employability studies were based on skill approach. In order to identify this alternative approach for employability, undergraduate curriculums in higher education institutions must be enhanced. This is further supported by Knight and Yorke (2002) that employability could be inserted in any subject curriculum deprived of conceding academic autonomy or stakeholder prospects of present academic significance. Consequently, Knight and Yorke presented the USEM (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs, and Meta-cognition) model and reflected as a main progress in employability investigations with respect to additional constructs including skills, subject understanding, meta-cognition, and personal potentials.

Brown et al. (2003) studied on the concern of academics pertaining to evolving common skills and causing upsurges in employability. Brown et al. questioned the discerning behind the key skills and cost-effectiveness development initiatives.

Hence, Brown et al. enquired the realism of foremost curriculum deviations in a setting of inadequate aid, and suggested additional responsiveness is assumed in the direction of post-graduates induction programs than the pre-graduation period. Besides, Tomlinson (2007) highlighted that the switch from university to workplace entailed a dynamic participation for graduates who deliberated that employability was a vital matter that must be magnificently accomplished. Sumanasiri et al. (2015) further stated that employability advance process comprised enhancements in graduate profile, credentials, attitude, and labor market strategies while the tensions, pressures, and disappointment management also performed a crucial role as well.

Finch et al.'s (2013) study clearly demonstrated that employers placed the highest rate on soft skills and lowest rate on academic reputation. They further acknowledged the employability factors in descending order of priority was listening skills, interpersonal skills, verbal communication skills, critical thinking skills, professionalism, written communication skills, creative thinking skills, adaptability, professional confidence, job-specific competencies, leadership skills, work experience, job-specific technical skills, academic performance, program reputation, knowledge of software, and institutional reputation. In short, their findings indicated that enhancements to new graduates' employment must emphasis on learning consequences which were associated to soft skills development.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To conclude the above literature review associated to the graduate employability, the researcher found the different interpretations on stakeholders' perceived employability concept. Employability hinges on not only the graduates' attributes for instance subject knowledge, practice, skills, and character qualities, but also on the faculty, curriculum, and instruction in university systems, in addition on the companies who employ the graduates and their prospects. However, only limited number of studies has engrossed on significant and conceptualization stages of employability (Mason et al., 2009).

This study was triggered by the internationalization of higher education and current socio-economic development of Thailand, where higher education institution is struggling to compete with its partners in the Asian region in terms of graduate employability. On this line of reasoning, this study aims to innovate higher education through developing learning, research, and teaching capacity to enhance students' employability.

This four-day workshop was essentially sought to interrogate the extent to which two different cultures participants share their understandings and expectations of employability; and how diverse and varied understandings and expectations of employability inform the way higher education societies and cultures respond to students' employability challenges.

METHODS

The researcher employed a qualitative

method by way of a logical particular method utilized to pronounce experiences and situations to give them meaning (Burns & Grove, 2003). The rationale for using this research design was to discover and pronounce the views and experiences of higher education practitioners regarding their innovative methods to enhance graduate employability. A qualitative approach was suitable to seizure the views and experiences during several discussion sessions throughout the four-day workshop. The researcher utilized Morse and Field's (1996) approach which intricated three phases, namely the conceptual, narrative, and interpretative phases.

In the conceptual phase, the researcher conducted a literature review to explain the concept and content of graduate employability. It was needed for the researcher to do linking to put aside any preconceived ideas about the enhancement of graduate employability while developing her research questions. The narrative phase elaborated arrangement the research design and the researcher herself would be the core data collection instrument. A preliminary study was piloted with three participants who encountered the sampling standards and would not take part in the actual study. Finally, the interpretation phase is the experiential research phase involved data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Data collection comprised qualitative evidence that was collected during the discussion sessions. The researcher correspondingly explored articles to comprehend the setting of the enhancement of graduate

employability, for the purpose of providing a view of reality.

The research sample was all the 34 participants who had registered as participants of the Researcher Links Workshop. They comprised 13 United Kingdom participants, 20 Thai participants, and one Vietnamese participant. These participants must meet the criteria of the workshop set by the Newton Fund in collaboration between Thailand Research Fund and British Council that is they were early career researchers who had been awarded their Ph.D. not more than 10 years prior to the workshop or to have equivalent experience, with allowances made for career breaks. If a researcher did not hold a Ph.D. but had research experience equivalent to a Ph.D. holder and worked in a field where a Ph.D. was not a pre-requisite for established research activity, they could still be considered eligible. Participants must be from non-profit organizations. A carefully selected sample was carried out by Thai and United Kingdom workshop coordinators respectively. Table 1 shows the list of workshop participants and their institutions.

Data were collected during the six discussion sessions after those participants presented their research verbally through the four-day workshop. Attaining data from participants with diverse practice enriches the evidence and therefore accumulative the reliability of the data (Parahoo, 1997). A workshop discussion is an interaction between one or more participants and more than one participant for the purpose of assembling data (Parahoo, 1997). The

researcher utilized this method for the determination of stimulating impressions, thoughts, and views about graduate employability enhancements linked to higher education (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002).

In this research, the researcher herself was the principal data collection instrument because the data from participants were arguments in the setting of the research problem (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). This method permitted larger autonomy in case responses, therefore, the participants would deliver detailed evidence concerning the graduate employability phenomenon. To guarantee the reliability of the data, the researcher video recorded those participants' views and experiences along the six discussion sessions. In order to allow flexibility in the data collection, the participants were not influenced by the researcher's preceding knowledge of the phenomenon, but by their individual understanding (Polit et al., 2001). The method used to analyze the qualitative data was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researcher measured and examined the occurrence, connotations, and associations of such arguments and ideas, then made implications about the messages within the transcripts.

RESULTS

Results of the six discussion sessions are presented in accordance with the two research objectives which are indicated

Table 1
Workshop participants and their institutions

Country	Institution	Participant indication	No of participants
Thailand	Khon Kaen University	P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P19	6
Thailand	Chiang Mai University	P2, P3, P10	3
Thailand	Kasetsart University	P4, P8, P17	3
Thailand	Shinawatra University	P7, P20	2
Thailand	Stanford International University	P1	1
Thailand	Mae Fah Luang University	P5	1
Thailand	University of Phaoyao	P6	1
Thailand	Chulalongkorn University	P9	1
Thailand	Ubon Ratchathani University	P18	1
Thailand	Nhongsakamwittayakorn School	P16	1
United Kingdom	University of Nottingham	P23, P27	2
United Kingdom	University of Westminster	P30, P32	2
United Kingdom	University of the West of England	P21	1
United Kingdom	Fanshawe College	P22	1
United Kingdom	University of Brighton	P24	1
United Kingdom	University of Bath	P25	1
United Kingdom	De Montfort University Leicester	P26	1
United Kingdom	London Deanery	P28	1
United Kingdom	Robert Gordon University	P29	1
United Kingdom	Southampton University	P31	1
United Kingdom	Higher Education Academy	P33	1
Vietnam	Nguyen Tat Thanh University	P34	1

above. The research objectives provided the structure and focus of workshop discussion. A number of recurring themes emerged. The initial result is the participants' understanding and expectations of employability. This is followed by how diverse and varied understandings and expectations of employability inform

the way higher education societies and cultures respond to students' employability challenges according to the participants' views and experiences. The following is the summary of such themes and reflects on some of the key results of the workshop discussion.

Participants' Understanding and Expectations of Employability

Majority of participants were very positive toward their higher education performance in terms of graduate employability. Generally, the United Kingdom participants defined graduate employability as 77.5% of the graduates consistently outperformed the higher education sector in professional or managerial jobs after six months of their graduation or 95.6% of the graduates were in work or further study after six months of their graduation while 99.1% of the graduates were in employment or further study three and a half years after graduation, compared to the national average of United Kingdom as 97%.

The qualitative results discovered extensive variances between universities and between countries in the techniques that teaching staff required to deliver employability skills or improving practices. Majority of them stated that they focused on teaching communications, presentation, and other generic skills to enhance their students' employability. Conversely, those participants who were from social sciences field still had a habit of concentrating on preparing their students with the abilities they taught as vital for an upright practitioner in the conviction that these abilities themselves were transferable into various professions. These were indicated in the following verbatim data:

"I like to see the subjects that I teach as vocationally oriented, however, there was variation in how this prejudiced the conveyance of employability skills instruction." (P2)

"For instance, the design courses all clearly hunted to prepare students with employability skills, to some extent because many of our graduates go in a very reasonable economic situation..." (P9)

"In my university, as long as the students can get employment or further study, we consider that we have equipped our graduates with sufficient employability." (P22)

"Employability should be an aim of any teaching, with the purpose of increasing the graduate's probabilities of gaining occupation and being successful in his or her profession." (P1)

The Way Higher Education Respond to Students' Employability Challenges

(i) Employers' involvement in course design

Majority of the participants highlighted that employers' involvements in course design and delivery contributing in graduate employability such as their comments on the significance of course content to future employment prospects, providing material and ideas of graduate projects, and giving guest lectures. In some cases, an employer/industry advisory group happened through recognized attachment, it mostly be influenced by personal relations between employer agents and higher education staff. This point of view was raised by P33.

"Four of the universities in the UK consisting of The University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Leeds,

and Northumbria University Newcastle were involved in High Education Academy Embedding Employability Strategic Enhancement Program (SEP) 2015. This program encompasses institutional and discipline led projects, High Education Academy consultant support, network events, and research, case studies and resources. Currently, there are 37 high education institutions utilized the employability framework and High Education Academy acts as industry advisory group.” (P33)

P8 added that the current drivers of change need for knowledgeability within business employees and global market transparency and developments. Therefore, she said that the strategic level intention was providing market opportunities and growth but operational level capability were included staff capability and capacity, technological systems for processing, the flexibility of curriculum design and delivery.

“To my opinion, the course and program designers at university level should implement strategy according to the required standard within operational constraints.” (P8)

(ii) Using technology to enhance employability

P25 shared his experience on how to facilitate underprivileged students in their transition to the workplace using technology to enhance employability. P25 mentioned that his university had provided help to assist underprivileged students by giving guidance on how to produce curriculum vitae, cover letter, and also attended their career interviews.

“Continue with the constant email support and putting on the sessions, being pro-active, treating each student as an individual and having the keenness to help.” (P25)

This view has been further supported by P1 who mentioned that graduate’s resume, interview, essays, references could all work to enhance their employability. P1 studied the e-learning and its relationship to the employability of graduates from hybrid MBA program.

“Critical thinking can be promoted via online learning, e.g. strategies such as learning reflections and discussion boards.” (P1)

In addition, P13 added that placement talks or workshop delivered by the companies found to be useful to enhance employability.

“To my opinion, such workshops or placement talks should include the topics like how to use LinkedIn, write the job application, their confidence while going for their interviews.” (P13)

Furthermore, P14 shared her experience on how to enhance employability by having speed meetings with employers, company presentations, placement fair, and placement office open day.

(iii) Preparing graduates to apply theory in practice

According to P33, learning and assessment is a ‘process’ over time which creates value that goes beyond the moment of change. P33 added that:

“Making graduate employable, lecturers should add further to the initial value of

their learning. However, lecturers have to realize the value of graduate capability.”

“First of all, we should consider the value of curriculum design that associated with teaching practice. Then we establish a sense of the reality by applying the sense-making theory to curriculum design. This will create knowledgeability that is the intention of what we know and what we are able to do”

P32 also had the same points of view on this matter. She emphasized that the practical application in conjunction with theories was essential in preparing students to meet the demands of today’s labor market. According to P32:

“University trading centers or trading rooms has brought the real world business platform to the classroom. It is of course powerful and sophisticated. The theory comes to life through real and simulated exercise and projects. For example, creates training laboratories, offer unique experiential learning cycle, and facilitate interdisciplinary.”

“The roles of real-world business platforms can enhance the existing curriculum, provide linkage to the business community, and supply in-house training. This will provide our students with the needed competencies in a professional setting.”

(iv) Educational challenges to the global manufacturing industry

P31 found that the current higher education society had less interest in manufacturing related subjects. Gender inequality can be

one of the main factors because there is a continually low recruitment of women in engineering. According to P31’s research findings show that:

“Lack of employees with the right skills to fill the positions. Many people still perceive working in manufacturing firms are having low income and long working hours. On top of that, the retiring workforce is declining the recruitment.”

“In order to improve the links between academia and industry, several events are required such as the establishment of Centers of Excellence, Studentships (e.g. Industrial Case Awards), Industrial Workshops, Work Experience or Internships and Promotion of Manufacturing Careers to students at the university.” (P33)

(v) Soft skills development is important to enhance employability

P5 had carried out the employer satisfaction survey and graduate job survey from the year 2013 to 2015. Her research findings showed that graduate’s study field fitted with the job had become the key reason for the graduates to obtain employment and the percentage was constantly increasing from 42% to 55% for the consecutive year. Besides, soft skills such as communication skills, good personality, and computer skills are the essential shared attributes between employers and graduates in employability enhancement.

“Our SWOT analysis shows that communicative skills, computer skills, interpersonal skills, and knowledge are the strengths of my institution. However, graduates are weak in their thinking skills.

In order to enhance employability, lecturers should go for training. Time, cost, and human resources are our threats.” (P5)

In addition, P1 agreed with P5 that strong communication skills could enhance graduate employability. P1 mentioned that soft skills, people skills or emotional intelligence were the strengths of her MBA students. According to P1:

“Recruiters have noticed that even students from the best university in Thailand can’t always communicate well or don’t know how to express their concerns tactfully during presentations.”

“For example ‘Airport test’ where the interviewer gauges whether he or she would enjoy being chatting with you during a layover or would rather be swallowed up by baggage claim. Show that those MBA students have those soft skills that future employers will value highly”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Currently, there are the significant means dedicated to the determinations to cultivate graduate employability either in Thailand or United Kingdom universities. In this article, the researcher has assessed the impacts of diverse types of higher education skills’ inventiveness on graduates’ working performance. Utilizing the comprehensive data gathered from the Researcher Links Workshop discussion session, the researcher distinguishes between five different mechanisms by which to enhance graduate employability: employers’ involvement in course design; using technology to enhance

employability; preparing graduates to apply theory in practice, educational challenges to the global manufacturing industry, and soft skills development to enhance employability.

The results revealed that innovative technologies and improvements in the higher education system are regularly believed of as drivers for enhanced educational outcomes in terms of graduate employability. This implies that innovative capacity in the economy requires innovation within the educational sector itself to be improved. In other words, innovations in higher education teaching methods have to be invented and implemented by the individual lecturers. Only high-quality teachers who are able to bring the best knowledge and skills as well as the most relevant evidence from experiences in the real working environments into the classroom. The results are in alignment with Brown et al. (2003), Finch et al. (2013), and Sumanasiri et al.’s (2015) results.

The current technological improvements have changed the skills demanded in the workplace. When the demand for the skill and knowledge forms deviations in the employment, the higher education sector should counter respectively to ensure high employability and innovation in the economy. On this line of reasoning, the higher educational sector must respond by adjusting the content, the curriculum design, and the learning environments to fit the employers’ requirement. The results further corresponding to the past researchers such as Finch et al. (2013), Knight and Yorke (2002), Mason et al. (2009), and Smith et al.’s (2014) results.

The results of this study revealed that innovations in teaching methods have to be a more intensive use of technology like computer and e-learning and have universally increased graduate employability. The evidence also clearly suggests that soft skills development like personal traits and character of graduates should be stimulated in an educational setting. The researcher argues that many policies can stimulate such changes and thus increase the innovative capacity of the higher education system, such as employers' involvement in curriculum design, increasing competition forces at higher education level by providing more autonomy to the institutions and more internationalization, and activating important stakeholders. It can be concluded that contemporary higher education is expected to facilitate a wider range of knowledge and skills development than ever before as human capital is the key to economic well-being (Pavlin, 2011).

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