Towards an Understanding of Employability Skills Development among University Graduates for Workplace Entry

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ABSTRACT

Today’s generation of university graduates will be required to continuously update existing employability skills and obtain new skills and qualifications as a result of the rapidly changing economy and labour market.

In order to engage in a multilateral discourse on employability skills between various educational stakeholders, it is important to consider the perceptions of both recent university graduates and faculty members. Even though specific employability skills have been identified by employers and supported by the literature, the general concept of employability skills is not fully understood. Often, recent university graduates do not fully possess the types and range of skills necessary for success in the workplace. Where such skills are taught, however, students often lack the awareness to articulate the types of skills learnt or developed in the classroom.

Employability skills are best developed when these skills are integrated across the curriculum. Effective teaching practices such as promoting active learning, using multiple teaching strategies and providing prompt feedback all contribute to the skills development of students and recent university graduates. Consequently, there is a role to play for university graduates, faculty members and employers in addressing the employability skills issue.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

As a result of changing labour market and economic conditions, the general employability skills required in today’s knowledge-based economy do not appear to be well developed by university graduates or well taught by university faculty members (Evers et al., 1998; Industry Canada, 2000). Often, the skills most in demand by employers, as measured by the wide range of skills asked of future employees, are typically the least in supply, as measured by the skills, abilities and competencies that university graduates bring to the job (Atkins, 1999; McLaughlin, 1992; Reich, 1991).

Employers continue to express considerable dissatisfaction with the general level of preparedness of recent graduates and of entry-level employees. This raises concern for faculty members and for students connected with post-secondary institutions. The lack of employability skills development is cause for concern resulting in many graduates leaving post-secondary education without the knowledge or foundational skills necessary to find and hold a good job in a changing labour market (Evers et al., 1998; De la Harpe et al, 2000). Even at the high school level, the issue of employability skills development has been examined in both Canada and the United States (Gessner, 1995; Krahn, Lowe & Lehmann, 2002).

The paper will attempt to address the following questions:

1. What are employability skills and its characteristics?
2. Why has the discourse on employability skills become increasingly important from the perspectives of recent university graduates, faculty members and employers?

3. To what extent are employability skills currently developed and fostered across different fields of study / academic disciplines?

4. How does an emphasis on employability skills impact on the purpose of a university education and shape curriculum from the perspectives of students and faculty members?

2.0 EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

One of the challenges in identifying, developing, and assessing employability skills is a clear articulation of characteristics that constitute employability skills. One source that helps describe employability skills is the numerous policy discussions centred around the need to ensure that graduates are fully equipped for the world of work. Ever since the Conference Board of Canada released its latest *Employability Skills Profile* report (Conference Board of Canada, 2000), discussions about the types and range of skills that both educational institutions and employers ought to be developing have been framed as employability skills.

Employability skills are defined as the foundational academic, personal and teamwork skills that employers expect of workers and which they expect to be developed by the education system (Conference Board of Canada, 2000). General employability skills such as oral and written communication, the ability to work with others and critical thinking skills are those skills that are foundational to
both academic and workplace success. They are skills that are needed not only in the workplace but can be useful in daily living, at play and just about any other social context (Conference Board, 1993, 2000; MacLeod, 2000). Further, employability skills are part of a broader discourse premised around the need to provide greater linkages between the education community and employment community in order to “ensure that Canada is competitive and successful in the global economy” (McLaughlin, 1992). The belief that our young people are not adequately meeting the skill requirements for an ever-changing workforce has elevated the employability skills discourse among several federal government departments (Human Resources Development Canada, 1996; Industry Canada, 2000) and provincial agencies (Manitoba Education & Training, 2002).

The Canadian model of employability skills development is similar to that of the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) study in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). For example, the SCANS report not only examined the skills needed to be successful in the workplace but also included those skills that were required for entry-level positions. The report identified specific foundation skills (written and oral communications, decision making, self-management and integrity) and competencies (time management, interpersonal skills, leadership and negotiating skills) as being important for workers to possess. These findings parallel those of a similar U.S. study completed at around the same time by Carnevale et al. (1988).

Another definition places employability skills in the context of attributes of employees, other than technical competence, that make them an asset to the
Employability Skills

Buck and Barrick defined employability skills to include reading, basic arithmetic and other basic skills; problem solving, decision making and other higher-order thinking skills; and dependability, a positive attitude, cooperativeness and other affective skills and traits.

As a form of human capital (Becker, 1964; Krahn, 1997; Schultz, 1963), general employability skills is further seen as a key contributor to aggregate economic growth and improved labour market outcomes for individuals. Lowe and Schellenberg (2001) alluded to the fact that, at an individual level, the acquisition of general employability skills contribute to personal development, through improved participation in society and professionally, in relation to favourable labour market outcomes and earnings, for example. Individuals invest time and money in order to become more skilled. Firms and societies typically invest in the human capital development of their employees and citizens in hopes of a future return on these investments. Skill development builds the human capital framework so vital for a healthy economy, which becomes the cornerstone for a knowledge-based economy (2001, 53).

Even though specific employability skills have been identified, the general concept of employability skills is not well understood for two reasons. The first is that many young people, such as recent university graduates, do not fully possess the types and range of employability skills necessary for success in the workplace. Part of the reason, unfortunately, is that educational institutions do not emphasize general employability skills development in their design of courses and programs nor in the shaping of curricula.
Where employability skills are taught, students often lack the awareness to articulate the types of employability skills they are learning in the classroom. Because the idea of employability skills is becoming more prevalent in our labour market and economic environment, it is critical that employers, educators and university graduates fully understand the issues surrounding the employability skills debate. To date, there has been little synthesis of the progress that has been made to address this debate.

A second source of misunderstanding in the employability skills debate is that employers continually dismiss the general preparedness of new hires citing lack of essential skills, management and leadership skills (Industry Canada, 2000). The Expert Panel on Skills, an independent group established by the Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Science and Technology in 1998, was tasked with determining whether the Canadian economy was experiencing a shortage of critical skills.

One of the panel's recommendations was that all levels of the educational system - from elementary school through to post-secondary school - be reformed to meet the needs of business and employers. In their final report, *Stepping Up: Skills and Opportunities in the Knowledge Economy* (Industry Canada, 2000), it concluded that while there is no shortage in technical skills (Finnie, 1995), Canadians in general do lack essential communication and teamwork skills that are needed for today's business environment and that the school system needed to better serve the interests of employers.
A further recommendation was that programs in post-secondary education systems be revamped to better prepare students with the employability skills needed for the changing workplace. However, the Expert Panel also recognized that there is a lack of common language or framework for defining and measuring employability skills, a similar observation made by the Conference Board of Canada when it recommended the development of assessment tools for employability skills (Gilbert & Bloom, 1998).

Further, one limitation to the Conference Board’s Employability Skills Profile is the basis in which skill requirements are assessed only from the perspective of employers. In order to engage in a multilateral discourse on employability skills, it is also important to consider the perceptions of both recent university graduates and faculty members. The paucity of information regarding the perceptions of both university graduates and faculty members on what constitutes appropriate employability skills development raises the research bar even further on this issue.

The Expert Panel on Skills was even encouraged to hear that universities were developing interdisciplinary degree programs and establishing co-operative education streams in areas as diverse as architecture, business, computer science and engineering. Through consultation with educational and business stakeholders, they also found that many post-secondary institutions have set up advisory committees for academic programs which allows for representatives of business and industry to provide input. This is one basis for providing stronger
links between classroom instruction and workplace application (Industry Canada, 2000, 60).

This suggestion was reinforced by a key recommendation made by the Expert Panel on Skills. They recommended that:

… Ministers responsible for post-secondary education encourage colleges and universities to establish advisory committees of representatives from industry and other appropriate stakeholders, for programs in science and technology, business and administration, and all other program areas that could benefit from closer links with the world of work (e.g., applied arts, social sciences and humanities). (Industry Canada, 60)

Even among employers, there are often differing views of what constitutes appropriate employability skills. Several studies have reported that employers frequently express contradictory demands for employability skills, often times inflating their expectations while placing undue hardship on the education system for ensuring that university graduates are fully equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities required of the workplace (Darrah, 1994; McLaughlin, 1992; Taylor, 1998). While an entry-level employee certainly will experience a rough transition if he or she is not adequately prepared, critics such as Darrah (1994) and Taylor (1998) focus the debate on ideological grounds, arguing that the responsibility for employability skills development has moved away from employers to rest squarely on the shoulders of educators and students.
Darrah (1994) provided a critical examination of employers’ need and three possible limitations on the notion of skill requirements. According to the framework set out by Darrah, he argued that having employers present a list of employability skills that are defined \textit{a priori} ignores the question of how these skills are demonstrated by a skilled worker (Darrah, 1994, 66, 72). The decontextualization of skills results in highlighting the deficiencies and failures of workers on skill development and not focusing on the actual nature of the work required or performed.

Another critique of the skill requirements concept is that it perceives that all workers must be capable of performing all the employability skills required by employers. He argued that in actual work settings, no single worker needs to possess all of the required skills desired by employers but rather, workers are typically held together by “networks of assistance with expertise distributed throughout” (Darrah, 1994, 77). Lists of skill requirements also assume employability skills are isolated from the actual work contexts within which they are generated and exercised. The social nature of work also challenges the concept of required employability skills. Discussion of employability skills focuses on what is required of individuals and how the latter relate to each other at work. Rather, the portrait of a skilled worker having portable skills moving from one job to another is preferred.

A final critique set forth by Darrah is the idea that workplaces are seen to be operating smoothly only if employers can attract properly skilled individuals. The result of not attracting skilled individuals into the workplace, argued Darrah,
leads to the possible exaggeration of skill deficiencies in young people and entry-
level workers while challenging those in the education system to be responsible
for ensuring that these individuals are equipped for the workplace.

3.0 EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ACROSS FIELDS OF STUDY

Ideally, an undergraduate education ought to provide current university
students and recent graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes
and values critical to navigate the dynamic complexities of the changing
workplace. Universities are continually asked: what are students learning and
what will they be able to do upon graduation from university? One response from
universities focus on a developmental approach (Donald, 1990), which turns its
attention to how the curriculum is organized enabling students to develop
competence in several general employability skill areas such as communication,
analysis and problem solving. Underlying this developmental approach is the
notion that student knowledge and skills in different subject matter areas can be
measured in a way that can be generally understood by all educational
stakeholders. However, a lack of a general vocabulary or framework for
understanding the nature of knowledge and skill development across disciplines
continues to be evident at most universities.

Studies have shown that employability skills are best developed when
these skills are integrated across the curriculum (Brown, 2002; Krahn & Bowlby,
1997; Williams, 1998). In fact, at the Universities of Alberta and Manitoba,
attempts have been made within their respective Faculties of Arts to make
explicit the value of a liberal arts education to the world of work (Dean, 1999; Kitagawa, 1998). Their objectives was to heighten students’ awareness that they can acquire or augment their employability skills while pursuing specialized fields of study. Another objective was to sensitize faculty members to the importance of emphasizing to students that employability skills are developed alongside subject-specific knowledge as products of the same process. Embedding these skills and attributes into the curriculum indicates comparable importance to content knowledge and compels faculty members to teach employability skills in the context of their courses.

Other characteristics of effective teaching which helps to foster employability skills development include the use of multiple teaching and learning strategies, use of active learning techniques, provision of prompt feedback and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (Cameron, 1993; Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). As well, a positive classroom environment, promotion of critical thinking skills and use of higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis and analysis (Bloom, 1956) are other ways to maximize student learning and enhancement of job preparation skills (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Chickering’s framework for good practice in undergraduate education is a useful framework in developing the employability skills of university students and in guiding faculty members to teach these skills (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Encouraging contacts with students and faculty, developing cooperation among
students and using active learning techniques are effective strategies to foster positive learning outcomes and enhanced skills development.

According to Chickering, frequent student and faculty contact both in and out of the classroom setting can influence student motivation and involvement. Working in teams through cooperation among fellow classmates is another good practice of undergraduate education. Effective learning, according to Chickering is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Sharing one’s own ideas and responding to others’ reactions can sharpen individuals’ critical thinking skills, logical reasoning skills and oral communication skills, for example.

The notion of employability skills development in the university environment continues to challenge traditional thinking and concepts of higher education and raises the question of the role a university education provides. The rapidly changing economy has fuelled the desire for university graduates to adapt accordingly and this poses a problem for universities because of the growing dichotomy between the purposes of education for employment and education primarily based on content knowledge for its own sake. Current students view the purpose of a university education as a step to career preparation. Many faculty members, on the other hand, continue to uphold the preserving, transmitting and creation of knowledge and the development of the intellectual mind while employers, demand highly-skilled workers. How will the resolution of these competing views influence the university curriculum in terms of teaching and learning practices? It is the focus of the following section to
address some of the issues in light of competing university purposes faced by students and faculty members.

4.0 IMPACT OF DIFFERENCES IN PURPOSES OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION ON CURRICULUM

Clark Kerr once said that curriculum is the battleground on which society debates the purpose of education (Kerr, 1977). The debate about whether education should be general or vocationally-oriented has been fuelled not only by changing societal and economic needs but with the growing diversity in the student population. Students’ backgrounds, interests, and expectations often influence the type of university education they pursue. As a collective group, they are one of the most important stakeholders in the learning process. Consequently, students’ experiences with the curriculum ought to be given greater attention.

Faculty members’ discipline and pedagogical orientation impacts on their position on what the role of university ought to be (Levine, 1978; Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Faculty members typically are responsible for, and have the authority to, determine the curriculum whether it is at the course level or program level. Commentators suggest that faculty should determine curriculum, given that students do not possess sufficient expertise to know what constitutes a sound curriculum or course of study (Twombly, 1995).

Others, such as McMurty (1991), claim that it is in the best interest of both students and society to acquire employment-related skills. Proponents for this position base their argument along the lines of a contract between universities
and society. That is, in return for the public monies invested in it, the post-secondary education system must make a significant contribution to the economic prosperity of the country and its people. However, opponents of incorporating the employability agenda into the university curriculum cite differences in a university’s purpose. These opponents do not want to see the role of universities to be primarily servicing of the economy and the profitability of employers, for example. As a result, the goals and purposes of universities are quite different from those of the market place (McMurty, 1991).

Nevertheless, the university curriculum has been, and continues to be, shaped by institutional, internal and external influences (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). The following discussion will locate each stakeholder groups’ position on how the university curriculum can impact on the types of general employability skills learnt and taught.

4.1 STUDENT EXPECTATIONS ON PURPOSE OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Students are a major consumer of post-secondary education. Students often enter university with a number of beliefs, values and expectations about what higher education entails, what is required, and what it can provide for them in the future. A closer look at how students form their expectations and views about higher education should be encouraged in light of structural changes in both the economy and society.

Over the past half century, and certainly within the past three decades, some commentators have pointed out that the characteristics of students and the
educational goals they hold have changed significantly towards a market orientation (Astin, 1985; Gaff & Davis, 1981; Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987; Stickgold, 1975). That a major purpose of university education is preparing students for the world of work is no longer in dispute. Educators are often heard criticizing students who pursue a university education simply by enrolling in courses that will only benefit them later in either finding employment, gaining wealth or obtaining status as opposed to developing their intellectual capacities and thirst for knowledge simply for its own sake. The result is a further widening of the dichotomy between vocational training in the former and liberal education in the latter situation. Some of the reasons cited for this shift in the approach to a university education may include a rapidly changing job market, the need for advanced technical skills in an information-based economy, a growing uncertainty of what the future holds, and to a questioning of traditional societal values. Current university students, as a result, view university as a place where one goes to be “trained” for a particular job, with hopes that a bachelor’s degree almost guarantees them employment, and not a place where one necessarily becomes “educated” for its own sake.

In recent years, the growing problems of university students lacking basic academic skills and higher level cognitive abilities have been further compounded by extensive curriculum implemented in an attempt to be more responsive to the external environment, in partnership with the employment community. Examples of granting external degrees, introducing short courses (such as workshops, compressed courses or pilot projects) or instituting co-
operative or internship programs in some university programs is evidence of the shift to address labour market needs or to enhance the vocational component of a university education. Employers regularly have voiced a desire for such courses or programs. They usually express their willingness and readiness to cooperate with the university in developing these courses or programs to enhance student learning. However, the employment orientation varies widely from subject to subject and from discipline to discipline depending on the extent to which courses are preparing for specific professions or not.

Even governments, as major funders of post-secondary education, have asked institutions to justify to what extent their university programs can meet the needs of the labour market and to demonstrate how their programs address possible skills shortages in a particular area or industry. Government funding of new university programs is partially determined by such labour market analysis and needs assessment (Council on Post Secondary Education, 2002).

Critics of the move toward vocationalism in university education point to how the demand for relevance and applicability in course materials has resulted in programs that seek to train students in a narrow range of techniques and vocational skills in “specialist” programs (Bercuson et al., 1984; Moodie, 1986; Stickgold, 1975). The resulting effect has led to the churning of students that “know more about less” (Bercuson et al., 1984).

It is no surprise then that the shifting emphasis by university students with adopting a career-oriented approach towards their education is partly due to the increasing uncertainty regarding their future employment prospects as well as the
changing skills and information requirements needed in an advanced global-intensive and service-oriented industry. The rising costs of university education (such as tuition and books) have also increased the number of university students relying on various forms of financial assistance (such as bursaries, student loans, scholarships, and even from parents). This has also impacted on students' views of what a university education should provide, which is stable employment upon graduation. In fact, as Stickgold (1975) pointed out several decades ago, many students are viewing their university education:

…as a place to be trained, not educated; to be given answers, not asked questions; …in short, to be certified for employment, not credentialized for citizenship (Stickgold, 176).

Further, Astin (1985) also pointed out that many students today believe “learning is for earning” and that a university education offers few additional benefits (Astin, 220). Students are choosing to attend university, not for the benefits found from the knowledge gained from the subject matter and the associated learning, but for the opportunity a university degree offers in either minimizing undesirable career prospects or maximizing their chances for stepping into a variety of “good” jobs. Hence, most current university students take labour market conditions into consideration when making the decision of whether to pursue higher education or not. Thus, job attainment from a students' perspective is one main purpose for their participation in post-secondary education. Hence, overall findings seem to suggest that students view the purpose of a university education based on extrinsic factors that are tied to
finding a satisfying job, gaining high incomes and obtaining positive societal status. These demands that are placed by students certainly impact the learning components of the university curriculum. Even a recently commissioned report on Canadian university education identified the struggle with dealing with curriculum issues related to the dichotomy between specialization and general knowledge, or, with taking a disciplinary versus interdisciplinary approach, for example (Smith, 1991).

4.2 FACULTY MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS ON PURPOSE OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

One purpose of a university education is that students become acquainted with a body of facts, theories, generalizations and ideas through the acquisition of information and knowledge (Bok, 1974). It enables students to engage in discourse, inquiry, choice and reflection. For some students, a liberal education helps to create a web of knowledge that can enlighten judgement and enhance experience during one’s lifetime.

Another purpose of a university education is to impart a variety of basic intellectual skills and habits of thought. Bok pointed out that because most students have little idea as to what to do with their lives after graduation, it becomes more difficult for universities to orient their curricula along vocational lines. However, there are certain intellectual skills and habits of thought that are so fundamental that it would serve students well regardless of type of job or position in society. These skills include the ability to communicate orally and in writing with clarity and style, including the ability to speak and read a foreign language (Bok, 165). Finally, another form of intellectual competence is the
knowledge of an academic discipline which is the hallmark of the undergraduate program – the academic major. Bok questions, however, the value of the academic major for students who will likely devote their lives or careers to very different endeavors. Although the university response typically is that students need to gain a sense of mastery in at least one subject, it is clearly the case that a great number of students, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are likely to pursue advanced work in professional programs such as business or engineering.

More recently in Canada, several university administrators have recognized how the changing nature of the university curriculum in its current state from what it was decades ago will likely impact on current and future undergraduate students (Farr, 2000). Educators are realizing that students’ needs and expectations have changed as surely as the world they’re ideally being educated to occupy as either public citizens, members of the workforce and as private individuals.

As an example of the changing nature and direction of curricula, the former principal of McGill University, Bernard Shapiro, argued that the undergraduate curriculum should not necessarily be over-specialized but rather open to a broad spectrum of disciplines and learning approaches. As Shapiro stated:

…the new undergraduate curricula of Canadian universities will increasingly be concerned with providing that exposure to students through interdisciplinary studies, smaller classes, an emphasis on explicit statements of required learning outcomes and skills, and subject matter
and teaching techniques that are more obviously meaningful for the student. (Farr, 12).

From a pedagogical perspective, some Canadian educators have argued that at the heart of all curriculum changes, regardless of the purpose of university education, is the desire to be more explicit and concrete about precisely what is to be taught and to what students are suppose to be learning. Students should leave university with a documented account of their learning, one that students themselves have participated in creating and documenting. As Fred Evers, professor of sociology at the University of Guelph stated:

…we tend to reward regurgitation of course content, when in fact we should be developing leadership and creativity, not the skill of taking multiple-choice exams, which just doesn’t reflect the real world. (Farr, 14).

He argued that, even though society has changed over the decades and there is greater consideration of labour market needs, courses can still be delivered with the same content but in exciting and innovative ways. What is required is for faculty members to be challenged to try new pedagogical techniques within their courses.

Faculty members will need to be convinced that an university's insistence on incorporating employability skills into their teaching and curriculum is not to be viewed as an attack on academic freedom in terms of content, but merely a request that they consider how they teach their subject matter. Harvey (2000) advocated that the main role of faculty members is to train students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while empowering them to be
lifelong learners and critical thinkers. That is, employability skills development ought to be viewed as supportive of good learning rather than in opposition to it. A culture that strives to improve the learning environment for the benefit of students and faculty members is essential for the successful implementation of curriculum change (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Harvey, 2000; Krahn & Bowlby, 1997; Stark & Lattuca, 1997).

5.0 SUMMARY OF PAPER

The changing nature of the labour market and economy over the past several years has impacted the role that post-secondary education and training systems play in the preparation of graduates for the opportunities and challenges of entry into the workplace. Dynamic changes in the labour market over time have made the task of post-secondary education institutions in keeping up with developing general employability skills and preparing graduates for the world of work increasingly difficult and challenging. With the future economy and labour market needs changing rapidly and becoming difficult to anticipate (Fisher, Rubenson & Schuetze, 1994), the need for individuals to continuously update existing skills and obtain new skills and qualifications is mounting.

Chickering’s framework (1987, 1996) for good practice in undergraduate education reflects well in the need to develop the employability skills of university students and for faculty members to teach a number of these skills. Additionally, the Stark and Lowther (1989) framework for combining both liberal arts education and professional education may provide the appropriate sets of skills required by
future graduates and workers. As the economy and labour market continually evolves, universities may need to rely less on the traditional teaching techniques and greater embrace of a teaching and learning paradigm that makes the learning environment a true reflection of the workplace. Innovative teaching practices indicate that students develop a deeper understanding of their courses when faculty members adopt contextual learning strategies such as active learning, teamwork, discussion and cooperative learning.

Today’s generation of university graduates and entry-level workers will increasingly need to develop a set of general employability skills to meet the ever-changing demands of the knowledge-based economy and the growing expectations required by employers. University students and graduates ought to think in terms of preparing themselves for lifelong employability (Evers et al., 1998) as opposed to lifelong employment as it is expected that workers will be changing jobs and careers several times throughout their working lives unlike previous generations. As a result, the need to identify, enhance and develop general employability skills is more important now than ever before.
LIST OF REFERENCES


