DEVELOPING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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Your Pathway to Employment

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Preface

A critical issue for graduates is about how best to achieve an effective transition from the university to the real world of the work environment. Thus, in an era when collaborative relationships are increasingly encouraged between industry and higher education to support graduate employment opportunities, a book on employability skills is timely. The contemporary focus on employability skills is about developing graduates who are both employable and capable of contributing to the society.

In this context, the term employability skills is widely used to refer to a range of qualities and capacities that are increasingly viewed as important by employers. These include thinking skills such as, logical and analytical reasoning; problem solving; capacity to identify access and manage knowledge and information; personal attributes such as imagination; creativity and intellectual rigor; values such as ethical practice, persistence, integrity and tolerance.

The growing emphasis on employability skills results from the increasing demand by employers for graduates to possess these skills. Employability depends on several factors which include self-belief and an ability to secure and retain employment. It also means being able to improve one's productivity and income-earning prospects. This often requires competing effectively in the job market and being able to move between occupations if necessary. It requires rigorous searching for new job opportunities in an advanced knowledge, communications and technological society.

The book outlines the nature and scope of employability skills before applying a handholding approach to the process of job searching, from skills audit, developing competitive CVs, providing effective interview techniques to discussing the expectations of the workplace once the successful candidate is in the job. It also makes some recommendations in respect of work experience that would be valuable in pursuit of enhanced employability skills.

Furthermore, the perspectives of employers in developing graduate employability skills are presented. Employers believe more could be done to develop skills, qualities and attributes

in graduates and, they specifically emphasized skills such as creativity, problem-solving, team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking etc.

Consequently, employers expressed concern that there were few companies serving on university committees and even if they do, it was noted that their contributions to course design were not taken seriously. The book sets out some very clear recommendations for action, including placing employability as core to strategic planning, widening access to work placements, and promoting real and equal partnerships between employers and universities.

The book takes into account the relative importance of the skills demanded by employers and concludes that the greatest skill deficiencies among new graduates were perceived to be lacking the capacity for independent and critical thinking. The book also notes that these skills are of great importance to employers, and seem to be the skills that set apart successful from unsuccessful applicants.

There is strong assertion that the overall performance of new graduates employed is considered unsuitable. Assuming that employers' perceptions of what they need and what they get have some basis, an important task is to unpack their concerns and incorporate them into an educational framework. This requires universities to have a thorough understanding of the needs of the industry, so that employers will be satisfied with graduate recruits.

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Chapter 1

How to Build Employability Skills

The importance of employability skills

One of the problems that graduates face is the intense competition for jobs and unpreparedness for the working world. Yet, potential employers and placement providers often require evidence of your skills which should be articulated during the interview. A degree alone is not enough to get through on the job market. Therefore, graduates need more support in order to make the most of the opportunities available in the job market. However, the competencies that enhance employability chances can also be derived from the application of the skills that are learnt during academic studies. For instance, a degree can provide transferable skills, but it is also vital to take every opportunity to identify and further develop these skills as well as personal qualities and attributes.

Employability skills play a significant part to effective performance in the workplace. From the employer's perspective, to be employable is about demonstrating that you have the skills and personal qualities that are needed in the workplace. These should enable you to get, keep and do a job effectively to the benefit of both yourself and the employer. If you have invested time and energy in developing non-academic skills throughout university studies, this can significantly improve your employability upon graduation. You will emerge more balanced, self-aware and mature and will differentiate yourself in the job market.

Attributes represent a package of skills, qualities and understanding that impress potential employers. These are a set of skills and knowledge that you should possess to ensure that you have the capability of being effective in the workplace. Personal attributes such as positive attitude involves a willingness to participate and having an open mind to new activities and ideas. It is important to understand your ability, strengths and weaknesses. Emphasis is also put on developing appropriate interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and adaptive expertise.

To be more effective, you will have to develop a portfolio of capabilities reflecting your personal and professional development throughout the time that you spent at the University.

Below are some of the attributes that can be included in your portfolio:

- An appreciation and recognition of work ethics
- The knowledge, skills, self-confidence and self-awareness
- The ability and motivation to participate responsibly and collaboratively in the work place.
- A professional and reflective approach, including qualities of leadership, responsibility, personal integrity, empathy, care and respect for others, accountability and self-regulation.
- The flexibility to thrive in rapidly changing and uncertain situations and to update skills and knowledge as circumstances require.

Employers often differ as to the skills they expect of graduates as well as the way they prioritize those skills. Many major employers also have their own competency-based system for recruitment, in-house training and promotion decisions. In addition to the skills identified above, employers are also looking for personal qualities such as:

- Interpersonal Relationships: An effective relationship builder and networker, who can empathize, consult, listen, respect, give consideration, use tact and diplomacy, and promote consensus and team spirit.
- Self-motivation: A self-motivated person is someone who readily tackles demanding tasks, willingly offers to get involved, and seeks out new/extra responsibilities.
- Quality orientation: Are you someone who takes pride in the quality of your work and are seen by others to have integrity and business ethics?
- Adaptability: This refers to the ability to respond appropriately to continually changing circumstances. It suggests a person who welcomes suggestions for doing things differently and is regarded by others as being open to change.
- Resilience: This means being able to cope with stress, work under pressure, show stamina and tenacity whilst remaining calm.

Skills and attributes provide a foundation for graduate employability. An excellent academic record cannot compensate for lack of skills as employers expect today's graduates to possess relevant workplace skills. Therefore, it is important to identify the skills-gap and recognize the need to bridge that gap.

Employability skills audit

To effectively understand the skills that you possess, you should start with a skills audit. This involves reviewing your skills and abilities as you plan your career progression. The skills audit will help you see where your strengths and abilities lie. Furthermore, conducting skills audit can help you as follows:

- The audit will assist you in seeing beyond the degree title and module content
- You will be able to address skills-specific questions when applying for a job
- Greater skills knowledge will help to make your CV more competitive
- The interview process often involves competency (skills-based) questions or scenario questions where examples of your skills in practice are required.

You can start an audit by taking each of the skills required by an employer and thinking of an example of that skill in practice. As a graduate you will have different areas with which to draw upon for your skills audit. For instance, studying for a degree helps in developing a range of skills through your course and extra-curricular activities. However employers will expect you to provide evidence of experience or activity that you have been involved in that demonstrates your ability in that skill. Using the skills audit technique below, explore a range of skills and rate yourself with a scale 1-5 where (1 is poor and 5 is excellent).

Skills audit technique

	Skill	Description	Rating 1-Poor 5-Excellent	Evidence	How to improve your skills
1	Team working	Being able to co-operate with others on a shared task, being aware of and adaptable to the working styles of others and working in teams.	1 2 3 4 5		
2	Oral communication / Listening	Being able to give clear and accurate information, using appropriate language, tone, intonation and style. Listening to others and clarifying your understanding.	1 2 3 4 5		
3	Presentation skills	Being able to present ideas and information clearly, concisely and appropriately to an audience using appropriate technology.	1 2 3 4 5		

4	Written communication	Being able to write well for a variety of audiences is important. If you demonstrated ability to write well in college, your writing skill should be self-evident from the quality of your application.	1 2 3 4 5		
5	Persuading and influencing	Being able to convince others that your ideas are useful to bring the best course of action.	1 2 3 4 5		
6	Negotiation	Being able to facilitate and negotiate an agreement with an individual or group, in a manner which is clear and respectful to all.	1 2 3 4 5		
7	Leadership	Being able to lead by example, providing direction, motivation and support to others.	1 2 3 4 5		
8	Initiative/creativity	Being able to support or start a new project, or to come up with new ideas/make changes to the standard way of doing things. Breaking the status core.	1 2 3 4 5		
9	Prioritizing/time management	Being able to assess the relative importance and urgency of tasks and plan accordingly.	1 2 3 4 5		
10	Problem solving/Decision making	Being able to research alternative actions and devise an appropriate method to overcome a problem, systematically choosing the best path to take.	1 2 3 4 5		
11	Using IT	Being able to use appropriate IT packages, e.g. word processing, databases, spreadsheets, power point, use of graphs etc.	1 2 3 4 5		
12	Numeracy	Being able to manage everyday mathematical problems with confidence.	1 2 3 4 5		
13	Analytical skills	Being able to think critically and logically, employing information seeking strategies; extracting, organizing and evaluating information.	1 2 3 4 5		

14	Self-Management	Being able to manage your own learning development by clarifying your values and objectives and evaluating personal performance.	1 2 3 4 5		
15	Positive attitude/ Motivation	Having a 'can-do' attitude, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen.	1 2 3 4 5		
16	Self-awareness	Knowing your own strengths and skills as well as having the confidence to articulate them.	1 2 3 4 5		
17	Flexibility/ Adaptability	Being able to anticipate and handle change and adapt to new situations.	1 2 3 4 5		
18	Project management/ Planning	Being able to plan, organize and manage resources to bring about the successful completion of project goals and objectives.	1 2 3 4 5		

Complementing your skills with experience

Once you have reviewed your skills and experiences, you should have a clearer picture of skills-gap that needs to be addressed. There are many opportunities available for you to enhance your skills and experiences. For example work experience and internships will often make you stand out of the crowd. Employers know that any exposure and experience of the workplace will help you adapt quickly when you are offered a job.

Many employers are keen to offer a job contract to a student that they have already trained in internships or summer vacation schemes. Even if this does not happen, work experience is a great way to learn and acquire the skills needed in the workplace. Furthermore, that exposure can help you to decide whether the career path chosen is the right option for you. There are a lot of work placement opportunities available to you and below are some options that you could consider:

Internship – this is a short, structured, paid period of work with an organization for a fixed period of time, usually during a vacation. It offers a valuable insight into a particular field or career.

Part time work – usually undertaken alongside academic study. It involves part time, term-time work. This can be paid or voluntary.

Placement– a fixed period of work in an organization usually lasts 3-12 months and often undertakes as part of the degree program between second and final year. There are however, short placements between 6-15 weeks. In a placement students are expected to work, but it is recognized and accepted that they are also training and gaining experience.

Volunteering – working for a charity or voluntary organization. Volunteers undertake work for no financial reward, apart from reimbursement of expenses only and will spend time doing something which is of benefit to others, society or the environment.

How to showcase your abilities

Recruiters are looking more for skills and experience even though your degree is equally important. The biggest mistake you can make as graduate is to overestimate your degree while underestimating the experience that you acquired along the way. Therefore, think broadly and highlight your skills in the context of past achievements. Employers are more interested in the evidence on how you have acquired these skills than just listing them. The table below provides guidance on how you can effectively showcase your skills and abilities.

Demonstrating your skills and abilities

1.	Describe your achievements	▪ Use terms that show actions which you performed and the results achieved. For example, if you resolved a conflict, highlight the benefit of your action.
2.	Show how you maximized opportunities to gain the skills	▪ Work placements training, group projects, voluntary, community work, participation in sports, societies, clubs etc. ▪ Highlight what you learnt and the challenges faced and how you dealt with those challenges.
3.	Relating your strengths to the job description	▪ To be successful in the job market, you must relate your skill set to the job description and support it with accomplishments. ▪ Also think about what you have done to go beyond the job description.
4.	Sharing responsibility	▪ Becoming skilled at sharing responsibility and work with others may be the most important thing you can do to add to your value. ▪ Specify the role that you played on teams and use examples of

		classroom group projects, sports teams, internships, and student organizations. ▪ Clearly explain the elements that you contributed to the team.
5.	Ability to adapt	▪ Employers are looking for people who thrive on change, therefore, express your willingness to change course and adapt to new rules quickly. ▪ Your college years gave you your first opportunity to make decisions and act independently. ▪ Demonstrate how you handled challenges and disappointments along the way. ▪ Explain how you have risen above the challenges and support your explanation with examples.
6.	Handling multiple tasks	▪ Multi-tasking is increasingly valued in the work place so, you should show your ability to juggle many tasks at once. ▪ Maximize on the training you received when your college teachers required you to simultaneous submit major assignments and projects.
7.	Meeting deadlines and thriving under pressure	▪ College work is always associated with meeting deadlines therefore demonstrate this important skill and your ability to do so. ▪ Specify the type of assignments and how you met the deadlines through careful organization and planning.
8.	Ability to achieve goals	▪ Your good grades are proof and exemplary of that skill, so demonstrate this achievement. ▪ Any goal you met while at college is potential ability to showcase.

Assessment of skills performance level

It is also important that you determine the level of your current skills level. You will notice that the first skills audit was to identify the skills you have and to provide evidence on how you acquired these skills. However, the level at which you have developed different aspects of each skills was not measured, neither did the audit establish your strengths and weaknesses.

Therefore, another assessment will be introduced to measure the level of the aspects that comprise skill. Skills performance assessment is a process of identifying personal strengths, weaknesses and areas for development within a range of skills areas. It is important for

personal development and employability. This will be supported by an action plan. The purpose of such analysis is to highlight your strengths and weaknesses thereby, helping you to identify your needs before developing a personal plan. Below is self-assessment tool designed to help you identify the level of your skills performance level.

Skills performance level assessment

COMMUNICATION						
Tick the appropriate column		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
C.1	Communicating effectively with lecturers and other university staff.					
C.2	Communicating effectively with colleagues and supervisors / managers / fellow students /team members					
C.3	Written communication skills, including report and essay writing.					
WORKING WITH OTHERS						
Tick the appropriate column		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
WO.1	Establishing good working relationships with people at different levels.					
WO.2	Motivating and inspiring team members and fellow students.					
WO.3	Being assertive and able to compromise.					
FLEXIBILITY AND WILLINGNESS TO LEARN AND IMPROVE PERFORMANCE						
Tick the appropriate column		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
ILP.1	Balancing studies, part-time employment, social life and home commitments.					
ILP.2	Accepting and learning from constructive criticism.					
ILP.3	Setting and achieving goals					
ILP.4	Planning own work and sticking to deadlines					
ILP.5	Ability to work alone and unsupervised.					

PROBLEM SOLVING		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Tick the appropriate column		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
PB.1	Keeping calm under pressure.					
PB.2	Making good decisions.					
PB.3	Identifying a problem clearly before deciding on a solution or action.					
PB.4	Knowing when your solutions are not successful and what to do next.					
PB.5	Implementing practical solutions.					
NUMERICAL APPLICATION						
Tick the appropriate column		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
NP.1	Making appropriate calculations when applying numeracy.					
NP.2	Ability to work with figures and interpret data.					
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROFICIENCY						
Tick the appropriate column		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
ITP.1	Preparing information using information technology, e.g. letters, emails, reports, presentations.					
ITP.2	Using information technology skills for editing and organizing data, e.g. manipulating databases, using spreadsheets.					
ITP.3	Using information technology to present information, e.g. creating tables, charts.					

Personal SWOT analysis technique

While skills performance assessments help you to understand skills level and to identify weak areas that need further development, this should be followed by a personal SWOT analysis which is a powerful technique designed to highlight strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. You conduct a self SWOT analysis by exploring own self-perception on the strengths you possess, but you should also put yourself inside a prospective employer's position as you consider these strengths. You can start by making a list of words that comprise your strengths. Strengths may include the ability to apply knowledge and skills to your job and how quick you can adapt your personality, learning style, and values to the goals and values of the company.

In assessing your weaknesses, think about what prospective employers might consider to be the areas you could improve upon. Facing your shortcomings now can give you a huge head start in career planning. Naturally people find it relatively difficult to identify the areas where they are weak. You can identify skill areas that are weak by analyzing your past performance appraisals and even your lower grades at college.

Furthermore, constructive feedback from your previous teachers or supervisors can provide valuable information which you can use as a stepping off point in identifying your weaknesses. From this analysis, you will be able to define a road map that shows you how to capitalize on your strengths and minimize or eliminate your weaknesses. You should then use that map to take advantage of opportunities and avoid or minimize threats. Below is guidance on how to use a SWOT analysis model. You can use the questions provided to articulate the issues that you can analyze.

The SWOT analysis should be followed by an action plan that clearly specifies how you will minimize the impact of weaknesses and threats while maximizing the strengths. It should also indicate how you will market yourself for employment.

Self SWOT analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
- Identify strengths which can contribute to success in the job market: - What do you do well? - What factors motivated and influenced you to choose your career path? - Do these factors still represent some of your strengths? - What needs do you expect to satisfy within the potential organization? - What have been your most notable achievements? - What do you attribute your success to? - How do you measure your success? - What knowledge or expertise will you bring to the company you join that might not be already available to the organization? - What is your greatest asset?	- Identify weaknesses that will present a barrier in the job market - What are your professional weaknesses? These might include technical skills, communication or interpersonal skills. - How do these weaknesses affect your job performance? - What do you need to do to improve? - Think about your most unpleasant experiences in college or in previous work placements and identify personal or professional weaknesses that could have contributed to that.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Identify opportunities (external) events that can contribute to your success in searching for a job. - Where can you find prospective jobs that are suitable for your profile? - What are you doing to enhance your exposure to the job opportunities? - What formal training and education can you add to your credentials that might position you appropriately for more opportunities? - Would any extra qualifications or other professional courses add to your advantage? - Useful opportunities can come from:	Identify threats (external) events that have the potential to prevent you from succeeding in the job market. - What obstacles can prevent you from breaking through in the job market? - Are the requirements for your desired job field changing? - Does changing technology threaten your prospective job opportunities? - What is the current trend for your personal area of expertise? - Could your area of interest be fading in comparison with more emergent fields? - Is your chosen field subject to internal

- Changes in technology and markets on both - Changes in government policies related to your field - Changes in social patterns, population profiles, lifestyle changes, etc.	politics that will lead to conflict? - Is there any way to perhaps minimize your involvement in potential disputes? - How might the economic changes negatively affect your industry? - Will your industry provide enough access to new challenges to keep you sharp -- and marketable -- in the event of sudden unemployment?

Action plan

An action plan can help you focus your thoughts and proactively work out your next steps. It could be a formal written document, part of your personal development plan or a file you keep personally. Career Action Plan is an opportunity to outline the progression of steps required to achieve your career goals. As mentioned before, it is your 'road map' to follow so that you can see the necessary steps to get where you eventually want to be.

Why create a career action plan?

Sometimes when people are confused about what to do, they do nothing. They decide to just wait and see what comes along. These people later realize that doing nothing is in itself a choice, and that very rare does anything worthwhile just happen. Things happen for people who make them happen. Therefore, it is important to take control of your life, make a plan, and maintain focus to achieve it.

An effective action plan should be turned into specific actions which should include the following considerations:

- Action – what will be done?
- Timescale – when will it be done?
- Responsibility – who is responsible for doing what?

Your key task here is setting specific timetables and deadlines for getting the information that will set the pace for your job search. However, the key to develop a successful action plan is knowing yourself from a much broader perspective.

Knowing yourself

This involves thinking about a career option that suits you best as some jobs can be quite stressful. What is your ideal job upon graduation or the job you would like to transition to from your current job? The more you know about what you value, what you are interested in and what you are good at, the more likely you will be able to make effective choices about your career.

Your preferences

Consider the following questions to help you get a general sense of your career-related preferences.

- What do you like to do?
- What are you proud of?
- What motivates you at work?
- What type of lifestyle do you want?
- What work experience do you have?
- What kind of training do you have or would you be willing to get?

- What do you do well?
- What makes work meaningful for you?
- What are your expectations from work?
- What skills do you have?
- What level of education do you have or would you be willing to get?

Your values

Assessment of your values is important as these are equal to your standards. A satisfying career usually reflects your values. Below is a guide which you can use to identify the values that motivate you. You can also add other values that are important to you.

- society
- variety
- money
- security
- being respected by others
- learning new things
- creativity
- personal satisfaction

- competition
- independence
- prestige
- making important decisions
- having time to pursue other activities
- protecting the environment
- belonging to a group