Assessing Emotional Intelligence and Interpersonal Skills of University Students as Predictors of Employability

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate the factors affecting quality of Pakistani graduates as potential employees for the 21st century job market. As the academic achievement of university graduates is the primary criterion for their recruitment, the study measured two of the most commonly cited employability attributes of selected graduates and correlated these with the Grade Point Averages (CGPAs). A sample of 300 final year students at the University of the Punjab's Institute of Education & Research (IER), were randomly selected and surveyed using the Chinese Emotional Intelligence Inventory (CEII) and the Interpersonal Skills inventory based on Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligence theory. Two hundred and twenty two graduates completed and returned the survey forms. The results showed that the self- reported Emotional Intelligence and Interpersonal skills of the graduates were very high (>87% for both categories), but there was no significant relationship of these important predictors of employability with the students' academic achievement. This finding suggested that the employability attributes of the graduates were not being given due weightage in their summative assessment and was not reflected in their academic achievement. The study's findings throw light on the student-assessment system of Public Sector Universities in Pakistan and corroborate the need for curriculum, assessment and faculty development expressed by Raza & Naqvi (2011) in their research on employability of Pakistani Public Sector graduates.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Interpersonal Skills, Employability, Academic Achievement

Introduction

With the advent of the 21st century rapid changes in the jobs market have transformed the nature of work and the subsequent perceptions of the workplace. It is no longer sufficient for graduates to hold a university degree based solely on subject-related competencies. Their Degrees need to be value-added in order to cater to the changing and challenging work situations.

Employers today, search for graduates who are innovative as well as capable of fitting into the organisational culture through team-building and professionalism (Harvey et al., 1997). In addition, the more challenging or non-traditional employment opportunities graduates aspire for, the greater becomes the need to possess and exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy. Yorke and Knight (2004), have drawn a causal relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs and self-theories together with certain other personal traits, and their level of employability. Self-efficacy, in relation to employability is widely understood as a person's perceived capability to plan, organize and execute the courses of action to achieve desired ends; such beliefs play a more significant role than the capability itself in achieving success (Bandura, 1997). The inter-relationship of Self-efficacy and Emotional Intelligence has been firmly established. Behjat & Chaudhery (2011) have quoted several studies that report a positive correlation between these two human traits.

The term Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been defined as the manner in which individuals perceive, process, manage and utilize information that pertains to their emotions. Higher emotional intelligence in individuals manifests itself when they associate with other people to pursue diverse but similar goals while engaging in activities that promote a positive lifestyle. Emotionally intelligent people have a better understanding of others' feelings and emotions and consequently are in a better position to use group dynamics for achieving common goals (Bandura , 2001).

Interpersonal skills are the life skills we use every day to communicate and interact with other people, both individually and in groups. People who strive to develop strong interpersonal skills are reported to be more successful in both their professional and personal lives. Interpersonal Skills Include:

- Verbal Communication – the language we use and the manner in which we express ourselves.
- Non-Verbal Communication - What we communicate to others through gestures, facial expressions and body language.
- Listening Skills – Our ability to interpret both the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by others.
- Negotiation – Being congenial when working with others.
- Problem Solving – Overcoming challenges by involving others to find solutions that are acceptable to all.
- Decision Making – Weighing available options for sound decisions.
- Assertiveness – Being vocal and clear in expressing one's values, beliefs, opinions, needs or wants.

This study was undertaken to investigate the real worth of university education in Pakistan. Employability was assumed to be the primary indicator of success in higher education. By measuring Emotional Intelligence and Interpersonal skills of university students as predictors of employability, the researchers aimed to determine their impact on the academic achievement of the graduates. The underlying assumption was that higher levels of employability skills would result in a corresponding high score in academic achievement. To reciprocate, the teachers' evaluation of students' worth would correspond with the students' self-reported worth if the desired teaching/learning was taking place.

However, the findings were disappointing and alarming as they revealed a discrepancy between the perceived worth of the graduates as reflected by their CGPA, and their self-reported worth as measured by the research instruments.

Literature Review

The Meaning of Employability:

According to Knight and Yorke (2003) employability refers to such personal attributes of individuals that make them more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen careers. Little (2001) perceives employability as a multi-dimensional concept, which consists of factors that influence job-acquisition and preparation for work. Employability as a concept can best be described in the context of lifelong learning or as a performance indicator for day-to-day living. Fugate et al (2004) have referred to a person's career identity, personal adaptability and human capital in its social context as the three dimensions of employability.

There is enough evidence in educational research that effective schooling, vocational training and university education affect income and job opportunities, and that these in turn contribute positively towards a society's economic prosperity. The lifelong benefits of education are manifested as resilience, psychological and emotional well-being, and participation in social life, all of which promote self-efficacy and can be translated into preferred employability skills. Education that provides work experience or internship opportunities promotes mastery experiences (Bandura, 1995) that turn 'novices to experts' (Benner, 1984). Work experience has been described by researchers as the most effective way of creating a strong sense of self-efficacy and consequently enhancing employability. Other skills associated with employability include, motivation and enthusiasm; interpersonal skills; versatility and adaptability; the ability to take initiative; planning and organizing; managing for personal development; and communicating effectively (HEA, 2006).

Knight and Yorke (2000) contend that learners need to understand how knowledge can be used in a variety of different situations before they can apply it in a specific context, thereby stressing the need for opportunities in education to apply the learnt concepts. They advocate the "USEM" model, which stands for, "Understanding (of the subject discipline); Skilful practices in context; Efficacy beliefs; and Meta-cognition." (Knight and Yorke 2004)

How to Promote Employability Skills?

Abilities, aptitudes and qualities that are deemed useful and supportive for an occupation or career are described as employability skills. These skills can either be inherent in certain individuals; or can be instilled and honed through effective pedagogical techniques; or else, can be developed through work experience. In any case, social and emotional employability skills need to be given due consideration for truly effective higher education (Dymnicki et.al.2013). Such skills are closely linked with lifelong learning and require suitable curricular innovations focusing on pedagogy, assessment and evaluation, student/teacher relationship and course designs. A very important component for promoting lifelong learning skills is to recognize and build upon particular strengths of a diverse student body. Parents and peers are a special source of support who play an indispensable role in lowering anxiety levels and helping students face challenging prospects and situations. (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

Higher Education and Employability Skills

With the diverse challenges of the 21st century, mainly stemming from irresponsible depletion of precious resources, it is imperative that educational institutions step in to play their foremost role of building up the value structure of societies and the corporate world. In this context, the degrees they award must represent the real worth of their graduates as opposed to token worth based on association.

A report generated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs on Pakistan's employment trends (2011) states that, "A rapid growing labour force in Pakistan might become problematic, especially those people who lack, skills, social networks and know-how to market themselves as potential valuable wage and salaried workers. They could be left behind, joining the growing number of people who are forced to accept work under inferior conditions, or move into the informal economy."

The fundamental requirement for graduate employment is an educational degree from a reputable higher education institution. This requirement has however resulted in a highly competitive labour market and an unhealthy race for higher and higher Grade Point Averages (GPA). Raza and Naqvi (2011) report that graduates from Public Sector universities in Pakistan are not geared to compete in the national and international job market due to a lack of institutional professionalism. They conclude that inadequate curriculum and teaching/learning strategies that encourage rote learning and regurgitation rather than problem solving, questioning, and creativity are the probable causes of this ineffectiveness.

It is now well recognized that a university degree based on subject competency alone is not enough to get a suitable job. Graduates need to polish and enhance their employability attributes, which then need to be reflected in their academic achievements. Recruiters are looking for people with additional qualities that are essential to cope with changing job demands in an uncertain and competitive world. Foremost among these qualities are a candidate's emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills which arouse a sense of security and dependability in potential employers.

Research Methodology

A survey of final year students at the Institute of Education & Research (IER), University of the Punjab was conducted to measure their Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Interpersonal Skills as the two identified, essential requirements for employability.

The items in the two inventories used for data collection were grouped according to the traits that they were designed to measure. The Factors for each inventory are given below:

III-1.   The Emotional Intelligence inventory had the following dominant factors:

Cognition and understanding of self-emotion. This refers to the graduates' ability to recognize and understand their own emotional make-up which can contribute towards providing them greater self-control under stressful or adverse circumstances.

Application and management of self-emotion

This trait helps individuals to use their cognition and understanding to avoid the adverse influence of negative emotions.

Cognition and understanding of social interaction

This refers to the ability of graduates to identify external factors impinging upon their own emotional states, as well as the emotions of others around them.

Application and management of social interaction

Includes interpersonal communication skills and the ability to interact with others in a composed manner even under stressful situations and show empathy to other's emotions.

Factor grouping for Emotional Intelligence:
- Cognition and understanding of self- emotion (Items 9, 10, 11, 12, 13),
- Application and management of self-emotion (Items 1, 2, 3, 4),
- Cognition and understanding of Social Interaction (Items 14, 15, 16, 17),
- Application and management of self-emotion (Items 5, 6, 7, 8).

III-2   The main categories for measuring Interpersonal skills were, Positive Personal Traits; Conduct; Self Confidence; and Negative Personal Traits (reverse coded).

Factor grouping for Interpersonal Skills:
- Positive Personal Traits (Items 5,7,9,12,13,14)
- Conduct (Items 1,6,11,15)
- Self Confidence (Items 2,4,8)
- Negative Personal Traits (Items 3, 10)

Results

Table 1
Percentage and Level of Emotional Intelligence in University Students

Emotional Intelligence	%	Level
Cognition and understanding self- emotion.	90	Very high emotional Intelligence
Application and management self-emotion (App SE).	87	High emotional Intelligence
Cognition and understanding Social Interaction.	90	Very high emotional Intelligence
Application and management self-emotion.	90	Very high emotional Intelligence

The Table shows that the respondents scored high in all four subscales of emotional intelligence. Given that self-reported positive attributes tend to be somewhat exaggerated, it can be safely stated that the respondents were by no means devoid of emotional intelligence and its closely related employability skill of self-efficacy.

Table 2

Summary statistics of Emotional Intelligence scores of University Students

Factors	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Cognition and understanding of self-emotion.	4.50	0.47	-1.04	0.57
Application and management of self-emotion (App SE).	4.37	0.57	-0.94	0.30
Cognition and understanding of Social Interaction.	4.51	0.54	-1.07	0.10
Application and management of self-emotion.	4.51	0.54	-1.41	2.06

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of scores of subscales of emotional intelligence. The level of cognition and understanding of self-emotion (M=4.50, SD=.47) is high as compared to Application and management of self-emotion (M=4.37, SD=0.57)

Table 3
Percentage and Level of Interpersonal skills in University Students

Interpersonal Skills	Percentage	Level
Positive Personal Traits	89	High
Conduct	82	High
Self Confidence	87	High
Negative Personal Traits	13	Low

The Table shows that students feel they possess sufficient interpersonal skills.

Table 4
Summary statistics of Interpersonal skills scores of University Students

Factors	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Positive Personal Traits	4.44	0.53	-1.08	1.06
Conduct	4.08	0.74	-0.58	-0.08
Self Confidence	4.37	0.57	-0.75	-0.15
Negative Personal Traits	4.35	0.78	-1.17	0.67

Table 5

Correlation among CGPA, Emotional Intelligence and Intrapersonal Skills

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.CGPA	-	.080	-.091	.018	-.047	-.020	.030	-.038	.040
2. Cognition and understanding of self- emotion.		-	.406**	.377**	.367 (**)	.411**	.411**	.289**	.477**
3. Application and management of self-emotion (App SE).				.324**	.647**	.402**	.371**	.307**	.414**
4. Cognition and understanding of Social Interaction.					.386**	.669**	.401**	.457**	.477**
5. Application and management of self-emotion.					-	.382**	.413**	.428**	.540**
6.Positive Personal Traits						-	.550**	.496**	.556**
7.Conduct							-	.289**	.440**
8.Self Confidence								-	.398**
9.Negative Personal Traits									

Conclusions and Discussion

The high levels of self-reported interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence in the study sample can be interpreted in several ways. It is however, a source of concern that the summative evaluation of the respondents' academic achievement as depicted by their CGPAs, does not take these skills into account. The most significant finding of this study was that it revealed no correlation between the employability skills and academic achievement of the respondents.

The analysis of available data points towards certain serious issues concerning university education in Pakistan. Far from developing and encouraging employability skills, the students' academic achievement does not take into account or reflect their inherent or acquired positive traits. The study shows that a majority of graduates possess the required traits for employability,

although it needs to be further investigated whether these traits have been developed as a result of the teaching/learning process at the university or have been instilled through the family support system, which is a special strength of the Pakistani culture and society.
The findings serve to corroborate the observed inefficiency and inaccuracy of the student evaluation system that caters to an outdated teaching/learning process that mainly employs the Lecture method of teaching. The lack of physical resources, including classroom space, inhibits interactive modes of teaching and learning. The sharp contrast between the stated and the observed standards of educational facilities further undermines the real worth of graduates.
This study has been very significant in highlighting the core element impinging upon the aspired effectiveness of higher education in Pakistan. Setting aside the missing facilities, which have never historically been the most recognized cause of ineffectiveness, and can even be credited with some very useful innovations, the perception of teaching/learning as a unidirectional activity where students are evaluated on the basis of what has been transferred by teachers through text books, can be cited as the root cause of ineffectiveness. Public Sector Universities in Pakistan have been slow in responding to the educational needs of the 21st Century. They need to employ indigenous techniques for enhancing positive, personal traits of students. In Pakistan's context, the most visible and effective source of enhancing self-efficacy beliefs is the extended family system, upheld and maintained through cultural and religious values. This system has the potential for providing experiences in problem-solving, conflict-resolution, team-building, negotiating, effectively using verbal and non-verbal communication skills, taking initiative and learning to manage personal and group emotions.

Public Sector higher education in Pakistan needs to focus on enhancing and strengthening the employability skills of graduates by promoting lifelong learning strategies and adding value to university degrees.
The key issues that require immediate reform include:
- An evaluation system that encourages rote learning;
- The perception of University teachers as ultimate authority on all knowledge, which results in setting boundaries on students' learning;
- Hierarchical student/teacher relationship and a condescending attitude towards students;
- Restricted use of resources for students, such as library facility and reference materials;
- Lack of encouragement for creativity in students, especially for out-of-the-box research proposals through teacher-dominated, lengthy procedures;
- Weak or non-existent Quality Control of the teaching/learning and student-evaluation systems;
- Extremely inadequate shuffling of permanent staff through fellowship or faculty-exchange programmes, in order to reduce knowledge stagnation and inertia;
- Delays and flaws in strategic planning and decision-making caused by a few senior teaching faculty wearing a number of important-position hats;
- Pseudo quality checks defeating their own purpose by causing delays in achieving targets;
- Lack of answerability and penalties for persistent delays in planned academic targets by staff and administration.

Recommendations

The study results point towards a need for updating and reforming the students' assessment and evaluation system in Pakistan's Public Sector Universities. This would have a corresponding desired effect on the teaching/learning process and consequently on the quality of the graduates. The study also draws attention towards the need to redefine the roles of teachers and students in higher education as creators of new knowledge and not as a hierarchy for transfer of information. Students in higher education must be perceived as valuable resources for adding depth and meaning to the learning process.

The world has recognized the need of education for all in the 21st century but we feel that education can defeat its own purpose if educational objectives, long-term goals and the process of achieving them are not made transparent and auditable. Answerability in education, and specifically in Higher Education is the most urgent need of the day. Although the size and selection of the study sample does not justify a generalization of its results, it does point to the need for extensive research in this area.

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