DEVELOPING "7/20/7" EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MENA REGION

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Abstract

Enhancing Universities' students' competences and employability skills to become ready for the job market after graduation has become a core global objective for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) around the world in general and MENA region in particular as the rapid increase of unemployment rates due to Covid-19 and the digital transformation worldwide has had the most profound impact on the MENA region. Education and employment will no longer be seen as two separate functions or phases of a young person's life, but a continuation of each other. With education being a precursor to employment, and employment a continuation of learning and development in the form of skill sets and experience. Moving towards this new paradigm requires using skills ecosystems including university faculty, companies, government, and students to adopt a mindset geared towards cultivating employment skills as early on in university formation as possible, integrating these into learning outcomes. Both academics and practitioners have recognised the value and importance of employability skills of success in the competitive business world and employability skills as being essential to long-term success for university graduates who should possess non-technical skills and knowledge than ever before. This paper proposes "7/20/7 Higher Education Strategy" for supportive and enabling employability initiatives including 7 Strategies, 20 Objectives can be achieved along with designated 7 Key Performance Indicators (KPI).

Keywords: HEI Strategy for employability skills; generic skills; graduate competencies; University Curriculum, Community Engagement.

1. Introduction

Student employability is a key academic and practice concern; to ensure that Universities'' students not only attain jobs but that they also have the right skills, the right attitude, the right behaviours and the mindset to be successful and satisfied throughout their career journeys. Employability is an approach to curriculum design that supports students in their personal development and career progression and is much more than just about getting a job and achieving lists of categories and skills. Instead the learner, who should be at the very heart of everything we do in the HEI, ought to be enabled and empowered to enhance a wide ranging repertoire of skills, attributes, abilities and knowledge through curriculum and extracurricular activity, personal development and career planning so that their mindset is engaged for a successful and satisfied career. In addition those students whose employability has been developed throughout their undergraduate programme are more likely to inhabit their first and future roles more efficiently. Furthermore academic staff are being positively challenged to go beyond facilitating learning and teaching activities that focus on subject knowledge and vocations skills alone and instead consider how employability, becomes a natural part of our 'teaching' and students 'learning' as a core activity (United

Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009, 2011, HEE, 2013).

Universities in worldwide are being called on to fulfil more and more roles, often with fewer resources. They are especially important to the knowledge economies of the 21st century, but their roles extend far beyond this. Universities are essential institutions underpinning of intellectual life in all societies in both developing and developed countries. Higher education institutions in a search for identifying and implementing skill sets in their teaching-learning processes to best serve the qualification requirements and needs of the ever-changing labor market. Understanding the complex roles of universities is a first step towards providing the needed support in a form of appropriate funding and joint programmes of activities at the national, regional and global levels with the actors in governments, businesses and society. Universities are an integral part of the skills and innovation supply chain to business. However, this supply chain is not a simple linear supplier-purchaser transaction; it is not the acquisition of a single product or service. This supply chain is multi-dimensional, it has to be sustainable, and it has to have quality, strength and resilience. These attributes can only be secured through close collaboration, partnership and understanding between business and universities.

The world of work has changed significantly over the last few years and a degree is no longer enough to secure graduate employment. Employers are often looking for skills that go beyond qualifications and experience. While the education may make the student eligible to apply for a job, to be successful in the role student will need to exhibit a mix of skills: 'employability skills'. This means that the specialist, technical skills associated with different roles may be less important than the 'soft skills' that can be transferred between different jobs and different employment sectors. The 21st Century brings many different challenges and opportunities for the University graduates for both developed as well as developing nations. One of these challenges is to equip graduates with a broader range of Employability Skills to meet the demands of employers and the profession.

There is an increasing need for people who have a wide range of skills as well as professional or technical competence. Organisations need multi-skilled people and flexible project teams that can be put together to accomplish the moving tasks in the new world of work. So although technical and professional skills are as important as ever, organisations are now also seeking people with an array of personal skills or human capabilities skills - people who can manage themselves in the resilience and adaptability culture special during and after COVID 19 era, can work effectively with colleagues and customers, who can think creatively and can take responsibility. Nearly half of the population of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region consists of children and young people in the age range of 1-24 years old, and as of 2015, there are almost 80 million youth aged 15-24 years old (UNICEF, 2019). Before Covid-19, Arab youth were already concerned about issues such as high unemployment rates, the quality of education, and limited access to services. According to the World Bank (2021), a total of 29.4 percent of the youth in the MENA region were unemployed as of 2017, which is the highest rate of its kind in across the world's regions. The higher education sector in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) faces many challenges, but the region's dynamism offers a source of hope. Today, two-thirds of MENA's population is under 35 years old. With the right education and training, the opportunities for students, institutions and businesses in the region are enormous.

It is known that universities have three main tasks: teaching; research; and community engagement. The question now is how these three tasks serve and enhance students' employability. Therefore, one of the university's roles and responsibility toward the society, in general, includes all the stakeholder and practically to their students to ensure that the students and graduates develop the necessary work-related skills and personal attributes that will allow them to compete successfully in the graduate labour markets. Also, ensuring that students and graduates have the knowledge, information and opportunities that they require

to secure appropriate professional employment. The university trust that developing students and graduates who seek to achieve goals and respond flexibly to challenges; creating and implementing new ideas and new ways of doing things whether through employment, self-employment or entrepreneurship. For employers, getting the right people means identifying people with the right skills and qualities to fulfil the role and contribute to the organisation's success. Candidates may have the qualifications and 'hard skills' needed to be able to manage the job role but, without a well set of 'soft skills', employers are less motivated to hire. Accounting education research has identified a skills gap that suggests accounting graduates lack the communication and problem solving skills expected by the accounting profession.

Calls for university education reform and improve the education system for all-round development are well documented in the literature (Hancock et al, 2009; Bui and Porter, 2010 and Willcoxson et al. 2010, Abadzi, H. (2015), OECD 2018). In addition, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) has acknowledged the importance of identifying these generic skills and embedding them in the curriculum (Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2013). In the last few decades, the term "employability" has become closely related to the acquisition of skills by the workforce, especially "employability skills" or "transferable skills" (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). This term mainly indicates the skills that an employee can "transfer" from job to job and includes, among others, personal and interpersonal skills, communication skills, ethical behaviour, critical thinking, problem-solving skills and teamwork ability. (Bunney and Therry). The Higher Education Academy (2015) identifies three main features to successfully embedding employability: 'Inclusivity', 'Engagement' and 'Collaboration'; and recognises that the responsibility to do so is not specific to one group, but to all stakeholders who should play a part throughout the student the frameworks for enhancing student success by embedding employability in higher education. As The first feature, inclusivity means all students,

regardless of location, situation, programme or mode of study, should have equitable access to opportunities to enhance their employability, make successful transitions and manage their careers. The second feature i.e collaborative approaches to learning and teaching can enrich and inform the curriculum and support graduate employability. Collaboration between HE and business provides opportunities, informs the curriculum, and should be a key feature of your approach to employability. Employability is a process of engagement and continual enhancement and is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders. The last feature is engagement which means the language used around employability is critical in terms of its potential impact on engagement, with all stakeholders. Developing a shared understanding and view of

employability in any given context will facilitate staff, employer and student engagement.

Students can subsequently engage proactively in seeking to develop as individuals

in the areas of focus being highlighted.

2. The term "employability":

Employability is ultimately "the ability to be employed". Three key elements of employability have been identified (Finn, 2000). Firstly, it is the ability to gain initial employment, hence the interest in ensuring that "key skills", careers advice and an understanding of the world of work are embedded in the education system. Secondly, it is the ability to maintain employment and make "transitions" between jobs and roles within the same organisation to meet new job requirements. Thirdly, it is the ability to obtain new employment if required; that is, to be independent in the labour market through being willing and able to manage employment transitions between and within organisations.

Knight and Yorke (2003) define the employability is: "A set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen

occupations". At the empirical level, Baruch (2001) argues that employability is now a substitute for "loyalty". New terminology has appeared in the working lives of employees, boundary less careers, protean careers, psychological contracts and transferable skills. These terms indicate important changes in the employment and employability status of the modern workforce. It is possible that the general or specialised problems that arise can be resolved if the employees and employers work together so employees develop a range of generic, transferable skills, such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork and decision-making skills. Employees will also need assistance to develop competences in self-evaluation, self-promotion and career management skills.

Improving Student Employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. It is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. To summarize the above literatures the employability is a set of knowledge, skills and competences that all job market applicants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy. Employability Skills can be defined as the transferable skills needed by an individual to make them 'employable'. Along with good technical understanding and subject knowledge, employers often outline a set of skills that they want from an employee.

The author come with the following structure to identify the employability skills components as the following diagram:
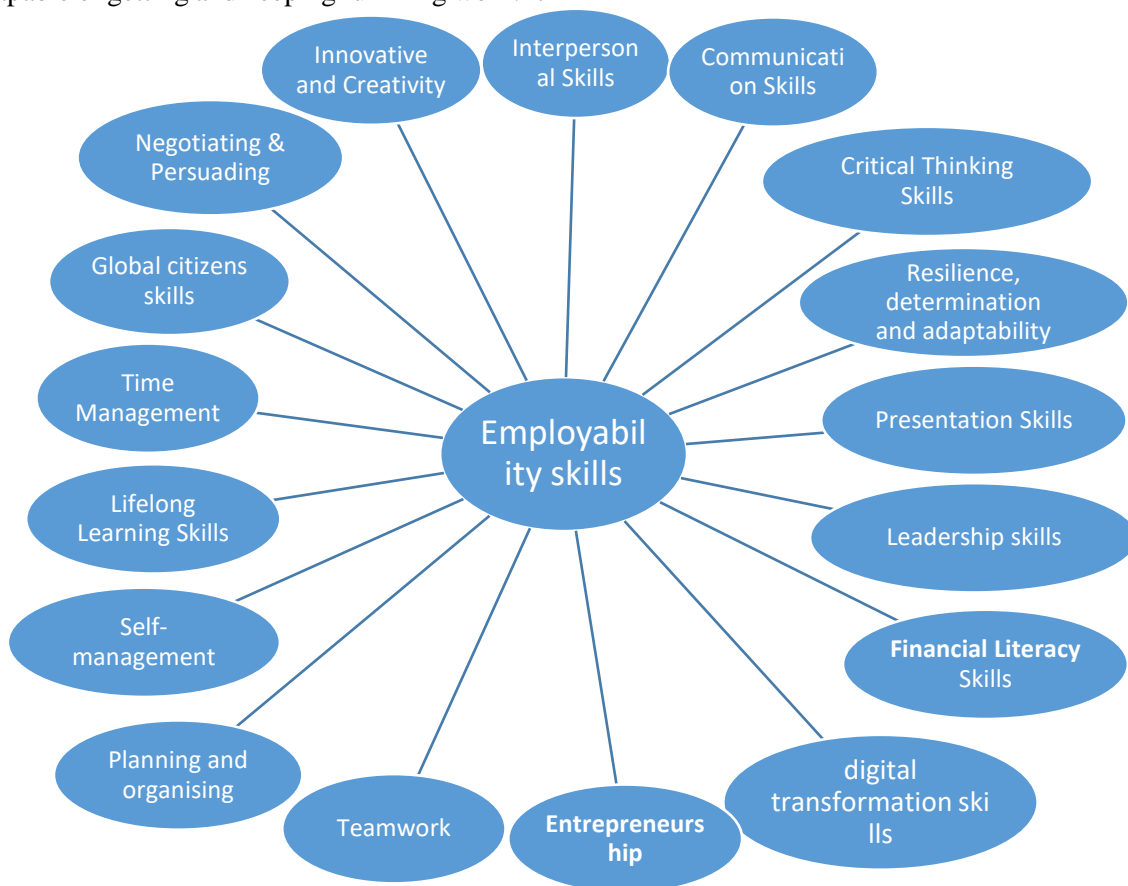
There are not many who would disagree that University graduates need well developed technical or hard skills and generic or soft skills.

Communication skills are an important component of generic skills, and accounting educational research to date has addressed

mainly writing and presentation skills. Research on developing accounting students' interpersonal skills has received scant attention.

Today if the graduate are looking to fill accounting and finance jobs at any firm, the firms will be searching for candidates with the necessary education and certifications, of course. But degrees, diplomas and designations aren't everything. The ideal hire will have great interpersonal skills and some general knowledge about the business world, too.

3. Higher Education and Employability Skills:

A common theme across Higher Education Intuitions (HEIs) is the need to ensure that graduates are prepared for and able to contribute to, the economy and society. The development of graduates with relevant attributes, skills and knowledge has placed graduate employability at the centre of the Higher Education agenda of priorities. Higher Education (HE) is recognised that its success in its roles is based on how and what will teach future employees and current students how to become employable; that is, how to develop a range of generic, transferable skills. As student expectations increase, higher education organisations are adopting a renewed focus on the student experience and in engaging students as partners in learning. They are also working to enhance the quality of their pedagogical approaches, giving consideration to the context of delivery and curricula construction. Researchers from various disciplines are exploring the relationship between skills, HE curricula and employability in a variety of professions (Hassall et al., 2003; Marks and Scholarios, 2008).

Mora, Garcia-Montalvo and Garcia-Aracil (2000) examined the employment opportunities of Spanish graduates and found that the Spanish economy was unable to create the 0.2 million jobs that would be necessary to avoid graduate unemployment. One of the reasons for this is the fact that Spain's HE system focuses almost exclusively on specialised competence, on knowledge rather than skills. When professions and job qualifications change very quickly, this system is too rigid to adapt to the changing labour market. Hartshorn and Sear (2005) examined employability in relation to the enterprise skills that business owners should possess. They argue for a growing recognition of the difference between the "old" and "new" employability skills sets required to compete in an increasingly flexible labour market. The Confederation of British Industry report (CBI, 2009) recommended that "business and universities must ensure that all students develop employability skills while still at university. These skills are selfmanagement, team working, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, numeracy, and the application of information technology".

Students clearly understand that employers place increasingly less emphasis on academic credentials while the so-called "soft" currencies are growing in importance. HE Institutions are assumed to have increased responsibility for preparing graduates to become "employable" and to find ways to achieve this target although there are voices against the so-called "marketization" of HE. Relevant concepts that have proven essential to the discussion on graduates' employability are the awareness of the importance of soft/ transferable skills by the stakeholders, the learning and assessment methods needed to acquire soft/transferable skills, and the required training of teachers in order to teach skills (Asonitou, 2014; Alamanda, Ahmad, Putra, & Hashim, 2021). Teachers should use particular techniques in order to promote critical thinking, innovation and professional skills, and finally a holistic education should be provided that can have a significant effect on the students' perceptions of the skills and abilities important for success in the business world. These particular techniques may include lectures and demonstrations, case analysis and discussion, problem-based learning, role play in decision situations, group research, new assessment techniques and peer evaluation based on written and oral reports (Ahmad & Ahmad: 2019; Kabir & Helal, 2021).

The teaching methods should encourage teamwork, should promote argumentation and the effective use of teaching equipment as well

as investigative research projects to encourage self-learning, sensitivity teaching through discussions of ethical cases classroom, discussions with practicing professionals, field trips and visits, work shadowing, project work, cooperative learning and computer-assisted instruction (Apostolou et. al 2013; Din et al., 2021). Several different learning strategies have been recommended and assessed, including work placements, simulation games, task-based or practice-based, experiential, and service learning. EU has responded to the requirements of the new era by introducing International Conference "Science in Technology" SCinTE 2015 the concepts of learning outcomes and the European Credit System (ECTS). These notions constitute a paradigm shift towards student-centred education which unfortunately remains underdeveloped, compared to the well-known teacher-centred educational pattern (Zulifqar et al., 2020; Danladi, 2021; B S, B, K, & C, 2021).

Additionally, EU has made specific recommendations which include a call for mandatory certified training for professors and the creation of a European Academy of Teaching and Learning by 2020 (EU, 2013). In the Greek context although the relative laws for the introduction of skills in the HEIs curriculum are voted (Law 3374/2005 and 4009/2011), in practical terms ECTS has been a mechanical calculation of teaching contact hours and not the essential transformation of the curriculum (Zaheilas, 2012; Asonitou, 2015a, b). The delay towards a realistic transformation of the curriculum in the Greek HEIs is due to indigenous barriers that exist in the local HE system that span all stakeholders' attitude; teachers, students, administration and business professionals (Asonitou, 2015c). For example, qualitative research has shown that barriers coming from accounting teachers include their hesitation as to "how proper is it to teach skills in higher education", the lack of their own professional skills, fear of the unknown and institutional inertia, the limited practice of new teaching methods, and even a tendency to "ignore" certain laws given the lack of control and sanction system. In many cases imported institutions which were successfully implemented abroad have met local resistance

due to fact that the local "system" absorbs any practices and efforts which are not in line with the established local interests. Lack of space and proper equipment as well as big size classes are also acknowledged as barriers to skills development: Students have their own share on the responsibilities to adopt innovative approaches to ensure skills development. These include their lack of readiness (low motivation, extended year of studies), the high absenteeism rate and the passive attitude in the classes (Nadeem et al., 2020).

4. The Proposal Strategy for supportive and enabling employability initiatives:

There are enormous challenges in creating a culture of employability across an institution and engaging effectively with students, staff and employers to enhance graduate employability. As engaging with employers is crucial to supporting the employability of graduates. Wilson (2012) in his work "A Review of Business–University Collaboration" stressed the importance of business/HE provider collaboration to the development of key skills and knowledge for employment (Ahmad & Ahmad: 2018). It also acknowledged that HE providers have a central role in providing "high-level skills, a world-class research base and a culture of inquiry and innovation" and that they were "an integral part of the supply chain to business – a supply chain that has the capability to support business growth and therefore economic prosperity. "The Wilson's review also emphasised the importance of work experience in enhancing graduate skills and ensuring smooth transition between university or college and business environments and made a recommendation made to increase the number of opportunities. This paper proposes "7/20/7 Higher Education Strategy" for supportive and enabling employability initiatives including 7 Strategies, 20 Objectives can be achieved along with designated 7 Key Performance Indicators (KPI).

1.   Curricula Development

The strategy ensure that curricula deliver skills to develop employability, through such

measures as the integration of skills development within tutorials and seminars, the development of an employability dimension within courses, and the provision of work placements and work-based learning opportunities for students by the following:

1.1   Procedures should be put in place for all academic subjects to be mapped, on a regular basis for employability skills. Using the existing Annual Programme Monitoring arrangements academic departments should report annually on the ways in which employability learning is being integrated into the curricula.

1.2   The profile of employability must be enhanced through the Personal Development Planning process (PDP).

1.3   Employability to be promoted to students and staff at all levels and across all committees via a framework of employability skills.

1.4   A strategic commitment should be made to increasing the number of students from all disciplines embarking on work placements.

1.5   The Careers and Employability Service will further develop and promote the concept of a negotiated learning contract which enable students to record and reflect on their off-campus learning. Added to this, a framework for recording the achievement of learning objectives and skills should be developed.

1.6   Structured support to be provided, both academic and personal, for students embarking on work placements.

1.7   To facilitate an increased number of students embarking on placements, a University Placement Unit should be created in the Careers and Employability Service.

KPI: Revised curricula. Improved graduate employment statistics.

2.   Feedback From Employers

Improve feedback from employers and other stakeholders to enable their views to inform curriculum design and review, where this is appropriate.

2.1   To establish the HEI as a leading producer of highly skilled and employable graduates strategic targets should be identified to develop and maintain high quality relationships with leading recruiters;

2.2   The Careers and Employability Service to provide students with greater access to high-level employability opportunities. Specialist tracks will be developed in order to increase the proportion of students from certain backgrounds, or with certain career aspirations, gaining employment with leading graduate recruiters.

2.3   An Employer Forum comprising local and national graduate recruiters to be set up to inform the work of the Careers and Employability Service and to advise on the implementation of the Employability Strategy.

2.4   To develop and promote the concept of 'University Graduate' with a specific focus on employability and career management.

KPI: More programmes designed/revised with employer input (Careers service to
          survey employers on their views of the HEI).

3.   Collaboration with Students Union and Clubs

Continue, in partnership with the Students Union and Clubs, to offer a range of extra-curricular activities for students which will enhance their personal development

3.1   The Careers and Employability Service, as part of its central careers programme, to run a series of events, workshops, presentations and seminars in conjunction with the Student Union which should be reviewed on an annual basis.

3.2   To encourage more students to engage in extracurricular activities, the Careers and Employability Service will explore ways to work with various student societies and groups.

KPI: Maintenance and enhancement of programmes of extra-curricular activities.

4.   Development Of Appropriate Assessment Methods

Ensure that appropriate assessment methods are in place in respect of transferable skills and work-based learning in the context of enhancing employability

4.1   Working closely with academic departments, a range of assessment options will be developed to enable students to gain credit for the acquisition of employability skills.

KPI: Enhanced assessment practices (reflected in improved results and improved student satisfaction). Positive employer feedback. Improved student employment rates.

5.   Widening Participation

Continue to develop targeted activities to improve the employment prospects of students who are identified as disadvantaged in the employment market (e.g. mature students, students with disabilities and minority ethnic students).

5.1   To ensure that employability initiatives do not discriminate against sub-groups of students - particularly those from non-traditional social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and those with restricted geographical mobility - the Careers and Employability Service should invest additional resources in developing work placements within the local community.

KPI: Improved graduate employment statistics.

6.   Enhancing Relationships With Employers And Professional Bodies

Continue to improve relationships with a range of employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), in order to develop an understanding of the needs of different stakeholders.

6.1   To improve the service provided to employers and professional bodies, a single, coordinated point of access to the HEI should be developed via a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database, monitored and maintained by the Careers and Employability team;

6.2   To enable the University more responsive to the needs of employers;

responsible for co-ordinating and maintaining the University CRM database and to monitor the Employability Strategy.

6.3   The Careers and Employability Service to become the focal point for the collection and dissemination of high quality graduate labour market intelligence.

KPI: Increased range of organisations providing input to inform our activities.

7. Collaboration with alumni

Work to improve feedback from Alumni

7.1 The Careers and Employability Service will work with Alumni in developing a range of graduate case studies to be collated, analysed and disseminated to current students.

7.2 To maximise levels of intelligence gained from labour market surveys

KPI: Increased input from Alumni to inform our activities.

CONCLUSION

Employability has become a central issue of interest for Higher Education Institutions. Policymakers and researchers claim that Higher Education has the potential and the responsibility to contribute towards this direction by developing certain skills and competences to students that will enable them to become highly competitive in the professional arena. However, there are still questions as to how Higher Education Institutions can respond to this challenge and how they can overcome the obstacles to achieve the desired results. In the Higher Education environment there should be more organised dissemination activities on the institutional level about the role of skills and competences within the curriculum. Institutions should urgently organise internal specific division that will concentrate on issues like teacher training, dissemination of information and evolutions on educational issues, recommendations, proposals and seminars to academic teachers on teaching, learning and assessment methodologies. This is the missing link that will bring teachers closer to important

professional skills and certainly more research is required in order to support Higher Education to reach the European and global standards.

There is no denial that university graduate employability has become a yardstick performance indicator of the quality of higher education in the context of quality assurance and qualification framework. Higher education institutions within a fierce competition are engaged in addressing their curriculum reforms and reshaping their move from teaching to learning paradigm for the sake of promoting the significance of core, transferable skills that make their graduates employable upon the completion of their academic degrees. However, such preoccupation is without fears of transforming the role of higher education institution in providing proper education of a qualified good citizenship to a mere training and instruction provider. Intellectualism creation which is the core quality production of higher education may be transformed into homogenous obedient robotism. This paper propose "7/20/7 Higher Education Strategy" for supportive and enabling employability initiatives including 7 Strategies, 20 Objectives can be achieved along with designated 7 Key Performance Indicators (KPI).

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