Employability skills of alumni students: requirements and expectancies

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Research Article

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to explore the views of young and experienced professionals in Uzbekistan and their relevance to labour market requirements in order to improve employment.

Design/methodology/approach – The data was collected using a quantitative approach; online semi-structured questionnaire was disseminated to 607 WIUT alumni students applying a Likert Scale question.

Findings – The results indicate that WIUT library program is current and well-planned. However, the activities do not fully meet the needs of young and experienced graduates. Shortage of staff impacted on applying LRC curriculum effectively.

Research limitations – The factors that impact an individual’s income are numerous, and the data that has been collected is not in-depth enough to make substantive correlations between library usage and income.

Practical implications – The findings will assist in planning LRC activities and developing teaching approaches at WIUT. Furthermore, existing and new graduates can advance market driven skills and boost their employability.

Originality/value – This research is the initial investigation conducted in Uzbekistan that examines how university library operations impact the employability skills of graduates. It is also one of the earliest studies that looks into the experiences of former students in terms of employability skills.

1. Introduction

The WIUT library is identical to the University of Westminster’s library in London. The university does not impose any limitations on the use of the library’s resources. All resources are freely accessible to all visitors. The team of LRC works hard to improve researchers’ exposure and prospects. Since 2002, the library has benefited from cutting-edge technology by developing digital catalogues for quicker and simpler access to its resources (WIUT LRC, 2023).

WIUT LRC has a lot of activities, workshops, training and blended mode courses which can enhance the students’ transferable skills that can assist in their employability. Ameen & Warraich (2011) describe employability as required skills for getting the job and doing it professionally. They can be taught based on academic and thinking skills and individual qualities.

To meet the demanding employer needs, efforts should be focused on developing marketable skills. Teaching LRC participants on skills which are market-driven play significant role in areas including presentation, IT, problem-solving, and research with high levels of commitment and motivation (Utkirov & Salahodjayev, 2021).
2. Literature review

The definition of graduate employability is not universally agreed upon by scholars, as the topic has attracted researchers from various disciplines, such as management, human resources management, accounting, and psychology (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Römgens et al., 2020; Mainga et al., 2022). Furthermore, the definition of graduate employability has evolved over time, with an augmented definition being used for this study as a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours, and attributes that increase the likelihood of graduates obtaining initial employment and succeeding in their chosen careers. It ultimately empowers graduates to be critical and reflective lifelong learners who are flexible and adaptable throughout their careers, benefiting themselves, their employers, the community, and the wider economy (Scott & Willison, 2021). In today’s globalized and rapidly changing technological world, lifelong learning, critical thinking, flexibility, and adaptability are crucial. Employability encompasses more than just academic knowledge; it includes the possession of skills, abilities, and behavioural attributes that align with the desired workplace or profession. Even if entry-level graduates possess acceptable levels of technical skills specific to their discipline, they may still fail on the job due to a lack of soft or transferable skills (Robinson & Garton, 2008; Osmani et al., 2017). To perform well in their initial employment, newly graduated individuals need to possess crucial employability skills, which comprise problem-solving, communication proficiency, critical thinking, interpersonal abilities, and teamwork aptitude (Lim et al., 2016; Osmani et al., 2017; Mainga et al., 2022).

Kovács & Keresztes, (2022) find out that the development of e-commerce has led to changes in the key employability skillset. The research found that soft skills, such as motivation, oral communication and presentation skills, interpersonal skills, flexibility, teamwork, stress resilience, problem solving, and creative thinking, were perceived to be of highest importance. Analytical and conceptual skills, knowledge of social media, e-commerce, mobile, and internet and software were also among the top categories. Equipping university graduates with the right hard and soft skills could make the transition from higher education to the world of work easier and boost job creation and increase productivity. The implications for employers of on-the-job training are as critical as skills development in higher education.

Mammo (2007) examines how employers in Ethiopia perceive employees and their ability to find a job in their field. He also looks at the curricula for the BSc degree in information systems, master degree in Information Science at Addis Ababa University, and BLIS at Jimma University. The study provides an overview of the difficulties library and information science (LIS) education and the reasons why employers and professionals in the field are dissatisfied. The study's results may assist not only LIS educators but other fields such as management, marketing and tourism related spheres in developing and designing necessary skills (Ameen & Warraich, 2011).

Strietska-Ilina et al. (2021) assessed that it is undeniable that during and after the pandemic, job-specific technical skills are crucial for individuals to retain their employment, while possessing broad digital skills has become a requirement for many jobs. However, in the midst of these uncertain times, core work/soft skills have become even more vital for effectively transitioning to the digital work landscape. This is
particularly evident in the current turbulent circumstances. For instance, the International Labour Organization's assessment of reskilling and upskilling needs in nine African countries due to COVID-19 reveals that employers primarily seek technical and core skills in new hires. The latest McKinsey Global Survey on reskilling also emphasizes the increased demand for strong core skills like adaptability, empathy, and leadership, driven by the crisis (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). This rising demand for core skills may continue beyond the pandemic as the business environment evolves, imposing employers to be innovative, flexible, agile, and highly adaptable to transformation.

It is crucial to address the disparities in how graduates perceive their level of acquired skills compared to employers' expectations. It is evident that graduates often anticipate employers to be content while, in reality, there is dissatisfaction. This mismatch can lead to demotivation among graduates and higher turnover rates. One effective approach to bridging this perception gap is to advocate for mandatory student internships, facilitating direct engagement with employers and the labor market. Additionally, promoting self-management skills, including self-awareness, can be beneficial. These measures aim to reduce the gap by providing graduates with practical experience, fostering active connections with employers, and enhancing their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses (Lisá et al., 2019; Utkirov & Salahodjayev, 2021).

Rani & Sharma (2021) found out that library and information science (LIS) graduates expressed dissatisfaction with their employability skills, citing the inadequate inclusion of suitable skills in LIS curricula as the primary reason. Alumni specifically highlighted weaknesses in communication, practical, and presentation skills. When seeking employment, alumni faced various challenges related to their employability skills. Recruiters now expect graduates to possess multidimensional and market-oriented skills, including improved communication, problem-solving attitude, indexing, classification, cataloguing, IT knowledge, and presentation skills.

Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia/Pacific (2017) emphasizes inclusive teaching and learning methods that aim to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to positively impact sustainability in the future. This involves promoting interdisciplinary research to tackle global challenges, adopting suitable institutional governance and policies informed by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and demonstrating external leadership through public engagement. Institutions that implement these guidelines prioritize sustainability as a central aspect of their curriculum and physical campus environment. They engage students in developing critical thinking abilities, problem-solving competencies, and ethical approaches to effectively address complex issues as responsible global citizens (J. Cox, 2021).

A. Cox & Brewster (2020) findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic had a noticeable and immediate impact on how mental health and well-being were being addressed by academic libraries in the UK. It triggered a strong recognition of the necessity to review the library services' influence on well-being due to the shift to digital learning, which resulted in increased stress for students as they struggled to adapt to a greater reliance on electronic resources. Consequently, the issue was identified as a form of study-related
stress. The implementation of social distancing measures was also perceived as a significant factor affecting student mental health and well-being. Moreover, many pre-COVID-19 interventions heavily relied on physical presence in the library, which became impossible due to the circumstances. As a result, library well-being services, such as relaxation spaces or nap stations, and hosting well-being-related activities became less relevant. It became essential to place greater emphasis on digital-based responses, utilizing the library website and social media platforms. Notably, in crisis situations, the evaluation of services seemed to rely more on informal feedback rather than formal mechanisms. However, it is important to acknowledge that there were significant continuities in certain aspects, such as the recognition of the value of fiction and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) collections. The library’s proactive alignment with institutional agendas remained unchanged.

3. Research design

The study utilized a questionnaire survey as its primary data collection method. To establish a comprehensive understanding of the subject, a thorough literature review was conducted, which informed the development of the data gathering instruments. Data collection is consisted of young specialists and professional specialists who had graduated the Westminster International University in Tashkent. The target population for this study consisted of a total of 607 students who completed their masters and bachelor degrees between 2008–2021 years. The researchers used a stratified random sampling method. Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire designed with a Likert Scale to measure responses. By employing these research methods and data collection phases, the study aimed to gain insights into the employability of graduates in Uzbekistan.

3.1. Data collection

Data was gathered by conducting personal visits to the target groups. In addition, email and cell phones, telegram, facebook social networks were utilized to maintain contact and follow up with the participants. The survey received a response from 607 alumni, which accounted for 80 percent of the total number. For data analysis and manipulation, the researchers employed SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for quantitative data. The software tool enabled to analyze and process the respective types of data effectively.

4. The data analysis and interpretation

Utkirov & Salahodjayev (2021) point out significant finding from the study, indicating that a considerable 62 percent of students who regularly visited libraries secured employment within the first month. This outcome strongly suggests a favourable labor market for graduates of WIUT (Westminster International University in Tashkent) university in Uzbekistan.

An independent sample T-test was applied to get the significant variance between means of opinions. Independent T-test outcomes represent the insignificance (alpha level $\alpha = 0.05$) among opinions (Mean)
of both age ranges (ages between 21–26 and 27–37). The results determine that both age group's (young and professional) opinions regarding the content of the activities (course) are linked to practical approach, interpersonal skills, communication skills, database management, problem solving skills, research skills and Information Technology (IT) are not significantly different. Therefore, the opinion of professionals' age between 21–26 and 27–37 is the similar for the above-mentioned aspect of curricula (Table 1).

The lowest mean was for course content (N1 = 3.41, N2 = 3.53) followed by Information technology (IT) skills (N1 = 3.46, N2 = 3.59) and communication (N1 = 3.59, N2 = 3.63). These outcomes illustrate that both young and professional specialists were unsatisfied or not sure about the scope of these challenges in LRC curricula (Table 1). The LRC Enhancement department at WIUT has now introduced the new compulsory course of "Information Intelligence" which is embedded with the "Strengthening Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills" module for foundation students in the 1st semester at WIUT. It is expected that the efforts of the LRC department should improve the position (WIUT LRC, 2022).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion on LRC activities for curriculum</th>
<th>Mean:</th>
<th>T-test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>young specialists – 351 respondents (N1)</td>
<td>professional specialists- 256 respondends (N2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Activities contents are related to Practical approach</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>0.090046</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>-0.67096</td>
<td>0.502623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teamwork skills</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>0.3578224</td>
<td>0.72066265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Communication</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>-0.46852</td>
<td>0.64047418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Problem solving skills</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>-0.53776</td>
<td>0.59103819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Database management</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>-1.86384</td>
<td>0.06287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Information technology (IT) skills</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>-1.61071</td>
<td>0.107796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Searching skills</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>-0.56916</td>
<td>0.569467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Research skills</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>0.055319</td>
<td>0.055319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1 - *Not at all*; 2-To little extent; 3-Just Ok; 4-To reasonable extent; 5 – To great extent

**Employability Skill**
The opinion of young professionals and professional specialists regarding with their employability skills was collected through rating scale from 1 to 5. Table 2 demonstrates the significant of difference between opinions of both groups which was calculated by Independent T-test sample.

a five-point scale

Table 2
Perceptions of graduates on Employability Skill; Independent Sample t-Test N = 607; Young specialists = Age-21-26 (N1 = 351 respondents), Professional specialists = Age-27-37 (N2 = 256 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability Skill</th>
<th>Mean:</th>
<th>T-test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>young specialists - 351 respondents</td>
<td>professional specialists-256 respondends (N2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Presentation skills</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>-2.69972</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Good academic record</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>-1.86084</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Good interview skills</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>-1.42136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Teamwork</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>-0.35999</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Problem solving aptitude</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>-1.49859</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Good report writing skills</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>-1.14674</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Information technology (IT) skills</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>-1.05648</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Online searching skills</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>-0.81737</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Friendly attitude</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.38567</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Learning skills</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>0.56600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Time management</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>-1.75019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Achieving Professional goals</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.13949</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Plan and organize independently</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>-2.02497</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Just OK; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly agree
Independent T-test outcomes represent that there is no significant variance (alpha level $\alpha = 0.05$) among perceptions of graduates on employability (Mean) of both age ranges (ages between 21-26 and 27-37). The results show the perception of young and professional specialists regarding various characteristics of employability skills concerning the good academic records, presentation skills, interview skills, problem-solving, teamwork, IT skills, searching skills, learning skills.

The results illustrate that the opinion of both professional age groups (ages between 21–26 and 27–37) concerning different aspects of employability skills i.e. presentation skills, good academic record, interview skills, teamwork, problem solving aptitude, report writing skills, IT skills, online searching skills, friendly attitude, learning skills, time management, achieving professional goals and plan & organize independently are not significantly different. Hence, both senior professionals and young graduates shared similar views regarding the mentioned employability skills (Table 2).

Both the age groups were of the view that above mentioned skills are very important for graduates to search and maintain good jobs in a competitive information market place. For young specialists (21–26 age) the highest mean ($N_1 = 4.17$) of problem-solving aptitude and plan and organize independently. The high mean ($N_2 = 4.33$) of plan and organize independently shows that this skill was very important for the professional in age 27–37 ($N_2$) professionals to provide a good job in this service-oriented profession. The other important skills in the age of 21–26 young professionals' opinion were similar result in learning skills and friendly attitude ($N_1 = 4.16$), time management ($N_1 = 4.11$). From the perspective of young professionals aged 21 to 26, the importance of IT skills in enhancing employability was rated higher, with a mean score of 4.09 ($N_1$) and professionals (27–37 ages) has very close outcomes ($N_2 = 4.07$). It is encouraging to note that professionals across different age ranges, specifically those between 21–26 and 27–37, demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding employability skills and hold a shared opinion regarding the importance these skills.

5. Summary and recommendations

Senior professionals in the field of LRC activities and curriculum of university education provided valuable recommendations in response to survey and discussions. They suggested that new courses should be introduced in various areas, including web searching, desktop and server-based database design, utilization of online resources and specialized access through free and low-cost subscriptions, digitization and indexing of materials, ICT skills, management skills, presentation skills, writing and speaking proficiency, as well as planning and problem-solving abilities. They emphasized that training in library software like Mendeley, database usages, research related softwares such as SPSS, Stata, Tableau, and web page designing should be integrated into the curriculum. Although some of these areas are partially covered in the current curriculum, there is a need for their effective implementation.

Additionally, professionals at all levels, including both young and senior practitioners, should continuously acquire new techniques and skills as learning is an ongoing process. Young professionals...
specifically expressed the opinion that the duration of internships should be extended from eight to sixteen weeks to facilitate the application of theoretical knowledge in practical settings.

The professional specialists recommended that at least 55 percent of the faculty should comprise competent practitioners to combine the expertise of academicians with practical experience. The LRC department members themselves should possess specialized knowledge with academicians of other departments. Moreover, the courses should be designed to be student-focused, encouraging students to actively choose this profession and fostering their commitment to learning. Longitudinal case studies should be conducted to evaluate the needs of both students and employers, while regular curriculum audits and gap analyses should be carried out. It is also important to provide career counseling services for students and organize career fairs for students and employers to facilitate networking and employment opportunities.

The employability skills framework encompasses a collection of universal skills and personal qualities that are utilized alongside dedicated knowledge and skills within the workplace. Suarta et al. (2018) proposed framework consists of seven categories of generic skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity and innovation, leadership, self-management, and learning skills. Among these, the top five frequently emphasized generic skills in job advertisements are communication, self-management, teamwork, creativity and innovation, and problem-solving. Personal attributes, which are characterized by specific behaviors and attitudes closely associated with generic skills, are also an integral part of the framework. These attributes include honesty, accuracy, independence, appearance, openness, ethics, behavior, and others. Job advertisements frequently highlight the importance of personal attributes such as honesty, independence, accuracy, and appearance in potential candidates.

As a suggestion for future research, it is recommended to conduct a cross-industry survey that specifically targets the identification of crucial employability skills necessary for a successful transition from school to the workforce. This study, although valuable, is not without limitations, one of which is the relatively small number of job advertisement samples analyzed. Therefore, it is advisable to broaden the scope of future research by including a larger and more diverse range of job advertisements and graduates of universities to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the required skills. Moreover, setting and collaborating with the Career Centers at the universities can be instrumental in establishing and nurturing connections between universities and employers, fostering valuable networking opportunities.

In order to fulfill their role in leading and influencing society towards a sustainable and resilient future, higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to play a transformative role in the growing knowledge society. It is crucial for the higher education sector to acknowledge that the quality of academic libraries holds significant importance in the rankings of institutions. As evident from our research, it is essential to define and measure per capita expenditure based on the present needs and challenges, ensuring that funds are allocated effectively for various programs and purposes to establish well-rounded and inclusive academic libraries. However, it has been a challenge to differentiate between the use of print and
electronic resources in academic libraries, despite the notable increase in electronic acquisitions. This poses a difficulty when evaluating their impact within the rankings. Nonetheless, it remains important for HEIs to recognize the evolving nature of access to resources and adapt accordingly in order to meet the changing needs of the knowledge society (Kumar et al., 2021; Utkirov, 2023).

6. Conclusion

In the current knowledge-driven economy, possessing theoretical knowledge in academic subjects alone is insufficient for the survival of WIUT graduates in the information market. To meet the evolving demands of employers, graduates must cultivate market-oriented skills. This includes enhancing their communication skills, developing a problem-solving mindset, acquiring comprehensive knowledge of IT systems and information storage/retrieval, honing their presentation skills, and attaining creativity and innovation. Additionally, graduates must exhibit motivation and commitment when delivering services to customers. By acquiring these attributes, their employability skills will be greatly enhanced. It is essential for the university curriculum at WIUT and other universities to align with these skill requirements to effectively prepare graduates for the job market.

Declarations

This study was approved by the Westminster International University in Tashkent Research ethics committee.

Competing interests: The author declare no competing interests

References


Figures

![Unemployment period after graduation (Out of 525)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N80oBRWd_zw)

**Figure 1**

**Unemployment period after graduation (Out of 525)** (Utikirov & Salahodjayev, 2021)