



A Critical Review of Graduate Employability Skills in Modern Higher Education: Emphasizing the Saudi Arabian Context

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Abstract: This study aims to review the literature related to the concept of employability and employability skills among business graduates, focusing on the Saudi Arabian context and comparing it with international contexts, particularly in developed and developing countries. This review is set against the backdrop of growing global interest in graduate employability as a key indicator of the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education institutions in preparing students for the labor market. The global labor market has undergone significant transformations over recent decades, resulting in increased demand for graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also practical and behavioral skills that enable effective integration into contemporary work environments. Accordingly, higher education institutions are required to adopt educational and training strategies that enhance the readiness of their graduates for the labor market.

The study is divided into several sections, beginning with the definition of employment and the concept of employability, addressing various perspectives of this concept, whether as a means of securing a job or as a set of attributes or achievements. The chapter also discusses graduate employability and the factors influencing it, with a focus on different contexts in developed countries, developing countries, and Saudi Arabia. The study concludes by identifying the research gap and clarifying the study's objectives and research questions, paving the way for recommendations that will benefit future research.

Keywords: Employability, graduate skills, higher education, Saudi Arabia, labor market, education and training, employment, challenges, graduates, education in developing and developed countries.

1. INTRODUCTION

The demand for employable graduates with relevant knowledge and employability skills has increased globally in both developed and developing countries. To ensure availability of employable graduates for the global labour market, higher education institutions across the world are expected to nurture and produce employable graduates for the global labour market. Higher education institutions (including universities) across the world are susceptible to a range of challenges in preparing graduates with employability skills to tackle the problem of shortage of employability skills in the global labour market (Crisan & Enache, 2011; Kostenkova et al., 2016; Yizhong et al., 2017).

Higher education institutions should ensure a good quality of education to promote and inculcate essential employability skills in their students, thereby producing graduates with employability skills to tackle the problem of a shortage of suitable graduates in the global labour market. Higher education institutions are expected to ensure this high standard of education through both internal and external mechanism/factors (Azevedo, Apfelthaler & Hurst, 2012). Internal mechanisms include quality of management, initiatives, and effects of internationalisation, while external mechanisms include global competition, client needs, labour market location, and employable skills required by employers (Azevedo et al., 2012). The need for valuable, employable graduates has impacted on the assessment

of the quality of education in many countries (including the United Kingdom [UK]) with respect to graduates' learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, and assurance of learning (Moskal et al., 2008; Thompson, 2004).

Institutions of higher learning typically try to focus on employability by operating curricula and course content that promote career services, work experience opportunities, employable skills development and career management programmes Harvey (2005). Notwithstanding the development and paradigm shifts of higher education institutions, there is a diverse view as to the ability of these institutions to equip graduates with the right tools to secure employment and cope with the challenges they face in the workplace (Abbasi et al., 2018; Al Kahtani & Syed, 2018; Bridgstock, 2009; Hills et al., 2003). For example, studies reveal that some higher education institutions are not well-equipped to produce business graduates with adequate skills to meet the labour market demands (Al Shayeb et al., 2008; Jackson, 2010; Washer, 2007). Some business schools have also been criticised for their substandard education quality, thereby producing poorly equipped graduates for the labour market (Al-Mutairi et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2018; McMurray et al., 2016).

The quality of graduates produced by higher education institutions and the demand for employable graduates in the labour market should be properly aligned. Embedded employability as part of graduate skills and learning outcomes by higher education institutions is beneficial to both graduates and the labour market, as this would facilitate an excellent structural and practical linkage between employability-related learning and availability of employable graduates (Cook, 2018; Gurukkal, 2019; Oliver, 2013). There is, however, increasing interest in different aspects of business education, including the global dynamic business environment, globalisation, and new technology (Azevedo et al., 2012; Kants, 2011; Pfeffermann, 2016). Changes in business dynamics and global competitiveness have led to an increasing quest of business graduates to acquire advanced business knowledge, teamwork abilities, and interpersonal skills (Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014; Jackling & de Lange, 2009; Kennedy & Dull, 2008). Moreover, it is beneficial for business

graduates to be knowledgeable about economics, technologies, employability skills, and their application in the business world and the labour market.

This study aims to analyse the employability skills of business graduates in Saudi Arabia. Salient literature is reviewed in this chapter, with relevant literature and academic resources being sourced for the literature review. The literature used here were derived from several sources, including Google Scholar, the Saudi Arabian government and embassy databases, textbooks, doctoral dissertations (EThOS – British Library e-thesis online library), and journal articles from various sources including ProQuest, JSTOR, and Academic Search Complete. The literature search commenced with a search on Google Scholar to ascertain the extent of available relevant academic publications for the study. During the search, several academic journals were found and the most relevant were retrieved for use in this chapter. In addition, relevant doctoral dissertations were also sourced and downloaded from EThOS, with useful data being retrieved from the Saudi Arabian government and embassy databases to provide a background information on Saudi Arabia for the study. Lastly, textbooks related to the field of investigation were retrieved and perused at the University of Dundee’s library to develop the research design and methodology for the study.

1.1 EMPLOYMENT

Organisations differ in size, structure, and policy. Likewise, employment policies vary from firm to firm. Employment is an agreement between two parties (employees and employer) whereby an employee agrees, directly or indirectly, to provide certain services to accomplish the employer’s objectives for a definite or indefinite period in exchange for wages (Linde, 2019). An organisation might consider some individuals (including business graduates) to be employable, and some individuals may be considered unemployable depending on their employment policies. It is essential to ascertain an individual’s employment status as this would impact on the employee’s eligibility to certain statutory rights (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy [DBEIS], 2017). There are two major categories of employment status: employee and worker. An individual is an employee where there is a contract of employment between the person (employee) and their employer (DBEIS, 2017), whereas an individual is a worker “where a contract of employment or contract to personally do work exists” (DBEIS, 2017, p.7). The category of employee, according to DBEIS (2017),

It has been argued by Lee (2002) that employment and employability are not the same. This is because employment focuses on job searching or getting a job, while employability focuses on the possession of attributes and skills to enable an individual to secure employment and successfully retain the job. This implies that being employable would reduce the risk of unemployment and enhance the competitiveness of an employee within an organisation and

the labour market (Paterson, 2019). This is consistent with the assertion of Lee (2002, p.3) that:

being employed means having a job, being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace. Employability from the perspective of higher education institutions (HEIs) is therefore about producing graduates who are capable and able, and this impacts upon all areas of university life, regarding the delivery of academic programmes and extra-curricular activities.

The implication is that employment and employability are not the same. Employment implies that there is a contract of employment between an individual and their employer (DBEIS, 2017; Linde, 2019). Essentially, employers would employ individuals who possess the required skills and attributes (i.e., employable individuals) to improve productivity and achieve organisational objectives. It is not reasonable for an employer to employ an individual who cannot contribute positively to the organisation's objectives. Hence, an individual should possess the right knowledge, skills, and attributes to be employable and retain employment (Mason et al., 2009; McMurray et al., 2016; Oliver, 2013; Yorke, 2006). Consequently, it is essential for an individual to enhance their capability to secure and retain employment by acquiring essential skills to be successful in the labour market. Acquisition and development of essential employability skills would ensure that an employee shifts the focus from employment to employability (Paterson, 2019). Hence, employability skills are essential and beneficial to secure and retain employment. Having discussed employment, we now proceed to discuss employability in the next section.

1.2 DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATION OF EMPLOYABILITY

The global labour market is increasingly competitive and dynamic. The competitive nature of the global labour force has necessitated the need for policy makers, employers and scholars to focus more closely on employability (Peeters et al., 2019). Many higher education institutions have also integrated employability into their agenda and curricula (Artess et al., 2017; Harvey, 2005; Pegg et al., 2012; Romgens et al., 2019). For instance, the rate of employability is one means of evaluating higher education institutions in the UK (DBEIS, 2017; Lees, 2002; Pegg et al., 2012; Yorke, 2006).

There are many different definitions of the concept of employability. Scholars from different fields of study view employability from different perspectives (Forrier, Verbruggen & de Cuyper, 2015; Harvey, 2001; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Thijssen, van der Heijden & Rocco, 2008). The literature reveals that all definitions of employability focus on an individual's ability to secure and maintain employment (Bridgstock, 2009; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Fugate et al.,

2004; Harvey, 2001; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Romgens et al., 2019; Yorke, 2006). A closer look at definitions of employability in the literature shows that employability is linked to employment. Definitions of employability in the literature reveal that employability can be classified into three categories: (1) employability as job acquisition; (2) employability as a set of attributes; and (3) employability as a set of achievements. Explanation of these categories is presented below and summarised in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Definitions of Employability

Source	Definition of Employability
Category 1: Employability as a tool for Job Acquisition	
Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.2)	“The capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.”
Lefresne (1999, p.465)	“The probability, for a given group, at a given time, of finding a job or emerging from unemployment.”
Harvey (2001, p.100)	“The ability of a graduate to get a satisfying job.”
Forrier and Sels (2003, p.106)	“An individual’s chance of a job in the internal and/or external labour market.”

Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004, p.16)	"A form of work specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities."
Rothwell and Arnold (2007, p.25)	"The ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires."
Berntson and Marklund (2007, p.282)	"An individual's perception of his or her possibilities of getting new, equal or better employment."
Category 2: Employability as a Set of Attributes	
Harvey (1999, p.4)	"The propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation."
van der Heijde and van der Heijden (2005, p.143)	"The continuous fulfilling, acquiring, or creating of work through the optimal use of one's competences."
Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007, p.280)	"... having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful."
Category 3: Employability as a Set of Achievements	
Yorke and Knight (2003, p.5)	"A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."
Pegg et al. (2012, p.4)	"A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make an individual more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."

(Source: Definitions compiled by the researcher, 2020)

1.2.1 EMPLOYABILITY AS A METHOD FOR JOB ACQUISITION

The first definition of employability is based on the traditional approach to employment. Employability as job acquisition views employment based on the acquisition of requisite employability attributes and skills, as well as viewed employability with regard

to gaining and retaining employment. In this regard, Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.2) define employability as “the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.” They also emphasise that “for the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g., personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work” (Hillage & employability of an individual and the manner in which a person improves the requisite skills in the labour market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998).

The majority of the definitions of employability focus on individual perspectives; however, Lefresne’s (1999) definition of employability focuses on how a specific group enters the labour market. Lefresne (1999, p.465) defines employability as “the probability, for a given group, at a given time, of finding a job or emerging from unemployment.” Lefresne’s (1999) definition views employability from job acquisition and labour market perspectives. Similarly, Harvey (2001, p.100) defines employability as “the ability of a graduate to get a satisfying job.” Harvey’s (2001) definition of employability is built on Hillage and Pollard (1998).

1.2.2 EMPLOYABILITY AS A SET OF ATTRIBUTES

The second approach to describing employability in the literature is employability as a set of attributes. Employability as a set of attributes is a skills-based approach to employment. For example, Harvey (1999, p.4) defined employability as “the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation.” This definition emphasises the need to exhibit desirable attributes at the time of recruitment and ensure that these attributes are demonstrated while working with the organisation (Harvey, 1999). Likewise, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007, p.280) define employability as “... having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful.” Dacre Pool and Sewell’s (2007) definition is similar to Harvey’s (1999), as both definitions emphasise the need for individuals (including graduates) to possess and exhibit attributes (including skills, knowledge, understanding, and personal attributes) to enhance his/her ability to obtain employment and retain the job. While there is no universally acceptable outline of attributes anticipated by employers, recent studies conceptualise attributes required by employers as a set of core skills (including teamworking, communication and risk taking) which are beyond disciplinary fields or attributes preferred by certain firms, employers or

sectors (Artess et al., 2017; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

A skills-based approach to employment provides an effective and objective basis for evaluation of employee performance (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). It is worthwhile to

state that having employability attributes and skills does not guarantee that a graduate will secure a good job and successful career; nevertheless, acquisition of these attributes and skills will certainly enhance the prospects of a graduate finding work in the labour market and positively impact on job performance. Hence, it is beneficial for graduates of higher education institutions to maximise their employability attributes by adopting a holistic self-development approach to acquiring employability attributes and skills rather than gaining one particular skill (Gooderham et al., 2018; Pearse, 2018). This is reasonable, as a graduate who adopts a holistic approach towards acquisition of employability attributes and skills stands a better chance of being employed and attaining a successful career.

1.2.3 EMPLOYABILITY AS A SET OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The third approach to describing employability in the literature is employability as a set of achievements. Instead of a focus on skills and attributes, Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) develop a contemporary approach to employability by focusing on students to describe a graduate identity with a set of employment-related achievements. In this approach, a set of prerequisite achievements is essential to secure employment and ensure a successful career that encompasses values, intellectual rigour, performance and social engagement. The set of employability achievements (i.e., values, intellectual rigour, performance and social engagement) highlighted by Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) are essential to ensure that employees (including graduates) are relevant in an organisation. Moreover, employability achievements can enhance the ability of a graduate to work with other employees, customers and clients in a global economy to improve his/her organisation's productivity and performance (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Employability is a major focus of contemporary higher education (Higher Education Academy, 2014, 2015). Employability ensures that employable graduates are prepared by higher education institutions for the global labour market (Paterson, 2019; Peeters et al., 2019; Romgens et al., 2019). This is reasonable, because higher education institutions play an important role in the attainment, acquisition and development of employability. This is obvious, as Yorke and Knight (2003) and Pegg et al. (2012) describe employability as a set of achievements (including skills, understanding and personal attributes) that places graduates in a better position to successfully move into the occupations they desire. Employable graduates are more likely to secure employment; however, the

quality of employability-development does not guarantee graduates' acquisition of job and successful career (Artesset al., 2017; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012; Yizhong et al., 2017).

1.2.4 CONCEPTUALISATION OF EMPLOYABILITY FOR THIS STUDY

Review of the various definitions of employability found in the literature, as set out in the previous sections, indicates that there are three main categories, namely employability as job acquisition; employability as a set of attributes; and employability as a set of achievements. However, in order to obtain a comprehensive, working definition for use in the current study, it is important to combine these categories into one succinct definition. Yorke is one of the most prolific researchers in this field and his definition is quoted the most often by others working on the topic of employability:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke, 2004, p.7)

This definition of employability presented by Yorke (2004) encapsulates the three forms of perception of employability discussed earlier (see sections 3.3.1, 3.3.2). For this reason, the meaning of employability as presented by Yorke (2004) is adopted for this study.

In conclusion, two major themes emerge from the discussions of the meaning and conceptualisation of employability. The first theme that emerges from this section's discussion is that all of the definitions given in the existing literature emphasise an individual's or group's ability to secure an employment – though some definitions also emphasise the need to ensure successful occupation and career. The second theme is that the meaning and conceptualisation of employability may be classified into three categories: employability as a job acquisition; employability as a set of attributes; and employability as a set of achievements, as shown in Table 3.1. Lastly, Yorke's (2004) fully comprehensive and succinct description of employability is the definition adopted for the purposes of this study. The following section discusses the employability of graduates.

1.3 GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

The way organisations (profitable and non-profitable) operate has

been impacted by globalisation and technological advancement. There have been changes in the nature of work and the manner in which activities are undertaken in the workplace. Hence, there is an increasing need for graduates to promptly adapt to changes within their organisation. Recent research indicates that graduates often encounter challenges in workplaces with advanced organisational structure (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Brevis-Landsberg, 2012; Chetty, 2012; Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Holmes, 2013). New employees and fresh graduates should be equipped to weather such environments and adapt to changes in the nature of work (Abbasi et al., 2018; Al Kahtani & Syed, 2018; Azevedo et al., 2012; Chetty, 2012). Educational qualifications do not guarantee success within an organisation (Chetty, 2012; McMurray et al., 2016; Rammohanpur, 2016), hence the need for graduates to adopt a holistic approach to developing their employability attributes and skills to be successful within the workplace (Gurukkal, 2019; Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Gowsalya & Ashok, 2016).

Recent studies have highlighted the need for universities across the world to promote graduate employability and learning objectives to adequately prepare students for

challenges in the ever-changing global labour market (Arrowsmith et al., 2011; BIS, 2011; EACEA, 2015; Jameson et al., 2012; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Tran, 2015). Moreover, higher education is assessed based on its ability to produce employable graduates for the labour market (Blackmore et al., 2016; Broussard & Tekleselassie, 2012). However, there are diverse views as to the ability of higher education institutions to equip graduates to obtain employment and cope with challenges in their workplaces (Abbasi et al., 2018; Al Kahtani & Syed, 2018; Huang et al., 2014; Bridgstock, 2009; Hills et al., 2003). Notwithstanding the integration of employability into higher education contents and systems (Crisan & Enache, 2011; Kostenkova, Pishchulin & Shepelev, 2016; Yizhong et al., 2017), embedding employability largely depends on the ability of individual students to develop skills and attributes required within their sector/industry (Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014; Yorke, 2006).

skills, (3) presentation, which focuses on presentation skills to secure employment, and

(4) personal circumstances and external factors (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Likewise, Yorke (2004, p.7) defines graduate employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” According to Yorke (2004), graduates should possess the requisite skills, understanding and personal attributes to enable them to get

jobs and be relevant within the workplace. Similarly, graduate employability has also been defined as “an individual’s capacity and willingness to become and remain attractive in the labour market” Coetzee and Schreuder (2011, p.77). This definition emphasises the willingness and capacity of a graduate to be relevant in terms of being employable and retainable in the labour market. Consequently, graduates should continuously improve their employability capability after securing employment in order to retain their job and maintain a successful career (Akkermans et al., 2013; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013; Taylor & Hooley, 2014).

Based on the definitions provided by Coetzee and Schreuder (2011), Yorke (2004), and Hillage and Pollard (1998), the perception of graduate employability goes beyond gaining employment: it also entails development of essential skills, personal attributes, motivation and business reasoning to enable graduates to contribute positively to productivity and attainment of organisational objectives (Al Shayeb, 2013; Chen et al., 2018; Masoka & Selesho, 2014). Considering the ever-changing nature of the global labour market, the view of the first school of thought on graduate employability is reasonable and relevant. This view is corroborated by other researchers who argue that graduate experience consists of performance, intellectual rigour, values, and engagement (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

The second school of thought on graduate employability views gradueness and employability as different and distinct concepts. Glover, Law and Youngman (2002) view gradueness and employability as two different, but interrelated, concepts. Glover et al. (2002, p.303) define gradueness as “a set of qualities that usually mark a person who has undertaken a degree course.” This description of gradueness entails acquisition of individual skills, knowledge and attitudes through higher education learning and

qualifications. On the other hand, graduate employability has been described as being when an individual obtains transferable skills and can therefore acquire a job Glover et al. (2002). Furthermore, it has been maintained that gradueness and employability are not the same, describing gradueness as “the inherent characteristics (transferable meta- skills and personal attributes) of graduates ... that differentiate them as responsible, accountable, relevant, ethical (RARE) and enterprising citizens, and employees of choice in the workplace” Coetzee (2012). In essence, it has been argued that gradueness ensures the development of students’ meta-skills and personal attributes to facilitate employment after graduating from higher education institutions Coetzee (2012).

Consequently, concepts of gradueness and employability are not the same, but they are interrelated and complementary (Coetzee, 2012; Glover, Law & Youngman, 2002). The concept of

graduateness connotes that a person has higher education qualifications – i.e., a graduate – while the concept of employability focuses on the ability of a graduate to get a job based on the employability attributes possessed. As stated earlier (see Section 3.3.4), the definition of employability presented by Yorke (2004, p.7) is adopted in this research:

[Employability is] a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

It is also necessary to define ‘graduate employability’ in the context of this study. Further to foregoing discussions (Sections 3.3 and 3.4), it is reasonable to assert that graduate employability goes beyond being a graduate and acquisition of graduate qualifications. This implies that beyond getting jobs as graduates – i.e., alumni of higher education institutions – it is essential for graduates to enhance their employability capability to remain relevant and viable in the labour market (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Gedye & Beaumont, 2018). This would ensure that graduates possess essential skills, personal motivation and attributes to be relevant in the workplace, thereby contributing positively to productivity and organisational objectives. Having a set of attributes and requisite skills would surely enable graduates to be employable – i.e., being employable graduates. The definition of graduate employability by Yorke (2004) is, therefore, adopted for this study. The rationale for adopting Yorke’s (2004) definition of graduate employability for this study is that graduate employability is more than getting job as a graduate; rather, graduate employability also entails the need to possess requisite skills, personal motivation and attributes to make positive contributions to enhance productivity and attainment of organisational objectives. Having discussed employability and graduate employability (see Sections 3.3 and 3.4), the next section focuses on discussions on employability skills.

1.4 DETERMINANTS OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

This study assesses the employability of business graduates in Saudi Arabia. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) emphasise that graduate experience involves intellectual rigour, values, engagement and performance. Acquisition and development of graduate employability is a major focus of higher education in many countries (Azevedo et al., 2012; Blackmore et al., 2016; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; Tran, 2015). The higher education employability agenda ensures that students’

positive attributes and transferable skills are developed to enable graduates to obtain and retain work. Transferable skills acquired by graduates through higher education enhance their employability in the labour market – i.e., to become employable graduates. Allen (1991) posits that transferable personal skills can be classified into eight main categories: creative; organisation; self- management; social and group; physical; cognitive; linguistic and communication; and contingency. These transferable skills include communication skills (e.g., written and oral communication and being able to listen to others), problem solving skills (e.g., critical thinking, being a fast learner, and specifying personal goals), and team working skills (e.g., being a good leader or delegator and being able to negotiate with others) (Smith, Wolstencroft & Southern, 1989). As well as possessing sound subject knowledge and technical understanding, employees are also expected to fulfil a set of skills criteria set out by employers in their job placement adverts. Employers believe that these skills help employees to work effectively in their respective roles within the workplace (Artess et al., 2017; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Hence, graduate employability depends on graduates’ assets (including knowledge, skills and attributes) and the manner in which these assets are used and presented to employers (Al Shayeb, 2013; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Cook, 2018).

According to Harvey and Green (1994), the basic core skills required of graduates are teamwork, eagerness to learn, problem solving, and more personal attributes such as having good self-management, motivation and energy, being committed, flexible, adaptable and reliable, and being able to summarise key issues. Employability skills are often referred to as core skills, key competencies, transferable skills, life skills, essential employment skills, or generic skills (Kenayathulla, Ahmad & Idris, 2019). Terms used for employability skills in some countries are presented in Table 3.2. For instance, some of the terms used in Australia include key competencies, employability skills, and generic skills (Table 1.2). These terms are synonymous with employability skills, but it is a matter of using different nomenclatures for employability skills in different countries or sectors.

Table 1.2 Terms Used for Employability Skills in Some Countries

Country	Term
Australia	Key competencies, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employability skills
Denmark	Process independent qualifications
France	Transferable skills
Germany	Key qualifications

Malaysia	Employability skills
New Zealand	Essential skills
Singapore	Critical enabling skills training (CREST)
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary goals
United Kingdom	Core skills, key skills, common skills
United States of America	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how

(Source: Alrifai & Raju, 2019, p.84; Legg-Jack, 2014, p.38; Naanda, 2010, p.25)

1.4.1 ELEMENTS AND CORE COMPETENCIES OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Employers often expect a set of skills from employees for different roles (Artess et al., 2017; Konig & Helga, 2019; Pearse, 2019). This implies that employability skills can simply be described as skills and attributes that employers expect employees should exhibit. Hillage and Pollard (1998) identify four main elements of graduate employability: (1) employability assets, which include knowledge, skills and attitudes;

(2) deployment, which focuses on career management skills; (3) presentation, which includes presentation skills to secure and retain employment; and (4) personal circumstances and external factors. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) also propose four main elements of graduate employability: (1) employability assets, consisting of knowledge, skills and attitude; (2) deployment, which entails career management, strategic approach and job searching skills; (3) presentation, which is relevant in getting jobs, curriculum vitae (CV) writing and interview techniques; and (4) external factors, which include having a good knowledge of sectors and market conditions. Elements of graduate employability highlighted by these two sets of scholars (i.e., Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Hillage & Pollard, 1998) are similar and relevant. The same nomenclature

was used for the first three elements (employability assets, deployment, and presentation) of graduate employability by both authors, but different nomenclature (external factors, personal circumstances and external factors) was used to describe the fourth element of graduate employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Hillage & Pollard, 1998). It is, therefore, reasonable to argue that elements of graduate employability include employability, deployment, presentation, and personal circumstances and external factors (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Hillage & Pollard, 1998). A summary of the elements of graduate employability is presented in Table 1.3.

Graduate employability aims to develop core competencies to enhance graduates' employability and viability in the labour market. Graduate employability is a core agenda of higher education to ensure that graduates acquire and develop general transferable skills and capacity to get jobs and retain their employment in the labour market (Coetzee, 2012; Gedye & Beaumont, 2018; Pegg et al., 2012). As discussed in Section 1.3.4, employability in the context of this study is viewed as "A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke, 2004, p.7). Similarly, graduate employability is viewed (as discussed earlier in Section 3.4) graduate employability for this study is that graduate employability is more than getting job as a graduate; rather, graduate employability also entails the need to possess requisite skills, personal motivation and attributes to make positive contributions to enhance productivity and attainment of organisational objectives (Yorke, 2004, p.7).

Considering the perception of employability and graduate employability (Yorke, 2004) in the context of this study, it is reasonable to argue that higher education inculcates core competencies of employability skills in graduates through the engagement of graduate employability elements (which include employability, deployment, presentation, and personal circumstances and external factors). The three core competencies of employability skills include teamwork, personal management, and academic skills (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Leroux & Lafleur, 1995). Academic skills include communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and life skills (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Leroux & Lafleur, 1995). Personal management skills include goal setting, positive attitude, self-esteem, and initiative, while team working skills include interpersonal skills, leadership skills, respect for others, and learning skills (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Leroux & Lafleur, 1995). For clarity, the elements and core competencies of graduate employability skills are summarised in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Elements and Core Competencies of Graduate Employability Skills (ES)

Source	Core Competencies and Elements of ES
Core Competencies of Graduate Employability Skills	

Kenayathulla, Ahmad and Idris (2019); Leroux and Lafleur (1995)	<p>Academic skills include communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and life skills.</p> <p>Personal management skills include goal setting, positive attitude, self-esteem, and initiative.</p> <p>Teamworking skills include interpersonal skills, leadership skills, respect for others, and learning skills.</p>
Elements of Graduate Employability Skills	
Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007); Hillage and Pollard (1998)	<p>Employability assets include knowledge, skills and attitudes.</p> <p>Deployment entails career management skills and job searching skills.</p> <p>Presentation is relevant in getting jobs, CV writing and interview techniques.</p> <p>Personal circumstances and external factors include responsibility and having a good knowledge of sectors and market condition.</p>

(Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2020)

1.4.2 GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN DEVELOPED NATIONS

The literature on graduate employability in developed countries is discussed in this section. Several themes have emerged from the discussion; for instance, there is a growing gap between graduates' skills, employers' expectations, and labour market requirements (Jackson, 2014; Nair, Patil & Mertova, 2009), and employers place higher importance on soft skills and less importance on academic reputation when hiring new graduates (Finch et al., 2013; Nair, Patil & Mertova, 2009). Moreover, the demand for digital literacy, technological knowledge, a strong work ethic, competency in communication, and multilingual skills has increased in the global labour market (Chen et al., 2018). Furthermore, the experience and knowledge acquired through work-based learning (including internship, working part-time, and job placement) are key factors in gaining employment and enhancing graduate employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; McMurray et al., 2016). Employers are concerned that undergraduate programmes are not sufficiently equipped to prepare students with vital skills (de la Harpe et al., 2000;

Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Hence, there should be a close relationship and collaboration between employers and academics to improve the curriculum and embed core employability skills in students to enhance graduates' competency and attributes (de la Harpe et al., 2000; Finch et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2009; McMurray et al., 2016; Tymon, 2013).

Employers are favourably disposed to employ graduates who are well prepared with a broad range of competencies for the labour market (de la Harpe, et al., 2000; de Villiers, 2010; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Tymon, 2013), but there is a gap between the competencies expected by employers and the skills or competencies demonstrated by graduates (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Jackson, 2014). Notwithstanding graduates' academics qualifications, employers expect graduates to possess personal and transferable skills (Branine, 2008; Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014; Jackling & de Lange, 2009; Kennedy & Dull, 2008). Academic qualifications alone cannot provide graduates with all of the technical and professional skills required (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008), hence the need for graduates to enhance their employability attributes and skills after graduation and on the job (Al Shayeb, 2013; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Cook, 2018). This shows that employers look beyond gradueness (graduate qualifications) by focusing more on skills that enable graduates to be productive and adapt to changes in the workplace (Coetzee, 2012; Glover et al., 2002).

The implication is that employability and employment are not the same, but the two concepts are related. This is consistent with the view of scholars who argue that employment and employability are not the same (Coetzee, 2012; Glover et al., 2002; Lee, 2002). This is because employment focuses on job searching or obtaining a job

(Gedye & Beaumont, 2018; Paterson, 2019), while employability is about having the attributes and skills to enable an individual to secure an employment and successfully retain the job (DBEIS, 2017; Linde, 2019). Moreover, there is a positive relationship between employability and employment because being employable reduces the risk of unemployment and enhances graduates' competitiveness in the labour market (Paterson, 2019; Peeters et al., 2019; Romgens et al., 2019).

Generally, research on graduate employability skills in developed countries indicates that different factors have an impact on undergraduate and graduate employability. For instance, Finch et al. (2013) identify 17 factors that influence undergraduate employability, and these factors are classified into five categories based on their impact on the employability and entry of new graduates into the labour market: soft skills (including effective

communication and interpersonal skills); problem solving skills (including critical thinking skills); functional skills (including job-specific knowledge); pre-graduate experience (including placements and work experience); and academic reputation (including degree classification and the reputation of the institution). Employers and students, however, rank the following skills as the most important: oral communication skills, ethical awareness, professional skills, teamwork, written communication, and an understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of the business (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Nair, Patil & Mertova, 2009). Generally, the skills and attributes perceived to be core graduate employability skills in developing countries include communication and problem solving, subject-specific knowledge, decision making, teamwork, independent working, leadership, personal learning and development, self-management, information retrieval and numerical skills, attention to detail, attitudes and behaviours, responsiveness to feedback, and strategic skills (Azevedo et al., 2012; Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; de Villiers, 2010; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Maxwell et al., 2009; Tempone et al., 2012). Having explored graduate employability in developed countries, graduate employability in developing countries is discussed in the next section.

1.4.3 EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Several studies have been undertaken on graduate employability in both developed and developing countries. These include studies by de la Harpe, Radloff and Wyber (2000) in Australia; Hodges and Burchell (2003) in New Zealand; Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) in Australia; Branine (2008) in the UK; Andrews and Higson (2008) in the UK, Australia, Slovenia et al., (2009) in Australia; Maxwell et al., (2009) in the UK; de Villiers (2010) in New Zealand; Wilton (2011) in the UK; Azevedo et al. (2012) in Australia, the UK, Slovenia and Romania; Tempone et al. (2012) in Australia; Tymon (2013) in the UK; Finch, Hamilton, Riley and Zehner (2013) in Canada; Dacre Pool, Qualter and Sewell (2014) in the UK; Jackson (2014, 2015) in Australia; Mihail and Kloutsiniotis (2014) in Greece; McMurray et al. (2016) in the UK; Moore and Morton (2017) in Australia; Chhinzer and Russo (2018) in Canada; and Chen et al. (2018) in Australia, the USA and Canada. These studies are reviewed below. Table (3.4) Summarises and synthesises the extant literature on employability skills from the perspective of three stakeholders in the developed countries are available in the appendices (Appendix A).

Other studies have been carried out in developing countries, including studies from the Middle East. These include studies by Hijazi, Zoubeidi, Abdalla, Al-Waqfi, and Harb (2008) in the United

Arab Emirates (UAE); Zhiwen and Heijden (2008) in China; Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010) in Sri Lanka; Al-Harthi (2011) in Egypt and Oman; Klibi and Oussii (2013) in Tunisia; Al Shayeb (2013) in UAE; Hanapi and Nordin (2014) in Malaysia; Abdulla, Naser, and Saeid (2014) in Kuwait; Abdullah, Kamarudin, Ahmad, Yusoh, Muhamad, and Ismail (2015) in Malaysia; Thomas, Piquette, and McMaster (2016) in Bahrain; Belwal, Priyadarshi, and Al Fazari (2017) in Oman; Hijazi and Zoubeidi (2017) in the MENA region; and Abbasi, Ali, and Bibi (2018) in Pakistan. These studies are reviewed below. A summary and synthesis of the existing literature on employability skills from the perspective of three stakeholders in developing countries are available in the appendices (Appendix B).

1.4.3.1 GENERIC SKILLS

The first theme emerging from the literature review is the need to be adaptable to the changes in the workplace and careers due to the growing request from employers for generic skills. A study into the quality of Australia's university graduates and their level of professional skills or generic skills found that employers are concerned that undergraduate programmes are not well equipped to prepare students with vital skills (de la Harpe et al., 2000). The study also emphasised the need for universities to update their curriculum and teaching pedagogy to ensure that graduates acquire and develop skills required by employers (de la Harpe et al., 2000). Reviewing the difference between an international perspective of generic skills and the developing view held in Australia, Curtis (2004) also considered the extent to which generic skills overlapped with job specific skills. His findings revealed that generic skills could be manifested on the basis of varied observers in several diverse settings. Other than that, there are certain hard skills that are usually needed in diverse jobs, while soft skills are also of importance in the contemporary world with its rapidly changing nature. As an outcome, generic skills are of much significance to graduates, as they tend to augment their employability scope (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Furthermore, as an array of key skills, generic skills are of significance for graduates who are keen to begin their professional careers. In addition, it has been indicated by Bratianu and Vatamanescu (2017) that generic skills could be instrumental in directly contributing to dynamic knowledge in management as employability skills.

The required generic attributes of accounting graduates in Australia were studied, wherein it has been emphasised that employers are concerned that graduates are deficient in terms of generic skills (Tempone et al., 2012). The results show that communication, teamwork, and self-management are considered

three core generic attributes in three areas of recruitment, training, and ongoing employment (Tempone et al., 2012). The findings also reveal that employers perceive that accounting graduates are not equipped with generic skills, notwithstanding their technical skills, and many graduates lack skills (such as teamwork, interpersonal and communication skills) that are key to their career and employability in the labour market (Tempone et al., 2012). The limitations of Tempone et al.'s (2012) study are that the findings are based on views of accounting professional bodies and employers of accounting graduates in Australia. The present study takes into consideration the views of employers, students and academia on business graduate employability skills in Saudi Arabia.

A wide range of themes have emerged from the empirical review of graduate employability in developing countries. For instance, the literature reveals that the

perceptions of graduate employability vary among the stakeholders (employers, academics, and graduates) in developing countries (Al-Harthi, 2011; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). The number of graduates has increased across different fields, including business, and the quality of the graduates produced in the higher education of many developing countries does not meet the expectations of employers and the labour market demands (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Hijazi et al., 2008; Klibi & Oussii, 2013). Graduates should develop their generic skills, including ethical awareness, communication, critical analysis, and teamwork (Abbasi et al., 2018; Belwal et al., 2017; Klibi & Oussii, 2013; Thomas et al., 2016). Employers in developing countries attach a high level of importance to graduates' knowledge, soft skills, and ability to work within groups, but less importance is attached to their personal abilities (Abbasi et al., 2018; Al-Mutairi et al., 2014).

Recent research on graduate employability in developing countries emphasises the need for partnership and collaboration between stakeholders, including employers, graduates, and academics, to improve business education curricula and enhance graduate employability (Hijazi et al., 2008; Priyadarshi & Al Fazari, 2017; Zhiwen & Heijden, 2008). Moreover, universities in many developing countries are not well equipped to provide business graduates with vital employability skills such as problem solving, creativity, self-confidence, learning skills and teamwork, personal skills, professional development and creativity skills, customer-oriented skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and problem solving-oriented skills, and the ability to apply taught knowledge to real-life situations (Abbasi et al., 2018; Al-Harthi, 2011; Al Shayeb, 2013; Belwal et al., 2017; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Thomas et al.,

2016; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010; Zhiwen & Heijden, 2008).

KSA is a developing nation. Most of the studies on employability skills come from developed nations. The success of developed nations in mapping out employability skills provides a good starting point for KSA in terms of the areas that could be targeted in the future development of employability skills. One of the developed countries that provides a clearer perspective on employability is Australia. Previous Australian studies have focused on research employability skills and the gaps between employers and employees. However, Australian studies, such as the one carried out by de la Harpe

et al. (2000), are also limited in terms of stakeholder coverage because they only focus on employers and do not pay attention to students and academics. The proposed research seeks to fill these gaps while leveraging developed country studies to develop a better perspective of employability in KSA.

1.4.3.2 ABILITY AND EAGERNESS TO LEARN SKILLS

A survey on employers' perceptions of the importance and performance of business graduate competencies in Auckland, New Zealand, shows that ability and being eager to learn are the most important competencies that graduates should possess (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). This reveals that there is a gap between the competencies expected by employers and the skills or competencies demonstrated by graduates; employers are favourably disposed to employ graduates who are well prepared with a broad range of competencies for the labour market, and employers prefer graduates who have soft skills and the ability to deal with customers in a professional and polite manner (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). The implication is that employers look beyond graduateness (graduate qualifications) by focusing more on the skills that enable graduates to be productive and adapt to changes in the workplace (Coetzee, 2012; Glover et al., 2002). In essence, employable graduates consist of graduates who are willing to learn new skills to keep pace with rapid changes in the workplace (Forrier et al., 2015; Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Linde, 2019; Paterson, 2019). These studies show that there is a gap in perception between the performance of graduates at work and the expectations of the employers of graduates and therefore my study will consider if a similar gap exists in Saudi Arabia.

1.4.3.3 ANALYTICAL/PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS, BUSINESS AWARENESS OR REAL-

LIFE EXPERIENCE, AND BASIC TECHNICAL SKILLS

There is a perception in the literature that the technical accounting skills of graduates do not always meet employers' expectations. Employers expect accounting graduates to be equipped with skills in three key areas: analytical/problem-solving skills, business awareness or real-life experience, and basic technical skills; however, new accounting graduates lack basic accounting skills (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Although there is agreement on the importance of a number of employability skills

such as oral communication skills, ethical awareness, professional skills, teamwork, written communication, and an understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of the business, both students and employers agree that academic qualifications alone cannot provide graduates with all of the technical and professional skills required (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008), hence the need for graduates to enhance their employability attributes and skills continuously after graduation (Al Shayeb, 2013; Cole & Tibby, 2013; Cook, 2018). Further, the attributes employers expect from newly hired graduates include trustworthiness, reliability, motivation, communication skills, and willingness to learn (McMurray et al., 2016).

Hence, there should be a close relationship and collaboration between employers and academia to enhance graduates' employability skills. The need for business schools to teach and develop critical thinking skills and promote work experience opportunities (such as placements and internships) to improve graduate employability has also been emphasised. The literature also highlighted that there is a competency gap between employers' expectations of and attitudes towards graduates in certain areas, including communication and problem-solving skills, social skills, leadership, emotional intelligence, and the ability to work on different projects. Further, competencies such as soft, hard, and global needs skills should be included in the process of the accreditation of programmes (Nair et al., 2009).

Graduate employability in Australia has been examined based on students' perceptions and employer expectations, but the views of university lecturers (academics) on graduate employability were not considered (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). The limitation of McMurray et al.'s (2016) study is that it focuses mainly on employers' demands from new business graduates during recruitment and on the job. Therefore, the current study explores graduate employability skills in Saudi Arabia based on the perceptions and expectations of key stakeholders (i.e., academics, students, and employers) in the Saudi labour market.

1.4.3.4 PERSONAL-RELATED ATTRIBUTES

Seven hundred UK-based employers were surveyed to investigate the differences in how graduates were recruited and selected (Branine, 2008). The findings from the study showed that regardless of company size, employers tend to use methods of recruitment that are cost-effective and sophisticated. The recruitment and selection of graduates depends more on personal-related attributes than job-oriented ones (Branine, 2008). This is because, in addition to applicants' qualifications, employers want to see the personality of the applicant along with their attitude and transferable skills at the time of employment (Branine, 2008; Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014; Jackling & de Lange, 2009; Kennedy & Dull, 2008). However, certain personal attributes such as confidence, efficiency, respectfulness, and independence tend to be statistically linked to an industry as well as to the job position (Wye & Lim, 2014), which indicates that there are variations from industry to industry. There are several personal traits that are particular to job positions and these would comprise cooperation between co-workers, patience, being self-driven, self-awareness about one's appearance, and being adventurous. The current research, therefore, analyses what employers may expect from business graduates in the Saudi labour market.

1.4.3.5 WORK-BASED LEARNING

The literature on graduate employability suggests that work experience is a key element of graduate employability. The experience and knowledge acquired through work-based learning (e.g., internship, working part-time, and job placement) are considered to be key factors in gaining employment (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Hence, the importance of work-based learning in enhancing graduate employability is highlighted here, as well as the need for higher education institutions in European countries to improve their programmes to enable graduates to acquire essential skills and attributes in readiness for the labour market. Consequently, the results from this study are relevant to this research because this study takes into consideration the role of work-based learning (including internship) in enhancing the graduate employability skills in Saudi Arabia.

The findings from this study are based on employers' perspectives, but again, the perspectives of students and academics are not considered. However, the study aims to bridge the competency gap between employers' expectations and students' capabilities by considering the views of key stakeholders (academics, students, and employers) on graduate employability in Saudi Arabia.

1.4.3.6 NEED FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND EDUCATION

Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of human resources postgraduate students in the UK (Maxwell et al., 2009) show that employers rank communication and problem-solving skills as the most important core employability skills. Thus, education providers and employers should collaborate to review higher education curricula to ensure that students acquire and develop these core employability skills. Similarly, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking have been identified by Chan and Fong (2018) as skills that are dependent on industrial experience as they are advantageous for the productivity and efficiency of work. These skills offer a competitive edge as they are resources that are tangible (Bratianu & Vatamanescu, 2017). Equally, employers place higher importance on soft skills and less importance on academic reputation when hiring new graduates. This again emphasises the need for continuous collaboration between employers and academics to improve the curriculum and embed core employability skills in students, thereby enhancing graduates' competencies and attributes (Finch et al., 2013).

The recommendation of Maxwell et al. (2009) is relevant to this study because this research examines the relationship between higher education and the Saudi labour market in terms of employers' expectations and the employability skills possessed by business students. The limitation of the Finch et al. (2013) study was that it only focused on the perceptions of employers on the core factors influencing employability. Therefore, this study considers the perceptions of academics, students, and employers on the employability skills of business graduates in Saudi Arabia.

In addition, the literature on business graduates conducted across the four nations of Australia, the UK, Slovenia, and Romania examined how well undergraduate business education aligns with the needs of the industry and develops the competency of business graduates (Azevedo et al., 2012). The research is a multi-country study of employers and business graduates, and a mixed-methods approach is used. The survey results indicate that employers are not satisfied with the capability of business graduates based on eight investigated competencies, namely, relationship building and teamwork; persuading and influencing; time management and self-management; analytical and critical thinking; the ability to see the wider picture; leadership;

presentation; and communication (Azevedo et al., 2012). The authors also highlight the need to strengthen competency development within higher business education. The limitations

of Azevedo et al.'s (2012) study was that it only focused on core competencies and the perceptions of two stakeholders (employers and graduates). These limitations are addressed in the current study by focusing on a wide range of skills and investigating the perceptions of three key stakeholders (academics, students, and employers) on business graduate employability in Saudi Arabia.

1.4.3.7 TECHNICAL AND GENERIC SKILLS

The literature also highlights the need for students to have strong technical and generic skills and be prepared for a lifelong learning career and that such skills would complement the technical skills acquired by graduates through higher education to enhance their employability (de Villiers, 2010). The technical knowledge possessed by individuals can also be referred to as hard skills (Rainsbury & Lay, 2002). This notion of hard skills within the context of employability has been outlined as processes, procedures, tools, and techniques by Azim et al. (2010). In addition, hard skills within project management have been explained by Marando (2012) as the development of tangible project delivery with regard to its schedules, reports and budgets, and diagrams. Conceptual and technical skills were described by Poisson-de Haro and Turgut (2012) as hard skills that are the core skills needed for employability. Furthermore, conceptual skills could be indicative of cognitive practices such as imagination, curiosity, and critical thinking as well.

The performance of business graduates in oral communication and ways of enhancing these skills show that the capability of business graduates in oral communication was high, but there is a growing gap between graduates' skills, employers' expectations, and labour market requirements (Jackson, 2014). The implication is that communication skills are essential employability attributes, but business graduates should also possess other core employability skills to secure jobs and enjoy a successful career, which was indicated through other studies (Abbasi et al., 2018; Alrifai & Raju, 2019; Azevedo et al., 2012; Cimatti, 2016; Finch et al., 2013).

The perspective of students on employability skills in the UK indicated that first- and second-year students are less exposed to employability skills development and they have little knowledge of the core needs of employers in their sectors (Tymon, 2013). Graduates appear to lack basic skills and are not well prepared for the labour market, emphasising the need to align higher education and stakeholders' (including students' and employers') needs to ensure that graduates are well prepared for the labour market (Tymon, 2013). In the same vein, Chhinzer and Russo (2018) found that employers consider some skills

essential when hiring graduates, including subject knowledge, generic skills (such as teamwork, attention to detail, and managing time effectively), being eager to work, general mental ability, being responsive to feedback, and attitude and behaviour (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). However, graduates appear to be deficient in these non-technical skills, such as attention to detail, general communication, teamwork, managing time effectively, responsiveness to feedback, and a desire to succeed in the labour market (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). These skills gaps can be filled by promoting social activities and networking in universities through experiential learning practices to assist students to gain valuable employability skills not taught in the classroom. Skills gaps can also be addressed through practical and professional experience. For instance, graduates lack skills in professional writing because writing in universities is not the same as writing in the workplace (Moore & Morton, 2017). It is, however, possible to enhance graduates' writing skills through exposure to different experiences and contexts involving writing (Moore & Morton, 2017). The limitation of Moore and Morton's (2017) work is that the study focuses on a single skill (communication skills), but it would have been better to examine a set of different skills to ensure a broader understanding of mismatching and perceptions of stakeholders. Therefore, this study takes into consideration the perceptions of stakeholders on the required graduate employability skills in Saudi Arabia.

is relevant as the views of stakeholders (i.e., employers, graduates, and academics) are considered in assessing Saudi business graduates' employability to meet the demands of the labour market.

1.4.3.8 PROBLEM-SOLVING

A key skill for employability noted in a number of papers (Abbasi et al., 2018; Al-Harthi, 2011; Al-Shayeb, 2013; Belwal et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018; de Villiers, 2010; Finch et al., 2013; Hijazi et al., 2008; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Maxwell et al., 2009; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Thomas et al., 2016; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010; Zhiwen & Heijden, 2008) is problem solving. For example, in Sri Lanka, there were differences in preferences toward employability skills among stakeholders, but all ranked problem solving, self-confidence, learning skills, and teamwork as essential employability skills that graduates should possess (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). However, problem solving was perceived by employers as a significant graduate employability skills gap before entering into the labour market.

Similarly, graduates' analytical and problem-solving skills revealed a gap between expectations versus the availability of knowledge amongst students, with a quarter of employers

deeming this to be lower than their expectations. This has been attributed to the fact that educational institutions, regulators, etc., recognise this issue and the theoretical syllabus is frequently upgraded, leading to such a trend (Lakshminarayanan, 2016). This theme existed within several other papers (Taylor & Hooley, 2014; van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2005), wherein the implication was that theoretical knowledge does not match with the expectations of employers.

Thus, the present study reviews the employability and skills of business graduates in Saudi Arabia and the extent to which it can be viewed as a continual learning process that goes beyond having business graduate certificates and qualifications – hence the need for business graduates to continuously enhance their employability attributes and capabilities (Akkermans et al., 2013; Simpson & Ferguson, 2013; Taylor & Hooley, 2014; van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2005). This implies that the knowledge, skills, and attributes acquired through higher education and working experience impact on graduates' employability in the labour market.

1.4.3.9 PERCEPTIONS OF GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS ON EMPLOYABILITY

There is a general perception of students in Egypt and Oman that university education enhances graduates' capability to secure and maintain employment (Al-Harathi, 2011). However, the students noted that the courses taught in their universities do not adequately align with the labour market needs, and that university education's curricula should be improved to meet labour market requirements. Students are not confident that the skills they acquire through university education will help them to find a job in the future and they are not satisfied with the university curriculum because it fails to prepare them for the labour market. Employability attributes should be integrated into universities' curricula to improve students' chances of a better future career.

Accounting employers believe graduates should develop generic skills, including ethical awareness, communication, critical analysis, and teamwork (Klibi & Oussii, 2013). Nevertheless, graduates perceive technical skills to be more valuable than generic skills. The gap in the perceptions of technical skills and generic skills between accounting students and professional accountants might be due to the low levels of communication between professional accountants and accountancy students. For this reason, accounting students are typically oblivious to the actual skills required for a job in the accounting field, particularly within the dynamic global business environment.

Finance graduates and employers agree that interpersonal and

development skills (including personal skills, professional development and creativity skills, customer-oriented skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and problem solving-oriented skills) are essential employability skills (Al Shayeb, 2013). However, employers place more emphasis on the prominence of interdisciplinary skills (including speaking a foreign language, legal environment, analysis of financial statements, and business ethics), whilst finance graduates feel that routine technical skills (including financial analytical skills, financial markets and institutions, investments, and financial instruments) are more important to learn, but employers do not consider these skills as key.

Employers in Bahrain consider generic employability skills channelled through English as essential (Thomas et al., 2016). The implication is that students and graduates should be confident and knowledgeable during the recruitment process and on the job, and that English language skills in higher education institutions should be treated as both specialised and broad generic employability skills and competencies to ensure effective communication in the workplace. Lastly, the student participants also identify Oman's five most essential employability skills as computing skills, teamwork skills, English language proficiency, prior training, and graduates' personality (Belwal, Priyadarshi & Al Fazari, 2017).

There is a tendency for educational institutions in Oman to focus mainly on the development of graduates' basic generic skills and attributes (Belwal et al., 2017). This again highlights the need for higher education institutions and workplaces to collaborate to improve graduate employability skills and attributes. Business graduates may also possess the employability skills required by employers in a specific industry (Abbasi et al., 2018). Bank managers indicate that soft skills, including problem solving, leadership, analytical, listening, communication, interpersonal, critical

thinking, and numeracy skills, are the major skills gaps observed among fresh business graduates.

These studies note differences between stakeholders on the employability of business graduates and on the suitability of the curriculum to deliver these. Therefore, the current study addresses the perception of three major stakeholders (employers, graduates, and academics) on the employability of business graduates in Saudi Arabia. The literature on developing nations shows that the missing employability skills identified in developing countries are not far from those also missing in developed nations. However, the low-level skills and less vigorous approaches to employability skills in developing nations necessitates further study and a review of how

developing nations such as Saudi Arabia can grow their employability skills.

1.4.4 GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN SAUDI ARABIA

A large amount of research has been carried out on graduate employability in the context of Saudi Arabia. These include studies on the unemployment of Saudi higher education institution graduates (Al-Nowaiser, 2001); the influence of immigrant labour on Saudi Arabia (Ba Ishen, 2002); Saudisation and employment in Saudi Arabia (Medhi & Barrientos, 2003); an integrated approach to help reduce unemployment levels (Al-Dosary, Rahman & Shahid, 2005); Saudi employers and their expectations of employability skills and the role played by higher education establishments in producing them (Albahussain, 2006); Saudisation and skills formation for private sector work (Al-Shammari, 2009); the causes, effects, and strategies for the reduction of employee turnover in Saudi organisations (Iqbal, 2010); addressing the skills gap of private sector employers in Saudi Arabia through vocational education (Baqadir, Patrick & Burns, 2011); solving of Saudi Arabia's employment challenges through educational programmes (Alfawaz, Hilal & Alghannam, 2014); the views of the corporate sector on the competencies held by Saudi graduates (Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014); the skills required by Saudi employers in the accounting sector (Zureigat, 2015); the measurement of critical thinking and learning outcomes in Saudi accounting graduates (AlMotairy, 2016); the effect of Saudisation on the recruitment and retention of labour in the Saudi banking industry (Edgar, Azhar & Duncan, 2016); whether and how business undergraduates' competencies align with the needs of the Saudi labour market (AlKhatani & Syed, 2018), and the study of accounting students' perceptions of Saudi universities regarding the importance of developing generic skills in their accounting education (Al Mallak, Tan, & Laswad, 2020). These studies are reviewed below.

There have been major criticisms about the education system in Saudi Arabia and its failure to meet the demands of the labour market. Graduates in Saudi Arabia have been specialising in subjects that are not actually required within the labour market, while at the same time lacking the generic skills required to thrive in a competitive economy. Private education institutions in Saudi Arabia have been trying to tackle the issue of graduate unemployment in their curricular and extra-curricular activities, along with career-related services, which might not be enough (Jamjoom, 2016). Employers in the private sector are unhappy with the higher education system as it fails to produce graduates with the correct core employability skills (Albahussain, 2006), including being hardworking and loyal, punctual and committed,

able to work well within a team, and possess English language and IT skills.

2. RESEARCH AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND QUESTIONS

The literature reveals that business graduates require several employability skills to increase their chances of finding employment. However, some studies suggest that limitations exist on employability skills necessary for business graduates to secure jobs. This implication is that business graduates require several employability skills, but there remain areas for improvement. It offers an opportunity for further research to explore new areas of business graduates' employability.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were introduced in the context of Saudi Arabia:

RQ1: What are different stakeholders' perceptions (academics, students, and employers) of the essential employability skills that makes business students employable in Saudi Arabia?

Sub-question: What is their understanding of the term 'employability'?

Sub-question: What is their perception of current level of employability among Saudi business students?

RQ2: What are the factors/barriers that enhance or impede the development of employability among Saudi business students as perceived by key stakeholders?

RQ3: To what extent do the current practices of teaching and learning in Saudi business education affect acquisition of employability skills as perceived by the key stakeholders?

Sub-question: What are the current internship practices, and do they affect the development of employability among Saudi business students?

RQ4: To what extent does the current employability development of business graduates by Saudi universities influence the Saudi Vision 2030?

The literature review supported these research questions based on the aim and objectives of the study. This study investigates the perceptions of different stakeholder groups (academics, Business students, and employers) about the suitability of employability skills for business graduates in the Saudi context. It also analysed the employability factors affecting business graduates, the current academic business curricula, the labour market needs in Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the mismatch between them. The rationale for the aim and objectives of the study have been addressed in Chapter

1 (Section 1.3).

2.1 CONCLUSION

This study explores the employability of business graduates in Saudi Arabia. The salient literature on this topic has been discussed in this chapter. The review focused on the meaning of employment (Section 3.2), definitions and conceptualisation of employability (Section 3.3), graduate employability (Section 3.4), determinants of graduate employability (Section 3.5), and empirical review on graduate employability in developing countries, developed countries, and Saudi Arabia specifically (Section 3.6). The discussions of the research problems show that there is a high rate of unemployment in Saudi Arabia, including graduate unemployment, which is caused by lack of core employability skills and adequate knowledge (Al-Dosary et al., 2005; Baqadir et al., 2011); hence, private sector employers in Saudi Arabia prefer to hire expatriate skilled workers (Al-Dosary et al., 2005; Alfawaz et al., 2014). Meanwhile, the Saudi Arabian government launched the Saudisation programme in order to lower unemployment rates and reduce the reliance on expatriates, replacing them with Saudi workers instead (Alsarhani, 2005; Al-Shammari, 2009; Azhar et al., 2018; Edgar et al., 2016). The implementation of the Saudisation policy has been successful in the public sector, but less so in the private sector (Edgar et al., 2016).

Business graduates in Saudi Arabia do not possess the right employability skills to enable them to obtain entry-level employment (Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014). This implies that the curriculum used in Saudi higher education programmes does not meet the needs of the labour market (Alfawaz et al., 2014), and Saudi graduates lack adequate knowledge and core employability skills required by employers (Baqadir et al., 2011; Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014). Hence, there is a need to review the curricula utilised in the business programmes of Saudi higher education establishments (AlKahtani & Syed, 2018).

It is necessary to align the needs of the labour market with the quality of higher education graduates to reduce unemployment and enhance graduate employability (Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014). There should also be a good relationship and collaboration between the Saudi Arabian government, employers, and academics to improve the quality of higher education and graduate employability in the country (Iqbal & Zenchenkov, 2014). Lastly, the literature reveals that core skills and competencies considered necessary in Saudi Arabia labour market include being hardworking and loyal, punctuality and commitment, teamwork, English language and IT skills; problem solving and decision making, critical thinking and logical reasoning, being self-motivated, teamwork, oral communication and presentation, computer skills, leadership,

business ethics, written communication, time-management skills, and previous experience (Albahussain, 2006; AlKahtani & Syed, 2018; Al Mallak et al., 2020; AlMotairy, 2016; Zureigat, 2015).

Results

The study revealed gaps in the employability of business graduates, including deficiencies in communication, functional, and technological skills. The main reasons include outdated curricula, weak collaboration between academia and industry, heavy theoretical instruction, limited training opportunities, and the dominance of Arabic-only instruction.

The literature survey showed recognition of communication and teamwork skills; however, graduates expressed low confidence in creativity and emotional intelligence, with inconsistencies in teaching practices.

Research at Jouf University highlighted a gap between skills and labor market needs, emphasizing the importance of practical education and partnerships with employers.

Employers indicated a lack of soft skills and a strong desire to collaborate with academia to develop curricula.

International literature emphasizes the importance of integrating academic and transferable skills. Additionally, developing countries show the significance of both technical and soft skills, along with self-efficacy.

Recommendations

- Update curricula to meet the needs of digital and analytical businesses.
- Offer interdisciplinary modules on design thinking and emotional intelligence.
- Establish partnerships with employers to co-design curricula.
- Invite employers to participate in course development.
- Develop career centers that provide guidance and workshops.
- Enhance professional certification pathways integrated into degree programs.
- Focus on using English as a medium of instruction.
- Improve student-to-faculty ratios and incentivize faculty members.

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