EMPLOYABILITY OF GRADUATES THROUGH WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL)

Introduction

Are South African graduates capable of performing job-related tasks and assuming work responsibilities? A straightforward question that, unfortunately has complex answers. O’ Neil (1997) observes that numerous tertiary graduates lack the required knowledge, skill and experience to be productive members of a workforce where the spotlight is on high performance jobs carried out by high performing employees. This deficiency adversely affects the workplace as employers are finding it difficult to obtain potential employees with the appropriate expertise, to make significant contributions in an extremely competitive business environment. In 2009, Higher Education South Africa (HESA) released a study titled “Graduate Attributes,” which was a report on South African graduates from the perspective of employers. The report signified a disparity between the expectations of employers and the readiness of graduates, and while expectations exceeded readiness, there was an indication that some tertiary institutions were focused towards producing graduates fully prepared for the workplace.

Most graduates lack essential experience of the workplace. Their training has not been sufficiently relevant to the requirements of organisations. For graduates to compete in the highly competitive world of work, organisations in various industries have resorted to on-the-job training. Weddle (2010) develops this point by observing that employers in the past were prepared to hire graduates who had modest skills and train them to perform a job. Today, however, they seek to employ graduates who have all of the skills to do a job and the ability to use those skills effectively in the workplace.

Students commence their studies with the expectation that a higher education qualification would improve their chances of finding a job. This is a reasonable expectation, given that
labour demand is shifting to higher skilled workers and professionals. Yet, a growing number of studies indicate that the process of finding a job for some graduates is not so easy. It is nonetheless generally recognised that graduates have the advantage in the labour market. This advantage, however, does not necessarily benefit all graduates, primarily due to the graduates’ circumstances and incompatibility between employers and job-seekers. There is some evidence, however, that race and gender discrimination persists in the workplace, particularly in the private sector, although graduate unemployment also results from the fact that there are more people with degrees than there are degree level job vacancies (Moleke, 2006: 1).

**Defining employability**

A widely used definition of employability, according to Yorke (2008: 3), can be defined as: “a graduate’s achievements and his/her potential to obtain a ‘graduate job’, and should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a ‘graduate job’ (which is subject to influences in the government, a major influence being the state of the economy). Employability derives from complex learning, and is a concept of wider range than those of ‘core’ and ‘key’ skills.

Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004: 16) refer to employability as one’s ability to identify and realise job opportunities, while Hillage and Pollard, (1998: 2) maintain that employability is “The ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain employment if required”. Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2003:111) provide a similar definition: “the relative chance of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment”. Yet, Brown et al. (2003: 110) challenge the definition of Hillage and Pollard. The former maintain that it is ideologically loaded because it ignores the fact that employability is predominantly determined by the labour market rather than the capabilities of individuals suggesting that their definition of employability signifies a classic example of blaming the victim.
To a large extent, these definitions assume a link between employment and employability, implying that if one has the right mix of skills, attitudes and behaviours, then one is supposedly employable. However, in reality, employment is an individual’s relative potential to obtain and retain suitable employment within the current job market. Having an appropriate mix of skills may increase the likelihood of success in employment, but it is not a guarantee (Bansal, Joshi and Choubey, 2009: 97). Perhaps, the best definition comes from Hawkins (1999) who maintains that “to be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure”. Employers are subsequently employing graduates with desirable skills relevant to the job market.

**Employability in South Africa**

According to Adcorp’s employment index (December, 2011), there are approximately 600,000 unemployed graduates in South Africa. This fact raises the question of how effective our education system is at producing graduates who have the right mix of skills required for industry, especially since the education budget is one of the country’s top priorities. Reasons for the advanced unemployment rate of graduates include:

- Lack of soft skills and life skills;
- Lack of graduate access to employers and social networks that facilitate employment;
- Lack of work experience;
- Negative attitudes by graduates to employers and employers to graduates;
- Field of study where there is little employment demand; and
- Educational institutions with poor quality learning delivery (Stuart, 2007/8: 66).

To this end, work experience is deemed a key factor by companies hiring new employees. The lack of work experience by graduates often results in unemployment or underemployment. Universities of Technology (UoT) and Further Education and Training
(FET) Colleges have offered courses with an experiential learning component, which requires the student to gain a certain amount of structured work experience before they graduate. However, thousands of students fail to graduate each year because they cannot find suitable workplace experience opportunities (Stuart, 2007/8: 66).

Table 1 indicates the probability of finding a job within 12 months of initiating a search, as well as the percentage of those operating a business.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Probability of finding a job within 12 months of initiating search (%)</th>
<th>Percentage operating a business</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All races</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No schooling</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>16.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>36.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTC III</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma plus Grade 12</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>74.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honours degree</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>81.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters/Doctorate</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>66.7</td>
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*Source: Adcorp Employment Index (December, 2011: 3)*

To some extent, affirmative action has succeeded in widening the desire to work in South Africa. Table 1 indicates that qualified Whites are less likely than Blacks to find work within 12 months of commencing an employment search. No doubt, this has contributed to significantly higher percentages of Whites managing their own businesses. Whites are approximately three times more likely than Blacks to start their own businesses (Adcorp, 2011: 2).
Education and experience as contributors of employability

Work experience is regarded as an essential asset for employment. The majority of final-year university students hardly have any form of work experience, except participating in some type of work-integrated learning. Consequently, work during the training phase does not necessarily bring students much understanding about their work in the future because they are seldom given actual work tasks. Bloxham and Boyd (2007: 162) suggest that conventional approaches to enhancing employability in higher education include work experience, career guidance and personal development planning. The lack of real work experience makes it difficult for students to obtain some practical sense of the workplace.

Typically, many students are not aware of the requirements of employers, or how they should go about being better prepared for the world of work. Furthermore, their lack of experience creates a lack of confidence which, subsequently, makes it more difficult for the student to meet the employers’ requirements. Intern students are required to perform menial office duties such as photocopying, typing, faxing, answering the telephone, running errands or even making tea instead of work requiring the use of their theoretical knowledge. Dench (1997: 190), nonetheless, reasons that employers are progressively identifying a set of generic, (usually personal) skills which they attempt to ascertain when recruiting new employees. These generic skills comprise of communication skills, the ability to manage basic literacy and numeracy in the work environment, being a team player, the competence to relate to customers and staff, taking ownership for one’s own work and personal and career development, being accountable, responsible and making decisions.

Hager and Holland (2006: 2) echo Dench’s sentiments by maintaining that, from the perspective of higher education, a range of graduate attributes have gained attention. Among these are thinking skills such as logical and analytical reasoning, problem solving and intellectual curiosity; effective communication skills, teamwork skills, and capacities to
identify, access and manage knowledge and information and personal attributes such as imagination, creativity and innovation.

The latest analysis of employers’ skill needs point out that personal attributes are developing into a focal point of attention. According to Dench (1997: 195), the extent to which personal attitudes are significant differs from one organisation to the next. While some employers want employees who will be dependable and will fit in with their existing workforce; others are more demanding (Dench, 1997: 192).

**What makes a graduate employable?**

Students that partake in work integrated learning start off knowing more about their jobs as they have practical experience and the advantage over students that did not undergo work integrated learning. These students tend to stay longer in their chosen field than students who have not experienced cooperative education.

Universities in countries such as Canada, the United States of America (USA), Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom (UK), have all instituted some form of skills curriculum into their degree programmes. This is undertaken either by introducing the skills aspect into the curricula or through separate, but necessary, courses that concentrate on skills development (Cranmer, 2006: 170). It is encouraging to note that, in South Africa, the NQF includes two sets of outcomes, namely; critical and specific, which add to the graduate’s personal development and to the social and economic development of the society (Harvey & Bowers-Brown, 2004). Teichler (2000: 87) develops this point by stating that graduates ought to have the following attributes:

- Be flexible;
- Be able and willing to contribute to innovation and be creative;
Be able to cope with uncertainties;

Be interested in and prepared for lifelong learning;

Have acquired social sensitivity and communicative skills;

Be able to work in teams;

Be willing to take on responsibilities;

Become entrepreneurial;

Prepare themselves for the internationalisation of labour markets through and understanding various cultures; and

Be versatile in generic skills which cut across different disciplines, and be literate in areas of knowledge which form the basis for various professional skills (Teichler, 2000: 87).

In support of the above, Falconer and Pettigrew (2003: 53) suggest that graduates need to ascertain that they develop not only academic and technical knowledge, but also transferable skills which employers are seeking in graduate recruits.

**What attributes of candidates do employers expect?**

Employability skills, according to Davies (2000: 436), can be defined as one of the more visible developments in employment, noticeably the rising expectations amid employers of recently recruited graduates. Davies (2000:436/437) affirms that graduates are expected to take charge of their careers and make a significant contribution from the beginning of their employment.

Employers want graduates who not only enhance the organisation, but are also likely to take the organisation forward in the face of constant change (Harvey and Mason, 1996: 17). The question is how can employers expect recent graduates to have work experience? The
requirements of the employers may seem unreasonable, yet, they reflect the real expectation of employers. Harvey and Mason (1996: 19) develop this point by observing that, for some employers, the question of a degree is of little or no consequence. Employers are only reasonably satisfied with the technical ability of graduates. Undeniably, graduates are not perceived to be particularly suitable at applying knowledge or understanding to practical work situations. Presumably, they lack commercial awareness and appreciation of the human or cultural context within which they are working. Harvey and Mason claim that they are learners, not experts: they have the capability but have not yet learned to perform.

Employers further feel that the academic programmes at universities do not educate students adequately with the essential skills to be competent in the workplace. Therefore, the need for in – service training is essential so that the students can develop the skills and abilities for the world of work.

Ideally, organisations attempt to employ graduates with appropriate experience, who have performed similar jobs or have been employed in a related work environment. According to Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2006: 2), there has been emphasis on the skills that students are taught during their time in tertiary institutions. Apart from suitable work-related experience, organisations seek to employ graduates with a positive approach to the work environment, because knowledge and skill can be taught, but the attitude is that of the graduate.

**Graduates’ expectations of employment**

Graduates have an excessively high expectation of employment. This is based largely upon media reports of high earnings within specific sections of the economy. Many new graduates are of the opinion that they have the right to a high salary and confident of a rapid route to
senior management. To this end, a portion of the blame can be placed on universities for promoting the notion that a degree is a guarantee to high-level employment (Currant and Mitton, 2000: 127). Pop and Barkhuizen (2010: 77) concur that the expectations of graduates are sometimes excessive. They assume that their qualifications will be the gateway to high salaries and management positions and are reluctant to learn the skills that form the foundation of employment. Moreover, they are of the opinion that they do not need to start at the bottom by virtue of being highly qualified, in contrast to permanent and elder workers who do not have equal credentials. More significantly, new graduates consider it their right to be treated impartially and on par with their more experienced peers.

Challenges associated with employability

The number of students entering higher education has risen. The demand for tertiary education has multiplied, whereas employment has decreased. Some critics suggest that the current trend in higher education is producing a growing number of graduates, who are, on average, older and more highly qualified than before (Kandola, Wood, Dholakia and Keane, 2001: 2/3). Pop and Barkhuizen (2010: 76) suggest that the lack of soft skills, workplace readiness and practical experience are some of the challenges associated with employability. Soft skills, in particular, are the main reason why many graduates are unsuccessful in the recruitment phase. Examples of soft skills include friendliness, team spirit, team cohesiveness, understanding of different cultural and historical differences, motivation, observance of rules, procedures and company etiquette, showing interest, solving skills, politeness, concise language, solid relations with diverse personality types, sociability, good interpersonal communication skills and similar traits.

Another factor to consider, according to Pop and Barkhuizen (2010: 77), is the graduates’ inability to work independently, basically due to lack of workplace exposure. Universities of
Technology in South Africa have introduced the WIL model of training, where students spend time at the workplace to gain practical experience.

**Overcoming challenges of employability in South Africa**

According to Marock (2008: 29) one of the ways of overcoming employability challenges is by developing a comprehensive understanding of the nature of employability skills. This should include skills that support personal and inter-personal development, focusing on proficiency, which enables graduates to access the labour market. These skills include general life skills, the ability to communicate to and with others, behavioural and attitudinal qualities such as willingness to do the work, reliability, honesty, trust and initiative. Furthermore, there is a need to accelerate opportunities for work experience available to graduates. Practical work has the advantage of placing graduates into jobs that they would otherwise not obtain. Most employers are hesitant to employ graduates because of assumptions about ability, maturity and skills. This signifies that real work experience may support graduates in dismantling stereotypes about graduate abilities and abilities.

Related to work experience is the importance to promote mentoring and work-preparation programmes. This factor is most significant to new graduates who enter a company as they are not only keen to learn new skills and develop their careers, but also need the mentoring aspect coupled with a patient manager to guide and initiate them into the workplace. New graduates are unusually ambitious and want to ascend the corporate ladder as quickly as possible.

Finally, the onus rests with graduates in terms of securing workplace employment. Ways in which companies support the sustained employability of graduates should be introduced into modules, together with consultation about the effectiveness of other labour market
interventions. In addition, strategies that promote self employment should be considered within this context.

**Conclusion**

The difficulty for tertiary institutions is to uphold high academic standards whilst affording students with a skills-based education. To ensure that the question of employability receives attention, universities need to include work readiness into their curricula to improve graduates opportunities for employment. For instance, they may incorporate career education and guidance modules, thus preparing students for the world of work which may be considered important to sustain a competitive advantage in the global environment. Employers want graduates who can do the job. It is up to colleges and students to make sure they are ready to bridge this gap. Employability of graduates should be the foundation of a tertiary education institution.

The challenge one faces in terms of employability for graduates in South Africa is extensive, but undeniably not insurmountable. As a country, one needs to appreciate the fact that the skills, knowledge and competencies of the South African nation are a significant indication of South Africa’s potential for economic growth.
References


