TOWARDS ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The Knowledge Economy has emerged and is emerging and it should be encouraged to emerge. The advent of the knowledge economy directs more and more societies around the world to use information to build knowledge for human development. To achieve this, the knowledge economy requires people with a wide range of skills and abilities to meet its demands. These skills and abilities are essential for productive participation in the knowledge economy. Amongst others, the skills required in a knowledge economy include the following, effective communication, thinking skills, team work, habits of learning and information literacy skills which may also include attitudes such as determination, enthusiasm and commitment. Due to the fact that many employers find the quality and relevance of graduates to be unsatisfactory, there is a need to effect changes in the education system and field excursions or in a way institutions of higher learning intervene in terms of preparing graduates to venture into the job market.

Keywords: Knowledge economy, technology, communication skills

1. Introduction

In many countries including South Africa, graduates from institutions of higher learning venture into industry for the first time with minimal or without the requisite employability skills for productive functioning in the knowledge economy and the experience to provide the quality of service required by the customers. Due to the fact that many employers find the quality and relevance of graduates to be unsatisfactory, there is a need to effect changes in the education system and field excursions or in a way institutions of higher learning intervene in terms of preparing graduates to venture into the job market. To effect these changes, education systems need to change with the objective of supporting basic competencies needed for participation in the Knowledge Economy.

This paper is a case study of a group of students appointed on part time basis in libraries of Tshwane University of Technology and a selected sample from industry of people who are in managerial positions who have staff recruitment as part of their key performance areas. Tshwane University of Technology is distributed in 3 South African provinces namely Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. The university recruits and appoints senior students enrolled for any discipline and from diverse social backgrounds in various service departments, including the libraries.

The study was conducted to establish the perception of young graduates versus those of prospective employers on expected critical thinking skills level at which young graduates are at when they venture into the labour market for the first time after completion of their studies. This critical moment can be both frustrating for both the employer and the employee. The study was intended to analyze the existing program of appointment at service units of the university as an effort to address the matter relating to:

- Developing and preparing students for optimal functioning in the knowledge economy.
- Asses their perceptions on critical thinking skills vis-a-vis those of prospective employers.
- Enhance and nurture critical thinking skills required in the workplace for productive functioning in the knowledge economy.
- Improve the quality of the way in which people think by applying the specific rules of logic and scientific reasoning.

It is envisaged that the study will:

Develop a best practice intervention method on how to equip new graduates with relevant skills to function in a knowledge economy with particular reference to critical thinking skills

2. Background and Study Objectives.

A research report, produced by the World Bank in 2007, presents several years of analytical work and research on the knowledge economy in its client countries. The report is about economic development as a process of generating relevant knowledge and putting that knowledge to work to generate further growth and competitive advantage.

For organizations to remain competitive there is a huge need for a labor force of critical thinkers who will have the ability to link knowledge management processes and the business strategy that is more often than not ignored in practice but constantly spoken about. Thinking is a way of life and yet a complex phenomenon which the quality of our live and the quality of our thought precisely depends on.

Literature suggests that higher levels of knowledge in a society can lead to higher levels of economic growth provided the labor force is educated and skilled to the level of being able to create and use knowledge efficiently. This is largely dependent on the country’s education and training base, its information and telecommunications infrastructure and its overall governance framework.

The study proposes the development of a properly managed intervention structure for skill enhancement programs at an institution of higher learning in South Africa. This study focuses on the enhancement of 1 (one) selected variable namely, Critical Thinking skill. By its nature, CT is never universal to any individual and yet the quality of thinking matters, hence it is important to note that it is important to develop CT skills and to harness and nurture the skill.

3. Research Question

At the crux of productive participation in the knowledge economy, is a set of conceptual tools with associated intellectual skills and strategies useful for making reasonable decisions about what to do or what to believe, namely, Critical thinking skills.

Literature suggest that there is a gap between skill requirements for entry level graduates and skills level of entry level graduate job applicants. The gap alluded to, bears reference to the employability skills levels of the new graduates about to venture into the job market. Employability skills are the basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job. These skills include attitudes and actions that enable workers to get along with their fellow workers and supervisors and to make sound critical decisions and employability skill refers to assets in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes and the way the assets are used and deployed in a given setting. Unlike occupational or technical skills, employability skills maybe generic in nature rather than job specific and cut across all industry types, business sizes and job levels and yet, they both require firmly developed intellectual skills and abilities to be employed for competitive advantage.

Therefore, the research question that needs to be addressed is:

To what extent is there a gap between the demand and the offering of critical thinking skills in SA?

By conducting a case study at Tshwane University of Technology Libraries wherein a numbers of students are appointed as assistants, this study will reveal the state of their perceptions on critical thinking skills vis-à-vis the perceptions of prospective employers in industry. Reasons to employ a case study is that it will allow the researcher to present the data that will be collected in multiple methods such as surveys and interviews.

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3 Rudinow, J. and Barry V. E 2004. Invitation to critical thinking. Belmont
4 Wickramasinghe, V. and Perera, L. 2010. Graduates’, university lecturers’ and employers perceptions towards employability skills. Education and Training 52 (3) 226-244
5 Naele, P. Thapa, S. Boyce, C. 2006. Preparing a case study: a guide for designing and conducting a case study for evaluation
4. Research Project

4.1 Case study description

Universities across the globe are increasingly required to produce highly skilled graduates who are able to respond to the ever changing and complex needs of the workplace. In addition to this, organizations and government institution are taking up the responsibility to equip senior and post graduate students and in some instances young graduates with working opportunities to develop and enhance transferable soft skills and competencies integral to graduate employability and necessary to function in a knowledge economy.

In response to this, Tshwane University of Technology also recruit and appoint senior students from any discipline in various service departments, including the libraries. For the purpose of this paper the unit of analysis is set in 1 of the nine sparsely distributed libraries of the university Polokwane Campus Library.

The recruitment and selection process of the students is formally conducted all relevant protocol of staff recruitment is observed in detail. The key requirement is that for any student to be considered for a position in the library and the Electronic Resource Centre, they have to be academically well performing students. This process is to ensure that students undergo the test they may encounter upon venturing into the formal job market. The key responsibilities as per the job advertisement include registration of new members, selling of computer consumables, assist clients in printing, scanning, photocopying and faxing, Creation of email accounts and orientation to new students. Following the interviews, students will be offered the positions and sign a contract aligned to the university’s policies and regulations and remuneration is based on the level of study. The students are then put into a training program during the first week of their employment. The training programs’ focus is mainly on the key responsibilities as indicated above. There is no training that is geared towards critical thinking skills and the assumption is that, there will be skills transfer between the permanent employees and the students.

4.2 Questionnaire and interview Survey

In initiating the study, the researcher developed a questionnaire that was sent to 10 service oriented companies from varied environments that were randomly selected in Polokwane, Limpopo Province and Pretoria, Gauteng Province. The aim of the tool was to gather information as to what skill do employers deem as the most important whenever they appoint new graduates. The focus of this investigation was not based on subject knowledge skills but skills that requisite tacit learning.

Three questionnaires were developed by the researcher. The first questionnaire was directed to managers in industry whose responsibility is staff recruitment.

The following set of skills were to be ranked on a scale of 1-5 with 1 indicating the not important at all and 5 indicated that the skills was of extreme importance. Effective communication skills, Team work, Information Literacy, Habits of Learning and Critical thinking skills.

Results of this short survey indicated that, the effective communication skill both written and verbal was of extreme importance to all the companies followed by critical thinking skills.

input. Pathfinder international tool series. Monitoring and evaluation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Effective Communication</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Team Work</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Information Literacy</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Critical Thinking skills</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Habits of Learning</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of the initial survey

It was the view of the researcher that a lot of studies had been conducted in the communication area hence the decision to pursue the study on the perception of prospective employer’s vs those of prospective employees on critical thinking skills. Also, because the researcher believes that critical thinking skills should be the beginning of any cause for action that includes problem solving, critical analytical and sound professional judgment in the workplace.

A second tool particular to Critical thinking skill was then developed and it was distributed to 50 managers from different companies in Pretoria, Gauteng Province and Polokwane, Limpopo Province. The two provinces were selected mainly because they mostly appoint this graduate than their counterparts. The aim of the tool was to determine what expectations prospective employers hold with critical thinking skills of new entrants in the job market. The questionnaire consisted of forty two (42) that were ranked on 5 point likert scale was sent to managers.

The managers were from varied environments comprising of government departments, universities, private businesses and state owned enterprises The response rate of 87 % demonstrated clearly that industry’s expectation of critical thinking abilities among young graduates is very important at 78%.

Another questionnaire was developed by the researcher and it was directed to the students. This was a self-evaluation questionnaire. 18 questions were to find out from students if they were going to have the ability to display the many attributes related to critical thinking skills in a work environment. 70% respondents indicated that they will have the abilities to do that and it was of extreme importance.

The questionnaires were followed by interviews with the students for more in-depth information on their understanding of Critical thinking skills.

The first question was ‘open ended” to set the tone and to build a rapport with the participant. The question was what was your expectation when you were informed that you had been appointed as a student assistant in the library? Many responded that they were “excited and expected to work in a professional environment and learn new things”

The next question was when you look at the items on the survey, how would you define critical thinking skills? 79% responded that is to think fast in a work environment. 13% responded that it is to be honest and disciplined at work. And 8% responded that it is to be emotionally intelligent and is a complex combination of skills.

On being asked whether they regarded themselves as critical thinkers and to provide a reason thereof, 100% responded yes that they are critical thinkers. However the reasons varied from I am honest, reliable, I can solve problems, I have interpersonal skills, I can work without showing my emotions. A further question was to rank, in order of priority the main reason that led to them applying for the position in the library. 81% of the respondents indicated their need for additional funds to supplement the meager budgets they get from parents, thereby indicating a dire economic need.

Managers were also interviewed telephonically on their description of a critical thinker. 66% of the managers responded that it is a person who looks at various dimensions and viewpoints about an issue or subject matter. Someone who will not rush into making
decision about issues. A critical thinker is a good listener. Someone who will make sound judgments’ about issues in the workplace.

5. Challenges and findings

The intervention program, as introduced by the university falls short of addressing the skills gap regarding critical thinking skills owing to

- Critical thinking being a very abstract concept and cannot be tested – ordinarily
- The use of academic performance as the only yardstick for appointment
- Critical thinking abilities are not taken in cognizance during the recruitment process
- Students expected to learn most work related traits un-guided
- Students are placed to work in environments where staff members are not trainers of critical thinking skills and they themselves may not be critical thinkers.
- Only a fraction of students can access the programs
- Students do not know what critical thinking skills are let alone the expectation and how important are these skills in a working environment.
- Their main reason for taking up employment is mostly for financial gain than the envisaged transfer of skills.

Managers, know what they need, however students do not know what is expected of them. It is also evident that the impact of the programs that are introduced by universities are not close to addressing the employability skills gap with particular reference to critical thinking skills. The results of the self-evaluation questionnaire demonstrates that 91% of the respondents strongly agree that should, they be appointed and enter the formal job market, they will be able to demonstrate the expected attributes related to critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking according to students

Critical thinking is a way of thinking about any content, subject or a given problem in a skilful manner of analyzing, assessing, evaluating gathered information, observing, reflection, and reasoning, communicating, check for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, significance logic and fairness as a guide to a belief or an action and the determination of whether there is adequate justification to accept the conclusion as true.

The follow-up face-to-face interviews presented the researcher with an excellent opportunity to build a rapport with the participants and were able to follow-up on questions for more in-depth answers. When students were asked what critical thinking is, 47% responded that it is to think out of a box, and to be able to read into a given situation which other cannot read, 51% responded that it is to think fast and to do more than three tasks at the same time. On being asked whether they are critical thinkers or not, 96% responded that they are critical thinkers and the answers varied from

- I am honest, reliable,
- I can do more than three tasks at the same time
- I can solve problems,
- I have interpersonal skills and
- I can work without showing emotions.
- Able to see things that other cannot see
- I have the ability to think for myself
- I make decisions that benefit me
- I do not ask anybody to think for me
- I am able to deal with all the challenges I am faced with.

The responses above demonstrated to the researcher that the students did not know what Critical Thinking is and subsequently concluded that they are not critical thinkers themselves because none of

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7 Leedy, Paul D. and Ormrod, Jeanne Ellis. 2010. Practical Research : Planning and design. 9th Edition
the above statements form part of the cognitive process.

2% responded that they are not sure whether they were critical thinkers or not and asked the researcher to skip the question.

Another 2% responded that they are

— naturally creative
— have creative business ideas
— are able to think deep about a task
— always look for more details of the topic at hand

It is acknowledged that the above responses reflect a different perspective from the responses that they are critical thinkers without the profound understanding of the meaning of critical thinking. The latter demonstrate minimal understanding which maybe a result of critical thinking and creative thinking that is more often than not contrasted. Creative thinking is expansive, inventive and unconstrained while critical thinking is focused disciplined, logical and constrained.8

Facione9 warns that professionals who overate their abilities are likely to act with inadequate caution. This may be true to the students who responded to the questionnaire or it could be related to their minimal understanding of what critical thinking is.

The challenge that remains is to harness their work–readiness by testing their ability to utilize their soft-skills such as critical thinking skills that remains so vital in any work environment so that they are able to meet the demands of the ever-changing demands of modern day work environment.

Whilst the expectations by managers in industry seem justified, the challenge remains as to whose responsibility it is to ensure the nurturing and best ways to cultivate critical thinking skills for competitive advantage in a knowledge economy. Should it be:

- Lecturers in class as part of the curriculum?
- Part of the intervention programs as introduced at TUT?
- Prospective employers for rigorous training upon employment?

Whilst we grapple with these issues here are some recommendations in conclusion.

**The skills gap findings**

The distinction between the various key factors of critical thinking that is language, argument, logic and problem solving are very fine and in some cases almost non-existent. The fine line is indicative of the close relationship that these concepts have in the sense that the one may influence the other.

Below are the correlations in statistical terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Thinking: Key aspect</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Industry Managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item test correlation</td>
<td>Item rest correlation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.5341</td>
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<td>Argument</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.4090</td>
<td>0.3546</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Average test scale results*
The table above is the results of the test scale on the items. The pattern displayed in the table is that of average scores. It is clear that the industry managers have higher expectations than the students on all the variables tested.

This confirms the existence of a skills gap as alluded to by Wicramasinghe and Perera

6. Recommendations

Whilst the researcher acknowledges that minimal transfer of skills may still takes place in these kinds of interventions, there is a beckoning need for a meaningful structured intervention. It remains vital to re-direct the perceptions of these young graduates regarding the programs by stressing the need for skills transfer. Facione 10 argue that any college or institution that trains people for entry level jobs, and not train them in valid general education and provide no grounding on how to learn to think, does a grave disservice to those graduates and its nation.

- Students should receive structured guidance/ training for critical thinking.
- They must learn the specific rules of logic.
- The guidance/ training to be conducted in class or a formal setup.
- First level of skill implementation should be in such programs as introduced by TUT.
- Mentors in the various service departments should be trained
- They should be awareness of parameters on how to mentor the students
- Periodic performance based assessment be conducted

There is no nation that can afford to develop only a few elite who can think who will then be trusted to make all decisions while the rest are trained only to perform mindless jobs.

References


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10 Facione P.A et al. 1995. The disposition towards critical thinking. Journal of General Education. 44 (1) 1-25