

Employability skills of business graduates in Saudi Arabia: Do academia and employers speak the same language?

Habilidades de empleabilidad de los graduados en negocios en Arabia Saudita: ¿Hablan el mismo idioma el mundo académico y los empleadores?

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ABSTRACT

Graduate education plays a role in improving the scope for employability of graduates. It empowers them with specialized skills, advanced knowledge, and critical thinking, which increases the scope for their employability. However, in the case of Saudi Arabia, it has been reported that there is widespread unemployment in the country. Though the Saudi Arabian government has initiated measures to nurture development in education through their 'Saudi Vision 2030' program, a gap exists. There are strong indicators which point at a mismatch of knowledge and skills possessed by graduates in Saudi, and the requirements of the labour market. Therefore, this paper examines the apparent gap between academia and employers in terms of employability, while focusing on whether graduate students have the same set of skills that employers require. Using a review method, information was derived from secondary sources, mainly from papers having examined the same topic previously. From the findings, academia believed that the educational system needed an overhaul and economic diversification, with the creation of new employment opportunities. Though employers believed that Saudi graduates lacked soft skills impacting their employability. It was concluded that a collaboration between students and employers was required, where employers could offer inputs supporting graduate employability.

Keywords. graduate, graduate employability, business students, unemployment, soft skills

RESUMEN

La educación de posgrado desempeña un papel en la mejora de las posibilidades de empleabilidad de los graduados. Les otorga habilidades especializadas, conocimientos avanzados y pensamiento crítico, lo que aumenta las posibilidades de su empleabilidad. Sin embargo, en el

caso de Arabia Saudita, se ha informado que existe un desempleo generalizado en el país. Aunque el gobierno de Arabia Saudita ha iniciado medidas para fomentar el desarrollo de la educación a través de su programa “Visión Saudita 2030”, existe una brecha. Hay fuertes indicadores que señalan un desajuste entre los conocimientos y habilidades que poseen los graduados en Arabia Saudita y los requisitos del mercado laboral. Por lo tanto, este artículo examina la aparente brecha entre el mundo académico y los empleadores en términos de empleabilidad, centrándose al mismo tiempo en si los estudiantes de posgrado tienen el mismo conjunto de habilidades que los empleadores requieren. Utilizando un método de revisión, la información se obtuvo de fuentes secundarias, principalmente de artículos que habían examinado el mismo tema anteriormente. A partir de los hallazgos, el mundo académico consideró que el sistema educativo necesitaba una reforma y una diversificación económica, con la creación de nuevas oportunidades de empleo. Aunque los empleadores creían que los graduados saudíes carecían de habilidades sociales que afectaran su empleabilidad. Se concluyó que se requería una colaboración entre estudiantes y empleadores, donde los empleadores pudieran ofrecer insumos que apoyaran la empleabilidad de los graduados.

Palabras clave. graduado, empleabilidad de graduados, estudiantes de negocios, desempleo, habilidades blandas

BACKGROUND

Graduate education and employability form the crux for economic and social development for any nation. They have been attributed with an array of achievements, personal traits, skills which provide graduates with a better scope to acquire employment and emerge successful in their occupations of choice (Holmes, 2013). Nonetheless, a large number of institutes of higher education (universities) are known to function within a highly dynamic and competitive job market, while they develop graduate programs that continue to evolve with market requirements. This would be further bowing to pressures by policymakers for producing graduates who are job-ready, to promptly joining the workforce. Given the setting, improving academic programs to provide the most latest and in-demand graduate attributes and skills is vital, nevertheless, it is challenging too. Lowering any mismatches in terms of expectations with regards to graduate attributes within academic and practitioner communities have turned out to be a key target for the concerned stakeholders, in tandem with the augmented initiatives to entrench more employability skills within the curriculum in educational institutions. Nonetheless, as per a study conducted in recent times by Moore and Morton (2017), it has been suggested that this kind of disparity was not essentially the source of the challenge. The said study presented findings of some interest implying that with changes in perspectives, universities could concentrate on teaching students about how to learn, instead of concentrating mainly on developing skills that get them employed.

As one of the key players in the Middle East region, investments are being made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in order to develop their human resources to enable a gradual shift from its dependence on hydrocarbon resources. Certainly, the government in KSA requires a workforce that is qualified enough to compete in this present global economy era. According to Jamjoom (2016), the past twenty years have stood testimony to large scale investments across all educational levels, leading to a greater number of university graduates. Irrespective of large educational and economic developments occurring in the nation, KSA has been witnessing a massive rate of unemployment. Employability of higher education graduates continues to be a major challenge that both policymakers as well as graduates are confronted with. The rate of unemployment in KSA was estimated at 11.7% of the overall labour force; out of these, 6.8% were male while 29.6% were females (Jamjoom, 2016).

Comparatively high rate of unemployment among graduates in KSA is a major challenge that the leaders within the nation have been confronted with (Alrasheedy, 2019). Previously, graduate employability and unemployment rates were not a major issue for the private sector or the government in KSA as all university graduates were absorbed by the private sector. The primary destination for higher education graduates was the public sector. In addition, tasks within the public sector tended to be rather routine, requiring minimal skill levels. The guarantee of jobs in public sector for all university graduates formed a fake sense of security, rendering them less concerned with the type of skills they acquired. It was the government sector that provided almost every service. Nonetheless, the public sector is now confronted with an oversupply of graduates, and thus they are in no position to guarantee jobs for all graduates. The KSA government through their policies has charged the private sector to provide job opportunities instead. Employers within the private sector, nonetheless, have observed that university graduates especially business graduates do not match the needs of the sector (Alzu'be, 2012; Hani & Lopesciolo, 2021).

Therefore, unemployment among graduates within KSA is not the same as unemployment across several other nations where it is generally an outcome of general poverty and poor socio-economic conditions. There have been arguments that the training and education system within Saudi Arabia, has not been successful in catering to the requirements of the economy. Arguments also exist as to graduates within KSA are lacking in knowledge and skills required to match the needs within the labour market. However, it is worth noting that the KSA government has now included a policy of 'Saudization' to resolve the challenge of unemployment. According to Alzalabani (2002), Saudization widely refers to the necessity for substituting non-Saudi manpower with Saudi nationals within the workforce. Through this initiative of 'Saudization', the objective is to motivate Saudi citizens to adopt a highly active role towards the social and economic development of their nation. This objective also aims to lower the number of non-Saudi workers and to motivate organizations to augment employment of Saudi nationals (Edgar et al., 2016).

Implications from the growth of unemployment rate in KSA are that there are more stringent requirements and competition for jobs that are currently available in the country, given the fact that the labour market comprises of unskilled as well as skilled employable labour which is inclusive of business graduates as well (Mohamed Meteb, 2017). The growing rate of unemployment in KSA is indicative of the fact that business graduates are required to have skills that are necessary for employability as needed by employers within the labour market in KSA (Velciu, 2017). As per the new developmental plan in KSA, which is termed as 'Saudi Vision 2030', education forms the crux and has emerged as a key foundation of this development plan. This reveals that there is direct commitment from the KSA government to foster development in the domain of education within the nation. Nonetheless, the mismatch between higher education graduates and job market requirements clearly indicates the existence of a gap. This will be the key focus of this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education and labour market

There is a huge variation in higher education institutions in terms of the level to which they are associated with the labour market. Nonetheless, it has been suggested through literature that institutes of higher education in KSA are adopting a proactive approach with regards to their links to the labour market (Ibeaheem et al., 2018), It has been suggested that matching the requirements of the market is a key reason for the expansion in private higher education across the world (Ibeaheem et al., 2018). The link between private education institutions and the labour market is considered of much significance for the legitimacy of such kind of institutions (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). Private higher education institutions, particularly the ones that are newly emerging are found to be unique in their association with the labour market. Private institutions are deemed as 'serious demand-absorbing' owing to their orientation to the labour market (Kwiek, 2016).

Several studies have deliberated about the association between higher education institutions and the labour market, while differentiating it with practices in higher education that add relevance to such institutions or relate it to the labour market (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020), (Hazelkorn, 2019). Practices in higher education that are considered to be pertinent to the labour market and subsequently improve employability of graduates would comprise of curriculum, training, career services and social events (Bridgstock et al., 2019). Before proceeding further, it would be worthwhile to emphasize that graduate employability is about the 'work-readiness' of graduates for the labour market. It has been stressed upon by Römgens et al. (2020) that employment must not be confused for employability, as the former refers to job acquisition.

Models pertaining to higher education institutions which improve graduate employability have been discussed by scholars like Yorke & Knight (2006). The model presented by Brennan et al. (1996), for instance comprises of five components; a) disciplinary content knowledge, b) disciplinary skills, c) workplace awareness, d) workplace experience, and e) generic skills. Disciplinary content knowledge is acquired through courses that are offered through the curriculum of the institution. Certain studies have investigated the significance of a domain of study for graduates' initial employment (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014). Discussions around the relevance of the curriculum to the labour market, concentrates on higher education providing subjects and equipping students with skills required within the labour market. Domains of study or specialization of graduates might be an easy way for employers to evaluate the knowledge of graduates' regarding the domain wherein a graduate is seeking employment. Academic knowledge and skills pertaining to discipline nonetheless, are not adequate for graduate employability (Little, 2001). Literature relating to graduate employability has highlighted 'generic skills' which are also commonly termed as skills that can be transferred or key skills (Zhao & Kularatne, 2020). Generic skills would comprise of skill such as communication, basic competence, problem-solving (adaptability), personal development, influencing, creativity and effectiveness (Joynes et al., 2019).

Though there are varied lists of the types of generic skills that employers seek, the pedagogy for employment group had developed a list on the basis of 25 years of research on skills that employers expect to find in graduates. Other than equipping graduates with significant generic skills, institutes of higher education should facilitate the transition of students from education and into the labour market. It has been suggested by that higher education institutes could play a key role in such transition by providing students with guidance when they sought jobs, creating opportunities for job through networking with business sector and also with intermediary agencies (Okolie et al., 2019).

Factors determining graduate employability

It has been emphasized by Rusznyak et al. (2016), that the experience of graduates would comprise of intellectual rigour, performance and engagement. Acquiring and developing graduate employability is a key focus of higher education across several nations (Blackmore et al., 2016; Tran, 2015). The agenda for employability in the higher education context ensures that positive attributes of students and transferrable skills are structured to facilitate graduates to acquire and retain work. When graduates acquire transferrable skills through higher education, it improves the scope for their employability within the labour market. It has been posited by Gamage and Henegedara (2019), that personal skills that can be transferred could be categorized into eight key categories. These include; creative, self-management, physical, linguistic and communication, organization, social and group, cognitive, and contingency. As mentioned one of the skills would refer to communication skills (oral and written communication and the ability to patiently listen to others), problem solving skills (being a fast learner, critical thinking, and outlining personal goals), and also team-working skills (being a good delegator or leader and having the capability to execute negotiation). At the same time, graduates are also expected to have a good knowledge about a subject and also possess technical understanding. As employees they would be expected to

complete a set of skills criteria outlined by employers within their job placement advertisements. Employers hold the belief that such skills would enable employees to function in an effective manner, within their respective roles at their places of work (Tran, 2019). Therefore, employability of graduates would hinge on the assets they have. These would also be inclusive of skills and attributes, knowledge, and the way in which such assets are utilized and presented to employers (Cook, 2022).

According to Hernández-March et al. (2009), the key skills that graduates need to possess are teamwork, eagerness to learn, problem solving, and other personal attributes such as having excellent self-management skills, energy and motivation, commitment, flexibility, reliability, adaptability and the ability to summarize major issues. Very often, employability skills are referred to as key skills, key competencies, transferable skills, life skills, essential employment skills, or generic skills (Kenayathulla et al., 2019).

Structure of labour market in Saudi Arabia

The labour market in Saudi Arabia has been characterized by several features. At the outset, the public sector has a penchant to absorb a massive share of nationals that enter into the labour market. At the same time, the private sector depends largely on expatriates. On an average, people in Saudi are known to possess a higher level of education as compared to expatriates and are in favour of getting employed in the public sector, where their remuneration is commensurate to the job they do (Diwan, 2021). The public sector also provides them with job security, offers increased benefits and also they work comparatively less hours than the private sector. A large majority of expatriates who are engaged in the private sector were concentrated in sectors like retail, wholesale, trade, agriculture, transport, personal services and construction. Expatriates who are known to be employed in this sector generally possess low skills, and get a lesser pay and they might also have to work for longer hours (Salam, 2022). Next, there is a substantial wage gap in the private sector which shifts the demand for labour towards expatriates as Saudi citizens get a higher pay than non-Saudi citizens. Definitely, there is also a substantial pay gap between Saudi citizens and expatriates who are employed in the public sector. Irrespective of the fact that there has been an increase in the rate of economic participation in Saudi, it continues to be low, particularly for women. As per existing statistics from quarter two in 2020, it has been indicated that only 48.8 per cent of Saudis participated as compared to 17.4 per cent in quarter two in 2017, to 31.4 percent in quarter two in 2020. Though there has been an improvement, it is still low as compared to the rate of participation of males of around 65.6 per cent in quarter two of 2020. Also, as per empirical evidence, it is suggested that the existence of mismatch in skills within the labour market is due to citizens not being well-equipped with skills that are required in the private sector.

With a view to nurture the creation of jobs for nationals, authorities in Saudi over the course of the past many years have deployed diverse policies that promoted employment within the private sector. For instance, the Hafiz programme was initiated to extend support to nationals seeking jobs with a monthly remuneration of Saudi Arabian Riyals (SAR) 2000 for a maximum period of one year. Similarly, the Nitaqat programme intended to augment the number of Saudi citizens engaged in the private sector (Basahal et al., 2021). Sanctions were imposed through this programme, on organizations that did not hire Saudi citizens. While it is true that there was a minimum wage policy applicable for Saudis engaged in the public sector, which was around SAR 4000, there are no such minimum wage diktats for expatriates. On the other hand, levies were imposed on expatriates and their dependents from around mid-2016. The initiative for reforms in labour market has slowly augmented the share of Saudi citizens in the private sector (Hasanov et al., 2021). There has been a growth in the Saudi citizen employment within private sector by an average of 8 per cent annually, from 2005 to 2017, and at the same time, an increase of an average 4 per cent was noticed in the Saudi citizen employment in the public sector in the period aforementioned. During November 2020, authorities in Saudi announced an ease on restrictions for expatriates engaged in the private

sector which allowed them not just to switch jobs, but also exit the nation without the consent of the employers. An examination of the dynamics in the Saudi labour market would be beneficial in acquiring an understanding about the pattern of development in the labour market on the whole (Hani & Lopesciolo, 2021).

Other than some sectors, expatriates are known to dominate employment within the private sector. It has been reported that dependency of private sector on the economy of Saudi on expatriates has witnessed a drop during the period between 2005 to 2017. Nonetheless, the rate at which restructuring of employment within all sectors was quite slow (Lopesciolo et al., 2021). Certain economic sectors like manufacturing, distribution, communication, agriculture, construction and transport continue to be dominated by expatriates, which led to an increased rate of unemployment among the rapidly growing labour force in Saudi. Only the sectors of utility and mining have experienced employment from Saudi citizens, as compared to any other sector. The proportion of the Saudi labour force within the private sector witnessed an increase from 11.6 per cent in 2005 to 18.6 per cent during 2017 (Hasanov et al., 2021). As per comparable education levels, the wages in the Saudi private sector are low for non-Saudis as for Saudis. This has been attributed as the key reason for an increasing number of expatriates as observed in the private sector (Hasanov et al., 2021). Having easy access to low-skilled expatriates with low pay implied that in sectors such as retail and wholesale, transport, personal services and construction have been instrumental to drive growth in private sector (Kammer, 2013). A growing trend of proportion of Saudi labour share and rapidly increasing rate of growth of Saudi labour forces across every sector is an outcome of labour market reforms in Saudi.

Role of higher education institutions in developing employability skills

As per the perspectives of academia, employability stems as a key outcome of educational procedures that mould the professional capabilities of future graduates, while offering the required foundation for circumnavigating the labour market. In order to ensure that graduates are in a position to effectively exploit their investments over the course of acquiring education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) need to be precisely aware about the expectations and requirements as expected by employers (Sin & Amaral, 2017). In addition, there are many studies that have investigated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Saudi Arabia, wherein the findings revealed that HEIs frequently accord low significance to transversal employability skills owing to imprecise views of suboptimal policies or the labour market (Ali Al-khateeb, 2020; Belwal et al., 2017; Griffin & Coelhos, 2019). At the same time, employers offer significant insights into probable enhancements to academic curriculums owing to their role as a key factor that influences the labour market. Particularly being aware of competencies that are required from a workforce of the 21st century, a large number of employers prefer graduates having the following employability skills; leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, oral communication, emotional intelligence, creativity and self-discipline (Husam & Abraham, 2019; Pauceanu et al., 2020). While there are no guarantees offered by HEIs regarding the ability of a graduate to obtain employment, graduates should be informed about the increasing importance of the so-called soft-skills as one of the key platforms to acquire a competitive edge within the labour market (Harvey et al., 2021). Since the fundamental goal of higher education is employability, a lack of agreement with regard to employability skills exerts pressure on the ability of HEI's to effectively ready graduates for their careers in future.

Scholarships in Saudi, concentrating on transversal employability skills is supposedly scant. As an outcome, it literally makes the situation highly disadvantageous for Saudi graduates. Given the framework of a knowledge economy that is continuously changing, this narrow focus on technological skills on the part of HEIs in Saudi adds on to the development of a skill gap that has a negative impact on the employment profile of the nation in particular, and the economy on the whole (Ebaid, 2021). This issue is further aggravated by certain economic barriers that needs redressal with due cooperation from main stakeholders (Ali Al-khateeb, 2020). The said challenges

are multiplied owing to the fact that curriculums with HEI's in Saudi accord priority to humanities and these include religious and language studies, as compared to subjects that are highly in demand (Alghamedi, 2016). Though the Saudization policy and Saudi vision 2030 aims to relieve the issues above mentioned, both students as well as HEI's need to concentrate on developing employability skills that would be vital in securing future opportunities in employment (Aloui & Shams Eldin, 2020). As such, there is much need for scholarly inquiry into educational activities focused on transversal employability skills that would enable lowering unemployment rates in Saudi, while ensuring economic prosperity of the nation.

METHOD

The aim of this research is to investigate the mismatch between higher education graduates and job market requirements in Saudi Arabia. In particular, this research intends to outline the mismatch from the perspective of academia and employers. Therefore, the researcher in this case has opted to adopt a review method, where a review of studies conducted in the past will be carried out and findings will be derived from past studies. Based on the review of papers, the perspective of past researchers on the topic will be presented in a systematic manner. However, it is not in any way a systematic review of extant literature (Bearman et al., 2012). Review papers are of particular benefit in terms of offering a wider viewpoint on the phenomenon being investigated and bringing practitioners up to date, while serving as a powerful instrument for invoking thoughts in a balanced manner (Green et al., 2006).

Since this research involves a review method, relevant papers pertaining to the topic will be found through secondary sources. Papers will be sourced through leading academic journals such as Emerald Insight, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, and other prominent academic journals. Google scholar will be mainly used to execute the search for papers wherein appropriate keywords and search strings will be used to find relevant papers. The papers thus found would then be reviewed in detail and the findings have been presented in a systematic manner. A detailed search of the said databases was carried out with search strings like 'graduate employability, employability skills of graduates in Saudi Arabia etc.,' to source the papers that were most pertinent. The search yielded a total of 112 papers wherein the titles referred to the word 'graduate'. Nonetheless, out of the 112 papers found, papers that did not talk about graduate employability (32), or those that did not concentrate on Saudi Arabia were removed (30). Further, the review of titles indicated the presence of duplicates which warranted additional papers (38) to be discarded. Following the elimination, a total of 12 studies were chosen for this review.

Inclusion criteria was setup for filtering papers that substantially contributed to an understanding of employability skills in the context of Saudi Arabia. Only studies that were published in peer-reviewed journals, written in English, and concentrating on the employability skills of business graduates in Saudi Arabia were taken into account. Further, papers that presented insights from employer as well as academic perspectives were prioritized to tackle the specific research question with regard to the disparity or alignment between employer and academia's expectations.

Exclusion criteria were applied for eliminating studies that did not match the particular criteria or concentrated exclusively on generic employability skills without a particular focus on business graduates in the context of Saudi Arabia. The papers chosen also went through an assessment of the methodology, sample size, data collection methods, and main findings to ensure the reliability and credibility of the information included within the review.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Academia's perspective on graduate employability

According to Dinh et al. (2022), scholars have long been concerned about employability owing to its intricate nature and modifications within requirements in the labour market for catering to the needs of globalization. Nonetheless, the authors add that there has not been much systematic investigation that has been carried out through extant literature to track the changes, trends and developments in employability research. The findings reflected a rapidly growing literature on employability, considering the increasing interest on the topic. To conduct this study, the researchers applied bibliometric analysis and descriptive statistics for identifying trends in research on employability, the impact of which has been sustained for many years now. With the help of science mapping, the conceptual form of scientific disciplines were envisioned, which emphasized three key schools of thought, also inclusive of employers needs and the preparation done by HEI's, the role of work-integrated learning in terms of improving the scope for employability and antecedents of employability. The findings further revealed that faculty was not much focused on delivering soft skills training to their students, and the focus was more on theoretical knowledge.

Literature pertaining to employment of Saudi graduates in the nation has mostly concentrated on investigating the role played by educational qualifications in acquiring employment across varied sectors in Saudi, and the necessity for further developing the domain of education, with a view to build the labour force or enhance skills for participation in labour market. There are many studies, for instance, that have investigated the impact of educational qualification on acquiring employment access in Saudi (Ahmed, 2016; Alfalih, 2016; Jouili & Khemissi, 2019). It is of significance to observe that these have not essentially differentiated between locally and internationally acquired qualifications, nonetheless, looked particularly at PhDs. However, this domain presented significant findings. Absence of adequate economic diversification in Saudi, for example has been indicated to be challenging with regards to establishing employment for graduates. Jouili and Khemissi (2019) analyzed the impact of economic diversification on job opportunities for graduates on the whole and they revealed a positive association between effective diversification of economy and opportunities for employment. From the context of Saudi, nonetheless, it has been argued that the actual economic diversification of the country was low with regard to the creation of new employment opportunities, particularly for students who held bachelor's degrees. Therefore, it has been stated by the authors that there is a need for the government to tackle the issue of diversification to enable increased jobs to graduates. Furthermore, there have been several sources which indicated that all graduates, from global or national universities, have been confronted with challenges in accessing appropriate employment within Saudi (Ahmed, 2016), owing to organizations being unfamiliar with hiring Saudi employees (wherein a greater percentage of expatriate workers exist) or being resistive to the idea of hiring employees from Saudi (Domash, 2022).

Recognizing the role played by HEI's in imparting employability skills and competencies were a major theme that was found through the study (Yusuf & Jamjoom, 2022). The findings revealed that a large number of the respondents in the study were of the opinion that curriculums that prioritized technical skills and accorded less significance to soft skills cannot be sustained. The findings further revealed that, in the current day, it was a key requirement to provide soft skills or job readiness skills for enhancing the employability and quality of graduates. Furthermore, it was a mandatory necessity to attain and maintain global accreditation to possess formal plans for assessment and tracking such skill outcomes. The data pointed to the increasing expectations from businesses and academia for HEI's to incorporate soft skills initiatives within the curriculum.

Based on the analysis of the data in the study by Yusuf and Jamjoom (2022), execution of initiatives in terms of employability within the Saudi HEI curricula continues to be non-uniform and sporadic. The study also found that HEI's in Saudi also lagged behind when it came to extra-

curricular activities and curriculum that was industry-ready. Further, the faculty felt that initiatives adopted by HEI's for nurturing soft skills among students involved including mandatory volunteering and formation of student clubs. This implied that graduates in Saudi did not gain the required employability skills during their stint with HEI's. The findings from a study by Aloui and Shams Eldin (2020), indicated the perspectives of faculty regarding initiatives for professional development of employability skills among graduates to cater to the Saudi Vision 2030 objectives. Out of the most commonly cited extracurricular and curricular activities required to equip graduates in their future career were cooperative training, collaboration with industry leaders, volunteering, communication and others. Though several HEI's in Saudi have already integrated the aforementioned solutions within their educational procedures, faculty members offered detailed insights into future scope for boosting sustainable employability of Saudi graduates. Particularly, the faculty also felt that planned visits to industries and frequent interactions between employers and students would provide students with enough exposure to a professional work environment. Many faculty members were of the opinion that since students in Saudi HEI's were more oriented towards grades and graduate certificates, introducing test-based practices for job selection would enforce the significance of learning in contrast to memorizing and regurgitating theoretical knowledge.

Employers' perspective on graduate employability

In the context of Saudi Arabia, HEI's are confronted with growing demands from employers and other stakeholders. Employers in Saudi are frequently demanding that HEI's offer appropriate skillsets to students, which are actually required by existing organizations. A study conducted by Iqbal (2010), highlighted that skills of graduates in Saudi may not presently be appropriate to cater to the requirements of the local labour market. At the same time, it has been cited by Hani and Lopesciolo (2021), that graduates from Saudi HEI's were not sufficiently skilled. This was attributed to the fact that educational outcomes did not respond to the demands of the market, and most graduates in Saudi opt to seek administrative and managerial jobs instead of vocational or technical jobs, which are mainly occupied by expatriates. This was because such jobs earned low wages and were socially deemed as menial.

On the basis of a study conducted by Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014), it was stated that employers in Saudi frequently sought graduates with communication skills, customer engagement skills, computer skills, bargaining / negotiation skills, networking skills among other soft skills. Nonetheless, employers were of the belief that recent graduates lacked such skills and they were also unaware of the concept of 'thinking globally, acting locally'. Employers also were of the opinion that recent graduates from Saudi HEI's lacked analytical skills. As a matter of fact, recent graduates in Saudi were found to underperform when it came to problem-solving, self-confidence, analytical skills and leadership skills. These findings were in tandem with findings from other studies, that revealed that graduates from Saudi under every education system did not receive training in soft business skills like team motivation, problem-solving, negotiation, leadership, project management and communication (Alenezi, 2020; Hassan & Ahmed, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Increasing literature on business has been concerned with the level and quality of preparedness of business graduates who entered the labour market in Saudi. Academia for their part is aware that the current curriculum in Saudi does not provide soft skills that are required in the current labour market. While academia across many HEI's in Saudi have been doing their bit to bring about a change in educational procedures, they still felt that there was a dire need to overhaul the educational system through policy changes. Academia also felt that there was also a need for bringing about collaboration between students and employers which will expose students to the

industry culture and provide them with insights as to what was currently sought by employers. Employers on their part could also provide inputs and support to make graduates ready to enter the labour force in the Saudi market. Educators also emphasized the need to bring about a shift in mindsets of students where they focused not just on grades and certifications but more on gaining employability skills. Employers on the other hand, seek a wide array of attributes and skills from fresh graduates, with a view to sustain a competitive edge.

The purpose of this study was to highlight the skills gap between graduates and job market requirements in Saudi Arabia. This study has significant ramification for academia as well as employers within Saudi. In terms of academia, the findings from this review indicate the necessity for overhauling the curriculum to at least be such that it provides the skill demands of the current industry. This study is significant to employers too as it will encourage them to initiate collaborative partnerships with HEI's in Saudi and they can thus provide graduate students with an understanding about the current job market and its requirements.

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CRedit AUTHOR STATEMENT

The author have contributed equally to all parts of the work.