



Perception of Summer Cooperative Graduates on Employers Generic Skills Preference, Haramaya University, Ethiopia

Mohammed Aman

Corresponding author, MSc., School of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness, Haramaya University, Ethiopia, mamiye2012@gmail.com

Melese Sitotaw

MBA., Department of Management, Haramaya University, Ethiopia, msitotaw7@gmail.com

Meeting the needs of employers and equipping graduates with employability skills are considered as among the shared responsibilities of Universities and different organizations. This study intends to assess the perception of summer cooperative graduates on their employers' preference for generic skills to secure employment, based on their work-performance. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed for 150 summer cooperative students and 110 were received and used for analysis during the 2013 summer academic program. Both descriptive and empirical analyses were used to achieve the objectives. The One-way-ANOVA result showed statistically significant difference among respondents on the higher order thinking skills as first choice among employers. This implies that, employers of cooperative graduates prioritize higher order thinking skills than the basic academic and personal quality skills. Hence, there is a need to focus and imbed higher order thinking skills enhancing contents in the curriculum.

Keywords: Cooperative, employability, generic skills, work-performance, perception, Haramaya, Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

It is worthwhile to start with the concepts of generic (employability) skills before detailed statements of the problem and objectives of the study. Accordingly, it is uncommon to find a single definition of employability skills. Rather, different authors conceptualized and explained it in various ways. Despite their wording differences, some common elements are shared by the authors regarding the employability skills definition. Some of them are presented for ease of understanding by the academic audience.

In the words of Moreland (2006), employability skills refers to a set of knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual to secure and to become successful in their occupations to the benefit of themselves, community, and economy. According to Weber et al. (2009), employability skills refers to the interpersonal, human, and behavioral skills needed to implement acquired technical skills and knowledge in different work places. Yorke (2010) defined employability skills as a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefits themselves, the workforce, the organization, the economy, and the community. Pegg et al. (2012) defined employability by making clear distinction with that of employment. Accordingly, employment refers to a graduate outcome that can be measured and used within the information published by universities. Whereas, employability refers to the relationship between teaching and learning of wide range of knowledge, skills, and attributes to support continued learning and career development.

Along with the transition to the knowledge-based economy, higher academic institutions in different parts of the world are under pressures from various stakeholders. Among others, Universities are required to produce both competent and employability (generic) skills equipped graduates that meets the needs of the dynamic world of work (Fallows and Stevens 2000; Gibbs and Angelides 2004; Possa 2006).

The issue of graduates' employability is considered among the focuses of the governments in different countries. This gets its focus from the human capital theory, which indicates fostering conditions to encourage growth of stock in human capital as the main responsibility of government. Among others, human capital is considered as the key to success and performance in the knowledge-based economies, and increases the productive potential of graduates via increasing their productivity (HM Treasury 2000).

Identifying the employability skills needed by employers and mainstreaming these skills on the education curriculum to equip graduates for enhanced employability are among the responsibilities of higher academic institutions, like Haramaya University. This is mainly because, the likelihood of employment by graduates is considered as among success measures for the university. The implication is that, students that focus on securing their employment after graduation will join universities that give due attention for employability skills in curriculum.

The prevailing condition in Ethiopia indicates that, the number of graduates is increasing despite limited employment provision by the government. This implies that, there is a need to consider alternative employment enhancing approaches among university graduates. Among summer programs provided at Haramaya University, the cooperative program is receiving due attention throughout the country. This is mainly because cooperative graduates are expected to assist the agriculture based economy of the country in various ways. Despite the increasing number summer cooperative

graduates, studies on the skills needed from these graduates to enhance their employability are not addressed well. To fill this gap, this study intends to assess the perception of summer cooperative students on their employers' employability skills preference. The three main employability skills considered for this study are: Basic academic, higher order thinking, and personal qualities. Basic academic skills are those skills reflected on knowledge of field studied that can be expressed in organizing and communicating obtained knowledge in written and oral forms. Higher order thinking skills refers to ability of graduates to exercise critical judgment, capable of rigorous and independent thinking, adopting a problem solving approach and etc. Personal qualities skills constitute graduates commitment to life-long learning, ability to plan and achieve goals in professional and personal spheres, and more importantly ability to work with others.

Even if this study is limited to one summer program in the College of Business and Economics at Haramaya University, the results obtained can possibly be used as a reference by others. Moreover; policy makers and different responsible bodies, including Haramaya University, can refer the results obtained and make possible amendments in the curriculum for both enhanced employability and better work performance of graduates. This study would have been more complete if the perception of employers was also considered. However; due to difficulty of getting dispersed employers' addresses and the tight summer schedule, the study did not take into account this aspect. This was another limitation of the study. Despite these limitations, the study can be considered as timely and relevant with respect to educational challenge in Ethiopia.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Different studies indicated the difficulty of securing employment by graduates without attaching them with employers to develop their generic or employability skills while studying. Some of them were summarized and presented in this study as it is not possible to mention all literatures.

Cox and King (2006), found the insufficiency of mastery of content areas alone by graduates to respond to employers preference and hence to enhance job opportunities. Another study in UK found employers' preference for graduates personal characteristics and soft skills irrespective of the degree program and university attended (Branine 2008).

Pool & Sewell (2007) found unemployment, decreased employment opportunities, diminished job securities, and quickly changing technologies as the main challenges possibly faced by new graduates to join the world of work. As a result, new graduates are expected to improve their employability skills and personal responsibilities to secure employment as well as to withstand with challenges.

A study among the college and the university students at Australia found that more than half of the graduating class students involved themselves, in various organizations, on part-time basis to gain experience and hence secure employment upon graduation.

Besides, employers were found to consider employability skills of graduates while recruiting new employees (Smith, 2004).

Another study conducted among 337 student teachers working in a problem based learning environment in India found the approach of teaching as a significant factor in developing graduates employability skills. Accordingly, the participatory learning strategies significantly dominated the traditional learning strategies in fostering eight employability skills (thinking, computation, communication, problem solving, independent learning, information processing, team-management, and self-management) of graduates. The study also recommended adoption of participatory teaching approach among higher academic institutions to enhance employability of new graduates (Reena, 2011).

Studies by Andrews and Higson (2008) and Miller and Newton (2013), indicated graduates employability relying on their ability to demonstrate management and organizational skills besides the basic academic achievement or degree.

Dafou (2009) found that, investment in education is positively correlated with employability and competence of graduates. An increase in employers' requirement from formal education and the gap between employees' capabilities and job requirements was also found (Tomlinson, 2008).

In the words of Livingstone (2010), employers and students believe academic programs lagging in equipping graduates with skills for the world of work. A study among 220 task performance employees of government sector in Malaysia found personal-management and team-work skills as the most preferred by employers, while positive attitudes and behaviours the most acquired skills by new employees. Moreover; a significant and positive correlation is also found between skills acquisition and skill competence. The authors also highlighted employers' preference for continuous enhancement of acquisition and competence on employability skills among new employees (Maripaz et al., 2013).

METHOD

Geographical Description of the Study Area

This study was conducted at Haramaya University that is located in Eastern Hararghe Zone of the Oromia National Regional State, Ethiopia. Haramaya district is located approximately 527km east of Addis Ababa; 14km west of Harar town, the regions capital. The elevation of the area is about 2000m above sea level and geographically it located 041°59'58'' latitude and 09°24'10''longitudes. The district receives an average annual rain fall approximately 900mm and climatically there are two ecological zones of which 66.5% is midland and 33.5% is lowland (HADB, 2010).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The population used for this study was summer students of Cooperative Department in the College of Business and Economics at Haramaya University, Ethiopia. Due to the demanding schedule of the summer program, availability sampling technique was used. Accordingly, a total sample size of 110 students out of the 150 was used for analysis. The class year of the respondents ranges from second-fifth year. Despite their class year difference, the population can be considered as homogenous in one aspect. This is that, all of them are government employees in the National Regional States cooperative bureaus in Ethiopia. This enhanced the representativeness of the sample.

Types and Methods of Data Collection

This study was solely based on the primary data obtained from the respondents through semi-structured questionnaire that constitutes questions about basic personal information, work experience and position in the organizations, and the three main employability skills of basic academic, higher order thinking, and personal qualities. The respondents filled the questionnaires by themselves due to ease of understanding and familiarity with filling questionnaires in their bureaus. The survey for this study was conducted from the second week of July to first week of August in the summer of 2013 at Haramaya University, Ethiopia.

Methods of Data Analysis

This study used both descriptive and empirical analysis to achieve its objective. Under descriptive statics, mean, percentage, minimum, maximum and ranges were estimated for age, and class year distribution. One-way-ANOVA was used as the empirical analysis to check existence of significance perception difference among the respondents regarding employers' preference for the three employability skills. The one-way ANOVA was selected to test existence of mean difference among students in class year and in which of the generic skills the difference was found. Alternatively expressed, this method is used for more than two means comparison and for this study four class year, second –fifth year, means were used to analyze perception difference among students.

DISCUSSION

Female and male students that participated in the study constitute 10% and 90% respectively. As far as the class year distribution of the respondents was concerned, the third year students constitute the largest share (43.33%) followed by the fourth and the second year students. The least share goes to the fifth year students (Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency distribution of students in sex and class year

Sex	<i>Class year and percentage share</i>								Total	%
	2 nd	%	3 rd	%	4 th	%	5 th	%		
Female	7	7.78	-	-	4	3.63	-	-	11	10.00
Male	19	21.11	39	43.33	37	33.64	4	3.63	99	90.00
Total	26	28.89	39	43.33	41	37.27	4	3.63	110	100.0

Source: Authors own survey (2013)

As far as age of the respondents was concerned, the mean age for female students (32 years) was found higher than the mean age for the total sample (29 years). Whereas, the mean age for male students was found to be slightly lower than the total sample's mean (Table 2).

Table 2: Age of the respondents in sex

Sex	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Std. Dev
Female	11	31.73	23	48	25	9.264
Male	99	29.71	22	53	31	6.573
Total	110	29.91	22	53	31	6.862

Source: Authors own survey (2013)

Perception Results for Employability Skills

The students' perception about their employers' preference for the three employability skills indicated that, oral communication and mathematical skills were the highest and the least preferred basic academic skills by employers. In case of higher order thinking skills, thinking creatively and reasoning were the most and least preferred by employers. Among personal quality skills, being responsible was the most ranked and integrity the least ranked skills (Table 3). This result was in accordance with that of Billing (2003) which found that communication, team work, and critical thinking, respectively, were among the most desired employability skills by employers.

Table 3: Students' perception about employers' preference for the employability skills

<i>Basic academic</i>		<i>Higher order thinking</i>		<i>Personal qualities</i>	
Items	%	Items	%	Items	%
O-communication	40.0	Thinking creatively	30.0	Responsible	24.5
Listening	18.2	Learn new concepts	28.2	Self-confident	20.9
Writing	16.4	Problem solving	20.0	Honest	11.8
Reading	12.7	Decision making	12.7	Cooperative	11.8
Maths skills	11.8	Reasoning	9.1	Social skills	10.0
Missing	0.9			Good work attitude	6.5
				Team spirit	4.5
				Punctual & efficient	3.6
				Self-motivated	3.6
				Integrity	1.9
				Self-control	0.9
Total	100		100		100

Source: Authors own survey (2013)

To check existence of significant perception difference among students on employers' preference and rank for the three skills, One-way ANOVA was estimated. Consequently, statistically significant difference was found only for the higher order skills. The result obtained indicate that, higher order thinking skill as the first employers preference dominated and this was statically significant at 10% significance level. In other words, the higher order thinking skills are the primarily needed skills from the

employees in the cooperative organizations and associations as indicated by respondents (Table 4).

Table 4 : Students' perception about employers higher order skill preference: One-Way-ANOVA

<i>HOSKL as 1st choice</i>					
	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig.
Between groups(combined)	1.108	3	0.369	2.464	0.066*
Within groups	15.883	106	0.150		
Total	16.991	109			
<i>HOSKL as 2nd choice</i>					
	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig.
Between groups(combined)	0.783	3	0.261	1.065	0.367
Within groups	25.980	106	0.245		
Total	26.764	109			
<i>HOSKL as 3rd choice</i>					
	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig.
Between groups (combined)	0.249	3	0.083	0.339	0.797
Within groups	25.942	106	0.245		
Total	26.191	109			

Source: Authors own survey (2013) *significant at 10% significance level (HOSKL represents higher order thinking skills)

This result was in accordance with that of Chung and Yet (2009). These authors conducted a study among thirty private universities in Malaysia and found that, although graduates are highly competent in personal quality skills, they lack the main higher order thinking skills of critical thinking, problem solving. Revising the curriculum by the universities is recommended to enhance graduates employability.

CONCLUSIONS

The result of the survey indicated that, oral communication from basic skills, thinking creatively from higher order skills, and being responsible from personal quality skills are among the most preferred by employers. Whereas, mathematical skills, reasoning, and integrating among workers are the least preferred among basic, higher order and thinking skills, respectively.

The higher order thinking skills are the primarily needed skills from the employees in the cooperative organizations and associations as indicated by respondents. This implies the need to focus and integrate higher order thinking skills in the cooperative department study curriculum to enhance employability of graduates and to meet the needs of employers. Even if this result was obtained for summer cooperative graduates, it can also be used as a signal for regular cooperative department students. To enhance

the higher thinking skills of cooperative graduates, engaging them with organizations either in terms of practical attachment or internship can be a valuable approach

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Turkish Abstract

Yaz Kooperatif Mezunlarının İş verenlerin Genel Beceri Tercihleri Algısı, Haramaya Üniversitesi, Etiyopya

İş verenlerin ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak ve mezunları işe alınabilir becerilerle donatmak üniversitelerin ve farklı organizasyonların ortak sorumlulukları olarak düşünülebilir. Bu çalışma yaz kooperatifi mezunlarının iş-performansları temel olarak işi garantilemek için genel becerilerden iş verinin tercihleri konusundaki algılarını belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. 2013 yaz akademik programında 150 yaz kooperatifi öğrencisine dağıtılan anketlerden 110 tanesi geri alınmış ve analize tabi tutulmuştur. Amaçlara ulaşmak için hem betimleyici hem de deneysel analizler kullanılmıştır. Tek yönlü ANOVA sonuçları iş verenlerin ilk tercihi olarak üst düzey düşünme becerileri konusunda katılımcılar arasında istatistiki olarak anlamlı bir farklılık göstermiştir. Bu sonuç kooperatif mezunlarına iş verenlerin üst düzey düşünme becerilerini temel akademik ve kişisel kalite becerilerinden daha fazla önemsediklerini göstermektedir. Sonuç

olarak, müfredatta içeriği zenginleştiren üst düzey düşünme becerilerine odaklanmak ve bunları müfredatta koymak ihtiyacı ortaya çıkmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kooperatif, işe alınabilirlik, genel beceriler, iş-performans, algı, Haramaya, Etiyopya

French Abstract

Perception de l'Été Coopérative Diplômés sur Préférence Employeurs des Compétences Génériques, L'Université Haramaya, Ethiopie

Répondant aux besoins d'employeurs et des diplômés équipants avec des compétences d'employabilité considèrent comme parmi les responsabilités partagées d'Universités et des organisations différentes. Cette étude a l'intention d'évaluer la perception de diplômés coopératifs d'été sur la préférence de leurs employeurs pour des compétences génériques pour garantir l'emploi, basé sur leur performance de travail. Un questionnaire auto-administré a été distribué pour 150 étudiants coopératifs d'été et 110 ont été reçu et utilisé pour l'analyse pendant le programme universitaire 2013 d'été. Des analyses tant descriptives qu'empiriques ont été utilisées pour réaliser les objectifs. Le résultat d'One-way-ANOVA a montré la différence statistiquement significative parmi des défendeurs sur l'ordre plus haut pensant des compétences comme le premier choix parmi des employeurs. Ceci implique que, les employeurs de diplômés coopératifs priorisent à l'ordre plus haut pensant des compétences que les compétences de qualité universitaires et personnelles de base. D'où, il y a un besoin de concentrer et enfoncer plus haut l'ordre (la commande) pensant des compétences améliorant le contenu dans le programme d'études.

Mots-clés: Coopérative, employabilité, compétences Génériques, performance, prestation de travail, perception, Haramaya, l'Éthiopie

Arabic Abstract

تصور الخريجين التعاوني في الصيف على مهارات عامة للعاملين ، جامعة Haramaya ، إثيوبيا

تعتبر تلبية احتياجات أرباب العمل والخريجين من ذوي المهارات تجهيز التوظيف على أنها من بين المسؤوليات المشتركة للجامعات والمنظمات المختلفة . وتعتمد هذه الدراسة لتقييم الإدراك من الخريجي التعاوني في الصيف على تفضيل أصحاب العمل للمهارات العامة لتأمين فرص العمل، على أساس العمل وأدائهم. وقد وزع الاستبيان ذاتيا ل 150 طالبا التعاونيا في الصيف وردت 110 وتستخدم لتحليل خلال الصيف في العام الدراسي 2013. واستخدمت كل من التحليلات الوصفية والتجريبية لتحقيق الأهداف. وأظهرت النتيجة في اتجاه واحد على ANOVA فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين أفراد العينة على أعلى ترتيب مهارات التفكير كما الخيار الأول بين أرباب العمل. هذا يعني أن أرباب العمل من خريجي التعاوني أولويات أعلى من مهارات التفكير الأساسية أجل المهارات الأكاديمية والشخصية الجودة. وبالتالي، هناك حاجة إلى التركيز ويسجي أعلى أجل تعزيز مهارات التفكير محتويات المناهج الدراسية .

الكلمات المهمة: التعاونية، القابلية للاستخدام، والمهارات العامة، والعمل الأداء والإدراك، Haramaya، إثيوبيا