

Validating an Employer Graduate-Employability Skills Questionnaire in the Faculty of Management Sciences

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to identify the psychometric properties of a graduate employability skills questionnaire that was developed as part of a PhD study by De Jager (2004:157) for the Faculty of Management Sciences. The aforementioned was investigated using the following hypothesis: There is a set of graduate employability skills that are perceived statistically significant by employers in the Free State with specific reference to Management Sciences. The sample consisted out of 503 (n = 503) employers from diverse sectors within the Mangaung area. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were used to analyse the data. Exploratory analysis identified a 7-factor solution, however parallel analysis yielded a 4-factor solution. The four factors responsible for the majority of the variance were interpersonal skills, Critical Cross Field Outcomes, job-related activities and academic skills. It is recommended that the results be used to stimulate research on the employability of Management Sciences graduates.

Keywords: Employability skills, Exploratory factor analysis

1. Introduction

Statistics South Africa (2014: 41) has indicated that during the second quarter of 2014, the number of unemployed South Africans was estimated at 5.2 million. Reasons stated for this high unemployment rate subsume that labour supply exceeded demand. Thus there was an increase of 126 000 job seekers, while the actual number of employed individuals increased by only 39 000. According to the British Council commissioned Institute of Education (2014), employers are dissatisfied with the skills and qualities of graduates. Employers in South Africa were the most dissatisfied with graduates' ability to speak a foreign language, their business acumen, leadership, problem-solving, self-awareness, and customer orientation. South African employers further specified that the most important graduate skills subsumed willingness to learn, team work, problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Additionally, Jonck (2014: 278) identified lack of practical skills and experience as a contributing factor influencing the growing unemployment rate of graduates.

In a study conducted by Kavita and Sharma (2011) reflecting on the work of Barrie (2006) as well as Kember and Leung (2005) employers indicated that graduates are often unprepared for the workplace and that higher education institutions should be held accountable for producing more employable graduates. Barrie (2006: 6) stated that although various lists of generic skills and research related thereto could be found, there is a need to understand the nature of the outcomes themselves, as well as for higher education institutions to review the quality of the education provided (Barrie, 2006). In this regard, Maila (2007) pointed out that the provision of quality education and accountability is an obligatory function of higher education. Quality education can be seen as an effective means to alleviate poverty, facilitate democracies and foster peaceful societies (Maila, 2007). Affirming the aforementioned Ahmed (2010) added that the role of education is to cultivate creativity and innovation to propel economic growth, improve productivity and advance human well-being in a sustainable manner. According to Matic and Agusaj (2012), the alignment of industries requirements with higher education programmes in transitional countries might aid to uplift society in general, assisting with employment and provision of scarce skills. A growing demand for adequate skilled graduates in South Africa has led to many higher

education institutions reviewing their objectives and aims, to meet industry needs. For the higher education sector to reach adequate levels of competitiveness, warrant relevance and be accountable, it must keep abreast of labour market requirements and adjust curricula accordingly to ensure effective development of human capital through training (Wessels & Jacobsz, 2010).

Against this background, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is in the process of developing a tool for assessing core skills (called the Assessment for Higher Education Learning Outcomes). However, currently it is only being used in developed countries (British Council commissioned Institute of Education, 2014) indicative of a need for research regarding employability of graduates with specific reference to the development of a measuring instrument. Bath (2004: 317) states that even if Graduate Skills Assessment tests were to be utilized it could only be used to compare institutions on a single set of indicators. Hence, it would be more beneficially to measure graduate employability skills from the employers' perspective, as they are the consumers of graduate produced by higher education. Increasing objectivity and accuracy in terms of identified employability skills that are deemed pivotal alternatively unimportant. For the sake of clarity employability in the current study can be defined as a set of skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, other stakeholders and ultimately the economy at large (Yorke and Knight, 2006).

Hence, the primary objective of the research reported on in this paper was to determine the psychometric properties (i.e. validity and reliability) of a graduate employability skills questionnaire that was developed as part of a PhD study by De Jager (2004) for the Faculty of Management Sciences. The before mentioned was investigated using the following hypothesis: There is a set of graduate employability skills that are perceived statistically significant by employers in the central Free State region of South Africa with specific reference to Management Sciences. The rationale for the study could be found in the work of Bath (2004) who reiterates the importance of validating curriculum design, and in this study the curriculum design was validated by determining the employer's perception on the employability of graduates from the Faculty of Management Sciences at a local institution of higher education. Thus higher education mission statements cover all the fields of study offered by an institution, however it is important to determine whether an institution has achieved its' goal of producing graduates with certain attributes who are employable in the marketplace (Bath, 2004). To achieve the aforementioned a psychometrically stable measuring instrument is a prerequisite. In addition, Bezuidenhout (2001:13) based on research conducted on undergraduate and post-graduate students from a Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences indicated that the concept of employability remains ambiguous and that there is a paucity of empirical studies regarding the foundation of employability, especially when it comes to the development of an accurate measuring instrument to assess the employability of graduates. Hence, the significance of the study lies in the validation of a measuring instrument that could accurately assess employability of graduates, in order to identify possible gaps in the curriculum and inform curriculum design, to increase employability and thus contribute to economic growth.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

Even though various theories such as the competency and self-regulatory approaches can be utilized as theoretical underpinning the current study is in accordance with the dispositional approach to employability. The aforementioned, is an umbrella term used to refer to a multidimensional constellation of inherent characteristics that predispose the individual in this instance the graduate to (pro) actively adapt to their employment and career environment according to Fugate (2004) as cited in Beukes (2010: 74). The dispositional approach to employability can be divided into three dimensions namely career identity, personal adaptability and human capital (Beukes, 2010). Career identity refers to the "who am I" in the context of individually chosen career paths whereas personal adaptability refers to the manner in which individuals are willing and able to change personal factors to meet the requirements of a particular work situation (Fugate et al, 2004).

In referring to human capital an employer perspective is factored in into the equation. As such Human Capital Development implies the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual stock by means of education intended for expansion of productivity, efficiency, performance and output to ultimately increase the fiscal revenue of the individual and or the organization (Akinyemi & Abiddin, 2013). This definition of human capital development confirms the notion that employability, as a disposition, is related to the inherent characteristics of the individual that might assist in adjusting to the external environment and foster positive employment results (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). Each of these three dimensions generates the concept known as employability, according to Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004). The purpose of underscoring the disposition theory is ascribed to the fact that the contemporary work environment is characterised by instability and uncertainty that requires adaptability. Thus employees would be empowered to cope with

the changing work environment if they were in possession of the characteristics which will assist them to adapt to constant transitions (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008).

The disposition theory provides further advantages for employers, as employees will have the necessary skills and qualities to handle job losses, job searches, are able to implement contingency plans, and will therefore find the transition between employment opportunities easier. Employees who possess these qualities may also be less likely to terminate employment, as they are able to cope with the stressors of work more proficiently than someone without these qualities. Beukes (2010) and Fugate et al (2004) confirm that by understanding the process of employability, individuals are able to manage their career more proactively, by focussing on inherent employability and emotional skills. Fugate et al (2004) furthermore, elaborated on the work of Ashford and Taylor (1990), by indicating that employability affects individual adaptability and reaction to the environment, and career identity plays a pivotal role in motivating an individual to adapt to the changing environment. Fugate (2006) further explored his model to include dimensions such as: openness to changes at work, work/career resilience, work/career proactivity, career motivation, social/human capital, and career identity.

The construct of employability centres mainly on an internal locus of control, as individuals have limited input in the human resource processes of organizations, their requirements in terms of qualifications or even skills (Fugate et al, 2004). Previous research seems to point to the fact that knowledge, skills and abilities related to employability are known and static, which has been refuted (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). Employability is at present seen to encompass the reactive and proactive personal characteristics needed in order for an employee to be successful in the workplace. This also affects the way that employees react to changes in their environment. The Dispositional Theory is also said to assist in identifying opportunities, taking into consideration personal learning and chance (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008).

3. Methodology

This study involved 503 employers from the central Free State region of South Africa specifically the Mangaung area. Ascribed to the fact that South Africa has a mixed economy plus minus equal number of public (n = 253) and private (n = 250) sector respondents were included in the sample. Since the research reported on emphasize employers perceived evaluation of employability skills the designation of the respondents were underscored. The majority of respondents, 32.2% (n = 162) were supervisors, 23% (n = 116) line managers, 20% (n = 100) human resources managers and officers, 11% (n = 56) branch managers, 8% (n = 42) head of departments, 5% (n = 24) sole proprietors and 1% (n = 3) from executive management. Highest academic qualification was also emphasised in addition to designation/position. The majority of the respondents 56.26% (n = 283) held a Diploma or Degree, followed by respondents with a Postgraduate degree specifically an Honours degree (n = 128; 25.45%), a Master's degree (n = 47; 9.34%), a PhD (n = 7; 1.39%) and lastly those with only a grade 12 secondary school diploma (n = 38; 7.55%). With reference to gender 57.65% (n = 290) were male and 42.35% (n = 213) female respondents.

Students from a Research Methodology class in the Faculty of Management Sciences were utilised as fieldworkers. The questionnaire and consent form were posted on an e-learning website and each student had to complete five questionnaires at five organizations for additional marks. Thus non-random convenient sampling was used to compile the sample. To ensure the trustworthiness of this process each questionnaire had to be stamped by the organization in question, while the respondent remained anonymous. Key ethical considerations subsumed maintaining confidentiality (especially since the researchers made use of fieldworkers and did not take part in the data gathering phase), anonymity, ensuring informed consent and willing participation at all times. Additionally, respondents gave informed consent to make research findings public. The ethical guidelines adhered to was in line with research protocols and ethics of care (Henderson, 2012).

The measuring instrument that was used was based on an employability skills model developed for the Faculty of Management Sciences by De Jager (2004) as part of a PhD study. The Graduate Employability Skills questionnaire is a 41 item measure of employers' evaluation of critical cross field outcomes (e.g Indicate whether or not you are satisfied with graduates' problem-solving skills) and graduate attributes (e.g. Do graduates possess the competency and or ability to compile a professional curriculum vitae?) that ought to be included in all higher education curriculum. Respondents indicated their evaluation of graduates' employability skills on a Likert type scale of 1 (no satisfaction / total disagreement) to 4 (satisfied / full agreement). The questionnaire also included a page to collect biographical information such as position, age, language and highest academic qualification. Furthermore, respondents were afforded the opportunity to identify additional skills not included in the measuring instrument that they deemed important in an open-ended question format. The theoretical range of scores for this scale is 41 – 164. The theoretical mean of the scale was 143.91. The unabridged version of the questionnaire had a Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of 0.96 and an inter-item correlation of

0.405340.

Factor analysis, both exploratory and confirmatory, were used to identify underlying dimensions of perceived employability skills as required by employers in the Mangaung area. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used on the subscales and the total scale.

4. Results

4.1 Psychometric properties of scale

The total scale had a Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of 0.97 with a scale mean of 143.91 and a standard deviation of 22.481. In order to determine the factorability of the scale and to determine whether the data adhere to the basic assumptions thereof an inter-correlation between the subscales were determined and illustrated in Table 1. As can be seen from Table 1 the Alpha estimates for the various subscales ranged from 0.863 to 0.922. The 6 subscales statistically significantly correlated with each other indicating that the data might be suitable for factor analysis.

Table 1: Scale descriptive statistics, Alpha reliabilities coefficients and inter-correlations

Sub-scale	\bar{x}	Std	Items α		Inter-correlation matrix					
					CCFO	JSS	AS	P/CM	IS	WE
CCFO	2.99	0.57	7	0.884	1					
JSS	3.08	0.56	6	0.863	0.533**	1				
AS	2.95	0.53	8	0.887	0.647**	0.659**	1			
P/CM	2.93	0.52	11	0.910	0.570**	0.682**	0.769**	1		
IS	3.03	0.56	10	0.922	0.580**	0.591**	0.745**	0.781**	1	
WE	2.99	0.64	5	0.907	0.451**	0.575**	0.644**	0.722**	0.767**	1

**p \leq 0.01 Note: CCFO's = Critical Cross Field Outcomes; JSS = Job Seeking Skills; AS = Academic Skills; P/CM = Personal/Career Management; IS = Interpersonal Skills and WE = Work Ethics.

4.2 Exploratory factor analysis

The data were highly factorable with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling at 0.963 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity statistical significant on the 99th percentile ($\chi^2 = 15541.88$, $df = 1128$; $p \leq 0.000$). An exploratory factor analysis with oblique (Oblimin) rotation was used based on results of the correlation matrix presented in Table 1 which indicated that the subscales were interrelated. Seven components had an eigenvalue exceeding 1 and accounted for 61.745% of the total variance. The seven components explained 41.901%, 5.356%, 3.870%, 3.321%, 2.634%, 2.439%, 2.225% and 2.027% of the variance respectively. Though, an inspection of the scree plot indicated a clear break after the fourth factor. Consequently, based on the scree-test, and supporting results from the Parallel Analysis it was decided to retain four components for further investigation. The Monte Carlo Parallel Analysis indicated that only four components had eigenvalues exceeding the corresponding criterion values for a randomly generated data matrix of the same size (48 variables \times 503 respondents). Confirmatory factor analysis was done with a forced four factor rotation with results displayed in Table 2 below.

In pursuant to the results of the confirmatory factor analysis illustrated in Table 2 four underlying dimensions of graduate employability were indicated. Factor one accounting for 42.297% of the total variance subsumed interpersonal characteristics that were valued or deemed as important by employers. The highest valued interpersonal / personality trait with a factor loading of 0.834 was overall work ethics followed by honesty with a factor loading of 0.819 and conscientiousness with factor loading of 0.809. The trait that received the lowest evaluation was time management which might be seen in the same lights as punctuality. Time management had a factor loading of 0.356 and punctuality 0.792. Factor 2 accounting for 5.758% of the variance focused on the Critical Cross Field Outcomes imbedded in all higher education curricula. The skill that had the highest factor loading was research skills (0.750) followed by problem-solving and communication skills with 0.749 respectively. Demonstration of analytical thinking was also included in Factor two and had the lowest factor loading (0.330). Factor 3 accounting for 4.206% of the variance focused for the most part on job related aspects such as compilation of a professional curriculum vitae (0.763), submission of a well-prepared application (0.735), overall Job seeking skills (0.619) and compilation and presenting a portfolio of evidence (0.600) amongst other. Factor 4 accounting for 3.558% of the total variance focused on academic skills per se and subsumed overall academic

skills, presenting information in different ways, and organise ideas logically. Several questions did not load onto any of the factors including application of theoretical knowledge to work-related situations, computer literacy, and assimilation of information, as well as research skills (acquiring, organizing, interpreting and evaluation of information) specific to careers per se. It is recommended that these questions be left out even though this does not influence the reliability of the measuring instrument. The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient for a 45-item scale without items which do not load onto any of the factors was 0.968. It is also worth noting that some of these aspects have been included under Critical Cross field Outcomes (see Factor 2).

Table 2: Four factor component matrix solution

Scale Item	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Overall work ethics (GA 40)	0.834			
Honesty as character trait (GA 37)	0.819			
Conscientiousness as character trait (GA39)	0.809			
Punctuality as trait (GA38)	0.792			
Awareness of ethical responsibility (GA36)	0.727			
Self-discipline (GA32)	0.712			
Interpersonal skill to work well in a team (GA30)	0.659			
Self-management (GA33)	0.640			
Flexibility (GA31)	0.604			
Overall interpersonal skills (GA35)	0.552			-0.323
Self-control (GA27)	0.535			
Leadership skills (GA34)	0.531			-0.312
Taking initiative – interpersonal skills (GA28)	0.519			-0.365
Accepting of responsibility (GA22)	0.456			
Demonstrate the willingness to learn (GA9)	0.446			
Demonstrate a positive self-image (GA23)	0.431			
Self-confidence (GA26)	0.387			
Adaptability (GA21)	0.382			
Assertiveness (GA29)	0.373			-0.362
Effective time management (GA19)	0.356			
Apply theoretical knowledge to work (GA7)				
CCFO 4 - Research skills		0.750		
CCFO 1 – Problem-solving skills		0.749		
CCFO 5 – Communication skills		0.749		
CCFO 2 – Team work skills		0.615		
CCFO 7 – Development of macro vision skills		0.612		
CCFO 3 – Self-responsibility skills		0.531		
CCFO 6 – Technological and environmental literacy		0.517		
GA 10 – Analytical thinking		0.330		
Assimilation of information (GA8)				
Computer literacy (GA41)				
Compilation of a professional CV (GA1)			0.763	
Submission of a well-prepared application (GA2)			0.735	
Overall Job seeking skills (GA6)			0.619	
Compile and present a portfolio of evidence (GA4)			0.600	
Appropriate behaviour during an interview (GA5)			0.599	
Appropriate attire for an interview (GA3)			0.555	
Identification and pursuit of career goals (GA17)			0.416	
Personal career management (GA25)			0.407	
Engage in continues career development (GA18)			0.404	
Display initiative in their careers (GA24)			0.381	-0.314
Academic skills (GA14)			0.335	-0.313
Conduct career self-assessment (GA16)			0.321	
Effective stress management (GA20)			0.309	
Research skills with reference to career per se (GA15)				
Present information in different formats (GA13)			0.319	-0.382
Organize ideas logically (GA12)				-0.362
Combine ideas or information in new ways (GA11)				0.345

Note: CCFO's = Critical Cross Field Outcomes; GA = Graduate Attribute

4.3 Confirmatory factor analysis

To further extend analysis of the validity of the measuring instrument, the scale was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis. Maximum likelihood and robust statistics were used to evaluate the fitness of the model based on the recommendations by McIlveen, Burton and Beccaria (2013) which indicated that a good fit model has a $\chi^2 / (df) < 3$; comparative fit index > 0.95 , and a root mean square error of approximation 0.05. The four-factor graduate employability skills employer evaluation measuring scale represented a good fit with $\chi^2 = 2655.04$; $p \leq 0.000$ ($\chi^2 / (df) = 2.8184$) and root mean square error of approximation of 0.06. The goodness-fit indicators for various iterations are displayed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Goodness-of-fit indicators of models

Model	χ^2	df	P	χ^2 diff
Single factor	4746.546	1080	0.000**	
Two factor	3725.079	1033	0.000**	1021.467
Three factors	3136.089	987	0.000**	588.99
Four factors	2655.004	942	0.000**	481.085

5. Discussion of Results

The research reported on in this paper focused on the validation of a questionnaire that was developed as part of a PhD study which concentrated on graduate employability skills in the Faculty of Management Sciences as evaluated by employers. Empirical results indicated a Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of 0.97. Exploratory factor analysis concluded that 7 factors had an Eigen-value exceeding one accounting for 61.745% of the total variance. The Scree-test results coupled with the results of a Parallel Analysis confirmed that only 4 factors exceeded the corresponding criterion values for a randomly generated data matrix of the same size. The first factor accounted for 42.297% of the total variance and underscored interpersonal skills, the second factor accounted for 5.758% of the variance focused on Critical Cross Field Outcomes, the third factor accounting for 4.206% of the variance emphasized job related activities while the last factor attributed 3.558% of the variance and focused on academic skills. These results confirm in part those of Gokuladas (2011) who indicated that academic skills coupled with communication skills increased graduates' employability. Academic skills were the least important factor that contributed to graduates employability skills in the present study. It should however be noted that the study by Gokulada (2011) was done in the field of engineering, while the current study was done in the Management Sciences. Kember and Leung's study (2005) concluded that academic skills had the strongest impact out of six capabilities investigated subsuming critical thinking, self-managed learning, adaptability, problem-solving, communication skills, interpersonal skills and teamwork. In the last mentioned study, students were assessed based on a self-regulatory approach whereby respondents rated the quality of nine facets of the teaching and learning environment, namely teacher-student relationship and student-student relationship. Raybould and Wilkins (2006) also found that the most important generic skills required by graduates were interpersonal, problem-solving and self-management skills.

In a study done by Dhiman (2012) in tourism management ethical behaviour had a factor loading of 0.85, whereas in the current study it had a loading of 0.834 confirming the results of the present study. Additionally, the fourth factor in the study by Dhiman (2012) enhanced human resources skills contained aspects that correlate with items in factor one of the present study namely communication, leadership, motivation and the ability to work in teams. The results of a study by Matic and Agusaj (2012) regarding the most important skills for entry level positions and discrepancies between industry and graduates found that the largest inconsistencies regarding skills or competencies existed in "soft skills" areas, where industry respondents stated that graduates did not know how to behave in a professional manner, lack customer service orientation, communication and interpersonal skills. These results support the findings of the current study.

Based on the results of the statistical analysis the hypothesis which stated that there are a set a graduate employability skills that are perceived statistically significant by employers in the Central Free State region of South Africa with specific reference to Management Sciences are accepted.

6. Limitations

Due to the usage of students in the data gathering phase non-random sampling were used to generate the sample adversely influencing the external validity of the findings. Consequently, the results of the current study should be interpreted with caution taking into consideration the results might not be generalised to the population. However, the purpose of the research reported on was to determine the validity of the questionnaire and not to generalize the findings to the larger population. It should also be noted that the employability skills measured might be informed by the higher education institutions' mission and therefore the outcomes would differ from institution to institution. Additionally the type of graduates being produced is being underscored without any consideration to how graduates are being produced.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary aim of the research reported on in this article was to validate a measuring instrument aimed at soliciting the perspective of employers on graduates' employability skills in the Faculty of Management Sciences. Business and Industries concerns about the employability of graduates produced by higher education necessitate higher education institutions to be accountable for stakeholders' expenditure. Hence, the growing demand for adequate skilled graduates in South Africa has led to many higher education institutions reviewing their objectives and aims, to meet industry needs. This process necessitates a valid and reliable measuring instrument that would produce results to inform amendments in curricula. Ascribed to the fact that the employer perspective is underscored the use of the dispositional approach to employability was used as theoretical underpinning. The aforementioned theory subsumes not only a human capital dimension but also career identity and personal adaptability. Characteristics emphasized in this theory can be categorised into interpersonal skills, personal and career self-assessment and various other aspects measured in the measuring instrument.

Exploratory factor analysis identified a 7-factor solution, however parallel factor analysis yielded a 4-factor solution. The four factors responsible for the majority of the variance were interpersonal skills, Critical Cross Field Outcomes, job-related activities and academic skills. The results of the current study were substantiated by previous research that focused on industry requirements and the employer perspective. Hence, the research hypothesis which states that there is a set of graduate employability skills that are perceived statistically significant by employers in the Free State with specific reference to Management Sciences are accepted. It is recommended that the measuring instrument be used in determining the skills requirement of graduates in the field of Management Sciences in various provinces in South Africa. It is also recommended that future research focus on specific industries since the employability skills in different industries might vary.

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