

Identifying the Dimensions and Key Components of Employability of the University Bachelor Graduates in Behavioral Science Majors: A Shahid Beheshti University Case Study ¹

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Abstract

The general purpose of this study was to identify the main and secondary components of graduates' employability from the perspective of faculty members, employers, and experts in the field of employment for a bachelor's degree in behavioral sciences at Shahid Beheshti University. The present study was a qualitative research. Participants in this study are faculty members, employers and employment experts. Sampling method in qualitative research was purposive sampling of the theoretical sampling type. Among the interviewees were 15 faculty members, 12 employers, and employment-related officials. The analysis of the first interview began with open coding and finally reached theoretical saturation in interview 27. In this study, an interview tool was used to collect the required data and the interview questions were designed in a semi-structured manner. The content validity of the interviews was reviewed and confirmed by 5 higher education experts. Also, to determine the accuracy and validity of the data, three criteria of acceptability, reliability and verifiability were used. The obtained data from this study was analysed by the thematic analysis method. A total of 94 themes related to employability were identified and finally in 15 sub-components and 4 main components of individual competencies, professional competencies, cultural competencies, and social competencies were categorized. Academic practical knowledge and skills were identified at the top of the employability components.

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Introduction

Job creation is considered one of the most vital prerequisites for the advancement and progress of any society in contemporary times (Poratashi, 2018). The employability of students is fundamentally linked to the vital skills, specialized knowledge, and field-specific abilities they acquire throughout their academic tenure at university. However, the sole emphasis on acquiring credentials and a lack of focus on acquiring essential skills has led to numerous challenges for graduates holding non-professional degrees, making it difficult for them to secure suitable employment opportunities within their area of study (Niksirat, Badri, Karkhaneh & Jalali, 2016). Every year, approximately 270,000 Iranian students graduate from universities, contributing to the already high demand for jobs, which the labor market is unable to fulfill (Alibaygi, Barani, Karamidehkordi & Pouya, 2013). In the past decade, the concept of graduate employability has received significant attention from universities (Bridgstock, 2011). To decrease the unemployment rate, institutions of higher education need to shoulder the responsibility of fostering employability skills among their students (Chen, 2018).

Graduate employability has become a prominent concern for policymakers, learning institutions, employers, and graduates alike (Misni, Mahmood & Jamil, 2020). Employability is a complex and fundamental issue (Yorke, 2006), comprising a multifaceted set of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and succeed in their chosen occupation(s), to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy (Pooja, 2013). In the new career era, employability is considered a critical condition for career success (De Vos, De Hauw & Van der Heijden, 2011). As such, employability has become a subject of significant investigation in the area of education and vocational guidance (Valitova, Starodubtsev & Goryanova, 2015). A large number of researchers have highlighted employability as a means to derive job security (Yizhong, Baranchenko, Lin, Lau & Ma, 2019).

The employability of university graduates has become a critical issue involving various social, economic, cultural, and national aspects for most countries (Ayoubi, Alzarif & Khalifa, 2017). Many industries and businesses have openly complained that the majority of higher education (HE) graduates are not employable. Some studies attribute this situation to the disparity between the skills students acquire in HE and the actual skills required by the labor market (LM). Other scholars have pointed out that the educational content and curriculum of HE are not relevant to the ever-growing demands

of the modern LM. These challenges in the HE system necessitate significant structural and educational improvements to ensure that students are equipped with relevant skills to be gainfully employed upon graduation (Okolie, Nwosu & Mlanga, 2019).

Despite the main function of higher education being to prepare individuals to meet the needs of the labor market, education systems do not adequately meet the new needs of societies, and the relationship between higher education and the world of work is far from ideal. Therefore, due to the unpreparedness of graduates for the "world of work" or their lack of employability, the higher education system is severely criticized by employers (Hedjazi, Gholami, Hosseini & Rezvanfar, 2018). The educational process in business schools has been criticized for not adequately developing student employability skills (Bell, 2016).

The issue of graduate employability affects all fields and academic specialties, but it appears to be particularly severe in the humanities. This is due to the fact that humanities graduates often seek employment in government-related sectors, and their skills and training may not align well with the needs of the private and non-governmental sectors. Moreover, available statistics suggest that about half of the country's students are enrolled in humanities programs, exacerbating the employment challenges for graduates in this area (Ahmadi, Mokhtari & Hosseinezhad, 2015).

In Iran, the lack of a strong connection between industry and universities, which is a key objective of third-generation universities, has led to high levels of unemployment across the country, with around two million university graduates reportedly unemployed in 2017 (Hakak, Hozni & Shah Siyah, 2018). Despite the various gaps and challenges in graduate employability, it is crucial to address the issue of university-industry interaction, which has been identified as an important and effective factor in enhancing graduates' employability. With an oversupply of graduates that the labor market cannot absorb, as well as a mismatch of skills among graduates, employability has become a major concern for universities.

One of the key issues is the unemployment of bachelor graduates in behavioral sciences, which encompass disciplines such as psychology, educational sciences, guidance and counseling, economics, public management, industrial management, business management, financial management, sports sciences, and political sciences. Given the widespread unemployment among graduates in these fields and the need to identify the components of employability, this study aims to answer two main questions: (1) What are the main and sub-components of employability for bachelor graduates of behavioral sciences at Shahid Beheshti University, according to faculty members, higher education experts, employers, and specialists in

graduate employment? (2) Which component of employability is considered the most important by faculty members and employers?

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research that aims to explore the employability components of the bachelor graduates of Behavioral Sciences in Shahid Beheshti University. The participants of the study are 15 faculty members, 12 employers, and employment-related officials. The sampling method used in this research is purposeful sampling method, which is a form of theoretical sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide designed by the researchers. The content validity of the interviews was reviewed by five higher education experts, and reliability and validity of the data were ensured through acceptability, reliability, and verifiability criteria. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis method, starting from open coding and reaching theoretical saturation in the 27th interview.

Findings

This study sought to explore the main and sub-components of employability for bachelor graduates in Behavioral Sciences at Shahid Beheshti University, with input from various stakeholders, including faculty members, experts in higher education, employers, and specialists in the field of employment of graduates. To achieve this aim, open codes derived from theoretical foundations and previous research were juxtaposed with codes obtained from interviews conducted in a reciprocal manner. A thorough analysis of the data resulted in the identification of 94 themes associated with employability, which were subsequently categorized into four main components, namely, individual competencies, professional competencies, cultural competencies, and social competencies. The aforementioned components were further subdivided into 15 distinct sub-components, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the employability of graduates in Behavioral Sciences.

Upon careful examination of the texts and the outcomes of the interview analysis, the themes relating to employability were organized into four primary components. The first of these, individual competencies, was found to encompass attributes such as mental health and behavior, conflict management, self-confidence, honesty in action, the ability to engage in continuing and lifelong learning, and emotional intelligence. The second component, professional competencies, involved knowledge and practical skills relevant to the field, the ability to prepare a resume, familiarity with job interview techniques, computer skills, proficiency in the English language, an

understanding of the situation and needs of the labor market, financial literacy, confidentiality, passion and inner motivation to work, realistic job expectations, assistant experience, work experience, decision-making ability, management of roles and tasks, time management, the ability to collect, organize, and analyze information, problem identification and problem-solving skills, a commitment to research and professional ethics, and a spirit of hard work, effort, and perseverance. The third component, cultural competencies, included positive thinking and positivism, cultural understanding, and respect for customs and values. Finally, the fourth component, social competencies, comprised communication skills, a spirit of interaction and cooperation with industries and the employment market, the ability to network and build teams, teamwork skills, social capital and trust in colleagues, and negotiation skills applicable in both domestic and international environments.

The second question addressed in this study pertains to the most crucial component of employability for graduates of behavioral science courses, from the perspective of faculty members and employers. The findings reveal that both groups shared a common view, with both highlighting the significance of the knowledge and technical skills associated with the field as a crucial component for bachelor's graduates' employability. This component is considered vital for both gaining employment and for career advancement and sustainability.

According to the study results, the most important components of employability, as viewed by faculty members and employers, are theoretical knowledge and academic practical skills, followed by communication skills. The organizing themes related to employability were classified based on their priority, with faculty members ranking theoretical knowledge and academic practical skills as the most important component of employability. Other essential components identified by faculty members include communication skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, networking, and team building, and teamwork skills.

Similarly, employers and experts in the field of work and employment identified several important components for graduates' employability. These include having work experience, ability to use new technologies, having a commitment to professional ethics, familiarity and mastery of the English language, and negotiation skills in domestic and international environments. It is worth noting that having work experience was ranked as the most critical component of employability from the perspective of employers and specialists in the field of work and employment.

Discussion and conclusion

The current study identified 94 themes related to employability, which were categorized into four main components and 15 sub-components: individual competencies, professional competencies, cultural competencies, and social competencies. Competencies, skills, and personality traits are crucial factors for succeeding in a job, with academic practical knowledge and skills ranking at the top of the employability components.

In developing countries, particularly Iran, employability is a relatively unfamiliar concept, and fewer studies have been conducted, particularly in the field of behavioral sciences. This research gap is still felt by the researcher. Employability is a multidimensional concept, and experts disagree on its definition. However, prominent thinkers and experts worldwide agree that employability includes skills, knowledge, perceptions, and personal characteristics that enable graduates to find a job and succeed in their chosen careers, benefiting the workforce, society, and the economy. Employability is a tool that can help overcome many problems, such as youth unemployment and graduation. Employability is a crucial issue in third-generation universities, and it is imperative for universities to prioritize it.

Employability encompasses more than just employment. Its goal is not only to attract and employ skilled graduates in organizations but also to promote entrepreneurship among graduates.

Based on the research results on the significance of employability for graduates with a bachelor's degree, particularly in the field of behavioral sciences, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. Practical training in basic computer software and hardware, as well as the English language, should be integrated into all courses related to behavioral sciences to align with the needs of the labor market.
2. Students and graduates should be familiarized with job interview techniques and resume writing methods. The university should provide relevant officials with training in this area.
3. The university should promote team building and teamwork programs such as startups and provide behavioral science graduates with financial and moral support to aid their success.

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