

REFLECTIONS OF EMPLOYED GRADUATES ON THE SUITABILITY OF THEIR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE FOR WORKPLACE-READINESS

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ABSTRACT

There is broad consensus amongst scholars and policy makers that the development of workplace-ready graduates requires a review of the teaching and learning strategies currently informing classroom learning. It has been argued that the curricula taught at higher education institutions should be compatible with industry requirements and expectations: this would not only ensure the livelihood of graduates, but also their viability in an increasingly competitive and changing labor market. Accordingly, academics have a duty to revise their approaches to teaching and learning to ensure that the graduate output will service graduate workplace-readiness. In light of the aforementioned realities, this study explored the opinions of employed graduates with regard to their workplace-readiness upon employment. The primary objective was to establish whether South African higher education institutions are producing graduates considered worthy and capable by the employment sector. The study is guided by the following three theories: *moral hazard*; *economics of trust and information*; and *adverse selection*. These theories elucidate the importance of inclusive stakeholder responsibility and accountability for the development of workplace-ready graduates. Twenty-four responses of employed graduates from eight South African higher education institutions were obtained by means of a questionnaire administered via a Google link. The study found that graduates generally did not feel adequately prepared for the workplace. The article concludes that considerably more effort is required to align higher education curricula, and teaching and learning strategies with labour market requirements.

Keywords: moral hazard, economics of trust and information, adverse selection, workplace-readiness, employed graduates, skills and knowledge, teaching and learning strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Employers have expressed concerns about graduates who cannot do the job due to a lack of knowledge and skills (Hansen 2017; Botes and Sharma 2017, 110). Academic skills are a primary requirement for employers, but most employers are looking beyond these skills for work experience combined with a qualification. Therefore, it is important to establish whether degree courses sufficiently prepare graduates for the work they are employed for (Hansen 2017;

Botes and Sharma 2017, 110). A survey of 400 organisations across different countries conducted by the NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2016), for instance, found that only three of ten employers considered recent graduates to be proficient in their application of knowledge and skills in the work environment.

Employers seek candidates who have experience gained through internships or co-operative programmes (Hansen 2017). Workplace-focused skills in high demand are communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprize, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technology (Brown 2013). These skills continue to be relevant across various fields in different economic sectors (Bowley 2018). Bowley (2018) argues that the evidence in the datum collected from a survey of 2000 business leaders shows that so called “soft skills” are in higher demand than hard skills. She adds leadership, strategy, management, collaboration and time-management to the list of important soft skills required by organisations (Bowley 2018). It is thus evident that the responsibility for the development of these skills must be reconsidered.

Ultimately the transfer of skills and knowledge in formal classrooms occurs with the purpose of developing the graduate to provide for their livelihood, and perhaps, to achieve a level of independence as an individual in future. The responsibility for the production and transfer of skills and knowledge is a process that involves many stakeholders. It is widely acknowledged that each stakeholder in this process has a level of accountability in the development of the graduate for the labor market.

The convergence of stakeholder responsibility and accountability should lead to the development of a holistic graduate who is prepared to embrace their future with confidence. Similarly, academics should be encouraged to find ways to present their subject content in ways that takes into account graduate workplace-readiness. The graduate attributes embedded in teaching and learning have to contribute to converting theory into practice. As far as could be ascertained from the literature, no recent study has focused on asking employed graduates across various economic sectors about their individual experiences in their respective workplaces since they graduated. Against this background, this study assessed employed graduates’ individual experiences regarding their workplace-readiness after employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical overview

A possible reason for the continued debates about graduate workplace-readiness is frictions amongst stakeholders and insufficient collaboration between higher education institutions and

the labor market. Given this context, the three theories may assist with creating awareness of the consequences of not improving the education process of graduate workplace-readiness, namely: moral hazard theory (Emons 1988); economics of trust and information theory (Dranove and Jin 2010); and adverse selection theory (Michaely and Shaw 2015, 280). *Moral hazard* refers to situations where one party has the opportunity to take advantage of another and instead of doing what is right, they do what benefits themselves instead of the party they should serve (Emons 1988). The *economics of trust and information theory* posits being accountable to, for example stakeholders such as students who trust higher education institutions to provide them with correct information and for being accountable in that relationship (Dranove and Jin 2010). Dranove and Jin (2010) argue that disclosure of information is not regulated leaving the “sellers”, in this case higher education institutions, at an advantage. Adverse selection, as proposed by Michaely and Shaw (2015, 280), refers to information asymmetry that may lead to a moral hazard because “investors”, which in this case constitute students, are uninformed and end up being less successful. The authors’ argument is viewed as part of a three-way interaction among stakeholders, i.e. students, higher education institutions, and the government, where a lack of relevant information and ineffective programmes may adversely affect a student’s success (Michaely and Shaw 2015, 280).

The following three headings *employers; workplaces; and student skills and knowledge* contextualize the environments for which skills and knowledge transfer are important. The literature focuses on the viewpoints of different parties that are linked to these environments showing the significance of an effective and efficient participatory stakeholder contribution to the skills and knowledge development requirements.

Employers

Employers in South Africa and internationally want work-ready graduates. The continuing debates that graduates from higher education institutions lack skills and knowledge lead to increased mistrust among employers in the ability of graduates to perform effectively in the workplace once they are employed (Klebnikov 2015). These concerns are further influenced by ongoing debates and accusations by different stakeholders on many platforms about employed graduates’ shortcomings after employment. The accusations are mostly directed at higher education institutions for delivering graduates who cannot fulfil the needs of the workplace (Klebnikov 2015; Hansen 2017).

South African stakeholders in education such as Nedbank chairperson Ruel Khoza believes that higher education institutions are failing the country with the mismatch between skills and qualifications that are not servicing the needs of employers and labor markets (Barron

2012). The issue is also highlighted by Klebnikov (2015) who claims that employers are experiencing difficulty when trying to find job-success qualities in graduates. Some graduates end up working in lower skilled jobs that are not relevant to the degrees that they obtained (Klebnikov 2015).

Workplace

The workplace is a flexible environment where micro- and macro-economic factors influence responsiveness and diversification by companies that are different from the structured environment of a classroom. There are, however, commonalities in the skills and knowledge produced in a classroom setting required by workplaces to respond to the economic environment. Employers recruit graduates to service their need to be sustainable and to grow in a highly competitive labor market environment.

Higher education institutions list the skills and knowledge developed in their degree programmes on various platforms used for marketing their study programmes. With many of these degree programmes, higher education institutions commit themselves to the development of skills and knowledge comprising, amongst others, soft, technical and theoretical skills in different fields of study. Of the skills in high demand for employers are also listed in degree programme module content, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprize, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technology (Brown 2013). How these skills are taught in classrooms must be explored as employers are not satisfied with the ability of graduates to transfer these skills to the workplace setting (Hansen 2017).

The challenge in transferring skills and knowledge to the workplace occurs when theory has to be converted into practice (Hansen 2017). Brown (2013) argues that skills and knowledge teaching and learning often take place theoretically in the classroom resulting in a mismatch between practice and theory. This discrepancy is an important factor that needs to be addressed given that 95 per cent of employers internationally want new graduates with work-related experience (Hansen 2017). This percentage is a leap from the previous year's 64.2 per cent (NACE 2016). Furthermore, workplaces require hands-on decision-making and problem-solving abilities from graduates due to workplace operational processes being dependent on flexible turnaround times and other influences such as productivity to remain profitable and sustainable. Case scenarios are provided in classrooms as practice examples for students, but in some instances these case studies are outdated. The workplace expectations cannot be taught in theory without grasping the actual and recent practical application and implementation requirements of industry (Jackson 2013, 776).

Student skills and knowledge

Selecting an undergraduate programme of study at first-year level can be a daunting exercise for a student. They may have an idea of the field they wish to enter after graduation but they still need guidance on how the skills and knowledge taught in classrooms are relevant to the workplace requirements. Furthermore, students rely on academics to know to what extent what is taught in classrooms will develop their ability to succeed in the workplace. Undergraduates are often not aware of the importance of gaining work-related experience before they graduate even though studies show that it will enhance their chances of securing employment (Jackson 2013, 776). It is therefore important for academics to be aware of these realities to inform and better prepare graduates for the workplace.

Students, on the other hand, should be able to trust that the skills, knowledge and information provided by higher education institutions will hold them in good stead for accessing the employment sector and their future growth. This would not only ensure the livelihood of graduates after employment, but also their viability in an increasingly competitive labor market.

This study explored the reflections of employed graduates about their workplace-readiness after employment. Awareness and consideration of graduate experiences and comments should guide academics towards more appropriate teaching and learning strategies and practices at higher education institutions.

The next section provides an overview of the literature on higher education institutions' responses and the expected contribution by academics to the process of developing workplace-ready graduates.

Higher education institutions responses to workplace requirements

The awareness of workplace requirements can guide academics towards more appropriate teaching and learning strategies to adequately prepare graduates for the workplace. Continuing debates on the responsibility for producing workplace-ready graduates are not solving the problem. Considering the extent of the moral hazard consequences (Emons 1988) of ineffective teaching practices on the recipients, questions on whether a graduate should have recourse if the degree quality is not what was expected is inevitable. The aforementioned may affect graduates who have completed a study programme and on employment find that they were not holistically prepared for the workplace by their higher education institution.

The responsibility of "reasonable disclosure" of relevant information in a relationship of trust (Dranove and Jin 2010) about course content to prospective students during or before enrolment in degree courses must be a duty of higher education institutions. Especially if there is an awareness that learning programmes are not able to produce workplace-ready graduates.

Prospective students, as customers, intending to invest in their future will not adversely select to invest their time and money in a process that will serve them minimally, or not at all, in future. The responsibility for the matching and alignment of skills and knowledge production of workplace-ready graduates should be addressed to ensure an output of productive graduates. The graduate leaves the higher education institution with a degree that was advertised by the higher education institution to have outcomes of what the graduates will be able to do on completion of the degree programme. The question of who is responsible for graduate workplace-readiness should be addressed considering that graduates enrol at higher education institutions to provide them with the prospects to eventually be suitably employed.

The role of academics at higher education institutions is to strive to provide solid, relevant preparation at the baccalaureate and other graduate levels (Harrison 2017, 8). Yet, employers argue that graduates are not adequately prepared for the changing world of work (Botes and Sharma 2017, 110). Traditionally, higher education institutions produced thinkers and intellectual elites, but due to the complexity of the global society nowadays, higher education institutions have to move away from outdated paradigms towards meaningful progress (Crow 2014). At higher education level, meaningful learning and student development is the responsibility of the individual academics in classrooms. Institutional teaching and learning frameworks and policies are the foundation of the structure of learning processes, but teaching and learning happens when learning content and contact time with students add value and also become a footprint that graduates can take with them into their future.

A study conducted by recruitment consultants McKinsey and Company (2014) involving nine countries including India, Turkey and Brazil reported that the lack of workplace-directed training compounds the shortage of employment opportunities. The report further states that workplaces should be more involved in academic courses which, in my opinion, may result in academics losing ownership of teaching and learning, or having to up-skill themselves with workplace practical needs. The latter should not be an option if academics realize how important their roles are to individuals, society and a country's economic growth, sustainability and competitive advantage particularly in a global context.

Expected contribution by academics

Linking education to workplace needs require an adjustment of the way knowledge is transferred by educators in the classrooms. In this respect, attempts are being made in the academic environment to assess the needs of employers and labor markets (Hansen 2017).

Viviers (2016) reported on a study that explored the level of pervasive skills of South African accounting students. The study established that educators are aware of the skills

development responsibilities to be incorporated into course modules but that this process needs improvement (Viviers 2016). Higher education institutions have a responsibility to their students and the public at large to provide relevant teaching and learning that will add value to the growth of the economy. In the case of the accounting field, education institutions are regulated by the policies and processes of the South African Institute for Chartered Accountants (SAICA) that prescribes course content requirements and alignment to industry requirements. However, employers also require pervasive skills development (Viviers 2016, 245). These skills are soft skills such as leadership skills, teamwork and communication skills that do not necessarily form part of the traditional accounting course content academics would teach in the field of accounting (Viviers 2016, 245). Academics are therefore required to adjust their content to also incorporate soft skills development. By disclosing the positives and negatives of degree programmes, higher education institutions can assist students with selecting a study programme from a variety of skills and knowledge acquisition options and institutions available at different levels of the South African skills development frameworks, which may serve them better in their future economic participation and livelihood.

In recent years higher education institutions have been encouraged to incorporate the concept of work-integrated-learning in the higher education landscape (Harrison 2017). Lecturers should include work-integrated-learning in the curricula but the process should have a multiple stakeholder approach that should include students, businesses, government and the education sector (Harrison 2017). A foreseeable challenge can be the difference between the structured approach in a classroom and the flexibility of labor market needs and its environment. Higher education curricula content incorporates theory that might have to be adapted to practice.

This convention is not impossible, but might entail re-training of some academics who are not suitably developed, or employing academics with a combination of workplace and lecturing skills, knowledge and ability, and thereby replacing lecturers who have not progressed to a level required to produce capable graduates. If the economy needs suitably qualified graduates with both academic and workplace experience, as indicated by Hansen (2017), this matter should be addressed urgently. Academia should be capable of responding timeously to the markets they serve, as what is taught should facilitate the required outcome of suitable workplace-ready graduates. The notion of work-integrated-learning as part of the curricula resulting in revised teaching and learning strategies might be construed as unfair because higher education institutions are traditionally and/or debatably [*my opinion*] expected to teach and produce research and thinkers (Harrison 2017).

The attempted responsiveness by higher education institutions in recent years in

collaboration with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) confirms the recognition of the need for change. It is therefore important for academics to continually revise and/or enhance existing teaching and learning strategies and/or implement new strategies to commit to the development of workplace-ready graduates.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative approach to data collection was followed using a content analysis strategy. The qualitative methodology was useful to discover and describe employed graduates' reflections on the suitability of their academic qualifications, skills and knowledge for workplace-readiness. The aim was to compare employed graduates' comments with various texts from the literature that could contribute to the revision of teaching and learning strategies at higher education institutions (Flick 2013, 5).

Population and sampling

The population consisted of participants who were employed graduates and who graduated between the period January 2010 and March 2017. The minimum period of employment was 6 months so respondents can provide informed feedback. Non-probability, random snowball sampling was used because there was no sampling frame (Saunders and Lewis 2012, 139). There was no exact indication of the population size as the initial six participants selected were asked to forward the questionnaire link to their contacts who would suit the specified criteria. These six respondents were selected from previous students of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the University of South Africa (UNISA) and on referral from other known contacts. No particular geographical area was specified to participants other than respondents having attended a higher education institution in South Africa. Participants were employed in different industries and graduated from eight different higher education institutions in three provinces in South Africa.

The random sampling technique allowed for new participants to be recruited (Ochoa 2017) from the initial six participants selected to participate in the study. By using the snowball sampling technique, the pool of respondents could be increased (Saunders and Lewis 2012, 139) in an accessible manner. In this case the Google questionnaire link was forwarded electronically via email. The respondents could also use email and other social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to distribute the questionnaire link to their contacts. The questionnaire link for this pre-test study was distributed between 15 November 2017 and 22 December 2017. A total of twenty-nine responses were received of which twenty-four questionnaires were completed and could be used for the study. The remaining five that were

excluded were spoiled questionnaire responses as not all questions were completed.

Data collection Instrument

Google forms was used to design the questionnaire for the collection of the primary data. Standardized qualitative questions were used in a specific order (Saunders and Lewis 2012, 139) that allowed for more precise comparison of the responses. The advantage of applying this method was that the data could be collected in a cost-effective manner over a short period of time (Crossman 2017).

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: *biographical information* consisting of nine questions; *higher education institution and qualification selection* consisting of fifteen questions; and a *skills and knowledge* section with a combination of twenty-seven open-and-closed-ended questions. The questionnaire link that was distributed using Google docs allowed for the responses to be recorded automatically in a linked excel spreadsheet. The snowball sampling process was impersonal as the researcher could not assist and/or influence participant responses by clarifying questions. To ensure validity, the readability and understandability of the questionnaire was pre-tested with three graduates. Adjustments were made where necessary before forwarding the link to the initial six respondents. The three pre-tested questionnaire responses were excluded from the sample as their purpose was to ensure that the instrument is error-free and technically sound to a random snowball participant. To ensure individual participant data trustworthiness and confidentiality, no participant had access to the responses of others, thereby confirming a true reflection of individual views. Public access restrictions were set on the electronic Google form feature.

Ethical considerations

The questionnaire was cleared by the University of the Western Cape and endorsed by the ethical clearance procedure number HS17/8/34. Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary. A paragraph stating their voluntary participation with no compensation was included in the electronic questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire confirmed consent and a short paragraph to this effect was added in the introduction section of the questionnaire. To ensure anonymity, participant email details were not electronically tracked and/or recorded.

Data analysis

The electronic participant responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Mayring (2014) states that qualitative content analysis is a mixed-method strategy because the frequency of respondent comments about a certain category or theme is recorded numerically. However,

the focus of this analysis is on the qualitative comments of the respondents. The variation in participant responses was categorized against the main themes and questions posed in the questionnaire. Three main themes were presented with more precise sub-theme codes for each main theme. Participants' comments and thoughts related to the themes and sub-theme codes were provided as extensively as possible and a short explanation was given to describe the comments. The following steps for qualitative content analysis were applied (Mayring 2014, 25):

- Coding, i.e. working through the material with the aid of a theme system;
- Examining the common occurrences of themes, and establishing the contingencies, requirements and constraints mentioned by participants; and
- Collating and interpreting the employed graduate comments under the three main themes and listed sub-themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conceptual framework to present the findings is focused on the suitability of academically acquired skills and knowledge for workplace-readiness under the following main themes: (1) awareness of workplace requirements and workplace-readiness; (2) graduate preparation by higher education institutions; and (3) employer expectations vis-à-vis higher education graduates.

Background information

Respondents had mixed views on the extent to which higher education institutions contributed to their workplace-readiness. Factors such as lecturers having relevant workplace experience; making sure that theories are relevant to contemporary workplace needs; and changing teaching and learning strategies into relevant practical approaches featured prominently in the graduates' feedback. The thematic presentation of the data assisted with showing the employed graduates' workplace challenges from a broader perspective across industries and occupations. Approaching employed graduates from different higher education institutions, degree programmes, industries and job functions endorsed the argument that the challenges experienced by employed graduates are applicable to degree programmes in *different* disciplines and fields of study.

Awareness of workplace requirements and workplace-readiness

This theme was divided into two sub-themes, namely (1) *Lack of information*; and (2) *Qualification-employment compatibility*.

Lack of information

Responses varied but the feedback was generally similar. Fourteen participants said that they had not received any information from their respective higher education institution on labor market needs. Others mentioned that some degree programmes provided more specific labor market requirements, while a number of graduates took the initiative to explore labor market requirements in their field of study. Examples of respondent comments include:

“Very few of my module lecturers informed me about the needs of the labor market.”

“There was not much information on the labor market demands. However, before I even started the course, I had researched job availability in my field and what employers looked for when hiring graduates.”

A pertinent factor mentioned by respondents is the insufficiency of the labor market information received from higher education institutions.

Qualification-employment compatibility

The overall feedback was that graduates *were* working in their field of study. Only one respondent was working in an unrelated field. The following examples reflect the participants’ comments:

“I completed a BCom Finance degree and I am currently employed as a finance assistant – my main function is to pay invoices and do intercompany billings.”

“I use my qualification on a daily basis – Personal trainer, help people get fit and healthy.”

“I am not currently doing what I studied to do – I have a BCom degree and work as a sales consultant in retail. However, I did other jobs as well – also worked as a chauffeur.”

Providing relevant information to students during degree courses corresponds with the views of Dranove and Jin (2010) that higher education institutions are obliged to create awareness when learning programmes cannot produce workplace-ready graduates. Correct information assists students to invest time and money in programmes that will serve them well in future. Although the responses about information received differed, twenty-three of the twenty-four respondents were working in their field of study and were thus reaping the benefits of studying towards a suitable degree.

Graduate preparation by higher education institutions

Theme Two consisted of three sub-themes: (1) *Qualification-job requirements compatibility*

assessment; (2) Curricula and labor market requirements – compatibility assessment; and (3) Student perspectives on lecturer competence.

Qualification-job requirements compatibility assessment

The comments were predisposed to the theoretical inclination of degree programmes that should be more practical. Herewith some of the participant comments:

“A substantive portion of the undergraduate learning is strictly theoretical. Shifting from a [theoretical] mindset to a practical mindset is something my degree did not prepare me for.”

“So much more can be done with students. Preparing students for the world of work is vital and students should have a curriculum vitae when they leave the higher education institution. They should be finding jobs in their final months at the higher education institution with the help of their lecturers.”

“Students should also be placed in vacation programmes which will provide experience on what to expect. They need to be made more workplace smart and technology savvy.”

“More practicality could have been illustrated in classrooms by lecturers.”

The emphasis on the word “practical” by many participants implies the need for degree programmes to have less theoretical value, or more theoretical articulation with workplace practical application.

Curricula and labor market requirements – compatibility assessment

Graduate comments varied as some participants acknowledged the flexibility of workplace environments and the related challenges it holds for classroom teaching and learning. The need for academics to make theory more relevant to practice was expressed by graduates from all disciplines. The following comments present the views of the respondents from diverse industries and job functions:

“Higher education institutions should partner with employers and government and offer programmes that enable higher education students to gain work experience while studying. A degree nowadays is no longer worth the paper it’s written on if one does not have experience of some sort. However, I believe that focused programmes aimed at giving experience to students in their field of study would go a long way.”

“It is possible to teach a student how to perform certain duties especially if learning is more authentic.”

The matching and alignment of skills and knowledge for producing workplace-ready graduates is important for the development of well-rounded graduates as is evident from the participant comments. The pre-test survey data for this research were collected over the period November to December 2017. The graduates’ comments are generalized views of the skills and knowledge

obtained in their job contexts as a result of their formal studies.

Student perspectives on lecturer competence

Twenty-two respondents relayed the importance of lecturers having workplace experience in order to make the classroom learning more relevant to the workplace. Two respondents commented that lecturers should at least be aware of the relevance of the theory they taught to the workplace environments. The following comments were made:

“Lecturers can use their workplace knowledge and bring [it] into the content taught and the student can understand not only the content but how it can be in the real world. And the student can be made aware of the expectations that lie ahead for a graduate to prepare in advance.”

“In this way lecturers can convey knowledge to the students in a well-rounded way – not just from an academic perspective. Working in the labor market is multi-dimensional and they should have the multi-faceted experience.”

“It is one thing to know the theory from prescribed textbooks from which lecturers get their course content. However, it is a completely different issue to teach a course when you also understand the practical aspects of the theory you teach.”

The respondent opinions expressed the benefits of teaching and learning that incorporates the participation of and integration with practice as important requirements from lecturers in preparing better-equipped graduates.

Employer expectations vis-à-vis higher education graduates

This theme is discussed under two sub-themes: (1) *Towards addressing skills and knowledge gaps at employment stage*; and (2) *Assessing the viability of a revised pedagogical approach for a balanced theoretical-practical perspective*. Respondents were required to provide actual examples of their workplace experiences after graduating. Comparing workplace skills and knowledge demands with academically acquired skills and knowledge, allowed for the reflection on what higher education institutions are reasonably capable of producing for workplaces.

Towards addressing skill and knowledge gaps at employment stage

The respondents placed more emphasis on soft skills and practical knowledge they needed for the workplace. Below are respondent comments on the skills and knowledge that employers had to develop among graduates after employment:

“Perseverance, self-control, time management, positive attitude, hard-working selling skills, skills in business processes.”

“Practical marketing skills; skills in social media, graphic design, computer programming, data analysis and networking.”

“How to professionally engage with people from all walks of life; how to manage difficult conversations with clients.”

“How to acquire the skill of being adaptable, as things change on a daily basis so you have to learn to keep up with these changes.”

“Practical communication, organisational and people skills.”

“Technical skills.”

“Employers need their employees to be hungry to learn, to see opportunity and build something new from it; they need people that can identify risk from a mile away and strategise on possible solutions. They also need people who will be accountable for what they do.”

“Employers seek people who will solve particular problems within their companies.”

Although respondents acknowledged the need for theory-in-practice, they pointed out that the focus and development of degree programmes should shift towards becoming more real world-oriented.

Assessing the viability of a revised pedagogical approach for a balanced theoretical-practical perspective

Participants provided suggestions of how this can be achieved based on what were expected from them in the workplace. Graduates’ suggestions and comments were as follows:

“Lecturers could have hosted certain “how to” sessions or provide recent workplace case studies.”

“The institution only taught about the existence of processes and procedures and how they work. But there was never an opportunity to experience how the [processes and procedures] worked practically.”

“Lecturers provided the theoretical part but more practical scenarios would have better prepared me.”

Respondents seemed confident that higher education institutions can prepare them more sufficiently for workplaces. The greater majority of participants stated that they would choose the same learning programme if the teaching and learning processes could be adapted to suit workplace-readiness and/or labor market needs.

Participant concerns about workplace-readiness were evident across different economic sectors and jobs. The fact that participants graduated from different higher education institutions shows that the problem is experienced nationally, which in turn points to the need for a broader conversation and action among stakeholders. Although graduates gained skills and knowledge from higher education institutions that were transferable to workplaces, it is

apparent that there still are shortcomings in the teaching and learning process that hinder workplace-readiness. The request and need for practical application and labor market relevance in teaching and learning is evident from this group of participants.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Initiatives for graduate workplace-readiness improvement have been implemented as shown in the literature, but the debates from various stakeholders still reflect negativity in this regard. Employed graduates are stakeholders in the education processes of higher education institutions with important experiences that can add value to the initiatives by academics to improve teaching and learning strategies. The comments and observations by employed graduates in this study provide suggestions that could be valuable in rethinking how graduates should be prepared and developed in classroom contexts.

It is clear that predominantly theoretical approaches towards teaching and learning do not strengthen graduates for the workplace. Investment in learning and development after graduation that should have been done effectively during degree programmes is unfair if the initial teaching and learning processes could have addressed the shortcomings. Graduate comments reflect the deficiencies in their development after employment. Although graduates confirmed that they were not *directly* informed by employers that they lacked skills and knowledge, employers had to re-train them in skills and knowledge, which the higher education institution could or should have addressed in the first place. They also felt inadequate in their ability to effectively respond to workplace needs. This resulted in employers having to train and/or re-train them in soft skills, hard skills and technical skills that could have been addressed to some level in the degree programme.

An important concern that needs to be addressed is that academics should take responsibility for their own development in making their teaching and learning relevant to the needs of labor markets and adequate preparation of the graduate who will have to participate in a flexible workplace environment. The graduate comments resonate with the need for lecturers to provide, for example, simulated examples of converting theory into practice. The repetitive learning content taught in classrooms must be aligned with the flexibility of the workplace in the form of case studies that have occurred more recently. Contemporary study material might be better suited with content and techniques that are currently utilized in the labor market. In the same way that students are responsible to expand their knowledge beyond the classroom, lecturers have a responsibility to renew their knowledge and teaching techniques to keep teaching and learning current.

Producing workplace-ready graduates is a key factor that could affect labor markets and

the graduate adversely if not done properly. This study provides valuable guidelines from employed graduates with regard to skills and knowledge requirements, which in turn could help to improve both module content and teaching and learning strategies in classrooms. The literature indicates that some of the shortcomings in skills listed by employed graduates in this study were mentioned in previous studies, but that it is still not sufficiently addressed in classrooms. Participants employed in different industries and work situations echoed these shortcomings, which denote that the problem is not discipline-specific. An interesting and important finding is that 22 of the 24 respondents confirmed that they did not choose the wrong degree programme, but that the teaching and learning practices during their studies did not prepare them sufficiently for the practical world of work (Botes and Sharma 2017, 110).

The inadequacies in both teaching and learning practices and programme content happen at different higher education institutions, affirming the need for review and adjustment of teaching and learning strategies. Graduates compete at various levels in the labor market that is highly flexible and competitive. Consideration of the employed graduates' suggestions may guide academics in their own development by staying current in their field. All stakeholders thus have a duty to commit responsibly to developing workplace-ready graduates as it is a moral hazard to know that a system is wrong yet allowing it to continue to the disadvantage of others. The need for employers to engage more pro-actively with the higher education sector with regard to curricula formulation, will help ensure that the graduate output by higher education institutions meet labor market requirements. This could partly be achieved through collaboration between curricula developers at higher education institutions and the relevant parties of the labor market sector.

In the same manner as is expected of individuals to be competitive for their own growth and livelihood, so must a country be competitive and sustainable. Higher education institutions have a moral obligation and responsibility to ensure that the educational investment that they are contributing to will enhance the country's economic growth over the long term.

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