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Higher Education and Employability in Pakistan – How Aligned are they?

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Preface

This working paper is derived from the MPhil research thesis of Ms Durriya Nadeem. Her qualitative research study was designed to capture the perceptions of higher education institutions, employers, and employees, regarding the role of higher education in increasing employability.

This paper investigates the perceptions of both higher education institutions and employers regarding the attributes and skills of new graduates; the preparedness of graduates after they entered employment; and necessary steps to make higher education more compatible with the job market. The findings of this study point towards the need for an adoption of work integrated learning at higher education institutes, collaboration between employers and academic departments, and initiatives such as in-house training by the employers.

By virtue of this paper's valuable contribution to the literature on employability and its relationship with higher education, it will be of great interest to academics, employers, current and future employees, and educationists alike. By informing the readers about the perceptions of the various stakeholders, it highlights the gap between the requirements of the job market and the curriculum of the higher education institutes – a gap that can be filled if the service provided by the higher education institutes becomes more aligned with the needs of the employers.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to examine the perceptions of the 3 key stakeholders involved in higher education and employability: university faculty, employers, and employees. This included checking if employability was prioritized in the curriculum and teaching of particular disciplines at university level, the expectations and experiences of employers in dealing with fresh graduates, and the preparedness of employees who had made the transition from being students to employees.

1.2 What is Employability?

Employability refers to the graduate's achievements and his/her potential to secure a graduate job, and not the actual acquisition of that job, which in turn is influenced by several external factors, especially the state of the economy, demand supply gap etc. (Yorke 2004). There are several other definitions of the concept.[1] Broadly speaking, employability skills refer to attitudes and personal characteristics required by employers; it is essential that these skills are incorporated in the learning that students receive before they enter the job market (Pool and Zahne 1993).

1.3 Higher Education in Pakistan

Pakistan is one of the youngest countries in the world, with 64% of its population aged under 29, and 29% between the ages of 15-29. Youth (15-29 years) makes 41.6% of Pakistan's total labor force (15-64 years).

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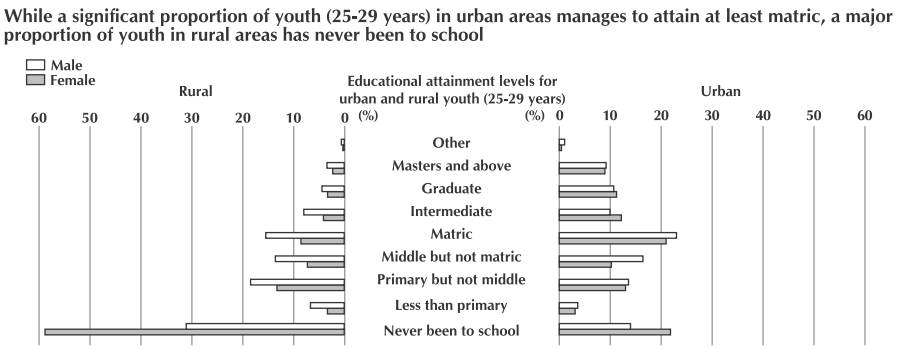
[1] Other definitions included Hillage and Pollard (1998), Harvey (1999), Outin (1990), Grip et al. (2004) etc. Misra and Mishra (2011, p.652) defined employability skills as "the degree to which employees are able to search, maintain and sustain themselves in employment through their proactive willingness, capacity to identify with their career, and enhance their personal adaptability through social networking and occupational (transferable or portable) skills."

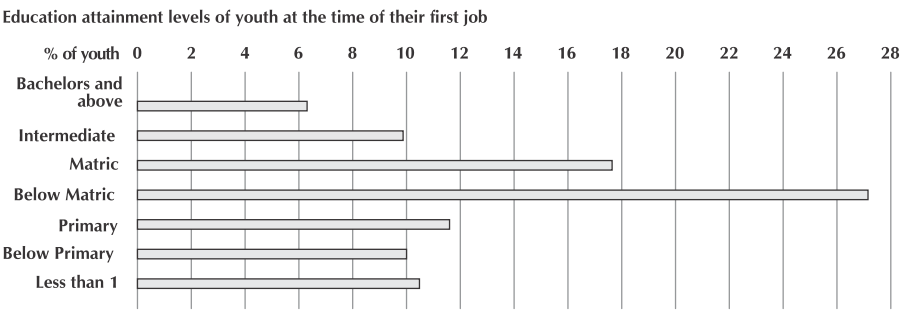
For a better and stable future, Pakistan needs to place its sizeable youthful population at the center of its developmental priorities. Employability of graduates is therefore a serious concern for Pakistan.

Figure 1: Educational attainment levels for urban and rural youth (25-29 years)



Primary = 5 years of education, Middle = 8 years of education, Matric = 10 years of education, Intermediate = 12 years of education, Bachelors = 14-16 years of education, Masters = 16-18 years of education
Source: UNDP calculations based on PSLM 2014/15.

Figure 2: Educational attainment levels of youth at the time of their first job



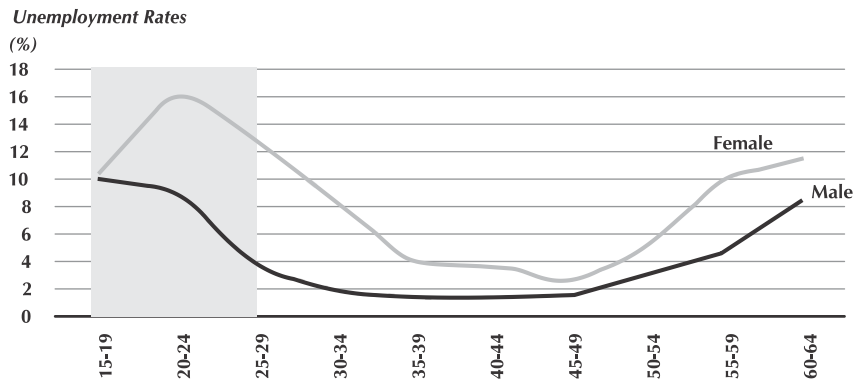
Note: The values of educational attainment do not aggregate to 100 percent because "Do not Know" category is not being shown in the figure.
Source: UNDP estimates based on National Youth Perception Survey 2015.

Pakistan's labor market generally requires a minimum qualification of secondary education. Figures 1 and 2 describe the educational composition of the population. 22.9% of the urban male population is matric qualified, 9.7% has completed intermediate education, and

10.7% possesses undergraduate degrees while 8.7% has obtained Master's degrees. Urban females have similar patterns. The difference in rural educational attainment is due to the obvious structural disparities affecting equity and access to education. Education is still not inclusive and many groups are marginalized due to gender, poverty, geographical location, etc.

Figure 3 shows that the younger population is more prone to suffer from joblessness/unemployment than the older population. The primary reason is that the labor market is unable to accommodate the new entrants every year.

Figure 3: Unemployment rates across age groups



Source: UNDP calculations based on Labour Force Survey 2014/15.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing Literature

There have been some studies in Pakistan on higher education as well as employability. Farooq (2011) studied education and occupation mismatch; Capstick (2015) examined the perceptions and experiences, related to employability, of Pakistani and Pakistani heritage students with reference to higher education in Pakistan and the UK; SAHE (Society for the Advancement of Education) published a report in 2016 on the impact of English language proficiency on the starting salaries of graduates. British Council's (2014) report highlighted that despite a surge in the number of university graduates, employers in Pakistan still

struggled to find good employees. An employers' perception survey conducted for HEC (2016) collected data from 375 organizations across a range of sectors. The purpose was to gauge the various attributes and qualities being sought by the employers in fresh graduates at the time of hiring, and their perceptions post hiring against the various qualities that were expected from graduates.

2.2 Purpose of this Research

There was a research gap in Pakistan on the perceptions of the three stakeholders of higher education and employability. Studies have been conducted in Pakistan on different aspects like the link between schooling and job prospects (SAHE 2016), perceptions of employers regarding new graduates (Thornton 2016) or the experiences of Pakistani and Pakistani heritage students regarding employability (Capstick 2015). But there was a lack of data or research that triangulated the perceptions of all three stakeholders, i.e., higher education institutions, employers, and employees. This paper attempts to initiate a discussion on their insights and perceptions regarding the role of higher education in developing employability in students in Pakistan. This was done through a thematic analysis of the primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. The research questions focused on the perceptions of both higher education institutions or HEIs and employers regarding the attributes, skills and knowledge of new graduates joining the workforce, the readiness felt by graduates after they entered employment in terms of skills, and what else can be done to make higher education more compatible with the job market.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The study aimed to address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of both higher education institutions or HEIs and employers regarding the attributes, skills, and knowledge of new graduates joining the workforce?

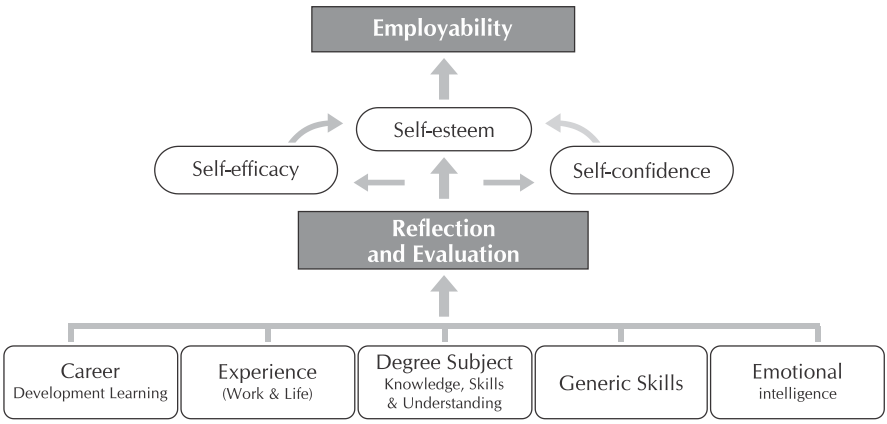
2. How well equipped do graduates feel after they enter employment?

3. What else can be done to make higher education more compatible with the job market?

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The CareerEDGE model by Pool & Sewell (2007) was a practical framework designed to explain the concept of employability and the factors that affect it. For the purpose of this study, CareerEDGE model was found to be the most useful and has been deployed to understand the connection between employability and higher education.

Figure 4: CareerEDGE Model (Pool and Sewell 2007)



3.3 Research Design and Sampling

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method used for gaining in-depth insights into the perceptions of the three stakeholders.[2] The interviewees were selected on the basis of convenience as well as snowball sampling.

[2] The research design was adapted from Mason et al.'s (2003) study on the impact of higher education on employability. This study gathered the perspectives of the 3 main stakeholders to allow for a triangulation of their responses. The study had examined the perceptions of 34 university departments in 5 subject areas (Biology, Design Studies, Computer Science, History and Business) across 8 universities, as well as 192 pairs of graduates and their immediate line managers. The themes covered in that study were used to derive interview questions for this research. The design was modified for the purpose of this paper.

The primary research had 3 components:

1. 24 semi-structured interviews of university faculty members (undergraduate level) were conducted at two universities in Lahore, which were the biggest in the city and hence provided a more representative sample. One was public and the other was private. This paper focused on four subject areas, i.e., physics, computer science, political science and business. The four disciplines were selected to provide a mix of more technical or "hard" subjects (computer science, physics), "soft" or "liberal" (political science) and business.

   The purpose of the interviews was to see if employability was a part of their curriculum, which skills were demanded by the market, which ones can be effectively developed within the higher education curriculum, and how effectively they can be transferred to employment.

2. 6 semi-structured interviews of private organization employers based in Lahore were conducted with the personnel concerned with the roles pertinent to our research like the hiring process, evaluating work readiness of candidates, satisfaction with university curriculum, and training and support provided to new employees who had recently graduated. The following sectors were covered: information technology (IT), fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), textile manufacturing, education, telecommunication and banking. The selection of these sectors was due to easier access and having contacts with people who could connect me to the respondents.

3. 20 interviews were conducted with employees who were relatively recent graduates (up to 3 years after receiving undergraduate degree), to gauge how they felt about their own work experiences, as well as their views about the role universities played in developing their skills for the workplace. They belonged to the same organizations whose employers were interviewed. Interviewees represented a diverse mix of educational training at the undergraduate level. More precisely, they held degrees of varied disciplines such as economics, electrical engineering, accounting and finance, political science, sociology and anthropology, business administration, and computer science.

Interview guides were prepared to provide a basic outline of the interviews – they were flexible and subject to variation depending on the

responses received. Transcripts were prepared after the conclusion of each interview. After the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted to observe the themes that emerged during the primary research, and how it corresponded to the literature on this subject.

4. Findings

This paper is a qualitative study of the perceptions of the three key stakeholders in higher education and employability, i.e., university faculty, employers, and employees. Several themes came to light after conducting a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. They were as follows:

4.1 Degree/Subject

4.1.1 Undergraduate Degree Relevance

Whether or not a graduate joined a profession with direct relevance to his or her degree, many jobs required subject specific knowledge (Johnes 2006). All employers stated that the ideal educational background depended on the job position. Some careers such as IT and finance required specific degrees, and others like human resource management or marketing/sales could absorb people from almost any undergraduate background. Someone with a degree in marketing would get an edge in a beginner's job in the field, but someone without a degree in software or computer science had almost no chances of finding employment in that field. For more advanced, experience-based positions, educational background did not matter as much as relevant experience.

Sometimes subjects like physics equipped students with skills that worked well in job functions, which had nothing to do with their subject specific knowledge. As explained by the HR executive at a telecommunications company:

> For us, the degree doesn't matter as much as the skillset. We have physics graduates in our commercial department. Core sciences make you quite good with data so we have physics people in business intelligence - they are very good with analytics.

Business and economics were perhaps the most hired degrees. Only one-sixth of the employers said they hired physics graduates at all; all

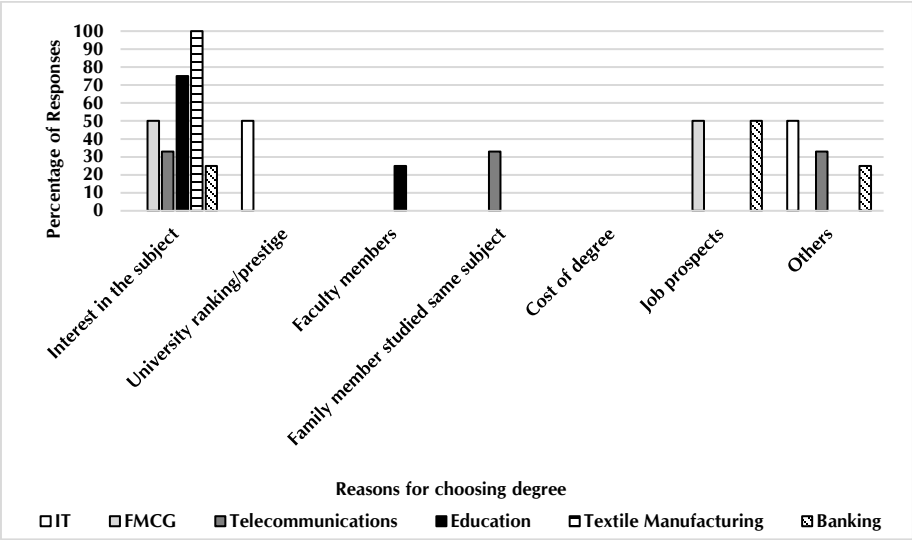
employers preferred business graduates for generalist positions in departments like sales, marketing, human resource, etc. Even in an IT organization, mainly people with business or economics backgrounds filled the non-technical posts. As every company had an IT department, computer science graduates were in demand. Some organizations had bigger departments and others had smaller ones, but finance and IT existed in all organizations.

Coming to employees, many graduates opted for jobs that had no direct relevance to their degree. Almost half of the interviewees were working in fields or departments that had little to do with their undergraduate degrees, e.g., 50% of the bank employees had obtained their undergraduate degrees in electrical engineering. However, it seemed that unless the position in question was technical, the degree could be very different from the job, since on the job training played a major role in making a graduate work-ready. Of course many people worked in relevant positions too. For example, 100% of the software engineers interviewed had degrees in computer science and were clearly working in a field their degree had trained them for.

4.1.2 Choice of Degree/Subject

Capstick (2015) examined the main influences on Pakistani students when choosing where and what to study. Factors included prestige of the university, course content, cost of the course, distance from family etc. This paper questioned employees about what factors had influenced their choice of degree/subject:

Figure 5: Factors influencing subject/degree choice



Interest in a subject was the most common reason, followed closely by job prospects. Most respondents mentioned parental pressure or advice as another reason. Choosing a future degree or career was not something they could do in isolation; culturally, parents in Pakistan were heavily involved in any major life decisions of their children. It can be assumed that parents paid the fees in private universities or students went on scholarships, so that may be a reason for degree cost not being the number one concern. Likewise, public universities were heavily subsidized so were affordable for most people. If the employees discovered a knack for another subject once they joined the workforce, they had opportunities to plan their career accordingly or even go for a 2nd degree of their choice.

4.1.3 Is University "Brand" a Good Indicator of Job Performance?

Employers were asked this question to assess how strongly they correlated a "good" university with a "good" employee. There were almost identical answers by employers across different fields. Both degree and university name were important to land the first job, as they were the only credentials of a fresh graduate. For the second job, one had to prove oneself based on individual experience and learning from the previous job.

A big university name (and good grades) definitely helped in the initial CV screening process. 4 out of 6 interviewees mentioned the categorization of universities into Tiers 1 and 2.[3] It was often assumed that someone from a good university (Tier 1) will do well professionally. It was taken for granted that these institutions equipped students with the appropriate skills. This did not mean that those from less impressive institutions could not be as good or better employees, but employer perceptions could be influenced by big names when hiring fresh graduates. It was agreed that as one progressed in his/her career, the university name took a backseat and a person's career graph and networking mattered more.

4.1.4 Second Degree

One of the main reasons for doing a postgraduate degree was to become more employable. Respondents were asked if one should pursue a second degree immediately or gain some work experience before going for it.

The responses of the university faculty varied according to discipline. Almost all (83.3%) of the business academics were in favor of gaining work experience in the first few years. Another reason given was to have a gap between both degrees. A 4-year undergraduate degree was a long process; a break was advisable before going back to studies. Secondly, the undergraduate program was a complete degree and sufficient for someone to be work ready. Working professionally allowed graduates to make an informed choice before they invested more time, money, and energy in another degree. They may discover they didn't need it after all.

All political science and computer science respondents suggested that it depended on the person's aspirations- if he or she wanted to work in research or academia then a second degree was required. For those who wanted to work in the industry, government, or media, the second degree was not urgent and they can make their decision after some work experience.

[3] Tier 1 referred to bigger and more prominent universities with more renowned faculty and research. Tier 2 universities were less renowned, smaller ones and those that were generally not the first choice for prospective students or even employers.

On the other hand, all physics faculty supported doing the 2nd degree immediately after undergraduate education as they felt that Pakistan did not have an industry to absorb graduates belonging to this field. They felt that academics and research were the most probable career options for students, and these required higher credentials and subject specialization. They further suggested that even if graduates planned to join the industry, experiencing the job market first hand was not something that had to be done before going for a Masters/MPhil. Organizations taught them their working style and culture whenever they joined the workforce.

In contrast, all the employers felt students should gain some practical experience before going for another degree; companies invested a lot in training employees and it took some time for them to reap the benefits of that training. They were of the opinion that the graduates can also make better decisions for their second degree after experiencing the job market and getting familiar with its realities.

The employers unanimously agreed that while doing another degree expanded one's knowledge and concepts, it did not bring about value addition as such in terms of work related skills and improved job performance. The telecommunications employer added that doing a post-graduate degree right after undergraduate education restricted students' exposure - they were relegated to academia and cut off from the workforce. Moreover, gaining a second degree without any work experience did not give any edge to prospective employees. They were evaluated along the zero work experience scale and offered the same salaries as undergraduate degree holders.

Similarly, 90% of the employees in this sample felt that it was better to gain work experience before going for a post-graduate degree. All the telecommunications employees in this sample had done their Master's immediately after receiving their undergraduate education, but they felt it was better to work for around 2 years before deciding on another degree, so as to make a more informed choice. The general experience among the respondents was that the post graduate degree should be relevant to the industry one planned to work in, which eventually led to better progression and career advancement opportunities.

4.2 Skills

4.2.1 Academic vs. Generic Skills

The two main types of skills that enhanced employability were academic and generic skills.[4] Both were found to be important for employability. For example, many candidates failed in the recruitment phase due to their lack of soft skills, despite being well versed in their subject. Similarly, one cannot move forward in job applications without having a degree (therefore academic skills). The respondents were asked which skills were more important (academic or generic) in the workplace; Figure 6 showed the results.

Figure 6: Academic vs. Generic Skills for University Faculty

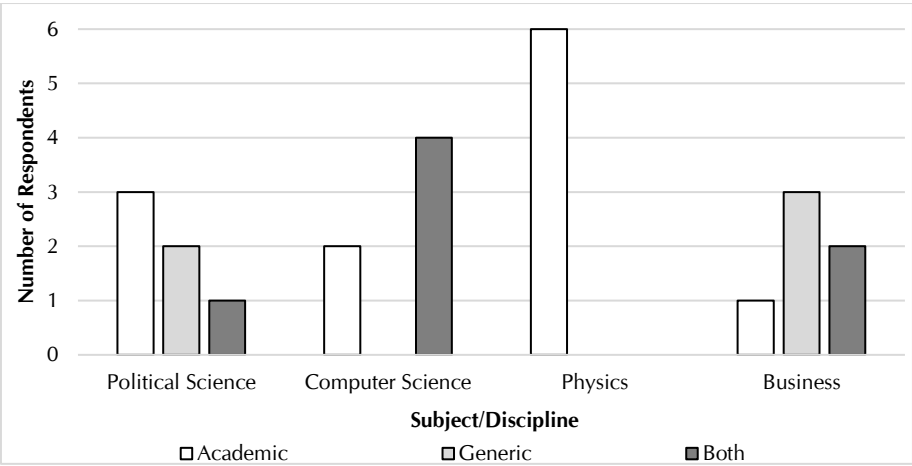


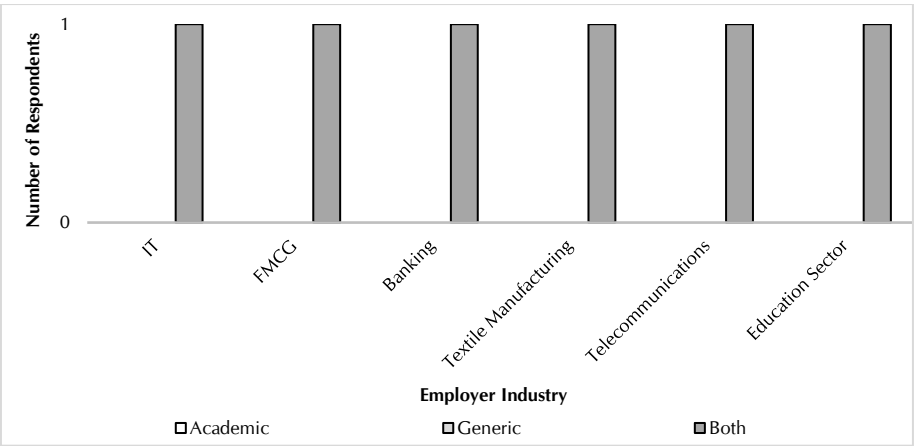
Figure 6 showed that 50% of the university faculty felt that academic skills mattered more than generic skills. Subject knowledge needed to be acquired at university; other skills can be acquired through work experience over time. Depending on the field, sometimes even

[4] Robles (2012, p.457, qtd. in Paadi 2014) described soft or generic skills as character traits that were not discipline specific or limited to a specific career, and these were not easy to measure. These were continuously developed during one's everyday life and in the workplace. These include problem-solving skills, team spirit, concise language, interpersonal communication, adherence to rules and procedures, basic manners etc. (Pop and Barkhuizen 2010, p.76, qtd. in Paadi 2014). On the other hand, academic or hard skills were the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job.

mediocre generic skills were not detrimental if the academic skills were good.[5] Of course the other type of employees also existed, i.e., people who had low technical skills but could market themselves well. However that was a difficult combination to sustain for computer science or physics graduates whose strength were technical skills; other skills were an added bonus.

Business emphasized the role of generic skills. At an entry-level stage, many undergraduates got jobs that had nothing directly to do with their degree. For example, a beginner level marketing employee did not need subject specific knowledge to do his job - what was more important was that he/she knew how to work, meet deadlines, and work in teams etc. – basically possess strong generic or transferable skills.[6]

Figure 7: Academic vs. Generic Skills for Employers



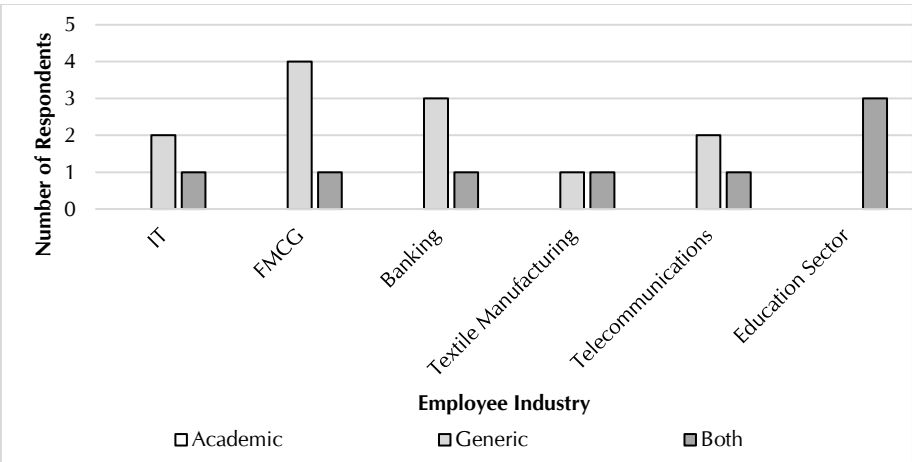
The vertical axis showed the number of respondents and the horizontal one represented the employer industry type in Figure 7. This illustrated

[5] For example, computer science graduates who were shy could land great jobs because of their knowledge and proficiency in programming or software development. This was especially pertinent in the Pakistani market, where there was a limited skill set and employees could dictate terms.

[6] Generic/transferable skills were valuable because of their transferability in any context, be it a new job or discipline (Bennett, Dunne and Carre 1999, p.76). They prepared a graduate for a variety of work related mobility. Examples of such skills were independence, adaptability, willingness to learn, numeracy, good oral communication, ability to work in a team, time management, attention to detail etc.

that all the employers stated that a combination of both academic and generic skills was required to succeed in any job. Importantly, the job type mattered. For example, good academic skills were a no-brainer for someone who was in an academic position. Non-technical positions should have presentation skills, communication, research skills, market know-how etc. There was a general consensus that generic skills took the lead as one progressed in his/her career.[7]

Figure 8: Academic vs. Generic Skills for Employees

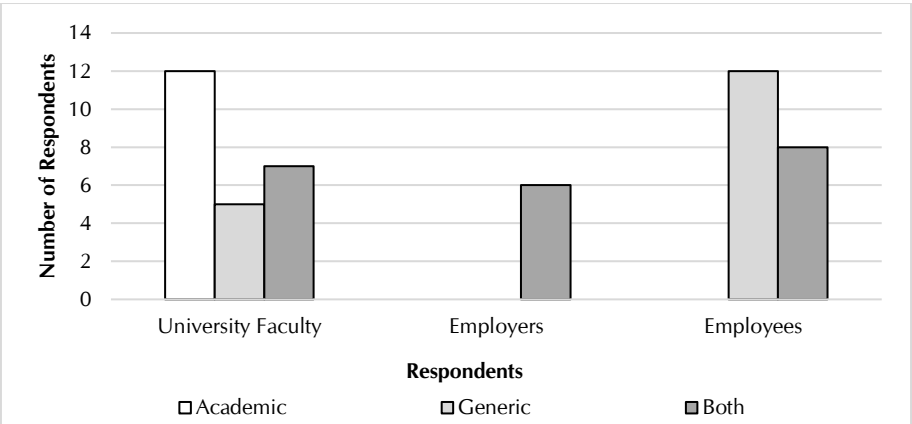


Surprisingly, none of the employees rated academic skills as being more important than generic skills (Figure 8). 75% of the bank employees and 80% of the FMCG employees believed academic skills were important for getting into the workplace but once there, generic skills helped the employee navigate successfully in his/her career. As one respondent claimed, "both generic and academic skills matter once you are in the workplace. People who are more street smart and socially well-connected usually perform better at their jobs. Simultaneously, critical thinking,

[7] The literature supported the perspective that the academic content of the degree seemed to be less important relative to work experience. In a study by Wellman (2010), which investigated the attributes required in marketing graduates, less than 50% of the employers demanded a degree and under a quarter required a degree in marketing- experience was given much more preference than the degree when hiring. On the other hand, transferrable skills (ICT, decision making, problem-solving, communication, self-managements, interpersonal relationships) and personal competencies (creativity, responsibility, determination, confidence and imitativeness) were important for employers.

analytical reasoning, having a know-how of technical and academic software are equally important skills."

Figure 9: Academic vs. Generic Skills (Overall)



In this sample, the majority (42% of all respondents) supported a combination of both skills. For employers, regardless of industry, both skills had to be considered because academic skills got the graduate to the interview stage and strong generic skills were important to progress in his or her career. For employees, generic skills were considered more important. For the university faculty, there was a clear demarcation according to disciplines, i.e., physics and political science emphasized on academic skills while business on generic and computer science on both.

4.2.2 Skill Development at Universities

All three categories of interviewees were asked which skills they felt universities developed in graduates.

Among the university faculty, the computer science department's focus was on the development of fundamental subject knowledge, e.g., programming in different languages, testing products etc. However, there was a growing realization that technical expertise needed to be accompanied with the ability to market products well, communication skills, critical problem-solving and the ability to learn.

Political science did not prepare students for a particular career. Certain disciplines had a ready market like economics, business, or computer science. Political science was not market oriented; graduates in the field got jobs that were not directly relevant to their fields. This department thus focused not only on subject knowledge but also communication skills, articulation, rational and logical thinking etc. Many graduates planned to take CSS exams (Central Superior Service)[8] for which knowledge of current affairs, exam solving strategies, and interview performance were important skills.

In physics, there were two major job markets, i.e., research and development, and academia. For research and development, it was important to be research oriented. For academics, communication skills mattered. Subject knowledge was mandatory for both, as were mathematical and quantitative skills. Rigor was essential too, especially for those planning to pursue a PhD.

Unsurprisingly, the business faculty focused on several generic skills like teamwork, communication, critical thinking, language, and analytical skills. There was also emphasis on the graduates' specific area of study. For example, if they were studying marketing, employers expected them to be aware of marketing theories and strategies and to have the ability to relate and apply those skills in the work environment.

When it came to employers, presentation, communication, and teamwork were skills that were greatly valued by organizations across the board. The employers agreed that these traits were strongly developed among students by the time they graduated. Subject related concepts were well developed but practical application took time, especially in IT and banking. Other skills that employers looked for in new graduates were analytical skills, problem-solving, ability to learn, and inquisitiveness.

There was even more unanimity in responses when employers were asked which skills were necessary in the job market but inadequately developed at university level. All answers related to difficulties in practical life, like issues in interpretation of data and dealing with

[8] The Central Superior Services exam is an exam conducted by the Federal Public Service Commission for appointment in entry level in various occupational groups of Pakistan Civil Services.

difficult people in complex situations (IT); theoretical but not practical knowledge (FMCG); lack of knowledge of various tools and software for analysis as well as of industry trends (telecommunications); adaptability to new environments and networking with new people (banking); lack of stability in terms of staying in the organization and reliance on theoretical knowledge (education); and inability to think beyond oneself, i.e., difficulty in customer focused thinking (manufacturing). The crux of the matter was that transition from studies to employment was deemed to be incomplete, and the employers required the graduates to adapt to new situations quickly.

It was important to note that in technical fields like computer science, graduates' concepts were well developed but the implementation was weak because students had limited practical exposure in real time scenario. IT employers felt that faculty preferred to teach entire batches of students the technology they were familiar with, with little regard to what was in demand in the market. For example, many instructors focused on JAVA although the international market had gone way beyond that. Even though Pakistan generally lagged behind the rest of the world in terms of innovation and adaptability to new technology, indicating that the demands of the local market may be different from the global one, Pakistan's IT industry was quite dynamic. The IT industry was considered to be a constantly evolving one and the employers urged the universities to maintain links with organizations in the industry in order to reduce the gap between the skill set of the students and the demands of the industry.

Most employees mentioned a number of skills in their responses. 50% felt analytical skills were most well developed at university level. This was because the main assessment tools were assignments and exams, which demanded in depth analysis of the course readings. 45% mentioned teamwork- this included 60% of the IT and FMCG employees as well as 100% of telecommunications industry.

This was followed by critical thinking (40%) and presentation/ communication skills (40%). Class participation, presentations, and term papers were used for evaluation at universities, and they played a major role in improving the aforementioned skills. The respondents were

clear about the difference between critical thinking and analytical skills experienced at university and those that were expected at the workplace.[9]

Employees were also questioned about the skills they had been lacking when they joined the workforce. The most frequently mentioned skills were basic computer programs and people management skills. Employees discovered that they had only a very basic idea of the functions of tools like Microsoft Excel or Word and had to learn a lot to be at par with other colleagues. Surprisingly, the majority of the IT organization employees felt they lacked hands on experience with software that the industry used regularly, and had to relearn databases and softwares to meet the demands of their job.

People and stakeholder management was the second most mentioned skill that employees across organizations felt they had been weak in when they joined the workforce. Young employees took time learning how to manage their dealings with many people – within their teams, managers, colleagues, external clients, department heads, shareholders, senior management etc.

4.2.3 Prioritizing Skills

At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to rate 14 employability skills from 1-14 in order of importance. 1 was for the least important skill; 14 was for the most important or highest rated skill. The list of skills was adapted from Graduate Employability Indicators (Oliver et al. 2011). The results were:

[9] The office scenario was different as the stakes involved were different. In office, one's thinking had to result in real time actions and decisions whereas educationally it was just another assignment or project to be done. More importantly, the academics who were interviewed emphasized that problem-solving and case studies were the focus of MBA programs, whereas undergraduate teaching was still mostly theoretical.

Figure 10: Discipline-wise Skill Ratings

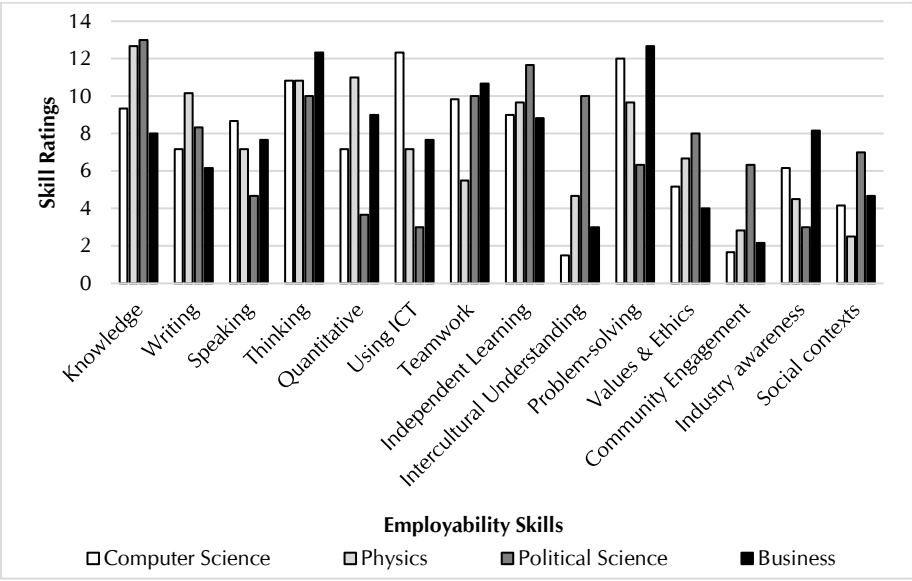


Figure 10 illustrated that the least important skill was community engagement in business and computer science, industry awareness and using ICT in political science, and social contexts in physics. The most important skills in physics and political science were knowledge, using ICT in computer science, and problem-solving in business. These findings corroborated what the university faculty members had said in their interviews, e.g., career training was not an aim for political science or subject specific knowledge mattered the most in physics.

Figure 11 depicted that generally, across disciplines, the university faculty perceived thinking as the most important skill and community engagement as the least.

Figure 11: Overall Skill Ratings for University Faculty

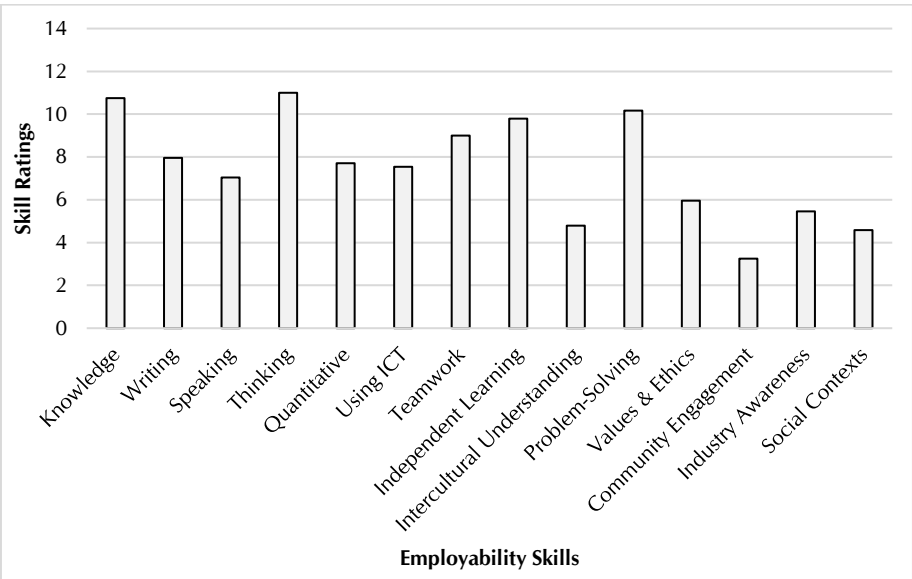
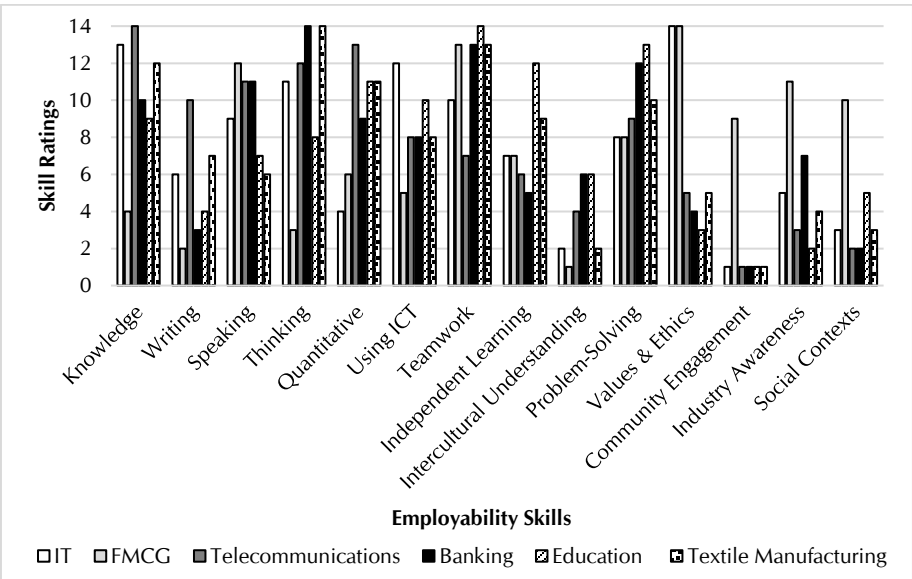


Figure 12: Employer Skill Ratings (Sector Specific)



There was a lot of variation in responses depending on industry. Values and ethics received top ratings by IT and FMCG employers; banking and textile manufacturing rated thinking the highest. It was teamwork for the education sector and knowledge for telecommunications.

The FMCG rated intercultural understanding as the lowest; the rest of the employers rated community engagement as the least important, a sentiment echoing with the general perception of the university faculty members in this sample.

Taking an average across all employers, community engagement was the least important skill and teamwork was the most important (Figure 13). Teamwork was encouraged since the start of university, in the form of projects and presentations. In organizations too, one had to work with completely new people at many levels, so teamwork was understandably an important skill.

Figure 13: Overall Skill Ratings for Employers

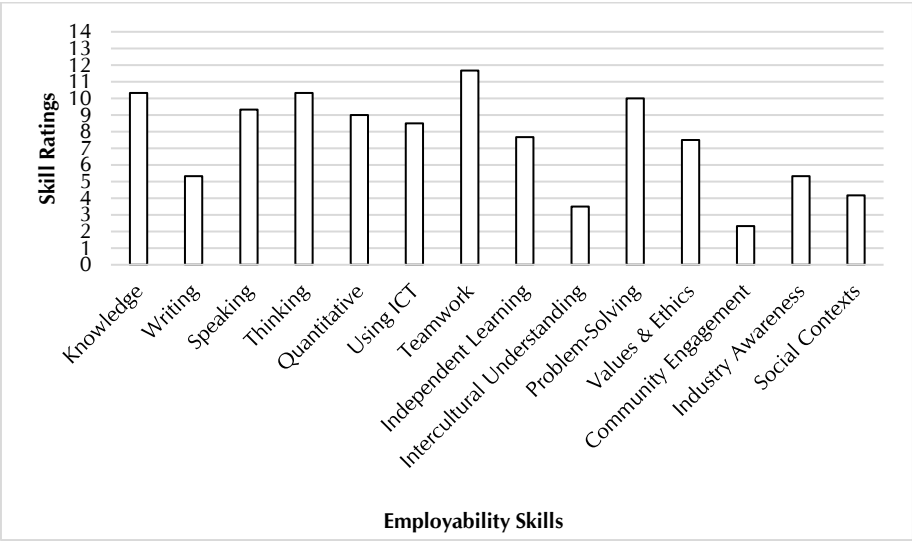
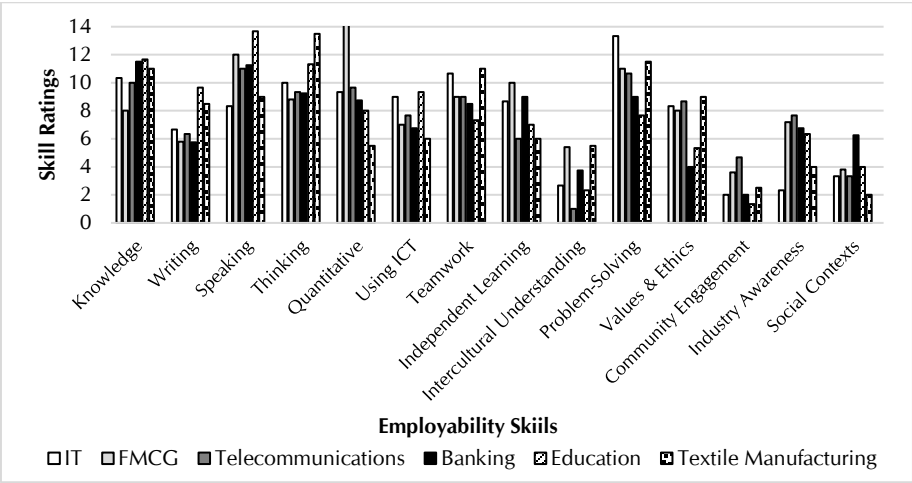


Figure 14: Employees Skill Ratings



Much like the previous results, Figure 14 showed that community engagement was rated the least by the majority of the employees. Speaking was the most important skill for 50% of the employees. FMCG, telecommunications, and education sectors demanded a lot of client and team interaction so speaking skills were important. IT employees rated problem solving as the highest, knowledge was chosen by banking, and manufacturing rated thinking as most important. There was not a very strong difference among industries for these various skills across industries.

Figure 15: Overall Skill Ratings for Employees

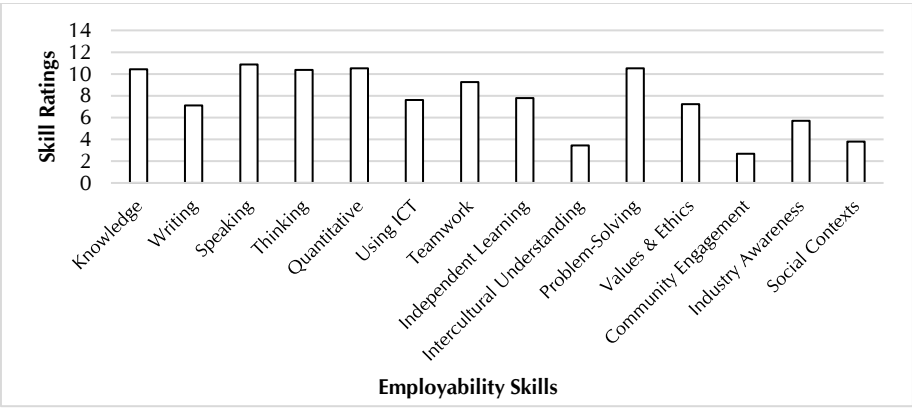
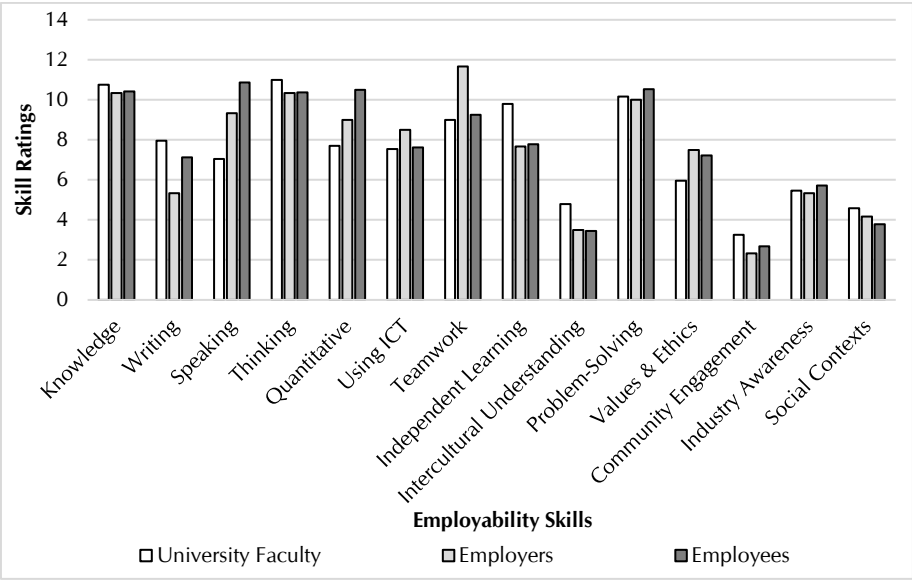


Figure 14 was based on employees per industry, but Figure 15 depicted the average across the entire sample of employees. Again, community engagement and speaking received the lowest and highest overall ratings respectively.

Figure 16 summarized the results of the ratings done by the three respondent groups. Much in line with the individual results, community engagement was the least important and knowledge and thinking were the most important skills according to all three stakeholders. Intercultural understanding was a skill that was not seen as particularly significant overall, but considering Pakistan wanted to be part of the global economy, developing this skill was very important.

Figure 16: Overall Skill Ratings across Respondents



4.2.4 Assessment of Skills during Hiring

The first stage of skills assessment took place during the hiring process. Depending on the company, different tools were used to evaluate candidate skills. Employers were questioned about their methods of assessing skills when hiring candidates and the employees were asked about their experiences.

Interviews were the main tools of hiring. Bigger corporations used additional methods like assessment centers and presentations. 4 out 6 organizations had management trainee programs that involved inter-departmental rotation for a year before designating a department to the employee. The hiring method for management trainees and lateral positions differed. The first step for both was HR screening of resumes to look for related skills and work experience.

For lateral hiring, interviews took place at different stages. Technical competencies and final year projects were evaluated during the interviews as were personality traits, i.e., whether they matched with the company's culture. In the educational sector, panel interviews were conducted for administrative positions. If it was a training position, candidates were asked to present a training plan on a topic. For the hiring of teachers, there was an interview, a pre-hiring language proficiency test, and an observation of the teaching demonstration.

For management trainees, the hiring process was more rigorous. The bank in the sample had several steps for hiring trainees. It commenced with an online test consisting of numerical, logic, and language components. This was followed by an assessment center, i.e., group activities to judge skills like communication, negotiation, problem-solving, leadership, and adaptability to work with new people. This could include activities such as building something from given material and analyzing a bunch of resumes with your team. The final step was a panel interview where interviewers assessed technical knowledge (finance/economics/banking mostly), and asked personality and strength based questions. The aim of the strengths/personality questions was to judge the mindset of the individual in tackling problems and to see if he/she was the right fit for the organization.

Employees from all the organizations generally concurred with their respective employers when describing the process of their hiring and how different skills were tested. The most detailed response was given by one of the employees from the telecommunications organization:

> I had two interviews. Firstly there was a functional interview where I was given job related scenarios that evaluated the way I approached and solved those problems. The second part of the interview was HR based where they asked about my choices in

> life, future plans, way of handling peers and tough situations etc. The other interview was with the director who evaluated my approach to data analysis, and my past choices and experiences.

All the bank employees in the sample had been recruited as management trainees so they went through a more rigorous hiring process, which involved an online pre-screening test, assessment center, and finally an interview. The online test came with limitations, since anyone could be taking the test for the candidate. Nonetheless, it only allowed the applicants to reach the next stage, i.e., assessment center, which was conducted in front of everyone and was a transparent process. In the case of the manufacturing sector employees, their recruitment process involved preparing a market research report, since they had done their Master's and were expected to have more knowledge of the market.

For IT employees, those who were hired as engineers were asked to explain their final year projects to the interviewers, which demonstrated their technical knowledge and verified that they had made the project themselves.

4.2.5 Adequacy of Interviews for Assessing Skills

The effectiveness of interviews in predicting a candidate's skills was debatable. They had issues like misleading initial impressions, confirmation bias, learning interview questions, over and under performance etc.[10] However, interviews were the main assessment tool at organizations in Pakistan, so the employers were questioned about their adequacy in the recruitment process.

While not sufficient on their own, interviews were the most commonly used assessment tools for hiring employees, and in many organizations these were the only methods. In most firms, interviews were conducted

10 Gada-Jane and Prickett (2000) reported that the first 10 seconds of the interview can predict the outcome, which depended on whether the interviewee made a good or bad first impression. But according to Senior Vice President of People Operations at Google Laszlo Bock (2015), these predictions were useless because they merely reflected confirmation bias on the part of the interviewer- rather than assessing the candidate, the interviewer would be looking for clues to confirm his or her initial impression. Interview questions were tricky too. Candidates can improve their interview skills through practice of popular questions or case scenarios; this did not reflect the candidate's ability to perform well at the job. Moreover, genuinely competent candidates could underperform and incompetent ones could over perform in the interviews.

at a number of levels – such as HR, technical, line manager – so there was an assumption that a reasonable assessment of the candidate can be made through interviews.

As one interviewee (FMCG) described, competency or behavioral interviews required candidates to use personal examples to back up their answers, supporting the belief that if the candidate had done well in the past, he was likely to do well in the future, for example, successfully managing client interactions. Strength based interviews included questions like "what are you good at," "do you most like starting tasks or finishing them, "what do you like to do in your spare time," etc. These interviews provided insight into the candidate's thought process.

Interviews were more limiting for technical positions. As expressed by one of the respondents, "Until you bring a software engineer to a computer to judge him in real time scenario, you cannot really evaluate him". If an interview was preceded by a written assignment, the interview allowed employers to judge if he/she answered the assignment him or herself, by asking related questions. Despite the subjectivity of interviews, they allowed the interviewer to make a judgment call.

However, more than half of the respondents felt that interviews alone were inadequate for assessing potential employees and their skills. Relatively high turnovers were common because interviews alone were insufficient for hiring the right fit for the job. They needed to be supplemented by other methods but this depended on the organization's resources.

The issue with assessment centers was that they were not always a practical choice. For large-scale management trainee programs, assessment centers worked because they allowed all candidates to be assessed simultaneously, in the form of group activities. For smaller companies, it was not feasible to organize these centers for a handful of applicants. Even if the company was large scale, it cannot have assessment centers for every position since most lateral positions did not have enough candidates to warrant the arrangements such as a venue, panelists, and equipment.

In addition to interviews, some job positions involved case study presentations and written tests (FMCG). This was a more practical approach and allowed a more thorough evaluation of the candidate.

4.2.6 Improving Skills after Employment

In the workplace, skills were learnt and relearnt all the time. Employers and employees were asked how employability skills were improved and assessed in the workplace.

Once hired, employers suggested that there was significant "handholding," in which new employees were given an overview of various departments and introduced to their immediate team. In the case of management trainees, the introductory phase lasted longer with departmental rotations and factory visits (FMCG, manufacturing).

On the job training took place at any organization regardless of size. Employees approached their supervisors if they had any concerns. Bigger organizations had their own training departments where structured training programs took place regularly. These programs were both for soft/generic skills, e.g., client interaction, conflict resolution etc. as well as technical skills. In some organizations, team leaders nominated their resources for specific trainings. Multinational corporations focused on a 70:20:10 development principle. 70% of development was from on the job learning, 20% was through in person interaction (coaching, mentoring), and 10% was acquired from classroom training, self-learning etc.

When the year ended, line managers and employees had discussions on whether objectives were met and about the development that the employee needed. Then his/her learning objectives would be designed accordingly for the upcoming year.

According to 83% of the employers, the new generation entering the job market lacked ownership of responsibility. It was expressed that employees needed to take full ownership and responsibility for their tasks.

Only two out of the six organizations (FMCG and telecommunications) coordinated with universities to provide employee trainings. These included seminars and trainings on business modules like conflict management, negotiation skills, building business models, etc. Table 1

summarized the mechanisms that the interviewed organizations had in place for improving skill after employment:

Table 1: Organizational Mechanisms for Improving Skills

IT	Skills were evaluated bi-annually during performance reviews. They were improved through technical (online, paid by the company) and non-technical (in house classroom method) trainings.
FMCG	The employee remained on probation for 6 months. The line manager kept a record of his/her progress. After confirmation of appointment, routine performance evaluation took place.
Telecommunications	Line managers had frequent check-ins with employees to ensure a continuous feedback loop. They were given work buddies/mentors they could shadow. Managers nominated employees for necessary trainings. The company had personal development plans for employees to chart out their aspirations and develop. The organization fulfilled those aspirations through job shadowing, rotations, learning and development.
Banking	Trainings and informal/formal feedback for improving particular skills took place.
Education	There were structured training programs for teachers, school heads, coordinators, and general staff. There was emphasis on the behavioral part as well, with soft skills training and teaching.
Textile Manufacturing	There was a calendar that was being followed for training and development, based on need assessment results. Employees were rated as high potential, medium, and so on. Based on these, they were given certain trainings to develop them as future leaders.

When employees were interviewed, they added more details that gave a clearer picture of how skills were improved after employment, since they were the ones who were supposed to benefit from this.

Internal or in house trainings for soft and technical skills were present in some capacity in all the organizations. These trainings took the form of sessions by different departments, e-learning modules, enrolment in relevant diplomas or programs, participation in conferences and seminars etc. MNCs and FMCGs had employee development plans which specified trainings and workshops, i.e., a program where each employee was responsible for identifying his/her own gaps and signing up for trainings accordingly like marketing trainings, leadership, teamwork. The telecommunications employees had access to online learning courses, as well as the freedom to search for any training of one's liking and discussing it with the line manager.

2/3 of the respondents in the IT organization stated they had not received any training as such but were "just given time to develop and that's it". Another respondent in the education institution sample agreed that her organization invested in trainings by sending employees for conferences, workshops, and seminars but that perk was usually reserved for managers. Unfortunately, it was not extended to lower levels of management, especially positions occupied by fresh graduates. Regarding employee assessment, all the employees said they had annual evaluations based on supervisor feedback and achievement of key performance indicators (KPIs). 60% of the employees had biannual evaluations as well, whereas 40% (belonging exclusively to the FMCG and telecommunications industry) had quarterly evaluations in addition to yearly evaluations. All the organizations have annual KPIs on the basis of which employee appraisals took place, and objectives were assigned. Quarterly assessments allowed a more regular check on employee performance, where progress was reviewed and targets adjusted if required.

The most comprehensive feedback process took place at two of the interviewed organizations: banking and telecommunications. In the former, monthly targets were assessed with the manager; in the latter, there was a feedback session with the line manager every month. An emerging feedback mechanism was the 360 degree feedback,[11] but it was more effective for employees who had worked longer in an

11 "360 degree feedback, also known as multi-rater feedback, is a system in which anonymous feedback is gathered about a member of staff from various people they have working relationships with. This is usually their managers, peers, direct reports, subordinates - hence the name "360 degree". It's designed so a range of people can share their opinion to provide a well-rounded view on the individual" (Beqiri 2018). This can also include a self-assessment by the employee himself.

organization and dealt with a larger number of people - managers, peers, subordinates etc.

There was no fixed timeline for how long it took a fresh graduate to work without supervision at his/her first job. In smaller firms, one had to pick up work more quickly; however in bigger ones, it took a resource approximately 6 months to be efficient and 7-8 months to be productive. Till then, that person was treated more as a trainee and not as an employee generating revenue.[12]

4.3 Employment and Jobs

4.3.1 Mismatch between Employers' Expectations and Graduates Produced

As depicted in Bari's article (2018), employers felt that they had to lower expectations and struggled to find the right person for entry-level positions.[13] Was there a gap between employer expectations and those of young graduates? Employers were asked to weigh in on this situation.

Interviews highlighted the difficulties in transition from university to practical life for graduates. Employers felt that there was a dissonance between students' expectations and what they faced at the job. New graduates struggled with interpretation of data, i.e., being able to utilize limited data to come up with recommendations and tell what specific data was needed to get better results.

Many university instructors possessed limited industrial experience, having gone into teaching after acquiring their PhD. Employers felt that

12 A valid point made by one of the organizations (IT) was that due to the hierarchical structure, an employee will always have a supervisor but progressive organizations did not have a culture of micromanaging. It took 2 years (roughly) to be promoted though, which may make some employees impatient.

13 Bari (2018) suggested there was something broken about the "education-employment connection" in our economy. It was not merely a skill mismatch. There was a frequent complaint that universities were churning out majors in humanities and social sciences but it was actually scientists, engineers, and skilled personnel that the industry and society needed. This was also the finding of the UNDP National Human Development Report for Pakistan (2017) when explaining the supply demand gap in the labor market.

they could not adequately prepare graduates for the shift to business requirements, especially in fast paced fields like computer technology.

Another concern was that graduates needed to be realistic about the adjustment period. It took at least 6 months to make the transition and it was easy to get disappointed. Moreover, graduates had to think independently instead of expecting the supervisor to solve all issues.

The findings of this research showed that "mismatch" may not be the right word to use, but there was certainly a gap between the requirements of the job market and what was taught at university level. The consensus was that the general knowledge of students about industries was very low.

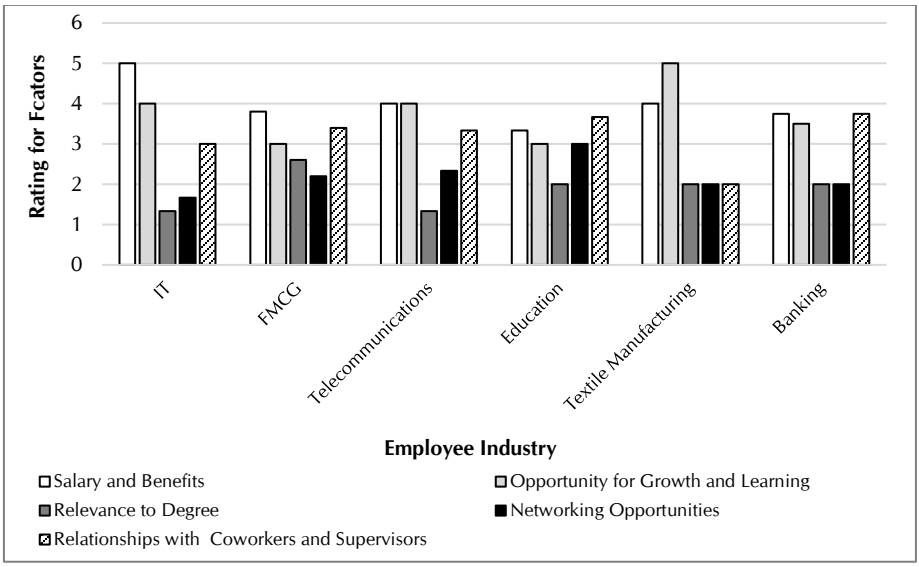
However, all the employers acknowledged that proficiency in relevant concepts and theories helped build a solid foundation. The accusation that universities only taught bookish knowledge and did not provide practical experience was not a fair one. There was no substitute for work experience, which came only at the workplace.

4.3.2 Job Satisfaction – What Matters?

There were several case studies on employee job satisfaction throughout the world, but limited research had been conducted in Pakistan.[14] The employees in this sample were asked to rate five factors influencing job satisfaction in order of importance, with 1 being the least important and 5 the most. The following results were observed:

14 Based on a case study of a leading engineering goods manufacturing company in Pakistan (Rukh, Choudhary and Abbasi 2015), employees aged above 50 (more experience and higher management positions) were more satisfied with promotions, salary, working environment, work condition and stress; their departments did not significantly affect satisfaction levels. The employees in this research were much younger and had less than 3 years of work experience.

Figure 17: Job Satisfaction Factors for Employees



Except for education and textile manufacturing, employees rated salary and benefits as the most important factors affecting their level of job satisfaction. The main reason for doing a job was financial incentive so this was not surprising, especially for someone who was just starting a career. Low rewards discouraged employees and they started looking elsewhere for more rewarding jobs. In line with the discussion earlier on degree relevance, most employees rated relevance to degree as having the least impact on their job satisfaction levels. FMCG employees rated networking opportunities as least important, which was followed closely by degree relevance.

4.3.3 Graduates Leaving First Jobs

Do graduates in Pakistan jump jobs too quickly? Employers rushed to recruit the best graduates, who may not be the correct fit for their organizations; similarly graduates often chose jobs without proper

research and understanding of their own interests and capabilities.[15] So how prevalent was this in Pakistan?

The majority of the interviewed university faculty agreed that there was a likelihood of leaving first jobs in the first year for various reasons, and did not see it necessarily as a negative thing.

37.5% of the sample (all physics and half of political science) cited the pursuit of higher education as a cause. Scholarships not only allowed graduates to study abroad, but also provided a channel through which big foreign companies could recruit them.

21% of the respondents felt that new graduates accepted first jobs in a hurry, feeling pressure from peers and family, and out of fear of joblessness. Their first job was their first encounter with real life so there were many things they had previously believed that turned out to be inaccurate. For example, they may have thought they were good at marketing but when they started working in that field, they realized they were better suited to HR. Once the employee got a better opportunity, he/she left for that. It was a combination of opportunism and self-discovery.

12.5% felt it had something to do with dissatisfaction with the organizational culture. Students were taught many concepts and theories. When they graduated, they wanted to work in organizations that used those skills and where they were well rewarded. When they ventured into the market, they actually didn't find such organizations. Graduates kept moving till they found the right fit. Whenever there was a cultural fit, students stayed there and didn't leave so easily unless there was a really good offer.

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15 According to a report titled "Driving New Success Strategies in Graduate Recruitment" on British companies (2014), employers rushed to recruit graduates who were the cream of the crop and paid a premium to attract that talent, as those graduates were strong in both hard and soft skills. In this process, they tended to ignore graduates who could actually be better fits for their organization. When those hired graduates left within a year, it was a loss of investment for the company. Similarly, graduates also made mistakes when applying for jobs by not spending time on researching potential employers and ending up having a vague understanding of their job description. Additionally they applied a scatter-gun approach, i.e., applying for jobs regardless of interest in order to increase their chances and often accepted jobs out of fear that there will be a gap in the CV. This resulted in a quarter of new employees leaving within a year (Burke and Gibbs 2014).

Half of the computer science academics felt that it was not as much about money as it was about getting a break in a big brand, which paved the path for one's career. It was common for students in technology to want to go abroad where they could earn many times the local salaries and become part of the big industry players.

In sharp contrast, the majority (83.3%) of employers agreed that high turnover of new young employees was a real problem in organizations. 50% stated that graduates were constantly on the lookout for better opportunities. Many started working at a particular job because that was the only option then; they moved as soon as they got something more lucrative or in line with their personal preferences. Some industries like IT had a high turnover due to the competition between firms to acquire the best talent by offering higher salaries.

Going for postgraduate studies was another major reason, as graduates often worked for some time only to strengthen their postgraduate applications.

One employer, from the IT industry, cited the trend of joining emerging startups as another reason. Graduates were attracted to the high salaries and incentive of being part of something new, but later realized the value of the stability offered at MNCs and aimed at finding employment there.

It was believed that the beginning of one's professional life was the best time to be experimental in career choices. An explanation given by the FMCG employer was, "I think there is high turnover because graduates don't have much guidance and go ahead with what is available, but once they develop their equity, they opt for the best options available. They understand the job market, realize their potential, and act accordingly. At the entry level, it is easier to switch. Once you are far ahead in your career, it gets difficult and you get stuck."

Another common reason was the inability of graduates to make a smooth transition from students to employees. These employees felt lost and looked for ways out of a situation they were not comfortable with. Importantly, the manufacturing employer pointed out that employees could also be disheartened by their manager's attitude and leave because of that.

The most nuanced perspective came from the employees, since they were the ones making these decisions to change jobs prematurely. 90% of the employees agreed that job-hopping was quite common for young graduates. Adjustment from student life to adult "real" life took a toll on fresh graduates. If they were not fully satisfied with their work, they had the option of pursuing another degree or looking for a better job. As described by one of the respondents from the manufacturing industry, "The new generation was impatient, and had their own point of view on the work environment. Not all organizations were ready for the millennial mind set."

Some of the employees felt that in Pakistan, even MNCs had no proper career path. Even if they did, the Pakistani office culture was not that inclusive and employers simply did not put in any effort to train new employees. One possible explanation was that employers invested more in an employee after he or she had spent some time at an organization. Once they sensed stability, employers may feel more comfortable in further training. On the other hand, it was equally possible that such steady employees were viewed as complacent and not ambitious enough, so the employer did not have much interest in them- it was a double edged sword!

Another common reason was "settling for mediocre". In the words of one of the FMCG employees, the allocation was imperfect and graduates ended up accepting positions they might not really want, just so that they had a job. Then they constantly compared themselves with peers, finding themselves getting a raw deal and on the lookout for better opportunities.

4.4 Collaborations between Universities and Employers

There were several ways of checking collaborations between universities and employers, and the former mentioned several relevant examples. Firstly, university placement offices organized career fairs and talks by different organizations. However, only business departments had their own departmental placement offices. This did not mean that MOUs (memorandum of understanding) were signed to recruit a specific number of students every year, but it did ensure continuous interaction of organizations with universities.

Secondly, alumni networking events were held at universities, which invited alumni, many of whom occupied prominent positions in multinationals, banks, government organizations, and NGOs. For private universities, many board members were senior position holders in organizations, and often gave detailed insights on what kinds of candidates were required in the market. Older graduates had personal relationships with faculty members, whom they could contact for employee recommendations for vacancies. Similarly, faculty members provided personal referrals for students that they felt deserved job opportunities.

Thirdly, many academics had formal collaborations and exchange programs with international universities for research projects and graduate programs. Computer science faculty members had research collaborations with the industry, where students may also be part of a team conducting research that benefited companies and their products, but the goal was not employability per se.[16]

Fourthly, another implicit way of assessing collaboration was to check the comfort of universities with an employer informed approach towards developing the curriculum. Regardless of academic discipline, all interviewees believed that curriculum design should be the domain of the concerned faculty, with no interference from external actors. It cannot be designed based on suggestions coming from the industry, or else it would be in constant need of revision. The main criteria were that the curriculum needed to be approved by the department, university, and be in accordance with HEC guidelines.

However, there was a division when it came to the usefulness of incorporating suggestions from employers in the curriculum. 50% (all of physics and political science) said that suggestions were always welcome, but they didn't make a significant impact on the overall curriculum since

16 The experience was beneficial for students and employers may offer jobs in the future to those who impressed them, but that was just a possibility. There were several research collaborations with top universities, and students ended up being hired by foreign collaborators as PhD students or research students. Faculty worked hard to build contacts, publish papers and co-author with students, paving the path for graduate applications and admissions.

the focus was on mastering the subject fundamentals.[17] However, university departments did pay attention to what was happening in the job market. Political science departments had started teaching public administration because employers suggested students should know about it and it was necessary for government related posts.

It was important to understand that employers' views got more weightage when there was a big industry to absorb the graduates and there existed a strong academic and industry linkage. In the words of one of the political science interviewees, "we are not in contact directly with the market because nobody is looking for political science graduates." This was because there wasn't a demand for political science graduates the way there was for niche fields like computer science or accounting. Similarly, even students didn't usually demand more seats in this discipline as compared to economics where there were more aspirants than available seats.

In computer science and business, there was more openness towards seriously considering employer input, because they planned to send their students to the industry. In business, when teaching students conventional marketing models in the classroom, courses on digital marketing tools were also taught because the market demanded it.

Fifthly, like all departments, business too had advisory boards to review suggestions and conduct feasibility studies when introducing new courses. For example, if there was a new major to launch, the faculty investigated and did market research on current and future market trends. If the major had scope in the future, the department introduced it. Similarly, the business department in the sample had previously rejected

[17] For example in political science, if there was a class on nationalism, the aim was not to produce nationalists. The instructor taught important debates in the area; what happened empirically, conceptually, comparatively etc. These basics cannot be influenced by employer opinions. Similarly, employability was not the key objective of physics departments, and the curriculum should be designed by physicists. If students didn't know basics like Newton's Law, what was the credibility of the course? The skills of physics graduates developed with their subject knowledge, and they were later utilized in fields like data scientists, design engineers, geophysicists, researchers, etc.

the suggestion of introducing a degree in actuarial sciences after market research did not show much potential for it in Pakistan.[18]

All interviewed employers had collaborations with universities, but generally they were limited to recruitment drives and handling placements with the career placements offices. Companies visited universities and gave presentations to prospective employees, conducted recruitment tests, and answered queries. At other times, companies organized presentations only to market their brands. All big employers had annual recruitment drives at leading universities in Pakistan. Additionally, career fairs were held in universities where many companies participated.

4.5 Internships

Internships provided a way for students to gain employable skills, build contacts, and demonstrate their work readiness to potential employers. How useful were they in Pakistan?

Universities encouraged internships, but the degree of importance varied according to the subject area. The departments of physics, computer science, and political science did not make internships mandatory, leaving them as optional for students. For business faculty, internships were usually a degree requirement. Students usually had to find their own internships, as universities' placement offices could only facilitate a certain number of candidates.

Some fields had a more applied approach like accounting so internships at auditing firms were required. In accounting, there were a lot of skills involved, for example, approaching your client for data, conducting audit etc. These skills were difficult to teach in the classroom but were easily developed in internships. For other fields like management or finance, internships only added value if they were well structured or else they were not of much use in terms of learning. Auditing companies cannot really benefit from an intern who joined the firm for only 6 weeks,

[18] Some interviewees felt that at times, highly placed corporate people were working at a completely different level, unaware of the situation on ground and disconnected from the real world. So what they felt was necessary may not be the right thing for universities. Of course, business degrees were generic and prepared students to be managers in any kind of industry - no one will tell universities to design customized degrees in management for every field.

which was the usual duration for internships. They needed 12 weeks to get some kind of results.

On the other hand, a well-structured internship program can be an enriching experience when universities coordinated with employers. The undergraduate business management program at one of the sample universities had a 6-month organizational based learning (OBL) program.[19]

Each interviewed employer organization offered internships in different departments (depending on available openings) for a period comprising 4-8 weeks. Only 3 organizations (FMCG, telecommunications and textiles) explicitly stated that an exceptional performance could lead to a permanent job position after graduation, as the candidate was shortlisted for future hiring. The FMCG identified 2 kinds of internships - associate interns came in an organization for 4-6 weeks and only performed operational tasks; project interns came for 3 months and delivered a proper project.

Unfortunately, most of the employers felt that in Pakistan, internships were usually not constructive. Only a few MNCs such as Coke, Pepsi, Nestle, Telenor etc. were considered as work experience in internships.

None of the employers made internships a job requirement, nor did they assign any particular weightage to it when assessing candidates. Although they all agreed that internships provided a realistic idea of the workings of an organization, the extent of its helpfulness was debatable.[20]

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19 For a whole semester, students worked as regular employees and got paid. It was deliberately not called internship because that implied "non serious" work. MBA programs provided even more exposure where students did internships as well as management consultancy projects in their last semester. Here they interacted directly with the industry and asked their problems (HR/marketing/supply chain etc.) and provided solutions based on research. For example, they went to an FMCG and studied their competition with respect to a specific product like bottled water. They observed the competition, i.e., what strategies they used, how the company can maintain its market share etc. This kind of work helped students understand organizational issues, challenges, expectations at a workplace etc.

20 For example, IT organizations felt that projects were more important than internships, as the latter usually required students to perform small jobs like photocopying, conducting basic research etc. which did not add to their knowledge or skills. Projects on the other hand allowed employers to assess the creativity of the project, innovation, level of difficulty in executing it, how the candidate justified his choice of topic etc.

The majority of employees agreed that internships provided a general idea of the work environment and helped develop some employability skills like familiarity with workplace environment, teamwork, accountability, and time management.

A candid revelation by one of the telecommunications employees was that the motivation behind pursuing internships was to develop a network, have a good brand name on the CV, and have good stories to tell during a job interview! No one said that internships were useless, but the main objective was to develop a contact network to facilitate future job applications and impress employers.

Only 30% of the employees in the sample had done internships in industries in which they eventually obtained their first jobs - 33.3% in IT, 75% of the bank employees, and 40% of the MNC employees. The interviews revealed that none of the employees currently working in the telecommunications, manufacturing, and education industries had interned in the same fields as students. However, there seemed to be negligible impact of this "relevant" experience on a candidate's ability to quickly adapt to the requirements of his/her eventual employment place.

4.6 English Language Proficiency

There have been some studies on the effect of English language proficiency on a graduate's earning capacity. In India and Pakistan, there were sizeable economic returns for being proficient in English.[21] We asked employers and employees if English language proficiency improved employability.

Employers suggested that the importance varied according to job functions, for example, if it was technical, a passable proficiency was required; for business functions like marketing and retail, the criterion was

[21] Two studies on India found that earnings were 12% to 34% higher for employees who spoke English, although it depended on the level of fluency (Bhandari and Bordoloi 2006; Azam, Chin and Prakash 2010). A study on the Pakistani labor market (Aslam et al. 2010, qtd. in SAHE 2016) too had similar findings that English language proficiency had the largest effect on earnings (compared to numeracy, literacy and health knowledge), and more for females than males. Jamal et al. (2003) observed the rate of returns for years in education was higher for educated workers (more proficiency in English language) from the services sector compared to manufacturing and agricultural sectors.

higher. The banking HR pointed out that good speaking skills helped in marketing oneself, whether it was with the employer or the client. They explained that since presentations were conducted and reports were written in English, a decent grip over the language was integral.

A strong point made by an FMCG representative was that English was a much bigger deal in Pakistan than it was in the many other places, highlighting our mindset that proficiency in English language indicated intelligence or professional capability. The workplace operated in English but once you got global exposure, English language was not a hindrance, e.g., many people in different countries worked for multinationals who either did not know English or spoke it less fluently, but that had little to do with their professional competence.

All employees, like the employers, agreed that proficiency in English mattered but to an extent. They gave similar reasons, i.e., ease of communication and presentations. Good English helped in the initial job interviews. Professionally, the content of the presentations mattered more than vocabulary, grammar or style. The employee had to convince others to agree with his/her stance and that can be learned through experience.

However, it is important to note that these interviewees had studied at prestigious universities, giving them an edge in their language skills. They may perhaps lack the perspective that someone from a less prestigious place would have about the advantage of good language skills.

4.7 Employability – A Priority for Universities?

Employability was a complex construct with many aspects, and university curricula could incorporate these to different extents according to subject types. How much was employability a priority for universities?

The general consensus among the university respondents was that the teaching and assessment of employability skills was not an explicit focus of the curriculum. It was assumed that the necessary skills were developed in degree programs with a focus on subject knowledge. The understanding of course material can be checked through exams and assignments. Presentations and class participation checked confidence, oral communication and teamwork; projects checked innovation, independent learning, and time management.

Internships and work-integrated learning were effective ways of improving employability, e.g., OBL or organizational based learning, which was mentioned by some of the respondents. Particularly in business schools, there were guest lectures by industry representatives who talked to students about organizational expectations and the kind of candidates they were looking for. Instructors organized industry visits and students had to prepare industry reports that were assessed. Case method teaching was used in MBA programs but it was gaining popularity in undergraduate level teaching too.[22]

For computer science faculty, the focus was on the development of strong knowledge fundamentals. In addition to industry, respondents considered PhD to be the next step after undergraduate studies for such highly specialized and employable education.

University academics were asked if they had changed their teaching style over the years to incorporate the learning and teaching of employability related skills. More than half of the interviewees (54%) responded that the change in their teaching style was not due to incorporating employability. Rather, it was due to the improved multimedia lectures, increased feedback from students, changes in course content etc.

In the same vein, 70% of the employees denied that their undergraduate degree program focused explicitly on the teaching and assessment of employability skills; rather the main focus was tailored towards academic learning. University courses were usually designed in such a way that these skills were embedded implicitly in the assessment tools. Employability skills were improved with work experience over the years.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

Based on the findings of this research and the literature, several themes came to light.

[22] However there were some issues too. These cases were usually based on first world experiences and were not the latest cases, but actually quite a few years old. As opposed to a case on American Airlines, one on Air Blue or PIA would be more helpful for students who would apply for jobs locally. Not all students can land jobs abroad and their absolute ignorance about the reality on their home ground will not serve them well in their job interviews.

Firstly, employability is an implicit objective of the undergraduate university curriculum whereas the explicit focus is on academic learning. Quality education, by default, encompasses traits like interpersonal behavior management, inductive/deductive reasoning, critical thinking, language skills, numeracy, ability to provide logical arguments etc. These are the skills that employers seek in any employee who had spent four years in university and graduated with a degree (Bari 2018).

Secondly, Pakistani universities have limited assessment tools, with a focus on exams, assignments, and projects. Co-curricular activities help students see beyond textbook learning and get some exposure to organizational requirements. However, industry liaisons and work placements are less common, especially for non-professional subjects like social sciences.

Thirdly, a second degree could make graduates more employable but it is advisable to acquire some work experience before that. It certainly does not harm one's chances, and employees with a postgraduate degree have a slight edge over those with an undergraduate degree.

Fourthly, the importance of internships in Pakistan is debatable. They provide a way for students to gain employable skills, build contacts, and demonstrate their work readiness to potential employers. First, a few weeks are not enough to learn much; second, interns gain experience when they are assigned specific projects but usually they are just given mundane tasks in the department.

Fifthly, interviews are the main hiring tools in organizations. However interviews come with some limitations like confirmation bias, candidates practicing questions, and over or underperformance. It is necessary to supplement interviews with other tools such as work sample tests for technical positions (product managers, engineers), structured behavioral and situational interviews with cognitive ability tests to better gauge how the person will perform once on the team, and cross functional interviews (Bock 2015).

Equipping students with the right education automatically means they pick the right skills, and the ability to learn even more once they are part of the workplace. In an ideal situation, "academia and the needs of employers are not in conflict and it is possible to be both sensitive to

academic expectations but also develop graduates with skills for employment" (Knight and Yorke 2002; Knight and Yorke 2003; Cox and King 2006).

6. Policy Implications

While this research was a preliminary investigation, the findings can provide potential areas for future research.

Higher education institutions should adopt the work integrated learning (WIL) approach after making suitable modifications. This includes work placements, internships and practicum; project-based learning; and service learning." (Yorke, 2011). Moreover internships need to be part of the formal grading so students can take them seriously.

The literature suggested "capstone subjects" as a means of investigating the strength of students' employability skills, i.e., "culminating subject of a program that provides students with the opportunity to consolidate skills and put into practice theory learned throughout their entire program" (Yue et all 2009). Yue et al. highlighted that capstone subjects were particularly useful in industries that involved client interaction, e.g., computer science students were assigned a real client to work with and asked to design a software development project (with a list of pre-assigned deliverables).

Career services or placement offices should give students a realistic picture about the limited scope in the job market, e.g., there can be only a certain number of product managers in the market, or in a company. They should inform the students about the avenues available to them, e.g., smaller firms, SMEs (small to medium enterprises), startups, etc. This helps students instill some flexibility in terms of career options.

Academic departments should regularly meet to discuss the expectations of employers from graduates of specific disciplines, so that they can include some sector specific skills and make their curriculum and teaching more responsive to employer needs (Thornton 2016).

Employers need to invest more in training young employees, not just senior managers. Additionally, they can sponsor virtual education or evening classes for their more promising employees. Some employers

suggested signing bonds with employees to return to their employer after getting the degree financed by their organization. Employees could still leave after receiving more lucrative job offers, but employers could experiment with this method.

There were many courses that employers recommended students should be taught to improve their employability related soft skills, e.g., leadership development, business communication, ecommerce, and data analytics. Also, instructors should have some practical experience because they cannot give a realistic picture of the industry without having experienced it themselves.

For a smooth transition, graduates should be willing to learn and employers have to be willing to teach. Graduates are job ready after university, but they need guidance in the initial stages of work life. Universities are training students with hard and soft skills both, but employability is something that keeps developing over time and all stakeholders need to play their roles.

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