

Critical Analysis of Higher Education and Employability in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the nexus between higher education and employability in Pakistan. In contemporary credential societies, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are believed to serve as the main providers of skilled and trained professional workforce. In Pakistan, higher education is crucial for creating job opportunities. This promotes the overall economic stability of the country. In the recent past, across societies, particularly in Pakistan, graduates have faced problems in securing jobs based on their credentials. The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between higher education and employability in Pakistan. The study was carried out in two public sector universities in Pakistan. A total of 80 respondents, selected through snowball sampling, were included in the study. Questionnaire was used for the collection of data. The collected data were analyzed using a quantitative data analysis technique. Univariate and bivariate analyses were performed. The study findings show a significant association between higher education and employability. The study found that graduates are less equipped with appropriate employability skills and training than before. There is a dire need to equip students with market-oriented skills during their stay in HEIs.

Keywords: Higher Education, Employability, Skills Development, Credentialism

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Introduction

Education, particularly higher education, is a binding force that promotes social mobility and economic development in a country. Quality education enables members of society to secure stable employment and improve their quality of life. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are zones and source of human resource development (Bakari, Hunjra, & Attiq, 2017). HEIs, across societies, are instrumental in creating employment opportunities, ultimately contributing to the economic growth of the country (Qazi, Raza, & Sharif, 2017). At the time of this research (in 2022), there were 232 HEC-recognized educational institutions that produced 445,000 graduates every year. The increasing number of universities and graduates does not indicate progress or an increase in job opportunities. The increased number of graduates in the market has led to a competitive job market, which has consequently contributed to an increase in the unemployment rate in Pakistan. Statistics show a significant increase in unemployment and underemployment in 2021, that is, 4.35 percent, which is a slight uptick from the 4.3 percent recorded the previous year, and the youth unemployment rate is recorded at 8.9 percent (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2021-2022).

Recently, research has shown a huge increase in youth unemployment worldwide. In Russia, fresh graduates face several issues in getting employment in the job market (Julia, Anastasia, & Anastasia, 2015). A similar situation prevailed in Italy, Spain, and Luxembourg, where the unemployment rate kept increasing compared to the annual graduating ratio. It is noted that graduates with higher education face a higher chance of unemployment (Fernández, 2006). Similarly, HEIs in Greece have failed to achieve employability skills for their graduates, and inadequate employability skills in their curriculum have become a prominent reason for this failure (Panagiotakopoulos, 2012). Like other parts of the world, the increasing rate of unemployment among graduates of higher education is a serious concern in the global north and south (Julia et al., 2015), and Pakistan is no exception. The importance of higher education and economic growth in Pakistan cannot be denied (Chaudhary, Iqbal, & Gillani, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the relationship between higher education and employability in the context of

Pakistan. Although few studies have been conducted on this issue in Pakistan. However, these studies focused on the quality of education, while employability skills have been ignored by researchers, scholars, and academicians. This study critically analyzed HEIs and employability in Pakistan. Researchers have attempted to determine the association between higher education and employability. The specific objective was to examine the role of HEIs in developing graduates' employability skills.

Employability has been the subject of debate among researchers and scholars. Several explanations of employability exist, but there is less consensus among scholars on employability (Bhola & Dhanawade, 2013). Scholars have defined employability from different perspectives (Gedye & Beaumont, 2018; Tymon, 2013; Yorke, 2006). However, employability has passed through three phases. First, market-oriented employability skills were focused on. Second, it aimed to acquire those skills, and third, it analyzed the ability to get employment (Bhola & Dhanawade, 2013). Similarly, Harvey (2001) in his study, also mentioned that there are two broad groups that defined employability. The first group defined employability in terms of the qualities of graduates securing employment after their studies. The second group associated employability with students' attitude, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Harvey, 2001; Hillage & Pollard, 1998). However, Lees (2002) found that employability and employment are different. According to him, employability contains the necessary skills to maintain employment, while being employed means having a job. Employability, from the perspective of HEIs, is to produce graduates who are capable of employment. Fundamentally, employability is about learning –learning how to learn – and employability is not a product, but a process (Lees, 2002). Similarly, the concept of higher education is evolving; however, in contemporary times, several characteristics are associated with higher education: the relationship of HEIs is characterized by research, education, skills, and the financial and cultural contribution of higher education to

society (Barnett, 1990). A connection has been established between higher education and economic activity, linking employability to higher education (Yorke, 2010). Therefore, higher education is essential in producing skilled human capital that generates economic activities to achieve financial growth within a society (Kuroda, Yuki, & Kang, 2014). It is pertinent to mention that HEIs have a significant contribution to producing a specialized form of human capital. Therefore, HEIs are regarded as engines of the knowledge-based economy (Ozsoy, 2008). Similarly, universities are considered a major source of human resources for the job market in the form of a trained and professional workforce (Bakari et al., 2017). Therefore, this study attempted to analyse the relationship between higher education institutions and employment opportunities

Recently, youth unemployment has increased significantly worldwide. Similar trends have been observed in Russia, where graduates from higher education institutions face employment hurdles in the job market. In Russia, young people have the highest unemployment rates (Anastasia, Julia, Elena, & Eldar, 2013). The seriousness of the issue is linked not only to the extent and persistence of unemployment but also to the employability skills that graduates acquire in higher-education institutions (Papakonstantinou, 2022). American graduates have also witnessed a vivid decrease in job opportunities. A small segment of college graduates was able to acquire lucrative job opportunities in the competitive job market in the USA. Thus, squeezing and polarizing American graduates pose fundamental challenges for policymakers (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020). Similarly, Italy, Spain, and Luxembourg are among those countries where the unemployment rate increases according to the annual increase in graduates' education. Graduates with higher education face higher unemployment rates (Fernández, 2006). Higher education institutions in Greece have also failed to achieve employability skills for their graduates (Panagiotakopoulos, 2012). The increasing rate of unemployment

among graduates of higher education is a serious concern worldwide (Julia et al., 2015). Leading consultancies proclaim that the relationship between higher education institutions and employability skills development needs to be revised due to its limited applicability in the competitive job market. This is equally a serious concern for international companies in Bangalore, Beijing, Shanghai, New York, London, and Frankfurt (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). Notably, graduates are not acquiring modern employment skills. Consequently, the demand for skilled graduates has increased in the job market. Furthermore, employers are not interested in utilizing their energies on graduates with no or fewer employability skills.

Pakistan, a developing economy, is rich in natural resources and human capital. Pakistan is presently facing a youth bulge, and the United Nations Population Fund Report (2016-17) highlights that among 207 million people, 63 percent of them are youngsters (Population Census, 2017). Fatima Warraich and Ameen (2011) in his research, concluded that if graduates only rely on theoretical knowledge, it will be difficult for them to compete in the job market. To improve their employability, graduates must develop basic employability skills, such as communication, arithmetic, and presentation skills. There is a significant difference between employers and recent engineering graduates' views on the importance of employability skills. Employers place a high value on cognitive and interpersonal abilities, whereas students do not consider these skills to be crucial. Engineering students tend to prioritize technical skills, whereas employers are more interested in candidates with soft skills. This difference in perception has led to longer job search times for these graduates (Rizwan, Demirbas, Hafiz, & Manzoor, 2018). However, in the case of developed countries (Pollard, 2015), a minimal difference is observed between employers' and students' perceptions regarding employability skills because of strong industry-academia linkage (Nair, Patil, & Mertova, 2009).

Compared to developing countries, developed countries offer more practical exposure to their students because of better socioeconomic conditions and skill development. It certainly helps in reducing the perception gap between students and employers (Rizwan, Choudhary, Jahanzaib, & Ammar, 2013). In contrast, developing nations face a shortage of resources, preventing them from offering similar opportunities to their graduating students. This results in a significant disparity between the expectations of students and employers (Rizwan, Farooq, Alvi, & Nawaz, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the theory of credentialism to understand the role of higher education institutions in developing employability skills. The founders of the credentialist framework are Dore and Collins. First, Dore analyzed the importance of credentials. After that Collins proposed his sociological theory of credentialism (Zajda, 2012) Collins, in his book, argued that there is a weak relationship between formal educational credentials and employability skills. He also highlighted that the education acquired in institutions does not meet industrial needs. This was a major concern of Collins' theory. The proponents of credentialism believe that higher education does not ensure employment of graduates, rather it increases the ratio of underemployment and unemployment (Walters, 2004). Collins, proposed that credentials have become a new currency in contemporary society. Graduates must attain more valuable credentials to secure their positions in the job market (Collins, 2019). Collins' also argued that new types of credentials are replacing the old ones due to new values attached to them. Collin's theory of credentialism allows us to analyze both the increasing trend of higher education and unemployment among youth in credential societies. He further contended that the significance of any form of education increasingly relies

less on the specific material taught and more on reaching a certain level and obtaining the formal qualification that permits progression to the subsequent stage (Collins, 2019). Using observations in this sense led us to argue that graduates acquire different credentials to increase their employment opportunities. However, these credentials do not enhance their employability skills, particularly in Pakistan. Achieving formal credentials without improving employability skills creates a hurdle for graduates to enter the job market and develop high positions during their careers.

Similar assertions have been focused in this study that whether the graduates equipped with credentials have employability skills or not. Therefore, the theory of credentialism allows us to use the concepts of formal education, employability skills development, competitive job markets, and credential inflation. In this study, formal education refers to higher education. However, employability skills development, competitive job markets, and credential inflation have been analyzed in the context of higher education institutions. Credentialism theory allows us to measure the role of higher education in graduates' employability skills development.

Research Methodology

This study used a quantitative research method to understand the connection between higher education and employability in Pakistan. The rationale for using a quantitative research method is to analyze the magnitude of the problem. The population of this study comprised graduates of two public sector higher education institutions. The sampling unit of the study was graduates from BS and MSc programs who graduated in 2017-2019. In quantitative studies, probability sampling is employed to select the sample size. However, this quantitative study adopted non-probability sampling. The rationale for using non-probability

sampling is the scattered nature of the study population and the need to find respondents for primary data. It is pertinent to mention that the respondents for this study were graduates who completed their degrees from 2017 to 2019. Therefore, it was difficult to reach them all and use probability sampling that ensures an equal chance of occurrence for all respondents. In such a situation, snowball sampling (non-probability) was opted as the best technique for reaching the study respondents. The sample size in this study was 80 respondents. The sample size was not fixed in advance data collection was stopped after data were collected from 80 respondents.

This study used a questionnaire as a tool for data collection. The questionnaire was compiled on google forms and distributed to respondents via email and WhatsApp. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first section was for graduates who were currently employed, and the second section was for those who were looking for jobs. The questionnaire was divided into two parts to analyze the job satisfaction and job-seeking experience of the graduates. The questionnaire consisted of structured questions.

The collected data were analyzed in line with quantitative data analysis techniques and were divided into two parts. First, researchers completed the univariate analysis, which focused on the percentage and frequency of responses and provided detailed information about respondents' socioeconomic backgrounds. In the second stage, we conducted a bivariate analysis comprising correlation and linear regression analyses. The bivariate analysis helps us measure the strength and predictability of variables, and it also helps test the hypothesis of the current study. The following key findings were derived from the teachers' interviews regarding girls' outperformance in education.

Results and Discussions

Table 1 describes the data on respondents' gender and age. The table's statistics indicate that females made up over half of the respondents, accounting for 52.5%, while males comprised slightly less than half (47.5 %). The table also presents information about the respondents' ages. The given data show that a significant number of respondents (81.3%) belong to the age group of 22-27. Similarly, the age group of the respondents from 28-33 are 17.5 percent of the total population whereas only 1.3 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 34-39. This table also provides information on the respondents' departments and levels of education. The statistics in the table reveal that more than half of the respondents (58.8%) were from social science departments. The data show that 17.5% of the respondents were from the computer science department. Respectively, 15.5% of respondents were from arts departments, and only 8.8% were from medical sciences. The data further revealed the education level of respondents, with a highly significant number of respondents (73.8%) holding an MSc degree. However, the rest of the respondents (26.3%) were from the BS program. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents by their parents' education and employment status. The statistics in the table indicate that 77.5% of the respondents' fathers were literate and 22.5% were illiterate. In contrast, 72.5% of the respondents' mothers were illiterate, with only 27.5% being literate. Additionally, the data revealed that 62.5% of the respondents were unemployed and 37.5% were employed

Table 1

Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent

Female	42	52.5
Male	38	47.5
Total	80	100.0

Respondents' Age

Age (Years)	Frequency	Percent
22-27	65	81.3
28-33	14	17.5
4-39	01	01.3
Total	80	100.0

Respondents'
Department

Department	Frequency	Percent
Medical science	07	8.8
Social science	47	58.8
Computer science	14	17.5
Arts	12	15.5
Total	80	100.0

Respondents' Education

Education	Frequency	Percent
BS	21	26.3
MSc	59	73.8
Total	80	100.0

Respondents' Father's
Education

Educational Level	Frequency	Percent
Literate	18	22.5
Illiterate	62	77.5

Total	80	100.0
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Respondents' Mother's Education		
Educational Level	Frequency	Percent
Literate	22	27.5
Illiterate	58	72.5
Total	80	100.0
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Are you currently employed?		
Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	32	37.5
No	48	62.5
Total	80	100.0

Table 1 presents the data of the respondents towards their employability skills. According to the table, 61.3% of the respondents were unemployed and did not provide feedback on the statements. Meanwhile, 13.8% strongly agreed with the assertion that "your university degree prepares you for the job," while 10.0% agreed, and 8.8% were neutral. Conversely, 5.0% disagreed, and 1.3% strongly disagreed with this statement. The table also shows that in response to "your discipline does not have a job market," 17.5% disagreed, 15.0% were neutral, 12.5% agreed, 10.0% strongly agreed, and 6.3% strongly disagreed. Regarding the statement "you have a good command of your subjects," 23.8% agreed, 17.5% strongly agreed, and 12.5% were neutral, while 7.5% disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. The data indicate that for "your degree taught you to work under pressure," 22.5% agreed, 15.0% strongly agreed, 11.3% disagreed, 10.0% remained neutral, and 2.5% strongly disagreed. Additionally, 23.8% agreed, 18.8% strongly agreed, and 10.0% were neutral regarding "your degree enables you to handle multiple assignments simultaneously," while 7.5% disagreed, and 1.3% strongly

disagreed. The table further reveals that in response to "your degree trained you to be an effective member," 27.5% agreed, 12.5% strongly agreed, and 11.3% were neutral, whereas 7.5% disagreed, and 2.5% strongly disagreed. The given data indicate that in response to "there were different job fairs organized by the university during your degree," 17.5 percent of respondents remained neutral, 17.5% disagreed, and 8.8 percent of the respondents agreed. While 8.8% of respondents strongly agreed, 8.8% strongly disagreed.

Table 2

Responses towards Employability Skills

Statement	UEM	SA	A	NO	DA	SDA	Mean	STD
Your university degree prepared you for the job	49 (61.3)	11 (13.8)	8 (10.0)	7 (8.8)	4 (5.0)	1 (1.3)	.86	1.310
Your discipline does not have job market	31 (38.8)	8 (10.0)	10 (12.5)	12 (15.0)	14 (17.5)	5 (6.3)	1.84	1.761
You have a good command on your subjects	31 (38.8)	14 (17.5)	19 (23.8)	10 (12.5)	6 (7.5)	0 (0.0)	1.28	1.292
Your degree taught you to work under pressure	31 (38.8)	12 (15.0)	18 (22.5)	8 (10.0)	9 (11.3)	2 (2.5)	1.41	1.481

Your degree enables you to handle multiple assignments simultaneously	31 (38.8)	15 (18.8)	19 (23.8)	8 (10.0)	6 (7.5)	1 (1.3)	1.29	1.333
Your degree trained you to be an effective team member	31 (38.8)	10 (12.5)	22 (27.5)	9 (11.3)	6 (7.5)	2 (2.5)	1.30	1.400
There were different job fairs organized by university during your degree	31 (38.8)	7 (8.8)	7 (8.8)	14 (17.5)	14 (17.5)	7 (8.8)	1.94	1.817

Table 2 shows a model summary of the linear regression, formulated after the linear regression analysis in SPSS. The model summary explains the R-squared value, which is .867. The R-squared value indicates that 86% of the observed data fit the regression model. The table presents the value of R, 0.931a, the value of adjusted R-squared, 0.852, and the standard error of the estimate, 0.188. Table 3 also presents the results of the ANOVA, formulated after the linear regression analysis in SPSS. The following data explain the F-statistic value 57.999 and significance value .000. The higher F value and the Sig value of .000 indicate a highly significant relationship between higher education and employability. The table also indicates the values of the sum of squares 16.468, degrees of freedom 8, and mean square 2.058 for the regression. The residual value sum of the square is 2.520, the degrees of freedom are 71, and the mean square is .035. However, the total value of the sum of squares was 18.987, and the degrees of freedom were 79.

Table 3

Linear Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
		1	.931a	.867	.852	.188

Linear Regression ANOVA						
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	16.468	8	2.058	57.999	.000
	Residual	2.520	71	.035		
	Total	18.987	79			

Conclusion and Discussion

The literature review and findings of the current study enabled us to conclude that there is a highly significant relationship between higher education and employability skills development. However, the study findings show that graduates are not equipped with appropriate employability skills and competence. The main factors responsible for the lack of employability skills development among graduates are ineffective curricula, incompetent faculty, theoretical base learning, and wrong perception of students regarding their employability skills development. Most of the findings were aligned with the literature review conducted for this study. Some of the findings of this study were unique. The

findings also revealed that most respondents rated themselves as highly employable, supporting the argument that higher education institutions in Pakistan play an essential role in developing employability skills. However, the results also revealed that most respondents were unemployed. The findings of this study support the notion of students' incorrect perception of their employability skills. The respondents believed that they were highly employable, but the reality was contrary to the current situation. In a nutshell, the higher education institutions of Pakistan are not enabling graduates with market-oriented employability skills and competencies.

Recommendations

The study's findings revealed a significant relationship between higher education institutions and employability. In light of the study findings, the following suggestions are forwarded for employability skills development among graduates.

- ✓ Higher education curriculum and teaching need to focus on employability skills required in contemporary competitive global and local contexts.
- ✓ Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan should encourage and implement problem-based and practice-based learning to meet market requirements.
- ✓ Employers should be flexible enough to provide employment opportunities to fresh graduates.
- ✓ Implementation of effective internship programs during studies.

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