

الدور الأكاديمي والإداري للتعليم العالي في دعم

طلبة الجامعة لاكتساب المهارات العامة

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أستاذ الإدارة التربوية المساعد بكلية التربية

بجامعة طيبة بالمملكة العربية السعودية

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الملخص باللغة العربية

هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى الكشف عن المهارات العامة التي يحتاجها طلبة الجامعة من وجهة نظر أرباب العمل، وأعضاء هيئة التدريس، والإداريين. كما هدفت الدراسة إلى التعرف على أهمية هذه المهارات، والدور الأكاديمي والإداري للتعليم العالي في دعم الطلبة لاكتسابها. واستخدمت الدراسة المنهج النوعي، وتكونت عينة الدراسة من (121) فرداً من أرباب العمل، وأعضاء هيئة التدريس، والإداريين الذين شاركوا في الإجابة على استبانة المهارات العامة المطلوبة، ودور التعليم العالي في دعم الطلبة لاكتسابها. كما تم إجراء (12) مقابلة شخصية مع فئات العينة الثلاث للحصول على البيانات الكيفية. وكشفت نتائج الدراسة عن (15) مهارة عامة يحتاجها طلبة الجامعة، كما توصلت الدراسة إلى أن هذه المهارات مهمة لتمكين الطلبة من المنافسة في سوق العمل في القرن الحادي والعشرين. وتوصلت الدراسة أيضاً إلى مجموعة من الأدوار الأكاديمية والإدارية لمؤسسات التعليم العالي لدعم طلبة الجامعة لاكتساب المهارات العامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

المهارات العامة، القرن الحادي والعشرين، طلبة الجامعة، التعليم العالي، دور التعليم العالي.

The academic and administrative roles of higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills

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Abstract. The study aims at exploring the generic skills needed by university students from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators, the importance of these skills, and the academic and administrative roles of higher education in supporting university students acquire these skills. The study used the qualitative approach. The sample consisted of 121 employers, university staff members and administrators. They participated in completing a questionnaire of the needed generic skills and the role of higher education in supporting university students acquire them. In addition, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted for in-depth qualitative data. The findings revealed fifteen generic skills needed by university students. These skills were found to be important to enable the students to become ready for the competitive workplace in the 21st century. It was also found that higher education institutions had important academic and administrative roles in supporting university students acquire generic skills.

Key words: generic skills, 21st century skills, university students, higher education, role of higher education

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Introduction

Labor market competitiveness indicates that economic growth is linked to the provision of high quality products. The university lies at the heart of knowledge society, and provides prospective graduates with important knowledge, skills and attitudes. These graduates represent the human resources that facilitate economic growth and social development in the society. This conceptualization is realized by developed countries. The report of the Council of Industry and Higher Education in the UK highlighted the findings from a pilot survey of 233 employers (Archer and Davidson, 2008). In their report 'Graduate employability: What do employers think and want', Archer and Davidson, (2008) stressed the role of higher education in ensuring quality graduates for global economy. They stated that their research will add value to the debate on the high levels skills agenda, but also help higher education institutions to address the needs of business to ensure that graduates are equipped with the skills and experience they need to compete in the race to the top. In their study in the Malaysian and

Indonesian contexts which examined the students' generic skills (i.e. communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, working with others, and subject-specific competencies) at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and the National University of Indonesia (UI), Hadiyanto & Ibrahim (2013) maintain: 'It is expected that graduates will be able to comprehend and analyze their generic skills to succeed in their career, satisfy their employer, and contribute to their country.' (p.82)

Success in a profession does not only rely on specialized knowledge and skills, but on a set of generic skills and capabilities that always come at the top of the list of priorities of employers. Ntombela (2010), in his study about project approach (PA), and its place in the curriculum and how generic skills are incorporated therein, highlighted that generic skills are increasingly becoming a determining factor of success in the employment sector, it behooves higher education institutions to prepare students for the job market.

Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann (2004) – in their case study of a team of university teachers at one Australian institution who went beyond the mapping and embedding of graduate attributes in their courses of study, and engaged in a process of action learning to create a valid and living curriculum for the development of graduate attributes – point out that, traditionally, the emphasis in higher education has been on the development of discipline knowledge and skills with the development of other generic skills to be viewed as a bonus. However, they added, this traditional view has changed as the common belief now is that there should be a balance between the body of discipline knowledge and generic skills development. This is also bolstered by Pitman & Broomhall (2009) in the Australian context who state:

In recent times, there has been increased pressure by educational stakeholders, such as state and federal government and the wider business community, to ensure that Australian tertiary graduates are equipped not only with the skills and attributes specific to their course of study, but also with a suite of general, 'meta' skills suitable for the twenty-first century. (p.439)

Although employers do not deny the importance of generic skills, they have different views with regard to the needed ones. Archer & Davidson (2008) simply put it that 'there is a mismatch between what businesses need and what graduates offer.' (p.5). For example, employers prioritize communication skills, team working skills, integrity, intellectual ability, confidence, character/personality, planning and organizational skills, literacy, numeracy and analysis and decision making skills. These important skills from the employers' perspectives are not the priorities of graduates. Instead, graduates are more competent in IT skills, a post-graduate qualification, good degree qualification, qualification from an institution with a good reputation, relevant course study, and cultural fit with company. The mismatch between what employers think and want and what graduates are provided with by higher education institutions highlights the need for the current study, which aims to identify the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators on the needed generic skills of university students in the Saudi context and the role played by higher education in supporting students acquire them.

Changing nature of employment in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia adopted a new vision (2030) that focuses on varying sources of income instead of depending on oil as the only source. This vision seeks to create a thriving economy that is based on competitiveness and development of personal skills (<http://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/node>). This is reflected in the current practice of established centers and departments of generic skills in some Saudi universities such as King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, King Abdulaziz University, King Saud University and Taibah University. For example, at [Institution], where the two researchers work, there is the Center of Generic Requirements which is concerned with developing the university students' generic skills through presenting a variety of courses including University Life Skills, Computer Skills, Entrepreneurship skills, Arabic Language Skills, Islamic Studies, University Values, and Health and Nutrition. Thus, there has been a shift from focusing on technical knowledge to generic skills, which are considered essential to all graduates. This is asserted by McLean (2010) – in a paper discussing current understanding of generic skills in Higher Education, including the Gulf, and presenting research findings from the literature and from a three-year study of incoming students conducted at the United Arab Emirates University – that ‘while disciplinary knowledge and skills are transient, “skills” or capabilities such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, analytical and critical thinking and leadership in fact represent the core capabilities of any graduate, irrespective of the field of study’ (p. 10). It is worth noting that interest in generic skills in Saudi Arabia is in alignment with the international shift towards knowledge

economy and the emergence of new skills to comply with the demands of the market place as highlighted by Hayward & Fernandez (2004) that the ‘shift from manual to non-manual occupations is often seen as being synonymous with a shift in demand for physical and craft skills to higher levels of demand for softer generic skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills’ (p.120). In addition, Young and Chapman (2010) in a paper delineating factors that contributed to the increased demand for generic competencies added that globalization necessarily increased levels of demand for workers with generic competencies able to keep pace with the rapid changes that the new economy brought.

An overview of generic skills

Considerable attention has been given to the kind of generic skills that need to be provided to university students to enable them not only to succeed in their university studies, but also to be able to cope, in the future, with the demands of the competitive workplace. As a result, a variety of terms appeared to describe these skills including: generic skills, soft skills, core competencies, and graduate attributes. Hager, Holland & Beckett (2002), in a paper outlining the nature and scope of generic skills, define them as a range of qualities and capabilities that are increasingly viewed as important and distinguished from the discipline-specific knowledge and technical skills that traditionally are associated with higher education. They refer to a variety of generic skills including logical and analytical reasoning, problem solving, intellectual curiosity, effective communication skills, teamwork skills, identifying, accessing and managing knowledge and information, imagination, creativity, intellectual rigor, ethical practice,

persistence, integrity and tolerance. Murphy (2001), in a manual including background information about the development of key skills within education and training contexts within the UK, provided a briefing on key skills in higher education. A widely-recognized set of six skills were identified by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. These were: communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, problem solving, and improving own learning and performance.

Daud (2013), in a review of the literature that focused on university students' generic skills, presented a comparison of generic competences in four countries: Australia, the UK, the USA, and New Zealand. The comparison yielded a variety of generic skills in four areas: (A) key competences such as collecting, analyzing and organizing information, communicating ideas and information, and planning and organizing activities, (b) core skills such as improving own learning and performance and working with others, (c) workplace know-how skills such as interpersonal skills, thinking and technology systems, and (d) essential skills such as self-management, numeric skills and decision making skills.

Pitman & Broomhall (2009)– in an article using content analysis of relevant university policy documents to assess how the Australian higher education sector has presented the notion of 'graduate attributes'–referred to a list of generic skills including proficiency in communication, interpersonal skills, high-order reasoning, critical thinking and the ability to use technology. Mclean (2010) pointed out that the university of Sydney's website provides an explicit documentation of three holistic overarching graduate capabilities: scholarship, global citizenship and lifelong learning supported by five key clusters of skills: research and

inquiry; information literacy; personal and intellectual autonomy; ethical, social and professional understanding; and communication.

In spite of variation in terminology, there is consensus on the importance of these skills for university students' life and requirements of labor market (James, Lefoe&Hadi, 2004; Billing, 2007; Bosanquet, Winchester-Seeto& Rowe, 2010; Sugahara&Coman, 2010; Young & Chapman, 2010; McNeil, Scicluna, Boyle, Grimm & Gibson, 2012). For example, Young & Chapman (2010) highlight that employers who operate in global labor markets now look for employees who possess not only high-level technical or job-specific competencies, but also, high levels of generic competencies which are not specific to any given job or work role – they are generic in that they are critical to success across different types of jobs.

It could be argued that the above-mentioned generic skills are very essential for university graduates not only to succeed in their study at the university, but also in their future career and lifelong learning. This was made clear by Willson, Sabir& Thomas (2016) – in a study considering the conceptual space that graduate students in an Australian research university needed for success in study and as preparation for employment – that a set of skills will be needed by graduates to deal with the varied real-life situations they will face in employment, especially critical thinking, problem solving and life-long learning. It is worth noting that these generic skills are related to each other and constitute an integrated whole that enables the graduate to deal with different aspects that are involved in a specific task.

The academic and administrative roles of higher education

Higher education – as represented in the university – has an effective role in supporting university students acquire generic skills (Pavlin, 2014; Greene & Saridakis, 2008; Star & Hammer, 2008). It is well-recognized that higher education plays a vital role in preparing good citizens who contribute to the welfare of their societies. However, the achievement of this role is undermined if the focus of the university study is only on discipline-knowledge without understanding the needs of the society and labor market. If this is the case, graduates face unknown professional future. The role of the university lies in preparing prospective employees to cope with the needs of the society and the requirements of the labor market. This is expected to enhance the employability of university graduates.

Using active learning strategies such as problem-based and project-based learning while teaching generic skills is viewed as an aspect of the role of higher education. Schulz (2008), in a paper discussing the importance of generic skills in students' lives both at college and after college, argues that learning at most education institutions at all levels has been changed towards more student-centered learning; a shift that goes hand in hand with embedding generic skills into the teaching of specialized skills. Other aspects of this academic role of higher education include training staff members in how to develop these skills in their students, and assessing the development of generic skills among students. James, Lefoe & Hadi (2004) – in a case study at Australian university examining the implementation of graduate skills by describing the role of teachers dealing with these skills – call for a bottom-up approach while

working through graduate attributes. They argue that graduate skills potentially allow the university community to focus on the processes of pedagogy and can be used to initiate the development of a community of practice through collaboration and sharing of teaching strategies.

The role of higher education in supporting students acquire generic skills can also be achieved through establishing a strong partnership between the university from one side and employers who receive university graduates from the other side. Through a strong partnership with employers, higher education can bridge the gap between the generic skills provided to students in their university study and the requirements of success in their prospective careers. Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragolini (2004) – in a paper presenting project findings at an Australian university that determined graduate perceptions of the contributions that the learning contexts of university, work placement and post-graduation employment made to the development of graduates' generic skills – found that stronger linkages between curriculum content and real world examples and applications were repeatedly mentioned by graduates as a means of developing generic skills in the university context.

Given that some generic skills need to be well-developed through the work place, it is highlighted that the development of generic skills and abilities such as communication skills, problem solving, analysis and teamwork skills entails that students are given opportunities to practise them throughout their degree programs and in an authentic workplace setting (Crebert *et al.*, 2004). They found that work placements provided an excellent platform from which students could progress to the workplace and seek further opportunities for their development.

It is important to highlight here that the role of higher education is to provide students with knowledge, skills and attitudes that are up-to-date and can be made use of and

applied for the service of developing students' prospective professional performance. Thus, the partnership can be fruitful in narrowing the gap between what is offered by the university and what is applied in employment institutions as well as to enable students to interact with more experienced employees and make use of their expertise. However, the partnership is not easy to be established and developed. Hence, there is an important role of higher education administration to support, facilitate and fund such partnership. This vital administrative role in developing generic skills was made clear by Hayward and Fernandez (2004)– in a paper providing a broad survey of the development of generic skills policy in England from 1975 to 2002, drawing on both the economic and educational literature – that initiatives to develop generic skills are unlikely to succeed without substantial changes in the education policy environment.

Greene & Saridakis (2008), in an article examining the career progression of self-employed graduates, indicated that the acquisition of the underlying teamwork, entrepreneurship management and leadership skills was important in determining initial self-employment. They found a positive relationship between support from lecturers and academic contacts and initial self-employment and that there was a positive relationship between sources of support, skills acquired and initial self-employment. Pavlin (2014), in a paper that is based on a literature review and 240 semi-structured interviews with higher education professors and managers from six European countries and from six different study fields, presented a common higher education framework for improving graduates' employability. Pavlin (2014) identified, systemised and clustered processes and activities for improving graduates' employability including

(1) curriculum and programme developments that are related to improvements in trade-offs between: providing theoretical and practical knowledge; narrowing and broadening the orientation of studies; and balancing the content-centred and learner-centred curricula such as with problem-based learning; (2) deepening cooperation with employers in terms of providing practicums and internships; (3) developing lifelong learning activities in terms of supporting own regular students in their careers as well as training and certifying the knowledge of older workers; (4) establishing career centres and (re)defining their roles; (5) developing research activities; and (6) supporting the internationalisation of students and teachers.

Research questions

The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are generic skills needed by university students from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators?
- 2- Why are these skills important?
- 3- What is the academic role of higher education in supporting university students' acquire generic skills from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators?
- 4- What is the administrative role of higher education in supporting university students' acquire generic skills from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators?

Methodology

The study was conducted under the umbrella of the qualitative approach given that the aim of the study was to explore the academic and administrative roles of higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills from perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators. The qualitative research design was selected as the appropriate approach given that different participants have different views. It is worth noting that the study is mainly qualitative. However, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to cover the range of the participants' views. In addition, it is difficult to interview all participants because of the sample size. According to Tracy (2013), qualitative methodology is characterized with certain features. It provides understanding not just description. It enables researchers to construct explanations from the participants' explanations. It helps the people understand the world, their society, and its institutions. It honors participants' local meanings. It interprets participant viewpoints and stories. It can help explain, illuminate, and reinterpret qualitative data. These characteristics of qualitative methodology makes it well suited for the current study.

The participants

A purposive sample was selected to take part in the study. The sample consisted of 121 employers, university staff members and administrators. Fifty participants were employers who were responsible for recruiting employees for their companies and institutions. They represented institutions in education, health, the Human Resources Development Fund (which coordinates with public and

private sectors in training and employing university graduates) telecommunications, banking, and petrochemical companies. The other seventy-one participants were university administrators and staff members from Taibah University at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All participants completed a questionnaire and twelve of them (six employers, three university administrators, and three university staff members) agreed to be interviewed for in-depth understanding of their views. The employers came from telecommunications, health, a private educational company, education public sector and the human resources development fund.

Instruments

Both a questionnaire and an interview were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was designed based on the generic skills that are highlighted in the literature to be necessary for university students from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators. The aim of the questionnaire was to identify the degree of importance of the generic skills listed. An open-ended question followed the list of questionnaire items to give participants the chance to add any additional generic skills they see as important and to provide a springboard for discussion during the interviews. A semi-structured interview was used to collect qualitative data. The aim of the interview was to dig deep into the participants' insights regarding the questions.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness and triangulation are two concepts used to ensure that the obtained data are credible. Flick (2009) suggested a variety of strategies for increasing the trustworthiness of qualitative research including member checks which were used in the current study. Through member checks, trustworthiness is

ensured through communicative validation of data and interpretations with members of the fields under study. Lewis & Ritchie (2003) stress the importance of giving a clear account of research methods as part of displaying the credibility of the evidence. In the current study, both a questionnaire and semi-structured in-depth interviewing were used to investigate the generic skills from the participants' perspectives. Using two instruments served as a triangular technique that has the power to explain more fully the richness and complexity of the topic by studying it from more than one standpoint, and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). According to Punch (2009), the purpose of triangulation is to obtain complementary quantitative and qualitative data bringing together the different strengths of the two methods. This was illuminating in many ways. The findings obtained from the questionnaire represented a starting point for revealing the views of the participants which were studied in depth through the use of the semi-structured interview. Moreover, the findings obtained from the interviews reinforced the findings of the questionnaire. In addition, triangulation in the sample of the study which consisted of three groups (i.e. staff members, university administrators and employers) was used. This also helped in collecting data from different points of views.

Data collection and analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to cover the range of the participants' views. Questionnaire data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Responses to the open-ended question of the questionnaire as well as interview data were analyzed

qualitatively. The twelve interviews were recorded and transcribed. Topics and categories were constructed inductively and coded (Radnor, 2002). Coding was essential to classify the topics and categories under each topic. Pseudonyms were used while presenting the qualitative findings to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Findings

Both quantitative and qualitative findings are presented in this section. Table (1) below shows the findings related to the questionnaire participants' responses regarding the ranked importance of the generic skills needed by university students.

Table (1) Ranked importance of generic skills

No.	skills	Very important	Important	Not Important	Total n*	Weighted average
1	Personal attributes (self-confidence, leadership, ambition, enthusiasm, initiation, creativity)	91.735% n=111	7.438% n=9	.826% n=1	121	2.909
2	Moral values (honesty, integrity, faithfulness)	90.909% n=110	8.264% n=10	.826% n=1	121	2.900
3	Communication	81.818% n=99	18.181% n=22	.000% n=0	121	2.81
4	Team work	76.859% n=93	24.140% n=28	.000% n=0	121	2.76
5	Problem solving	71.07% n=86	28.92% n=35	.000% n=0	121	2.71
6	Computer skills	64.462% n=78	33.884% n=41	1.652% n=2	121	2.62
7	Lifelong learning skills	52.892% n=64	44.628% n=54	2.479% n=3	121	2.504
8	Professional development and growth	53.389% n=63	42.220% n=51	3.389% n=4	118	2.500
9	Critical thinking	51.239% n=62	44.628% n=54	4.132% n=5	121	2.47
10	Handling data and information	42.500% n=51	57.500% n=69	.000% n=0	120	2.42
11	English language skills	42.148% n=51	53.719% n=65	4.132% n=5	121	2.38

n* number of respondents

Table (1) shows the generic skills needed by university graduates from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators according to their importance. The findings revealed that either all or the vast

majority of participants highlighted the importance of all the skills for the university students. This consensus indicates the match in the views among employers, university staff members and administrators with regard to the needed skills. This entails providing the students with sufficient support to acquire these skills that could pave the way for their future employment opportunities. Personal attributes (such as self-confidence, leadership, ambition, enthusiasm, initiation, and creativity) and moral values (such as honesty, integrity, and faithfulness) were found to be the two most important skills in the Saudi context. It could be argued that all of the above-mentioned skills in Table (1) are not isolated from each other, but they interact to constitute a comprehensive entity of skills needed by university students from the perspectives of all stakeholders.

In terms of qualitative findings, four topics were constructed from qualitative data analysis of the semi-structured interviews. These were: the generic skills needed by university students, the importance of generic skills, the academic role played by higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills, and the administrative role played by higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills. Under each one of the four topics, a number of categories were constructed. These topics and categories are presented in the following sections.

Generic skills needed by university students

Fifteen categories were constructed under the topic of generic skills needed by university students. These categories are: communication skills, setting priorities,

personal attributes, self-development, knowledge of English language, computer skills, team work skills, thinking skills, data handling, awareness of contemporary issues, time management, problem solving, writing Curriculum Vitae (CV), values, and entrepreneurial skills.

Communication skills were highlighted by all interviewees. For example, one interviewee mentioned:

Through my experience in working in the private sector and interacting with many companies, communication skills whether verbal, written or body language are essential to succeed at work (EM1).

Another interviewee highlighted the role of context with regard to communication skills. He mentioned:

Communication skills are essential for these individuals wishing to work in the private sector as they are expected to deal with others from different cultures and nationalities (EM2).

Thus, cross-cultural communication is viewed as an essential skill to succeed at work in the Saudi context. Prospective employees need cross-cultural communication skills to deal with millions of customers from all over the world who come to Saudi Arabia for work or for religious tourism.

Setting priorities was another generic skill needed by university students as highlighted by four interviewees. For example, one interviewee stated:

University students need to know how to distinguish between priorities with regard to importance and urgency. They need to know how to distinguish tasks which are more important or urgent from those which are less important or urgent (EM1).

Personal attributes were highlighted by all interviewees as generic skills needed by university students. For example, it was stated:

Positive influence, self-confidence and bearing responsibility are among the skills which the university student should have (AC1).

Personal attributes needed to succeed at work in the private sector are initiation, ambition, enthusiasm, competition, confidence, leadership, creativity, honesty, integrity and loyalty (EM2).

Personal attributes include emotional balance, being responsible, and courtesy (EM3).

Commitment at work in an essential personal attribute (EM4).

Good appearance and ability to cope with work pressures – two aspects of personality – were revealed as necessary generic skills by open-ended responses to the questionnaire.

Four interviewees referred to self-development as another important generic skill. For example, it was stated:

Self-development is a very important generic skill. University students need to know how to look for and master up-to-date knowledge in their field of specialization and future career (EM2).

Knowledge of English language was viewed by five interviewees as an important generic skill. For example, it was stated:

English language is an essential generic skill (AD1).

English language is the language of the private sector (EM2).

Computer skills were viewed as important generic skills by seven out of the twelve interviewees. For example, it was stated:

Skills of dealing with modern technologies are essential for university students (AD3).

Computer skills such as how to use office applications including Word, Excel, and PowerPoint are essential generic skills at work (EM1).

Team work skills were viewed as important generic skills by seven out of the twelve interviewees. For example, it was stated:

Working in teams, forming teams and having teamwork spirit are important generic skills (EM2).

Thinking skills were viewed as important generic skills by nine out of the twelve interviewees. For example, it was stated:

*Students need positive thinking skills (AC1).
Critical thinking is essential for university students. Creative thinking is a needed generic skill (EM5).*

Data handling were highlighted by two interviewees:

It is important for university students to know how to interpret data, tables and figures (EM2).

Problem solving and decision making were highlighted by half the interviewees. For instance, it was mentioned during the interviews that:

*Problem solving and decision making are important generic skills (AC1).
Ability to solve problems and find suitable solutions for them is important generic skills for university students (EM5)*

Awareness of contemporary issues was also constructed as a needed generic skill by university students as highlighted by an interviewee. He stated:

University students are expected to be aware of contemporary issues such as political and economic issues which have an impact on business and labor market (EM2).

Six interviewees highlighted time management as an important generic skill. It was stated:

Time management is a vital generic skill which is required by university students (AC2).

Other generic skills were mentioned by some of the interviewees including writing CV which was mentioned by two of the interviewees and entrepreneurial skills which were mentioned by an interviewee who stated:

Developing entrepreneurial skills and encouraging students to start their own projects are considered important skills (ADI).

Values were highlighted by two interviewees as important for students to have. For example, it was stated:

Values are the security valve that enables the student to apply all other skills in an appropriate way (ADI)

As highlighted by this last quotation, there is a close relationship between values and skills in a way that they shape one's behavior. In addition, values were highlighted by open-ended responses to the questionnaire. For example, one questionnaire respondent highlighted the necessity of 'understanding religion in a moderate way'. It could be argued that the educational system in Saudi Arabia is based on the principles of Islam that call for co-existence, tolerance, mercifulness, and need for learning for the benefit of humanity. The importance of helping students to

understand religious principles in the right manner could be highlighted based on the respondent's previous remark.

The importance of generic skills

Four categories were constructed under the topic of the importance of generic skills. These categories are: readiness, employability, productivity, and competitiveness. Generic skills are important because they enable the student to become ready for the labor market. Seven out of the twelve interviewees highlighted readiness as one reason for the importance of generic skills. For example, as mentioned by one interviewee:

*Generic skills are important because they equip the student with the required skills which are needed to become ready to achieve the goals of the company. This will help the student to cope with the work demands in the institution. Consequently, the institution saves time and money and invests in improving its employees' skills in training programs (EM1).
Generic skills are important because they help the student have the needed competencies to succeed in the workplace (AC1).*

When a student is ready with the essential generic skills, this increases the employability of the graduate as highlighted by half of the interviewees. For example, one interviewee stated:

Generic skills are important because they enable the student to get a job in this modern competitive world (EM5).

Generic skills are also important to increase institutional productivity as mentioned by three interviewees. For example, it was stated:

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Generic skills are important to build individuals who are able to increase productivity of the company in which they work (EM6).

Competitiveness is a fourth reason why generic skills are important. This is highlighted by six interviewees. For example, it was mentioned that:

In the 21st century, companies are in a race. When employees are well-prepared and equipped with generic skills, they will assist the company to achieve its intended goals and profits (EM1).

Students' skills are considered very valuable because these skills enable them to achieve their goals effectively and competently (AD1).

The academic role played by higher education in supporting students acquire generic skills

An academic role of higher education in supporting students acquire generic skills was revealed by the interviewees. Five categories were constructed under this topic. These are: curriculum planning and design, teaching methods, academic staff training, assessment of generic skills, and providing academic counseling. Curriculum planning and design was highlighted by ten out of twelve interviewees as an important aspect of the role of higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills taking into consideration linking theory to classroom practice by providing practical knowledge. For example, it was stated:

The curriculum should focus on practical knowledge because employers favor practitioners who can deal with situations and

gain practical experience. This will be reflected in their professional skills especially after joining the labor market (EM1).

Five interviewees highlighted teaching methods as an important aspect of the academic role of higher education in promoting generic skills among university students. Student-centered learning was highlighted as a better alternative to develop students' skills than the old-fashioned rote learning approach. For example, it was mentioned:

It is important to develop methods of teaching to avoid rote learning. The educational process should move towards student-based learning through reinforcement of generic skills such as observation, inference, comparison, generating ideas, and experimentation (EM3).

Developing teaching methods and strategies is necessary to focus on practical aspects (AD3)

For university staff members to be able to develop students' practical knowledge and use effective teaching methods, staff training was highlighted by nine interviewees as part of the academic role played by higher education. For example, an interviewee stated:

Developing staff members' skills is a cornerstone in supporting their students acquire generic skills (AD1).

Instead of the use of lectures which students find boring, staff members should be trained in how to develop communication and dialogue with their students. This could be done by organizing workshops for university teaching staff (EM6).

Four interviewees highlighted assessment as part of the academic role of higher education. It was mentioned:

The academic and administrative roles of higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills

Assessment of the students should include participation in extracurricular activities and doing research (EM6).

Assessment should take into consideration international professional standards that focus on skills in addition to knowledge (EM3).

Providing academic counseling was asserted by an interviewee who stated:

It is important to support students' skills by holding regular meetings with them and listening to their interests and needs and taking them into consideration (AC1).

Open-ended responses of the questionnaire revealed the role of academic counseling, extra-curricular activities and participating in voluntary work in supporting students acquire generic skills.

The administrative role played by higher education in supporting students acquire generic skills

An administrative role of higher education in supporting university students acquire generic skills was revealed from the analysis of the interviews with five categories constructed under this topic. These categories are: willingness, planning, partnership, funding and job fairs. For the development of generic skills to be successful, the willingness of the administration of higher education institutions was seen as vital in supporting academic work. Two interviewees highlighted this essential component of the administrative role of higher education. For example, it was mentioned:

It is important for higher education administration to be willing and believe in

promoting generic skills. Otherwise, nothing will be achieved (EM1).

Planning was also seen as another important aspect of the administrative role of higher education. For example, one interviewee mentioned:

Developing generic skills should be considered by university administration as a strategic goal (EM2).

Partnership was highlighted by six interviewees. For example,

It is important to open channels of communication with employers to organize training programs for students. These programs should be consistent with the needs of labor market (AC2).

For this strategic goal to be achieved, productive partnership with public and private sectors should be established and maintained (EM2).

It is worth noting that the partnership is not a cheap option. Funding is essential for the aims of partnership to be achieved. Funding was highlighted by four interviewees as an important element of the administrative role. It was stated:

Sufficient funding from the part of higher administration to support the development of generic skills through educational research, academic activities, and the provision of facilities with public and private sectors is essential (EM2).

Funding and partnership were also revealed by open-ended responses of the questionnaire as important administrative roles. In addition, job fairs were referred to by two interviewees as an integral component of the administrative role. For example, it was mentioned:

Universities should market its graduates nationally and internationally. This could be carried out through job fairs (EM3)

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that there are fifteen generic skills needed by university students from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators. These skills are: communication skills, setting priorities, personal attributes, self-development, knowledge of English language, computer skills, team work skills, thinking skills, data handling, awareness of contemporary issues, time management, problem solving, writing CV, values, and entrepreneurial skills. This finding is in agreement with previous literature (e.g. Murphy, 2001; Hager *et al.*, 2002; Washer, 2007; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009; Mclean, 2010; Daud, 2013; Thomas, Piquette & McMaster, 2016). It could be argued that these skills are varied and not isolated from each other. They constitute a whole unit to build the personality of the university student. Schulz (2008) asserts that generic skills are shaping human beings' personality. He maintains that any educator's dream is that graduates, especially from tertiary education institutions, should not only be experts in a certain field but matured personalities with a well-balanced, rounded off education. Schulz argues that this characteristic is reflected in generic skills, not in hard skills. This highlights the importance of generic skills. The findings of the study also revealed several reasons for the importance of generic skills for university students to be more ready for the labor market and to be employable. It was also revealed that university students who had these skills could increase the productivity

of the companies that they would work for, and consequently these companies could become more competitive in the labor market. This is highlighted by Schulz (2008) that one straightforward reason for the importance of generic skills is today's job-market, which in many fields is becoming ever increasingly competitive. He adds that to be successful in this tough environment, candidates for jobs have to bring along a "competitive edge" that distinguishes them from other candidates with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results and employers prefer to take in job candidates who will be productive from a very early stage on.

For university students to acquire generic skills in an effective way, the role of higher education is vital in supporting them. The findings revealed that the academic role of higher education could be achieved through curriculum planning and design, teaching methods, academic staff training, and assessment of generic skills. It was revealed that the university curricula should not only focus on the theoretical knowledge, but also on practical knowledge. This could be achieved by establishing effective partnerships with the work place. This could enable university students not just to apply what they have learned in the university, but to construct practical knowledge from practitioners. Hence, there is an important role of partners to facilitate access to practical knowledge. This is highlighted by Hager *et al.* (2002) that professional education typically can be mapped as providing specified disciplinary knowledge and related technical skills, but that there is another realm of knowledge and skills required for practice as a professional that lies outside the standard syllabus. They maintain that higher education is a preparation for professional work for many graduates, and the development of 'practice' knowledge should be as much an explicit part of the curriculum as disciplinary knowledge.

Teaching methods are another important aspect of the academic role played by higher education to support university students acquire generic skills. It was found that university teaching staff should focus on active learning approaches while teaching generic skills instead of focusing on traditional rote learning. Active learning enables students to be engaged while learning through cooperative learning, critical thinking, and problem solving. Hager *et al.* (2002) highlight that there is a strong and recurrent link between the development of generic skills by learners and teaching and learning methods that exhibit such features as problem-based learning, lifelong learning skills, active, learner-centered approaches. In these approaches, integrated thinking and action occurs on tasks that are relevant and meaningful to learners. Moreover, Crebert *et al.* (2004) found interactive group work and collaboration as the most effective ways to develop generic skills.

To be able to use active learning approaches to develop their students' generic skills, university teaching staff members need to be well-trained as highlighted by the findings of the study. Training is useful to equip staff with up-to-date knowledge and effective student-centered strategies for developing students' generic skills. It is worth noting that curriculum planning and design, teaching methods, and staff training are all important aspects of the academic role to be played by higher education to support university students acquire generic skills. Assessment is an integral aspect of the academic role as revealed by the findings of the study. Higher education institutions need to focus on the measurement of generic skills taking into consideration international standards as a recent trend in assessing generic skills. Measuring higher education learning outcomes has raised a wide debate recently. It is argued that

GPA is not considered a real indicator for making full use of generic skills (Ito, 2014a). This problem encouraged the development of a set of tools for measuring generic skills such as Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and Progress Report on Generic Skills (PROG) to measure the generic skills attained by university students. Higher education can make benefit from the feedback obtained by the implementation of these measures and provide university students with informed reflective practice that maximizes the development and application of generic skills.

For the academic role to be achieved effectively, the administration of higher education needs to play an important role in supporting and facilitating academic work. It was found that the administrative role could be achieved through various aspects including: willingness, planning, partnership, funding and job fairs. Willingness from the part of higher administration at the university is essential to support students acquire generic skills. Partnership is another aspect of the administrative role played by higher education. This partnership between the university and work place could be achieved by signing agreements to train university students. However, the partnership is not merely about signing the agreement. Both partners should have the willingness to work together with a common objective as equal partners. Ito (2014b) points out that there are various ways through which this partnership can be achieved. Employers can have their own say in training prospective employees. This can be achieved by inviting employers to the university to participate in building the curriculum of generic skills by identifying aims, content and methods of training university students. A successful partnership can also be achieved through a variety of ways with well-defined roles and responsibilities for each partner. Employers could be encouraged to come to the university to give lectures to

students about various pathways of professional development. In parallel, representatives from the university could visit prospective employing institutions to get to know the various ways used by companies to develop the performance of their employees. Crebert *et. al.* (2004) recommend that the input and views of employers and graduates should be considered in relation to program development, not only as part of program accreditation and review but at the level of teaching and assessing in courses. In addition, the willing university administration with a strong belief in the need and importance of developing students' generic skills facilitates the funding of the partnership to work effectively and productively. Furthermore, it was found that organizing job fairs was another important aspect of the administrative role of higher education. It is a great opportunity for all partners to meet and reflect upon the partnership. Besides, inviting companies to the job fairs familiarizes university students with the requirements of future jobs and graduate students have the chance to hunt the jobs offered.

Conclusion

The findings of the study answered the questions of what are the generic skills needed by university students from the perspectives of employers, university staff members and administrators, why these skills are important, and the role of higher education in supporting students acquire these skills. The fifteen generic skills that were identified represent a framework that needs to be adopted by higher education. These skills are not only important for the students, but also for the institutions they are expected to work for. University students with generic skills were seen as more ready for the

work place and help in increasing productivity. The academic role of the university is vital in supporting students acquire generic skills through active learning and teaching approaches, a curriculum that integrates both theoretical and practical knowledge, and effective assessment of generic skills. Moreover, the university should establish and maintain an effective and productive partnership with the workplace. Higher education administration should work side by side with academics in complementary roles by supporting, funding and encouraging such partnership. In the 21st century, the development of generic skills is no longer a choice, but a must for universities to enable students to become ready for the competitive work place. University graduates suffer unless they are competent in these skills.

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