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THE EFFECTS SOCIAL CAPITAL ATTRIBUTES ON THE EMPLOYABILITY READINESS AMONG ENGINEERING GRADUATES IN THE HIGH EDUCATION INSTITUTE'S IN OMAN

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of Social Capital attributes on the employability readiness of the engineering graduates of the High Education Institutes in Oman. The study adopted a self-directed structured questionnaire was distributed to a sample of engineering students and graduates from a number of colleges and universities. The study used structural equation modelling (SEM) for analysed the collected data. The findings of the statistical analysis of the study showed the significant contribution of social activities in the attainment of teamwork, communication, proficiency of the English language, and problem-solving skills. As a result, the involvement of the graduates in social activities strongly influences the awareness of career information which in return affects positively graduates' Readiness for Employability. Specifically, study findings showed Social capital attributes factor could have a high influence on the Readiness for Employability of the graduates in Oman when it is utilised effectively. Finally, the study's implementations and recommendations could be transferred to the Gulf and Arab or other countries' contexts having similar settings of HE systems and similar issues of skills gap and employability concern of their graduates.

Keywords: Social Capital Attributes, Employability Readiness, Engineering Graduates, High Education Institutes & Oman.

INTRODUCTION

Oman labour market is considered as a continuously growing market since the starting of the renaissance era that took place in 1970. However, as Al-Harthi (2011) stressed, most of the industrial workplace holders are expats (Al-Harthi, 2011). And as thousands of Omani students' graduates annually, the industries have become the main work providers. Nevertheless, they consider those graduates are not ready for employment (Al-Barwani, Chapman, & Ameen, 2009). One of the essential shortfalls of the Higher Education is that its graduates are considered to have low readiness for employability skills (Al Hinai, Bhuiyan, & Husin, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Lim, Lee, Yap, & Ling, 2016; Rahman & Bhuiyan, 2019; Yang, Cheung, & Fang, 2015). As a result, it's harshly affecting the fresh graduates' employability and career performance at work (Al-Azri, 2016). To stress in the importance of understanding the skills Gap of the HE graduates, Matherly and Hodgson (2014) pointed out that recently, the government of Oman has created important policies to improve national graduates' employment. However, workplaces have continuously raised major doubts on the quality of the HE outcomes stressing that the HE system graduates lack the required sets of graduates' readiness for employability skills (Matherly & Hodgson, 2014). To improve the Readiness for employability of the HE graduates, and since most studies refer to graduates' attributes as the set of skills, knowledge, and competencies graduates are required to gain. Few studies have considered the graduates attributes factors which effect the attainment of the employability skills or the Readiness for employability skills. The study that was carried out by Clarke (2018) serves as one of the back bones of identifying factors affecting graduates' employability. The study analysed the human capital factors including skills, technical abilities and career proficiency; the social capital factors including network, community involvement and HEI classification; and the individual attributes including personality variables, adaptability and flexibility (Clarke, 2018).

Hence, there is a strong evidence that social capital attributes have a strong impact on employment outcomes (L. Holmes, 2013; Mtawa, Fongwa, & Wilson-Strydom, 2019), this study aims to examine the effect of Social Capital attributes factors on the graduates' readiness for employability to improve the quality of engineering education which consequently, will enable the engineering colleges to produce graduates suitable for employment. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduates' Readiness for Employability skills

The graduates' Readiness for Employability skills required for Engineering graduates of the HEIs in Oman have been identified as Analytical thinking or critical thinking, Problem solving skills (The ability to analyze facts and situations), Creative thinking (The ability to develop and apply appropriate solutions), Communication skills including listening and questioning, Capacity for lifelong learning including readiness to contribute to new ideas, Capacity for lifelong learning including openness to new ideas, Teamwork including respecting others, cooperating, negotiating / persuading, and contributing to discussions, Professional ethics and morality, Entrepreneurial skills, Leadership skills, Proficiency in written and oral English, Specialization and industrial required technical skills, Capacity for applying knowledge in practice (Al Hinai et al., 2020b).

The above Readiness for Employability determined skills were supported by the findings of many types of research such as the identification of the required soft skills for the Readiness for Employability (Adnan, Daud, Alias, & Razali, 2017; Al-Azri, 2016; Anastasiu et al., 2017; Belwal, Priyadarshi, & Al Fazari, 2017; Craps et al., 2017; Evans, Davis, & Wheeler, 2017; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013; Gupta, Singh, & Kaushik, 2018; Lane, 2017; Moore & Morton, 2017; Neisler, Clayton, Al-Barwani, Al Kharusi, & Al-Sulaimani, 2016), Proficiency of English (Al-Lamki, 1998, 2006; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016; Allen & De Weert, 2007; Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley, & Doughney, 2014; Manoharan & Arockiam, 2017), and the technical engineering skills (Belwal et al., 2017; D. W. Holmes, Sheehan, Birks, & Smithson, 2018; Jollands et al., 2015; Lane, 2017; Suleman, 2018; Tran, 2019).

Social Capital attributes

There is a strong evidence that social capital attributes such as the quality and rank of university attended and the specialisation attained have a strong impact on employment outcomes (L. Holmes, 2013; Mtawa et al., 2019). For some researchers, the reputation of awarding university has strong impact on graduate employability (Finch et al., 2013). In addition, some other studies founded that the status of the rewarding HE university influenced the recruiting process which means that rewarding HEIs affect the readiness of employability of its graduates (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2014). There are also indications that it impacts perceived employability (Okay–Somerville & Scholarios, 2015; Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008). As a result, networking as a key component of social capital attributes, strongly influences the awareness of career information which in return affects positively graduates' readiness for employability (de Janasz, Forret, Haack, & Jonsen, 2013; Forret & Dougherty, 2004) . Therefore, social capital attributes when combined with human capital attributes and other factors such as individual attributes, and modern active learning environment have the ability to greatly improve graduates' readiness for employability (Al Hinai et al., 2020b).

Also, a new approach to employability was considered by developing a framework that incorporates six key dimensions which included human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviours, perceived employability, and labour market factors. The study was based on UK and Australian data. The studied social capital factors included network, community involvement and HEI classification (Clarke, 2018). Besides, the effect of social capital on graduates' employability of undergraduate students in Malaysian Higher Educational Institutions was studied (Wong, Samsilah, Siaw, Sulaiman, & Ab Jalil, 2018). The findings of the study illustrated that teamwork, work, career resilience, and conscientiousness attributes had the highest score. Also, academic, leadership, human, and social capital attributes had considerable respondents' rates. Besides, the study revealed that employability among students depends on the academic achievement and study areas. Also, the high influence of Social Capital attributes on the Readiness for Employability was proven by previous studies (Bennett, 2020; Clarke, 2018; Mtawa et al., 2019; Oliver, 2016), who all emphasized in the importance of students' engagement with the society toward acquiring valuable learning outcomes, understanding career requirements, and acquiring knowledge and Readiness for Employability skills.

In addition, the Omani HEIs are required to enhance Social Capital attributes of its students through the introduction of more society oriented activities such as social team building activities, engagement in extra curriculum participation such as scientific competition, academic-industrial seminars, future career exhibition, and social welfare participation (Al-Azri, 2016) .

According to Al Azri (2016), the involvement and participation of student in extra curriculum activities such as industry field visits, HEIs' career exhibition and open days, engineering students' clubs or committees, and inner and external scientific competitions could be helpful to promote undergraduate employability through acquiring essential employability skills and self-exposition to expected future career providers.

Therefore, the initial theoretical framework representing the relationship among the study variables is presented in figure 1. This portion of the framework is obtained from a wider study of factors affecting the Readiness for employability among Engineering graduates of the HEIs in Oman (Al Hinai et al., 2020b).

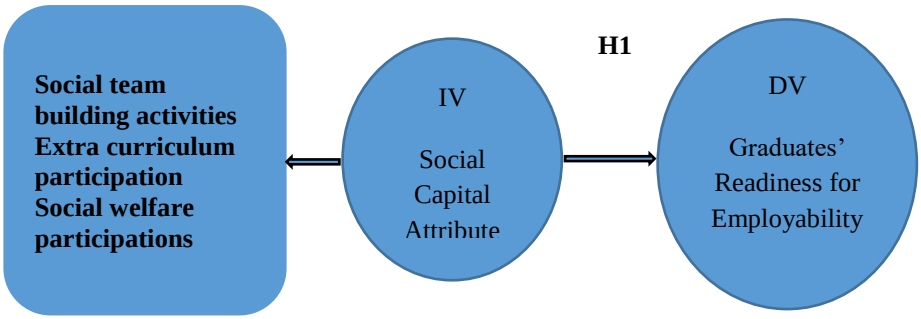

Figure 1. The influence of Social Capital Attributes on Graduates' Readiness for Employability among Engineering graduates of the HEIs in Oman

H1: There is a significant relationship between social capital attributes and graduate's readiness for employability among engineering graduates of the HEIs in Oman.

METHODOLOGY

The simple random characteristic strategy of the sampling technique was utilised by collecting data from an intended sample consisting from 340 random sample of engineering students obtained from different HEIs in Oman. To ensure the validity and clarity of the questionnaires, a panel of experts were consulted consisting of two academic engineering experts and two language experts. The findings of this study are accomplished utilizing the quantitative statistical methodology approach. This approach implements a numerical analysis using survey questionnaires as the base to collect data from students, and graduates (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Dörnyei, 2007).

Human Capital Theory were utilised as the underpinning theory of the study since it examines the financial benefits resulting from the investments in people' skills and resources. Such investment will result to have highly-skilled labors placed in highly-skilled careers, which could improve the nation's economy and prosperity (Becker, 1962; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; McMahon, 2009; Schultz, 1963; Slaughter, Taylor, & Rosinger, 2015). Also, two statistical programs are used for data analysis. The first one is the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Studies (SPSS) version 26.0 to administer the preliminary data analysis. The second statistical program utilised for this study was the Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) software. This program is used for the evaluation of the reflective measurement model, structural model, path analysis, and hypotheses testing (Hair Jr, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2017).

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation-Social Capital Attributes

Descriptive Statistics-Social Capital Attributes

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have developed and explored the lesson of team work skills through social activities	340	5.3000	1.30508
I have developed and explored the lesson of Communication skills through social activities	340	5.2529	1.35264
I have developed proficiency of English language through social activities and interaction	340	5.2235	1.47047
I have developed and explored the lesson of Problem-solving skills through social activities and interaction	340	5.2118	1.30435
I have developed and explored the lesson of Self-differentiation and distinction through social activities and interaction	340	5.1441	1.29435
I have developed and explored the lesson of Society reconciliation skill through social activities and interaction	340	5.0912	1.33279
My social activities and interaction helped me to expose myself to future employers	340	4.9941	1.45937
Social Capital Attributes average score	340	5.1441	1.15206

Note; Using 7-Dimensional Likert Scale (1 represents "strongly disagree", and 7 represents "strongly agree")

Utilising SPSS 26, table 1 reveals the contribution of social activities in the attainment of readiness for employability skills. Team-work (Anastasiu et al., 2017), communication (Husain, Kumar, & Saritha, 2017), proficiency of the English language (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018), and problem-solving skills (Husain et al., 2017) scored higher means than the average mean score of the social capital attributes. As a result, the involvement of the graduates in social activities strongly influences the awareness of career information and requirement which in return affect positively graduates' readiness for employability (de Janasz et al., 2013; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Oliver, 2016).

Table 2. Summary of measurement model findings

Constructs (Latent Variable)	Measurement items (Indicators)	Convergent Validity (Loading)	Internal Consistency Reliability CA	CR	AVE	Discriminant Analysis
Social Capital Attributes	SCA1	0.869	0.922	0.938	0.684	Yes
	SCA2	0.897				
	SCA3	0.813				

SCA4	0.802
SCA5	0.847
SCA6	0.840
SCA7	0.707

Table 2 highlights a brief summary of the results obtained for the measurement model assessment which illustrates that all the requirements of reliability and validity of the measurement model assessment are met.

Hypothesis Testing

To conduct the hypotheses testing connected to the structural model of the study, PLS-SEM version 3.0 was utilised (Hair Jr et al., 2017). There are several elements are required to be considered. The first element, for a hypothesis to be valid, the value of the path coefficient of 0.1 or higher is required to account for a certain impact within the model (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). Secondly, the acceptable t-value and p-value must be greater than 1.96 and less than 0.05 respectively (Ramayah, Cheah, Chuah, Ting, & Memon, 2018). The hypothesis testing result of the impact of Social Capital Attributes on the Readiness for Employability is illustrated in table 3.

Table 3. Hypothesis testing results

	Path Coefficient β	T Statistics	P Values	5% BCI LL	95% BCI UL	Decision (p < 0.05)
Social Capital Attributes -> Readiness for Employability	0.032	0.469	0.319	0.076	0.148	Rejected

The finding of the study illustrates no significant influence of the Social Capital attributes factor (H1) on the Readiness for Employability of the engineering graduates of the HEIs in Oman. Despite the high influence of Social Capital attributes on the Readiness for Employability as proven by previous studies (Bennett, 2020; Clarke, 2018; Mtawa et al., 2019; Oliver, 2016), who all emphasized in the importance of students' engagement with the society toward acquiring valuable learning outcomes, understanding career requirements, and acquiring knowledge and Readiness for Employability skills. As a result, the Omani HEIs are required to enhance Social Capital attributes of its students through the introduction of more society-oriented activities such as social team building activities, engagement in extra curriculum participation such as scientific competition, academic-industrial seminars, future career exhibition, and social welfare participation. According to Al Azri (2016), the involvement and participation of student in extra curriculum activities such as industry field visits, HEIs' career exhibition and open days, engineering students' clubs or committees, and inner and external scientific competitions could be helpful to promote undergraduate employability through acquiring essential employability skills and self-exposition to expected future career providers.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

This study provides a valuable recommendation for the technical departments of higher education institutions, course designers and policy makers to further increase the involvement and participation of the students in social activities as extracurricular activity due to their high positive effect on students' academic performance, interpersonal skills development, acquisition of employability skills and knowledge development. Higher education institutions are recommended, as previously explained, to offer different types of social capital activities and to encourage students to effectively engage in and participate productively in such activities due to their influence on skills development. In order to increase the employability of engineering students through the characteristics of social capital, higher education institutions should organize and encourage individuals and groups to participate in social activities, be valuable for employment activities such as writing professional resumes, conduct professional pilot interviews with the job providers or practitioners in the industry plan conference presentations on technical undergraduate graduate projects in all higher education institutions in which industry professionals are present, encourage the establishment of student committees, science clubs and scientific societies and encourage student involvement to acquire valuable Readiness for Employability skills and abilities, such as teamwork, communication, leadership, English language skills and problem-solving skills, and finally organize open days with profess industry and meeting with industry professionals and leaders to build social network connections that can raise students' awareness of labor market requirements and expectations that can contribute to future employment.

The results of this study addressed one of the main causes of the graduate engineer's skills gap from the higher education institutions in Oman by examining the impact of the independent variable of the social capital attributes factor on the graduate's readiness for employability, clearly indicating where the higher education institutions are located. that are strongly needed to develop and improve in order to close the skills gap of their graduates, thus improving their quality and their readiness for employability. Finally, the findings of the study, their implications and recommendations in this study will be a valuable resource for the improvement of higher education and the development of future strategies that will contribute to the generation of talented and qualified engineers and promote their employability readiness. It also makes sense to emphasize that while the implementations and recommendations of this study focused on the readiness of engineering graduates in Oman, they can be extended to other fields of study. The wide range of factors addressed in this study can be generalized as an Omani context. In addition, the implementation and recommendations could be transferred to the Gulf and Arab or other countries with similar higher education institutions and issues similar to skills shortages and employability issues of their graduates.

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