

The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Developing Employability Skills of Saudi Graduates Amidst Saudi 2030 Vision

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Abstract

In alignment with sustainable goals outlined by Saudi Vision 2030, the research paper aimed to investigate the views on employability skills in higher education by exploring the perceptions of Saudi students and education leaders. The study's qualitative design caters to the exploration of the practical significance of employability skills and attributes of Saudi graduates as a function allowing to address unemployment and strengthen the economy. The researchers analyzed two sets of qualitative data collected from a sample of Saudi students (n=49) and a sample of education leaders (n=6) with the help of Likert-scale questionnaires and open-ended questionnaires, respectively. Corroborated with the scholarly evidence, the explorative analysis of the data showed the practical significance of employability skills of Saudi graduates for achieving the country's economic goals through the means of sustainable employability. Overall, the results are consistent with the current scholarship on the topic suggesting that all stakeholders should partake in the development of initiatives and programs that hone transversal employability skills. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the ongoing unemployment crisis necessitates the introduction of a national policy that would formulate a collaborative agreement between the three main stakeholders - employment-seekers, employers, and higher education institutions.

Keywords: employability; employability skills; Saudi Arabia; Saudi Vision 2030; soft skills

1. Introduction

The year 2020 has signified economic and social changes that are going to mark the subsequent decade for Saudi Arabia as well as the international community. However, not all of the transformational changes emerged as the outcomes of the global pandemic and perturbations in the global petroleum market. In many ways, the upcoming decade was already designated as the key period for attaining the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 and the 2030 Agenda (Al-khateeb, 2020). While the Covid-19 pandemic revealed weaknesses in modern institutions, it served as a major catalyzing factor for sustainable innovations in the economic sphere. Social and financial constraints affecting millions of Saudi citizens as well as expatriates which constitute a sizable portion of the country's workforce signified the need for sustainable solutions to the ongoing unemployment crisis. With both skilled and unskilled workers leaving Saudi Arabia for their home countries, their return is not at all guaranteed due to epidemiological restrictions and government policies intended to secure newly-opened vacancies for Saudi nationals (Al-Youbi et al.,

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2020). In light of transformations ushered by the Saudization program, all stakeholders should consider sustainable employability practices as an important step towards alleviating the polarization of the labor market.

Apart from the overreliance on the fossil fuel industry, the notoriously high unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia remains one of the key issues that should be addressed within the scope of Saudi Vision 2030. Coupled with investments in education, the introduction of protectionist policies by the Saudi government is designed to bolster the country's workforce by ensuring that the demand for skilled workers can be satisfied with Saudi nationals (Alfawaz et al., 2014). In this context, researchers indicated that core technical competencies and professional experience are insufficient for securing one's employment in the rapidly-shifting economy. According to the scholarly consensus, employment-seekers are expected to have a set of so-called soft skills that would ensure their adaptability and flexibility (El Mansour and Dean, 2016; Heike, 2020). Regardless of industry or economic sector, companies perceive employability skills as an attribute that positively distinguishes an individual from dozens or hundreds of graduates with equal professional competencies. Under the described circumstances, employees rely on higher education institutions (HEIs) to accommodate the growing demand for transferable and digital competencies among graduates (Suleman, 2018). In anticipation of the long-term changes ushered by Saudi Vision 2030, the current research aimed to investigate employability skill initiatives in higher education by exploring the perceptions of Saudi students and educational leaders.

The study's design caters to the exploration of the practical significance of employability skills and attributes of Saudi graduates as a function allowing to reduce unemployment and bolster the economy. Accordingly, the paper comprises of the following major sections that build upon one another: the literature review providing the scholarly background for the researched problem; the methodology section outlining the sample as well as the data collection procedures; the findings and discussions section that provides a comprehensive breakdown of major themes that were identified during the data analysis stage, and; the conclusions section that focuses on the study's implications for the scholarship and other stakeholders. The ultimate objective of the qualitative study is to answer the following research question: "In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, what is the role of HEIs in alleviating the unemployment crisis by developing employability skills among Saudi graduates?"

2. Review of Literature

Lacking a universally-accepted definition, the concept of employability has been interpreted differently from the perspectives of HEIs, governmental organizations, and businesses. There is no uniform consensus in regard to measuring and researching employability as a person's capacity to become employed has both tangible and intangible connections with social, industry-specific, and economic variables (Bennett, 2019; Rufai and Mat Rashid, 2015). Nevertheless, the overarching perception among scholars is that employability encompasses competencies and skills that define the ability not only to gain employment by navigating the labor market but also to progress in one's career (Geoff et al., 2009). The increasing number of studies reveal that the expected value of technical or professional skills is often overstated due to the oversaturation of the labor market with highly-trained graduates (Belwal et al., 2017; Uddin, 2021). The latter is especially evident

in sought-after industries that are characterized by the high number of applicants competing over limited vacancies (Deloitte, 2017). While emphasizing the need for HEIs to revisit current educational approaches, employers tend to prioritize qualities that would allow a prospective worker to be both flexible and competent (Al-Youbi et al., 2020; Heike, 2020). Taking into account economic uncertainties such as those arising due to the Covid-19 pandemic, transversal employability skills are often presented as a prerequisite for sustainable employability and valued on par with professional qualities by some employers (Laguna-Sánchez et al., 2020).

From the perspective of educators, employability emerges as the main result of educational processes that shape a future graduate's professional capabilities while providing the necessary foundation for navigating the labor market. To ensure that students and graduates can effectively capitalize on their investment in educational pursuits, HEIs should be acutely aware of the requirements and expectations communicated by employers (Sin and Amaral, 2017). Moreover, several studies focusing on Saudi Arabia and GCC countries have demonstrated that HEIs often deemphasize transversal employability skills due to the inaccurate perception of the labor market or suboptimal policies (Al-khateeb, 2020; Belwal et al., 2017; Deloitte, 2017; Griffin and Coelhodo, 2019). On the other hand, employers provide important insights into potential improvements to educational curriculums due to their role as a driving force in the labor market. Being particularly aware of competencies that are indispensable for the 21st-century workplace, most employers are seeking graduates with the following employability skills: leadership; emotional intelligence, problem-solving; creativity, teamwork; self-discipline, and; oral communication (Husam and Abraham, 2019; Pauceanu et al., 2020; Rusai and Mat Rashid, 2015). Although HEIs don't guarantee a person's ability to secure employment, graduates should be made aware of the growing significance of so-called soft skills as one of the main venues to gain a competitive edge in the labor market (Harvey et al., 2017). With employability being one of the prime goals of higher education, the lack of consensus regarding employability skills puts a strain on HEIs' ability to efficiently prepare students for their future careers.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the scholarship focusing on transversal employability skills is markedly scarce which, consequently, translates into the disadvantageous position of Saudi graduates as job-seekers. In the framework of the ever-changing knowledge economy, the narrow focus on technological skills by Saudi Arabia's HEIs contributes to the creation of the skill gap that negatively impacts the country's employment profile, in particular, and the economy, in general (Ebaid, 2021). The latter issue is compounded by major economic challenges that are yet to be comprehensively addressed through the cooperation of key stakeholders (Al-khateeb, 2020). Similar to other GCC states, Saudi Arabia's labor market is characterized by a disproportionately high number of foreign employees as well as extreme unemployment among Saudi citizens (Deloitte, 2017). Throughout 2020 and in Q1 of 2021, the total percentage of Saudi citizens employed across all sectors of the economy has fluctuated between 20% and 22%, with nearly four-fifths of positions being occupied by expatriate workers (Arab News, 2021). Coupled with the economic and social outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic, the so-called Saudization policy or Nitaqat contributed to the recent exodus of foreign workers from Saudi Arabia (Alghamedi, 2016; Alfawaz et al., 2014). As for the country's unemployment rate, it has subsided to 11.7% in Q1 of 2021 after a sharp rise to 15.4% in early 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions

(Bloomberg, 2021). While the labor market is yet to stabilize, the situation remains unsustainable in the long-term perspective due to female unemployment averaging at 22% and male unemployment at 7% in the 2020s (Bloomberg, 2021). The described economic challenges are further exacerbated by the fact that curriculums of Saudi HEIs prioritize humanities, including language studies and religious studies, over subjects that are currently in demand (Alghamedi, 2016). Although Saudi Vision 2030 and the Saudization policy are intended to alleviate the aforementioned concerns, both HEIs and students should focus on the development of employability skills that would be critical for securing future employment opportunities (Aloui and Shams Eldin, 2020). As such, there is a considerable need for a scholarly inquiry into educational initiatives aimed at transversal employability skills that would help to reduce Saudi unemployment rates while ensuring the nation's economic prosperity.

3. Research Methodology

The current research builds upon the existing body of knowledge on the topics of employability skills and higher education initiatives that can equip future graduates with transversal competencies and abilities sought by employers. Framed within the theoretical background presented in the Literature Review section, the following research question underpins decisions in regard to methodology and research design: "In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, what is the role of HEIs in alleviating the unemployment crisis by developing employability skills among Saudi graduates?" To investigate the studied phenomenon and answer the research question, the authors employed an exploratory qualitative research design. The design choice is grounded on the fact that perceptions of Saudi education leaders and graduates on employability skills remain understudied. From this perspective, the in-depth exploration of these perceptions through the collection and analysis of qualitative data will prove invaluable for laying down a scholarly foundation and developing conceptual frameworks that would drive future research.

The research process commenced with the determination of target populations followed by purposive non-random sampling of 49 Saudi students and 6 education faculties in Saudi Arabia. Although the number of respondents in the two sample groups was smaller than expected, it was deemed adequate for the purposes of saturating the research with sufficient data. The collection of qualitative data was accomplished through the means of closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires administered to students and faculty staff in Saudi Arabia, respectively. In the case of the closed-ended questionnaire, the authors used a Likert-type scale with five response options ranging from one (Strongly Disagree) to five (Strongly Agree). Apart from recording demographic data regarding age, gender, academic degree, the field of study, year of study, and the university's type of ownership, the questionnaire included 10 subject-specific questions that were designed to grasp students' perspectives on employability skills. As for the open-ended questionnaire administered to the faculty staff, it also included a demographics section to record the respondents' gender, age, discipline, the university's type of ownership, job title, and academic degree. Moreover, the questionnaire comprised 11 open-ended questions to gather education leaders' perspectives on the development of employability skills among students in their institutions and the country as a whole. The design of subject-specific questions for both

questionnaires was guided by the literature review and the research question. Following data collection, the data analysis stage involved the coding process with the consequent identification of major themes in the respondents' assessments of employability skills in Saudi Arabia. In the case of the Likert-scale questionnaires, the collected data were visualized in the form of graphs and pie charts to facilitate the consequent analysis. Although responses from closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires were studied separately, the analyses were later compared to determine whether there are differences or similarities between the perspectives of students and education leaders. Finally, the emerging themes and findings were further scrutinized through the lens of scholarly views on the studied topics that had been established in the literature review. The final stages of the research pertained to the development of conclusions based on the findings unearthed in the course of the study. Based on the findings, the authors proposed prospective approaches to the development of employability skills among Saudi graduates.

Table 1 visualizes the demographic data of the student sample which consisted of 49 respondents who participated in the study. Out of 20 male and 29 female participants, the majority represented the 18-29 ($n=26$) and 30-39 ($n=19$) age brackets, with only 4 people reporting their age being between 40 and 49 years old. With 42 studying at a private educational institution, nearly all participants ($n=46$) pursue a graduate (Master) degree and nearly two-thirds are in their 1st year ($n=15$) or 2nd year ($n=16$). The sample did not have any unusual or unexpected characteristics that would have required additional investigation. As for the chosen field of study, the highest number of participants pursue an academic degree in Master of Business Administration ($n=18$), International Relations ($n=9$), and Finance ($n=5$).

Table 1. Demographic data of the student sample ($n = 49$)

Demographic Attribute	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Gender		
Male	20	40.8
Female	29	59.2
Age		
18-29	26	53
30-39	19	38.8
40-49	4	8.2
Academic Degree		
Undergraduate (Bachelor)	3	6.1
Graduate (Master)	46	93.9
Type of Institution		
Public	42	85.7
Private	7	14.3
Year of Study		
1st year	15	30.6
2nd year	16	32.7
3rd year	2	4
Last year	8	16.3
Graduated	8	16.3

Table 2 demonstrates the demographic distribution of the faculty sample which consisted of 6 participants who filled the open-ended questionnaire. Out of 3 male and 3 female participants aged between 40 and 49 years old ($n=6$), the majority holds a PhD degree ($n=5$) and work at a private institution ($n=5$). While the current reported job title of 4 respondents is Assistant Professor, 1 interviewee works as a Lecturer and 1 is a Dean. With the exception of 2 individuals who teach Finance, all respondents specialize in different disciplines. For the purposes of anonymity, the researcher did not collect or record personally identifiable information and each participant from the faculty sample had been assigned with an ID number (e.g. P1, P2, etc.).

Table 2. Demographic data of the faculty sample ($n = 6$).

Demographic Attribute	Number of Respondents
Gender	
Male	3
Female	3
Age	
40-49	6
Academic Degree	
Graduate (Master)	1
PhD	5
Type of Institution	
Public	1
Private	5

4. Results and Discussion

The preliminary analysis of the demographic data from both sample groups did not result in surprising or unusual findings. While the demographic profiles cannot be extrapolated on the two target populations due to the low number of participants, the choice of academic disciplines mirrors a general tendency among students to prioritize majors related to business and finance. With 95.9% of students choosing either Strongly Agree or Agree, the survey demonstrated a nearly universal agreement that employability skills are critical to achieving success in one's professional field. Although the investigation of individual competencies and abilities was out of the study's scope, the majority of participants are confident in their employability skills and claim to be knowledgeable regarding competencies aligning with professional goals. A considerably higher proportion of students disagreed and strongly disagreed with the claims that HEIs provide initiatives to develop employability skills (24.5%) or they have access to activities focused on non-technical skills elsewhere (28.6%). Although the questionnaire revealed overarching support for the notion that employers should be involved in the development of students' employability skills (98% Agree and Strongly Agree), less confidence was shown in regard to the actual situation in Saudi Arabia. Namely, 16.3% of respondents Disagree and 6.2% Strongly Disagree that Saudi students receive any type of support from employers or HEIs when it comes to employability skills and future employment. The most contentious question pertains to the importance of technical skills as compared to employability skills,

with only 34.7% of participants prioritizing the latter for professional employment in Saudi Arabia. The described response contrasts with previous scholarly works revealing that Saudi employers tend to prioritize applicants with superior non-technical qualities (Deloitte, 2017). Nevertheless, nearly all respondents recognized that the development of one’s employability skills will provide additional opportunities as the country moves towards Saudi Vision 2030. Figure 1 provides a question-by-question breakdown of responses collected from the student sample.

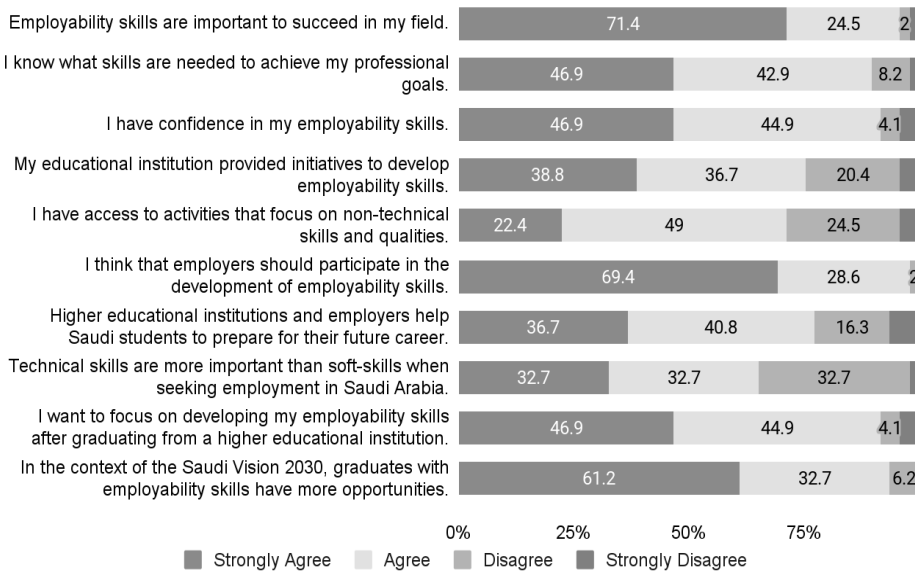


Figure 1. Students’ perceptions as reported in the questionnaire

Similar to the student sample, all educational leaders exhibited an understanding of the researched concept and agreed upon its key role for progressing in one’s professional life. While the definitions offered by the respondents differed in granularity, employability skills are fundamentally understood to encompass non-technical qualities that increase the likelihood of securing and keeping the desired job. The authors assessed the importance of employability skills as a whole, but each educational leader highlighted the most important examples as per their understanding of the term. In alignment with the scholarly consensus, all participants mentioned communication and interpersonal skills as the basic non-technical qualities that are integral for Saudi graduates and job-seekers (Harvey et al., 2017). Among other employability skills cited by the respondents were: teamwork, leadership, digital fluency, creativity, and others. The recognition of HEIs’ role in teaching employability qualities and competencies emerged as a major theme with all respondents indicating that curriculums which prioritize technical skills and de-emphasize soft skills are unsustainable. As further explained by P3, “it’s now a requirement to offer these soft or job readiness skills to improve the quality and employability of the graduates. Also it’s a requirement for attainment and maintenance of global Accreditation to have formal plans to assess and monitor these skills/outcomes.” Indeed, the data showcases the growing

expectations from academia and businesses for HEIs to include soft skill initiatives in the curriculum.

Judging from the collected data, the implementation of employability initiatives in the curricula of Saudi HEIs remains sporadic and non-uniform. While P1, P5, and P6 mentioned extra-curricular activities and industry-interacted curriculum development, several respondents struggled to provide definitive examples from their educational institutions. Additional efforts to foster students' soft skills pertain to the inclusion of compulsory volunteering and student clubs (P1, P3). When asked to assess the implementation of employability skills in their organizations, several participants were skeptical with P1 emphasizing that "The initiatives need time to show results." In this context, the second major theme emerging during the data analysis relates to the fact that Saudi graduates do not acquire necessary employability skills during their education. The problem was partially explained by the lack of self-discipline and engagement among Saudi students and graduates (P1, P3, P6). Apart from P5, all participants agreed that most students remain uninvolved even when HEIs offer comprehensive programs and organize extracurricular activities aimed at developing non-technical competencies. Support originating from employers as well as the involvement of all stakeholders emerge as critical aspects of achieving sustainable employability goals according to all education leaders who answered the survey. Specifically, P6 proposed that private and public organizations should "collaborate with Universities through voicing their needs in workshops, guest speakers, or even through their membership in advisory boards." Other suggestions included the provision of assessment-based training and more direct involvement through co-op programs. The described solutions can be achieved not only through collaborative agreements between HEIs and employers but also with the help of an overarching national policy (Alfawaz et al., 2014; Ebaid, 2021). By providing businesses with an opportunity to directly participate in the development of students' employability skills, education leaders can address the existing skill gap.

Finally, the data analysis revealed educators' perceptions of initiatives aimed at professionally-oriented development of employability skills for the purposes of fulfilling the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. Among the most commonly cited curricular and extracurricular activities necessary to help students in their future professions were co-op training, collaborative workshops with business leaders, student clubs, volunteering, and others. While many HEIs in Saudi Arabia have already incorporated the said solutions into educational processes, participants provided valuable insights into future opportunities for bolstering the sustainable employability of Saudi graduates (Aloui and Shams Eldin, 2020; Al-Youbi et al., 2020). Specifically, P4 and P5 emphasized the need for planned industry visits and employer-graduate interactions that would help expose students to the professional environment. Several faculty members stated that because Saudi students are grade-oriented and overly fixated on graduate certificates, the introduction of test-based job selection practices might enforce the importance of learning as opposed to simple memorization of technical information. In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, the participants are highly conscious of the fact that none of the sustainable goals can be achieved without ensuring that Saudi graduates possess a well-balanced profile of technical and soft skills. In other words, Saudi Arabia is undergoing major socio-economic transformations predicating the demand for employable graduates who are expected to

dominate all business sectors in the upcoming decade. Table 3 provides an outlook of five major themes that were uncovered during the data analysis stage.

Table 3. Major themes identified from the collected data

Theme	Number of Respondents
HEIs hold an important role in developing students' employability skills	6
Saudi graduates do not acquire necessary employability skills during their education	3
Employers have an important role in helping students to develop necessary employability skills	6
The involvement of all stakeholders is critical for achieving sustainable employability goals	6
Employable graduates are key to achieving Saudi Vision 2030	5

5. Conclusions

The researchers analyzed two sets of qualitative data collected from a sample of Saudi students and a sample of education leaders with the help of Likert-scale questionnaires and open-ended questionnaires, respectively. The authors aimed to explore the practical significance of employability skills of Saudi graduates for achieving the country's economic goals through the means of sustainable employability. Corroborated with scholarly evidence, the findings provided an opportunity to address the following research question: "In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, what is the role of HEIs in alleviating the unemployment crisis by developing employability skills among Saudi graduates?" The findings indicated that both students and education leaders are aware of significant roles played by employability skills in achieving one's professional goals through sustainable employment. The results are generally consistent with the current scholarship on the topic which suggests that all stakeholders should partake in the development of initiatives and programs that hone transversal employability skills (Huang and Hsieh, 2020; Rufai and Mat Rashid, 2015). While HEIs are expected to abandon the outdated model that prioritizes technical competencies at the expense of soft skills, employers should actively engage by offering training sessions, workshops, and other solutions (Harvey et al., 2017). In the context of Saudi Arabia, the ongoing unemployment crisis necessitates the introduction of a national policy that would formulate a collaborative agreement between the three main stakeholders - employment-seekers, employers, and HEIs (Kinash et al., 2016). From the perspective of Saudi educators, the immense demand for soft skills, such as communication and leadership, can be met with the help of learning experiences that immerse students into the professional environment by providing industry interactions and practical exposure.

The study revealed that educators and students are well-aware of the situation and are both eager to change the status quo. However, the active cooperation from the government and employers is likely to prove instrumental for implementing transformational changes required by Saudi Vision 2030. Considering the rapid deployment of the Saudization program and diversification of the country's economy, the goal of sustainable

employability cannot be met without immediate actions from all parties. Furthermore, socio-economic challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that the current emphasis on technical skills at the expense of employability skills is unsustainable from the long-term perspective. From this perspective, Saudi Arabia's HEIs should embrace a proactive approach by revisiting their curricula to include employability-oriented initiatives and programs. While students are expected to focus on self-development, it is integral for employers to communicate their expectations and actively engage in the educational process. Due to the lack of scholarly works focusing on employability skills from the perspectives of Saudi Arabia's HEIs and Saudi students, the current research provides crucial clues that can be employed in Saudi Arabia as well as other GCC countries. Finally, the findings can be further adapted to serve as the foundation for future policies and guidelines. The growing importance of remote work in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic calls for educational initiatives and upskilling programs that would help students to develop remote working skills. In this regard, the input from industry leaders can be especially useful as they often have a first-hand experience with remote work and office work balance as well as other employability competencies.

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