

Reem Albooinain, John Taylor

University of Southampton, United Kingdom

New approaches to employability: the importance of communications between universities and employers (0227)

Programme number: B4

Research Domain: Quality Assurance and Assessment

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to employability among university graduates. Governments, universities and employers, faced with increasing economic competition, have developed policies to enhance employability through educational initiatives with a view to boosting national wealth. Students are naturally concerned that their degrees will equip them for future employment and careers. However, the inter-relationship between employers, students and universities raises important conceptual and practical questions about the purpose, design and delivery of degree programmes. Improving the quality of higher education in terms of employability requires effective communications between employers and universities. This study explores these issues by considering the efforts of private universities in Bahrain to engage banking sector employers in order to improve the employability skills of graduates. The paper is based on semi-structured interviews with human resources managers in 12 Banks in Bahrain, including national and international banks, and interviews with 6 Deans of business schools.

Background

In December 2008, the kingdom of Bahrain set out its economic vision for the next 20 years. A crucial change was the planned transformation away from oil towards dependence upon the non-oil sector, particularly the banking sector, and the intention to improve the quality of education in order to provide highly skilled home graduates to replace the expatriate work force working in banking sector.

Against this background, this paper aims to explore the perceptions of banking sector employers about efforts by private universities to enhance the employability skills of graduates.

Literature

Consumer satisfaction of a product lies at the heart of any quality improvement process. This concept can be difficult when applied to higher education. The outputs of higher education are varied - they may be tangible or intangible - and the indicators of satisfaction may be similarly varied, including examination results, employment, earnings and academic satisfaction. (Becket and Brookes, 2008).

There are many different interpretations of quality. In higher education, Harvey and Knight (1996) identify five dimensions of quality, two of which may be seen to relate to employability and employer

satisfaction. These dimensions are: quality as fitness for purpose (meeting the customer's requirements) and quality as transformation (enhancing the participants' value and empowering participants for future careers). In some other approaches to quality, the perceptions of consumers are also central to improvement, such as functional quality (Grönroos, 1984) and interactive quality (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). Improving higher education quality with the aim of improving employability skills may be assumed to be an example of functional quality or interactive quality.

Employers are mostly concerned with the "product" of higher education (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996), including various generic or specific skills, particular or general knowledge and potential for future development. However, the precise mix of knowledge and skills will vary according to the sector and the employer. Harvey (2002) argues that "the employers' needs are transformative and varied"; even in the same sector, the needs of employers are transformative. Freeman (1994) therefore that no pre-prepared list of requirements can improve the quality of education. Meeting these highly changeable employability requirements cannot be achieved without good communications between higher education institutions and each employment sector.

Achieving consumer satisfaction requires an understanding of distinctions between expectations and perceptions. Parasuraman *et al.* (1985; 1988) created the SERVQUAL model; the most used model in measuring service quality. This model seeks to compare consumers' expectations and perceptions. (Cronin Jr and Taylor, 1992, Parasuraman *et al.*, 1994) and is relevant in considering how employers view their new employees.

Consumer satisfaction is an indicator of service quality (Athanasopoulos, 2000); (Clow and Beisel, 1995); (Ennew and Binks, 1999). In looking at the relationship between universities and employers, it is necessary to bear in mind the gap between expectations and perceptions, and to develop tools that help universities to measure this variable gap and then improve their processes accordingly. This paper offers new perspectives on how universities and employers can work together to enhance employability of students.

Methodology

This paper discusses the perceptions of employers as consumers of higher education. Perceptions are non-measurable variables, so the nature of the reality to be considered is subjective. Qualitative research is more concerned with explanation than measurement or causation (Mason, 2006); and was therefore well-suited to the purposes of this research.

The relationship between employers and universities is highly complex and is dependent on the views, feelings and experiences of individuals. To understand this relationship, therefore, it is important to use an in-depth, fine-grained qualitative approach, able to adjust to new issues and ideas as they emerge (Amaratunga *et al.*, 2002).

The paper reports on findings from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 human resources managers in the banking sector, a purposive sample providing a balanced representation of all categories of banks. Six semi-structured interviews with Deans of Business Schools were used to present the view of higher education providers.

Findings

The banking sector is characterised by high levels of internal competition. The sector looks for high performance and rapid achievement, possibly more so than most other sectors. The findings of this study set out in detail the needs of the banking sector in improving employability. The paper explores the impressions and assumptions of banking sector employers about the initiatives of higher education in improving employability; in particular, the paper presents variations between higher education and banking sector employers in their understanding of employability, knowledge and skills, and improvement processes. Quality is about product improvement and continuing improvement to maximise employability, this study presents the variation between academics and employers in their views on continuous quality improvement processes and how they might work effectively together to improve employability.

Significance

This paper is significant in four ways:

1. The paper offers a detailed view of student recruitment within the banking sector in Bahrain and how universities can respond to the national priority to develop this sector of the economy. In this way, the paper presents new views on the relationship between banking sector employers and universities, and on the implementation of policy priorities in higher education.
2. By focussing on the perceptions of employers and universities, the paper builds a new conceptual model of how the relationship between employers and higher education operates in practice including the requirements, expectations and pressures on both sides. This model aims to explain how issues of employability are addressed and how such issues can be developed in the future. Whilst the model is based on a relatively narrow base – the banking sector in Bahrain – it is believed that the findings will have a wider significance and therefore contribute to the understanding of employability in other countries and other settings.
3. The paper is also a contribution to understanding of higher education in the Arabic speaking world, a subject area that is seriously under-represented in present literature.
4. Finally, the research has a practical significance in helping universities, and in particular business schools, to meet the best method of communication and cooperation to engage changing requirements of the banking sector.

References

- AMARATUNGA, D., BALDRY, D., SARSHAR, M. & NEWTON, R. (2002) Quantitative and qualitative research in the built environment: application of "mixed" research approach. *Work study*, 51, 17-31.
- ATHANASSOPOULOS, A. (2000) Customer satisfaction cues to support market segmentation and explain switching behavior. *Journal of Business Research*, 47, 191-207.
- BECKET, N. & BROOKES, M. (2008) Quality Management Practice in Higher Education—What Quality Are We Actually Enhancing?
- CLOW, K. & BEISEL, J. (1995) Managing consumer expectations of low-margin, high-volume services. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 9, 33-46.
- CRONIN JR, J. & TAYLOR, S. (1992) Measuring service quality: a reexamination and extension. *The Journal of Marketing*, 55-68.
- ENNEW, C. & BINKS, M. (1999) Impact of Participative Service Relationships on Quality, Satisfaction and Retention An Exploratory Study. *Journal of Business Research*, 46, 121-132.
- FREEMAN, R. (1994) Quality Assurance in Secondary Education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 2, 21-25.
- GRÖNROOS, C. (1984) A service quality model and its marketing implications. *European Journal of Marketing*, 18, 36-44.
- LEHTINEN, U. & LEHTINEN, J. (1991) Two approaches to service quality dimensions. *The Service Industries Journal*, 11, 287-303.
- MASON, J. (2006) Mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way. *Qualitative Research*, 6, 9.
- MAYS, N. & POPE, C. (1995) Qualitative research: rigour and qualitative research.
- OWLIA, M. & ASPINWALL, E. (1996) A framework for the dimensions of quality in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 4, 12-20.
- PARASURAMAN, A., ZEITHAML, V. & BERRY, L. (1994) Alternative scales for measuring service quality: a comparative assessment based on psychometric and diagnostic criteria. *Journal of Retailing*, 70, 201-201.