

Enhancing Student Career Success through Employer Engagement

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Abstract

In the dynamic landscape of the global job market, where technological advancements continually reshape industry demands, the collaboration between universities and employers becomes paramount for ensuring students' career success. This paper advocates enhanced employer engagement as a vital form of experiential learning, facilitating students' direct interaction with potential employers. Through initiatives such as internships, field trips, guest lectures and collaborative projects, employer engagement bridges the gap between academic learning and the evolving requirements of the labour market. The persistent challenge of post-graduation employment emphasised the urgency for proactive measures. Drawing upon Kolb's Experiential Learning theory, this paper discussed strategies to boost collaboration between universities and employers. It presented a spectrum of engagement tactics, including internships, field trips, research partnerships, and guest lectures. The significance and implication of employer engagements in enhancing students' career success and employability were also discussed in the paper. One recommendation from the paper is for universities to increase employer engagement in academic activities by aligning educational programmes with industry demands through practical experiences and hands-on activities.

Keywords: Career success, industry demands, employability, employer engagement, experiential learning, university graduates.

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Introduction

The requirements to gain employment in the competitive labour market are constantly changing and students are facing challenges in securing jobs. There is a growing concern regarding universities' failure to equip graduates with the essential skills for success in the competitive job market (Pitan & Muller, 2020); Velasco, 2021). Various reasons, such as rapid technological development, evolving industrial demands, and an increased emphasis on soft skills and adaptability, continue to change the demands of industries (Muammar & Alhamad, 2023). Hence, students are unable to connect the skills acquired through university education with the changing demands of employers. Employers of labour no longer rely only on degree requirements to explore graduates' preparedness for work but have alternative methods to do so due to the changing nature of work (Pitan, 2017). This is where employer engagement emerges as a vital force in transforming the way educational institutions prepare students for their professional journeys.

Employer engagement is the interaction and partnership between employers and different stakeholders, like educational institutions, and organisations. The importance of such interactions for students' career success lies in introducing students to various career paths and helps them acquire skills that are in line with market demands. An important outcome of increased employer engagement is the enhanced employability profile of graduates (Kemp et al., 2009).

Despite numerous research on different aspects of student's employability, there seems to be limited work on employer engagement in graduates' smooth transition into the world of work (Pitan, 2016; Pitan & Muller, 2023; John, 2014). Based on Kolb's theory of experiential learning, this paper explores the different strategies that educational institutions and employers can implement to assist students in succeeding in their careers. Additionally, this paper addresses the significance of employers' engagement for students' career success.

For the organisation of this article, the first subheading was the introduction, which discussed the background and the problem. This was followed by a conceptual, theoretical, and empirical review of the literature in the following order: changing job market and employer

engagement, the concept of employer engagement, Kolb's theory of experiential learning, the significance of employer engagement for student career success, employer engagement strategies for student success in a competitive job market, addressing employer engagement challenges in higher education, and the implications of employer engagement for higher education and policymakers. The paper concluded with recommendations and conclusion.

Changing Job Market and Employer Engagement

The dynamic nature of the employment market poses problems for student career success. The shifting job market demands present challenges to students because they frequently struggle to secure employment despite having the necessary qualifications due to the evolving demands of employers. To address this, it is expected that potential employers are involved in educational activities to help produce quality graduates (Hou et al.,2022). Higher education institutions are required to foster students' personal growth and prepare them for the professional environment of the twenty-first century, since most graduates' soft skills are predominantly developed at the university (Muammar & Alhamad, 2023). In order to give students a strong combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience, such as opportunities for internships, mentorships, co-ops, and other experiential learning initiatives, it is imperative that educational institutions foster strong connections with the real-world demands of employers (Sobri et al.,2023).

The labour market has become more crowded and competitive, with job qualifications becoming increasingly complex (Pitan, 2023). It has often been argued whether the level of qualification graduates earn at university sufficiently meets employer's demands in the changing job market (Hou. et al., 2022).It was reviewed that the needs of businesses do not align with the mission and strategies of the university (Wilson, 2012). Consequently, it is essential for educational institutions and employers of labour to collaborate with the aim of exposing students to activities such as internships, mentorships, co-ops, mock interviews etc, which can be an effective means of developing business ideas in graduates, reduce the cost of recruitment exercise to employers and at

the same time, enhancing students' employability. (De St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Hou et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is imperative to address ways to match students' skill sets with the changing demands of the labour market and determine effective techniques and challenges to establish stronger relationships between universities and potential employers.

The Concept of Employers Engagement

The concept of employer engagement involves collaboration and interaction between educational institutions and businesses. It aims to create a mutually beneficial relationship that addresses workforce needs, improves the quality of education and training, and ultimately increases individuals' employability (Nabulsi et al., 2021). Employers' engagement and employability are interconnected aspects of employability enhancement (Mason et al., 2022). Employers' engagement activities are potential solutions to address students' skill problems (Suleman et al., 2021). This engagement can encompass various aspects, including employer contribution in curriculum design and delivery, internships, mentorships, and co-ops, as well as employment information dissemination through activities such as career lectures, networking events, and mock interviews (De St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Hou et al., 2022). For example, industry experts can observe sabbaticals in universities, where they participate in course delivery, supervision of student projects, and organising educational excursions to relevant industries (Pitan & Muller, 2020).

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

This paper is hinged on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which is scholarly influential and the most cited model of experiential learning theory (Morris, 2020). Experiential learning involves learning by doing and the act of reflecting on authentic practical experiences to increase and deepen the learning from such experiences (Kolb, 1984). The experiential learning theory is an effective technique for enhancing students' employability (Eimer & Bohndick, 2021). According to the theory, learning usually occurs when an individual attempts to make sense of real-world experiences. It emphasises the importance of life experience in the learning process, stating that knowledge is created

through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 2015). According to Kolb, if students want to be active, they need four important skills which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation skills. This means that students should be willing to embrace new experiences, reflect and observe the experiences from different perspectives, create concepts that align with their observations into logically sound theories, and be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020).

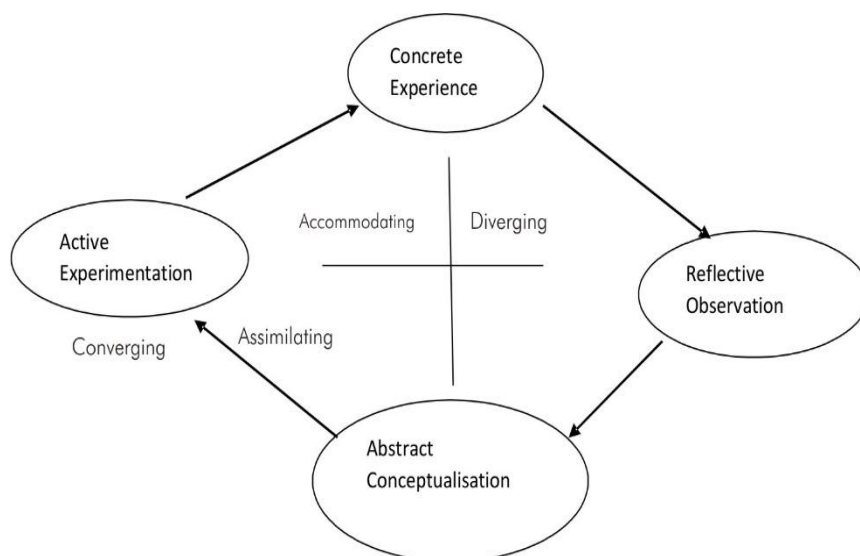


Figure 1: Kolb's learning cycle, with each arrow demonstrating the traditional order of each step(Kolb et al., 2004).

Using Kolb's experiential theory of learning, it is important that employers of labour directly partner with educational institutions and interact with students which will lead to increased employability of university graduates and subsequently, to the growth of industries.

Significance of Employer Engagement for Student Career Success

As discussed in Kolb's theory and shown in the model above, students should engage with employers of labour in the real world to make sense

of their experiences. Employer engagement is very important to enhance students' employability. It increases graduates' motivation toward their chosen career paths by building professional confidence. It allows students to acquire relevant industrial-specific skills and knowledge, lifelong learning tactics through internships, projects, and mentorship for the changing job market. For instance, during internships, students are opportune to get primary experience and direct information about everything that goes on within the industry they are assigned to. Employers' engagement closes the skills gap between education and industrial demands. It has been defined as the active involvement of employers in addressing the societal challenge of promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups (Van Berkel et al., 2017). It is also the practice that concentrates on the development of the workforce and effective management of skills and proactive preparation of students for rapid changes to maintain a competitive advantage and cope with the rivalry (Khan et al., 2020). Students will be able to sharpen their job search skills and improve their resume writing, interview techniques, and networking. It contributes in shaping the curriculum and also integrates career preparation throughout the curriculum which will provide feedback and insights into industrial demands and trends.

Employers of labour will be able to provide career counselling and coaching services to students directly, enlightening them on what to expect during a job search. This gives students the room to ask direct and important questions about their profession.

Employer Engagement Strategies for Student Success in a Competitive Job Market

1. **Curriculum Development and Updating:** In order to meet industrial demands, educational institutions, and employers should collaborate in the development and constant updating of the curricula. Through this, the latest technologies, relevant skills, and information that employers need from potential candidates are incorporated. It is necessary that the curriculum should be developed with input from industrial professionals to ensure it is relevant and addresses contemporary industrial needs (Wynekoop & Nakatani, 2023).

2. **Internship Programmes:** University bodies should increase access to co-ops and internships, which can lead to experiential learning opportunities by collaborating with a variety of employers. Various companies should be open to training students and making them work-ready by providing important projects required by industries that align with academic coursework through internship programmes. Due to science and technological advancement, establishing strong collaboration between universities and industry in this area is inevitable (Othman & Omar, 2012). The opportunities should offer hands-on experience, access to industry-standard tools, technologies, and exposure to real-world situations which allow students to gain practical experience in real-world settings.
3. **Field Trips and Excursions:** It involves exposing students directly to different industries, factories, workplaces, and industrial experts which will help them understand the skills, standards, practices, and knowledge required from them by potential employers. It is the process whereby students visit companies, factories, or offices which allows them to experience real-world situations and gain insights into various job requirements in their career paths. Students get the opportunity to interact with experts, managers, and staff in various organisations and this will provide them with crucial connections for future internships, job opportunities, and mentorship (Okolie et al., 2020). Engaging in professional interactions with professionals teaches students how to effectively work with employers, ask pertinent questions, and present themselves with confidence.
4. **Research Partnerships:** This focuses on practical applications and innovation which enables students to directly collaborate with industrial experts and industries to connect their academic knowledge to real-world situations and this will expose them to experts and mentors in their field of study thereby enhancing their professional development by working on collaborative projects, attending workshops and seminars, and participating in industry events which is essential for success in the workforce (Thomas & Busby, 2003). Students can gain access to valuable resources, such as state-of-the-art facilities, cutting-edge technology, and specialized

expertise by collaborating with industrial partners (Ankrah, & AL-Tabbaa, 2015). Employers require students who have practical experience, industrial connections and this can be developed through engagement in research partnerships.

5. **Guest Lectures:** This involves inviting experts from different industries to deliver practical tips on career opportunities, specific skills and provide first-hand insight on current trends, challenges that will educate students on what is expected from them by the industry. This allows students to interact with guest speakers and ask relevant questions on matters that align with their path of interest. Establishing connections with employers through guest lectures can lead to long-term partnerships between educational institutions and companies (Leary, 2013).

Addressing Employer Engagement Challenges in Higher Education

The focus here is identifying and offering solutions to the obstacles that hinder effective collaboration between higher education institutions and employers. Many challenges can prevent effective collaboration between universities and industries.

Cultural and Structural Barriers: Barriers within universities often stem from cultural differences that hinder the willingness to collaborate with employers to meet skill demands. There's a perceived cultural mismatch, with HE institutions whereby academic activities are prioritised over business-oriented activities. (Bolden & Petrov, 2008; Suleman et al., 2021).

Communication Difficulties: Establishing and maintaining effective communication channels by employers and academia can be challenging as a result of administrative processes or a lack of dedicated platforms. Additionally, there may be communication breakdowns, as employers and universities may struggle to find common ground due to differing languages and priorities (Little et al., 2003; Suleman et al., 2021).

Disciplinary-Based Curriculum: Building a flexible curriculum that captures the specific needs of employers can be an issue because some universities focus more on the theoretical aspect of learning rather than

the practical aspect which involves learners having real-world experiences. However, some universities lack appropriate learning packages that can build learners to better fit employers' specific needs and this can be because of insufficient information about employers' skill needs (Suleman et al., 2021).

Employers Barrier: Employers can stand as a barrier between themselves and higher education collaboration because the skills they demand from university graduates change over time. As technological advancement sets in, so do the requirements and demands for recruitment change (Teichler, 2009; Suleman et al., 2021).

Detachment of Higher Education: Higher education focuses on academic activities that they fail to set shared goals and a common language that would increase collaboration and togetherness. This detachment can lead to a mismatch between the skills acquired at HE and those required by employers (Suleman et al., 2021).

Implications of Employer Engagement for Higher Education and Policymakers

Due to technological advancement which reshapes industrial demands, higher education and policymakers need to collaborate with industries to align the curriculum and academic activities to suit industrial demands by integrating relevant skills and information into the curriculum which will assist students to be better prepared for employment, reduce the skills gap and increase employability (Tandika, & Ndijuye, 2021). Collaboration with employers can lead to research initiatives that address real-world problems encountered by industries, foster innovation and technological advancement (Wafa, 2020). Failure to collaborate effectively with industries can reduce the productivity and contribution of prospective employees to the growth of society. Some of the ways universities can improve collaboration with industries include but are not limited to internship programmes, field trips, research partnerships, and guest lectures. One significant benefit of such collaboration is that universities gain access to information on industry needs and demands. This information enables universities to make informed decisions on fund allocation and curriculum development. As a

result, the issue of skills mismatch will be addressed, leading to the production of more employable graduates.

Recommendations

First, there is a need to increase employers' engagement in academic activities by aligning educational programmes with industrial demands through practical experiences and engaging in hands-on activities.

Secondly, the constant changes in industrial demands should be monitored by educational bodies and those changes noticed should be included in educational activities to meet up with rising demands of the employment market. This will increase students' awareness of the important skills in demand.

Finally, practical work experience and employer mentorship should be properly monitored, and every student should be given the opportunity to participate through internship programmes, workshops, practicums, and career fairs. Various industrial bodies and corporations should be invited by the university bodies to give career talks and connect with students thereby exposing the students to the necessary skills and demands of the job market.

Conclusion

Based on Kolb's Experiential learning theory, this paper explores how the partnership between universities and potential employers helps to facilitate the alignment of industrial demands with educational activities which will make graduates more marketable and employable. It presents various employer engagement strategies that can assist students meet the demands of the competitive world of work. The paper also emphasizes the significance of employer engagement for students' career success which will assist university graduates navigate through the constant competitive job market. In an attempt to do this, a few definitions of employers' engagement by different researchers were discussed, several challenges that higher education and students may face in engaging with employers were considered and employer engagement strategies that can assist students meet the demands of the competitive world of work were also discussed.

This paper concluded that employer engagement aims to create a mutually beneficial relationship that addresses industrial needs,

improves the quality of education and training, and ultimately increases individuals' employability. Educational institutions and various employers of labour need to collaborate to close the gaps that hinder university students' employability in the labour market.

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