

Values, Skills and Competencies for employability of fresh graduates

Dr. Kiran Sharma*

Abstract

Fresh out of school and +2, students are not aware of what is expected out of them. It becomes imperative to groom them for the external world. Colleges / Universities have a crucial social role to play in grooming the youngsters with the essential technical and non-technical skills so that they become readily employable at later stages. Not all have the opportunities, therefore, Universities' responsibility is doubly increased in providing right kind of platform for each and every student. Citing a survey conducted by Wheel-box Employability Test, the Home Minister of India, Rajnath Singh said "only 34 percent of our graduates are employable" and thus questioned the education that is being provided to the students in the country."In modern education system, the entire focus seems to be on materialistic aspirations," he said, and pleaded the principals to take the responsibility to educate the students and make them prepare for the future by providing them quality education and moral understanding in their respective schools. The educational institutions' role does not end in providing academic and technical education only. Their role as social reformers lies in inculcating right kind of values, skills and competencies so as to prepare them for real life situations and job environment. There is a need to create a hub and interface between the industry and the institutions of higher education. The values, skills and competencies need to be developed within the curriculum.

Key words: values, skills, competencies, employability,

1. Introduction

Fresh out of school and +2, students are not aware of what is expected out of them. It becomes imperative to groom them for the external world. Colleges / Universities have a crucial social role to play in grooming the youngsters with the essential technical and non-technical skills so that they become readily employable at later stages. Not all have the opportunities, therefore, Universities' responsibility is doubly increased in providing right kind of platform for each and every student.

The present day graduates are conceptually very clear as to what they want in life. Those who have all the basic existing material needs fulfilled look forward to creativity and innovation in their work pursuit. On the other hand those who are seeking employment for earning bread and butter look forward to stability and earning basic income. Among these, there are some who work hard to rise up the ladder while others stay fixed to the same job profile for a couple of years to gain stability and work experience. More than just monetary benefits, the youngsters of today have become more selective about the kind of company or industry or even work-place where they would prefer to serve. Today's graduates enjoy trying different work roles and getting a variety of work experiences before making a decision on their eventual career path (Tang, 2014).

*Chief Counselor, Chandigarh University, Gharuan, Mohali;
E-mail:kiransharma1@gmail.com; Mobile: 9872900919

1.1 Value Education

According to the Home Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, the education system in the country needs a qualitative improvement with focus on skill development which would further provide job opportunities for students in the future. "Our education system needs qualitative improvement and it should focus on skill development, values and spiritual development," he said here while addressing an international conference for school principals. The home minister also expressed concern that not even one Indian university featured in the list of top 275 universities in the world, according to the Times Higher Education Survey. The home minister showed his concern over the failure of any Indian University that could make the mark of top 275 universities in the world. The survey was conducted by the Times Higher Education and the results made the minister quite unhappy, for which he demanded a re-evaluation in the overall education system of India. Citing a survey conducted by Wheel-box Employability Test, the minister said "only 34 percent of our graduates are employable" and thus questioned the education that is being provided to the students in the country. "In modern education system, the entire focus seems to be on materialistic aspirations," he said, and pleaded the principals to take the responsibility to educate the students and make them prepare for the future by providing them quality education and moral understanding in their respective schools (IANS, 2014).

Thus, solid foundation for employability needs to be given during the growing years in school and college. CBSE has already introduced a paper on Problem-Solving Ability (PSA) conducted in November every year. The students of Classes 1X and X are performing the verbal ability test, numericals and problem solving.

Before skills and competencies are taught to students, it is essential to state to them the reasons for acquiring them. The need to develop ethics, before any kind of skill and competency is taught, is a must.

1.2. Professional Ethics

Competence in Professional Ethics requires:

1. Clarity about comprehensive human goal: *Samadhan-Samridhi-Abhay-Sah-astitva*, and its fulfillment through universal human order
2. Confidence in oneself: based on the right understanding of oneself and the rest of existence
3. Mutually fulfilling behaviour: Clarity and confidence in ethical human conduct and its correlation with sustainable personal as well as collective happiness and prosperity
4. Mutually enriching interaction with Nature: Self-sufficiency in fulfillment of physical needs; ability to assess the needs for physical facilities for the family and their fulfillment through productive systems ensuring harmony in the nature. (Gaur, Sangal & Bagaria, 2009: 97-98).

The need to understand oneself and through that the entire existence is important. Every human being wants to do what is right i.e. his intention is always right. Intention is related to our Natural Acceptance i.e. what is naturally acceptable to me. Only the competence may be lacking which needs to be developed through proper understanding and practice. For e.g. if the other has better understanding than me, I shall understand from the other. If the other has less understanding than me, I accept the responsibility to improve the understanding of the other. Thus, it becomes imperative on the part of Colleges and Universities to impart Value Education so that the prospective graduates understand the meaning of comprehensive human goal, mutually fulfilling behaviour, understanding self and the entire existence. Learning skills and competencies aimlessly will lead to emptiness and vacuum. Acquiring skills and

competencies based on clarity about Universal Human Goal will be fulfilling and satisfying to the individual.

1.3. Hard Skills and Soft Skills

Skills and attitudes are often termed as ‘Employability skills’ or even ‘Soft skills’, that are to be acquired in addition to the ‘Hard skills’ or the technical skills. Hard skills are learnt automatically as its learning is incorporated in the formal academic learning. Soft skills require to be enhanced through continuous, systematic and formal training. Soft skills are often left at the mercy of the learner to learn by themselves. Soft skills need to be instilled through practice. Soft skills training and practice should become part of curriculum. For e.g. learning leadership skill should be part of curriculum through practice. Each student at the end of the course should be able to exhibit two or three traits of leadership. Even a shy student of the class should be able to achieve this objective. Then only College/University are playing their role of creating ‘employable’ youth. Sixteen years of schooling will then be completed in all forms.

Technical training in industry helps the undergraduates to communicate with people, learn the intricacies of the work environment and manage things on their own. They also learn working with computers and planning and organizing work. Technical knowledge requires thorough preparation in the undergraduate years. Regular, weekly assessments through objective tests, surprise tests, quiz and multiple choice questions are a regular feature. Preparation for Aptitude tests requires to be done in a graded manner right from 1st year of College so that the students are in touch with reasoning, logical thinking, verbal and quantitative abilities, problem solving abilities, cross-cultural communication, business partnering, business skills and writing projects.

Globalization and modernization are creating an increasingly diverse, transparent and interconnected world. To function well in this world, individuals need to master changing technologies and to make sense of large amounts of available information. They also face collective challenges as societies – such as balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability, and prosperity with social equity. In these contexts, the competencies that individuals need to meet their goals have become more complex, requiring more than the mastery of certain narrowly defined skills.

1.3.1 Competency

According to United Nations Industrial Development Organization (2002), “A competency is a set of skills, related knowledge and attributes that allow an individual to successfully perform a task or an activity within a specific function or job.”

Coll, Zegward & Hodges (2002:36) define a competent individual as “one who has skills and attributes relevant to tasks undertaken”. They used Birkett’s distinction between “cognitive skills which are the technical knowledge, skills and abilities, whilst behavioural skills are personal skills such as principles, attitudes, values and motives”. These terms could also be related to “employability skills” (Hind, Moss & McKellan, 2007). According to Harvey *et al.* (2002), most employers are looking for graduates who are proactive, can use higher level skills including analysis, critique, synthesis and multi layered communication to facilitate innovative teamwork in catalyzing the transformation of their organization”.

Competencies are the ability to accomplish a task. Competencies can be divided into generic (soft) and subject specific (hard) competencies. Generic (soft) competencies are related to skills and knowledge commonly possessed by the general public. These are not

occupationally specified and considered applicable in more than one context. The main categorization of such skills in the study includes personal qualities, critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, ICT skills and management skills. These two skills operate in the cognitive and affective domains. Subject specific (hard skills) competencies are acquired through the curricula which are exclusive to a particular discipline. These are discrete components of the knowledge and skills that are discipline specific, and are academically relevant and form the basis for professional preparation and development. Knowledge and skills can be learned through a particular program. As in the case of electrical and electronic engineers, subject specific skills refer to those abilities which allow individuals to participate in the occupation more effectively, and they can be categorized as technological skills and subject knowledge (Hays, 1971: 40-46).

In a study conducted by Somalingam & Shanthakumari (2013: 36-46) using Delphi method, the important top five skills and competencies identified by the panel members in a domestic organization environment are as follows: Mastery skills and knowledge in the Discipline, Communication and language skills, Innovation and creativity skills, Social and leadership skills and Inter-cultural competence. The same five skills and competencies have been projected in a different merit order when it is required for a multi-national company's organizational context. Priority is given to 'inter-cultural competence' when an engineering graduate is employed in a foreign country. The top five skills and competencies identified by the panel members in MNCs are as follows: Mastery skills and knowledge in the Discipline, Communication and language skills, Inter-cultural competence, Innovation and creativity skills and Social and leadership skills.

1.3.2 Employability Skills

Employability skill is an often talked about term these days. Everyone is stressing on the need for employability skill in young graduates – be it the academicians, the industry or the government. The NASSCOM-McKinsey report (Gupta, M. 2009), which says that approximately 75 percent of fresh engineering graduates from India are not directly employable, gives the idea of employability an identity of its own.

A recent survey conducted by FICCI and the World Bank revealed that 64 percent of the surveyed employers were not satisfied with the quality of engineering graduates' skills (Gupta, 2009). If the prospective candidates appearing for any recruitment process possess requisite skills, then it becomes easy for the recruiter to filter out the deserving from the not-so-deserving ones. Also, hiring people with the desired job-readiness skills will lead to a significant reduction in the training of fresh recruits.

Another benefit of hiring people with relevant employability skills is that it helps in managing attrition as only those who are interested in that field will take up the job. Employability skills can be best learned through interactive and experiential learning curriculum where a person first experiences and then derives the learning from that activity. This way the learning becomes permanent and more effective (Gupta, M. 2009). Furthermore, employers are now searching for graduates who are well-balanced, with good academic achievement and possessing 'soft-skills' such as communication skills, problem solving skills, inter-personal skills and the ability to be flexible (Nurita, Shahrudin & Aion, 2004b).

Employability skills are competencies that are required when preparing students for the workplace and their employability on completion of their qualifications. Skill concerns the execution of a single task, while competence deals more with the execution of a whole series of different tasks in a certain (occupational) domain, all of them performed well and in coherence or integrated (Mulder, 2001: 147-159). Marzano *et al.*'s (1993) have emphasized on three domains of taxonomy of competencies, namely, attitudes and perceptions, productive habits of mind and meaningful usage, extension and acquisition of knowledge.

According to Bordogna (1997), integration, analysis, innovation and synthesis, and contextual understanding are the key capabilities for engineering students

On discussing the skills of globally competent graduates, Jed Willard (2012) emphasized the following skills: initiative, enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, interest in continuous learning, courage, self-reliance, self-confidence, self-control, self-knowledge, positive outlook toward adversity, independence, appreciation of diversity, perseverance, creativity, flexibility, comfortable with uncertainty, open-mindedness, language and communication skills, assertiveness and sense of humour. In a report by CBI(2007), UK, the discussion on employability defined the employability skills as: Positive attitude, Self-management, Team-working, Business and customer awareness, Problem-solving, Communication and literacy, Application of numeracy and Application of Information technology.

Employability is conceived by Rothwell & Arnold (2007: 23-41) in terms of interrelated components which include wider contextual factors such as:

- The student's academic performance and engagement in his/her studies
- The student's confidence in his/her skills and abilities
- The student's ambition
- The student's perception of the university's brand
- The reputation the student's university has within his/her field of study
- The status and credibility of the student's field of study
- The student's awareness of opportunities in the external labour market
- The student's perception of the external labour market
- The external labour market's demand for people in the student's subject field.

2. Comprehensive Skills

Students need to make the most of University life and extra-curricular activities to develop the generic skills. It is only through interaction and teamwork that students learn sportsmanship, tolerance, patience, perseverance, competition, ability to bear humiliation, pain and failure- so very essential to face life in reality and cope with it. Amidst all successes and failures, managing self occupies the utmost top priority in life.

It is necessary to plan early to get relevant work experiences and voluntary work so that students become work ready and are aware of their strengths and short-comings in the chosen fields. It is essential to take up relevant courses and workshops.

The most sought after skills are: Initiative, dynamic, team-player, proactive, self-motivated. Soft Skills include such skills –presentation skills, effective oral and written skills, ability to read the audience, strategic thinking and leadership skills. Soft skills should complement the hard skills gained in the respective programmes.

The graduates need to question themselves as to whether they have – led, achieved, co-ordinated, delegated, delivered, identified, presented, reported, resolved or organized. If not it is never too late to start afresh. All efforts can be directed towards achieving these action words. One has to look for opportunities which means high level of alertness, networking and relationship building is required for gathering information.

Computer and technology competencies are increasingly in demand because of the increases in automated services and the Internet. These skills involve the ability to use software, troubleshoot hardware issues, type, and send and receive e-mails and faxes. Advanced positions may consider skills such as coding and hardware engineering a must. One should be effectively and efficiently be able to use e-mail, the Internet, mobile telephony, instant messaging and Adobe Acrobat.

Based on a number of surveys on the skills required by graduates undertaken by Microsoft, Target Jobs, the BBC, Prospects, and other organizations, here is a list of the most

often deemed important skills that graduate recruiters look for are: Ability to work under pressure, confidence, perseverance, motivation, leadership organization, problem-solving, negotiation, persuasion, and commercial awareness.

The employability skills that the engineering students must possess (Natarajan, 2012) are the skills tested in written test which include Domain knowledge, Quantitative aptitude, Analytical skills, Logical and critical thinking and Verbal ability/ proficiency in English Language; skills tested in group discussion like Communication skills, Inter-personal skills, leadership skills, motivation skills, Team building skills, Tolerance to ambiguity, Divergent thinking, listening skills, presentation skills and Analytical skills; and skills tested in interview like Attitude, Domain knowledge, Clarity in thought, Clarity in goals, Presentation skills, Communication skills and level of motivation.

According to Harvey *et al.* (2002), most employers are looking for graduates who are proactive, can use higher level skills including analysis, critique, synthesis and multi layered communication to facilitate innovative teamwork in catalyzing the transformation of their organization.

There are currently more than hundred people at Google who previously did Teach for America (TFA), a two year programme that places elite college graduates as teachers in under- resources urban and rural public schools. Google loves hiring people from the program because it requires new graduates to think on their feet and achieve success in a challenging new environment, two traits the company feels people will need to master once they get to Google. “TFA graduates have to coach their students in an environment where motivation isn’t always a given— and solve very complex problems that require patience, perseverance and commitment— things we really value at google,” Casserly, the company’s head of Culture Communication, tells Business Insider. “It’s difficult to find talented professionals with this kind of intense experience at such an early stage in their career.”

During his two years in the classroom, McWilliams discovered that he personally was a visual learner and devised strategies for breaking through in a classroom where each student had his/her own learning needs. Finally, he says the creative problem solving he did to communicate with students is similar to the ‘Corporate triage’ he does every day when trying to figure out how best to explain a new Google product to the public.

We need to take examples from them and include such part-time activities for students while they are in school and college. Projects like ‘Each one, Teach one, Plant one’ and visits to children with special needs and writing a report on them – will create awareness towards social issues and sensitize the students towards problems of humanity and how to cope with them. The values of compassion, care and love for all will be reinforced. To ensure better outcomes for students, the higher education institutions have already started to partner with employers and other community stakeholders outside of the circle of colleges and universities.

Work-integrated programmes have the purpose of preparing students for the workplace by identifying and developing the important competencies that are believed to be needed by employers (Hodges & Burchell, 2003: 16-22). These technical skills are then transferred to the real work environment by the students having a compulsory semester of work integrated learning (Crebert *et al.*, 2004: 47-70). The time spent in real life situations gives students the opportunity to apply abstract concepts in the classroom. The soft skills are handled in a realistic manner rather than trying to simulate opportunities by carrying out role play or similar teaching methods in a classroom experience (Tovey, 2001: 225-240).

The challenge though is to make students realize how important it is to have generic competencies, how these improve their employment opportunities in a highly competitive market and that they should take ownership for these (Maher & Graves, 2007). They should

also be aware of the needs and be able to relate their abilities to those required by employers (Yorke & Harvey, 2002; 41-58).

According to Coll, Zegward & Hodges (2002: 35-44), if students do not see the need or importance, the likelihood of higher education institutions managing to convince students to instill these, will be difficult. The importance of the work-integrated learning experience cannot be denied as students will be exposed to realities and the competencies required in the work place (Rainsbury *et al.*, 2002: 8-18). The opportunity to actually work in a work environment will enable the students to learn how to work with people, develop communication skills and learn how to get things done.

However, each chosen field of profession has its own requirement of set of skills and competencies. One needs to dwell deeply into personal values and strive for developing the required skills and competencies. For e.g. Hospitality faculty must prepare their students for a highly labour-intensive, customer focused, service industry. The competencies such as customer service, flexibility, concern for order, quality and accuracy, teamwork and cooperation as well as self control will allow students to understand how to operate efficiently and professionally in the demanding environment of hospitality.

Surveys of professional librarians show a high need for the skills for professional competencies, management, networking and teamwork. In addition to this, the core communication skills recognized for effectiveness in a library setting include professional knowledge, non-verbal communication, negotiating, competence in presenting and explaining information, and basic listening skills (Koganuramath & Mallikarjun, 2000).

By enhancing soft skills, self-esteem, self-confidence, attitude towards life, one can improve employability skills and approach work life with more positivity and enthusiasm. Imparting academic and technological knowledge is a simple task. However, taking on the task and responsibility of providing value based education with non technical skills is a challenging task. The stakeholders need to accept this as a major responsibility by being instrumental in providing the change which is very much the need of the hour. Timely intervention is required to safeguard the employment of the youth. Without jobs at the right juncture of life the youth may become potential hazard for the community at large.

2.1 HRM initiatives

Over the years, highly skilled and knowledge based jobs are increasing while low skilled jobs are decreasing. There is a need for multi skill development. Competency Mapping is a process of identifying key competencies for an organization, the jobs and functions within it. Competency mapping is important and is an essential activity. Every well-managed firm should have well defined roles and list of competencies required to perform each role effectively. Competency mapping identifies an individual's strengths and weaknesses in order to help them better understand themselves and to show them where career development efforts need to be directed. Competency mapping is not only done for Confirmed employees of an organization and it can also be done for contract workers or for those seeking employment to emphasize the specific skills which would make them valuable to a potential employer. These kinds of skills can be determined, when one is ready to do the work. Competency mapping is one of the most accurate means in identifying the job and behavioral competencies of an individual in an organization. Competency is a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to perform a job effectively and efficiently. A Competency is something that describes how a job might be done excellently; a Competence only describes what has to be done, not how. Core competency is the pillar upon which the individual rests. Core competencies are the skills, characteristics and assets that set the company apart from competitors. They are the fuel for innovation and the roots of

competitive advantage (Ahmad,2008). Thus it calls for future skill mapping through proper HRM initiatives (Yuvaraj,2011). If MNCs and Industries are looking for efficiency and stability, they must do competency mapping and job profiling for each post beforehand so that the freshers joining the company are able to tune themselves to their requirements and perform accordingly.

3.Conclusion

The Colleges/ Universities play a crucial role in grooming the under - graduates in their growing years. The Universities’ responsibility is doubly increased in providing right kind of platform to each and every student. The need to incorporate value education, technical skills and non-technical skills into the curriculum is essential. Aptitude skills, Logic and reasoning, Spoken English, Business etiquette, General Knowledge, Current Affairs, Practical learning of Leadership and Teamwork, Event management and Management techniques – all should be consciously integrated within the curriculum. Students should get hands-on experience with seminars, project work, report-writing and presentations. Acquiring soft-skills and competencies in the process will help the students to gain confidence and high self-esteem.They will be better equipped to tune themselves to the demands of industries and MNCs with more bargaining power in hand.



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