

Sustainable Employability Skills among Bangladeshi University Graduates: Employers' Perspective

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***Abstract:** The employability skills of graduates are considered to be essential for ensuring employment in this competitive employment market of 4IR. Through review of the relevant literature and analysis of survey data on employers' perspective, this study attempts to find the employability skills gap among university graduates. Data was collected from employers through a survey questionnaire and data analysis was carried out through SPSS. Although the evidence shows that there is no specific list of employability skills to be prescribed, the study found some relevant skills like: interpersonal communication skill, problem solving skill, leadership skill, analytical skill, IT skill, critical thinking and creativity skill, decision making skill, adaptability skill, etc. that university graduates lack to get employed. Furthermore, this study attempts to suggest some measures like: modifying the curricula; involving industry experts in teaching-learning; involving students in practical oriented assignments, projects, real case study analysis and solving real life problems in a group; collaborating with industry; introducing employability skills related courses; etc. to be taken by academic institutions to reduce the gap and ensure sustainable employment of university graduates both at home and abroad.*

Keywords: Sustainability, Employability skills, Skill gap, Industry collaboration, Curriculum development, Employers' satisfaction, Graduate employability.

1. Introduction

As per the Bangladesh Statistics 2019 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) of the Statistics and Informatics Division (SID), Ministry of Planning of the Government of Bangladesh, the total number of employed population (age 15+) is 60.8 million while the unemployed population is 2.6 million in Bangladesh. The unemployment rate prevailed at 4.2 percent at that time. This ratio is supposed to increase manifold as a consequence of the COVID-19 after effects. However, the World Bank data shows that the unemployment rate in Bangladesh was 4.055% in 2012 (Statistics, 2019). The total population of Bangladesh was 164.6 million in 2019. According to the Labor

Force Survey Bangladesh, 2016-17 (BBS), the total labor force was 63504000. A total of more than 3.2 million of university graduates/tertiary level graduates are employed in Bangladesh (Statistics, 2018). Although the number of university graduates are increasing, the ever-increasing gap between the job market expectations and the academia readiness is hindering the real development of the country, especially, the development of a knowledge and skills-based society in Bangladesh. Currently, about five hundred thousand foreign professionals and workers are working in various industries in Bangladesh who take home a substantial amount of money every year though a good number of higher educated youths of the country are still unemployed (Ahmed, 2020). The main reason behind this situation is a lack of required skills among our graduates and an expectation gap between industry and academia (Milon et al., 2021).

There has always been a debate regarding the skill gap which arises between the skills requirements of the industry or employers and the skills that are being developed among the graduates by the higher education institutions. The industry or the employers always claim that they do not get their required skills in university graduates and sometimes suggest updating the curricula and need for more industry-academia alliances to bridge the skill gap. The international economy is declining significantly as a result of the long-term effects of the 2008 global recession, as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. One of the long-term effects of a declining global economy is that people's spending power declines, resulting in less production and fewer employment generation opportunities. As a result, graduate employability has been and is going to be the topic of discussion for the future. Graduate employability has long been a concern in developing countries, particularly in Bangladesh. This is because most students pursue higher education in order to ensure a safe and better career. In today's competitive employment market, only achieving high academic results is not enough to ensure better employment but requires some skills and efficiency as sought by the employers or industry. As a result, there is a growing tendency of emphasizing graduate employability skills in addition to subject knowledge. Legislators tend to stress the need for 'employability skills' so that graduates are properly prepared to tackle the difficulties of an increasingly competitive labor market (Skills, 2008). A good number of countries will generate fewer jobs than the number of new graduates as a result of many changing global conditions, until national economies resume their normal pace. Universities and graduates must learn new skills and approaches in order to obtain the employment they desire. To equip better, there is a dire need to conduct some extensive studies to identify the skills set that are going to lead the employment market in the future so that the academia can prepare their graduates accordingly to achieve those skills and meet the rising industry demands.

This study strives to know the status of the university graduates in the employment market, skills they possess and skills that employers seek among university graduates

while recruiting. Identifying the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for future skills improvement of the graduates has also been emphasized in the study. The study will help to know the skills gap areas so that academia and industry can take necessary measures to bridge those skills gaps and to strongly position university graduates in the employment market both at home and abroad in order to develop world class skilled and sustainable human resources.

2. Literature Review

Employability has been defined by some authors as the ability to find and keep work (Finn, 2000; Ritchie, 2000). Yorke (2006) defined employability after analyzing existing definitions as a set of achievements, abilities, apprehensions, and personal traits that make graduates to get employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. Graduates' employability is an important issue for higher education institutions (Holmes, 2013). The proper and sustainable employment of graduates is considered to be one of the major indicators of evaluating the quality of graduates and teaching-learning and other support services of a higher education institution (Okolie et al., 2020). Unemployment hinders the real development of a country which was advocated by (Chowdhury & Hossain, 2014). It is evident that the skill demands vary based on types of industry, organization and country in the ever-changing employment market (Lauder, 2013). Chowdhury and Miah (2019) found verbal communication skills and honesty as the most sought-after skills by local companies, whereas multinational companies (MNCs) prioritize research-based internships and interpersonal communication abilities. They also found a negative correlation on prioritizing skills between managers of local companies and MNCs. Jayasingha and Suraweera (2020) revealed that, while academic knowledge is crucial, it is not the only element that determines graduates' employment. According to the findings of a study conducted by Weligamage and Siengthai (2003), on employer needs and graduate skills, employers consider seven vital expected factors when recruiting fresh graduates. These factors are communication skills, general knowledge, personality, computer and IT skills, verbal communication skill, realistic experience, and educational background. According to Paddi (2014), the most sought-after graduates should be able to work in a team, communicate well, think analytically and critically, and use technology.

On the other hand, Uddin (2021) found computer literacy, teamwork & cooperation, self-confidence, interpersonal understanding, and English language proficiency as important skills to ensure a decent and sustainable career. Yang et al. (2015) suggested incorporating employability skills in teaching-learning, assessment and curriculum development by educational institutions. The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), in one of its recent studies found graduates' unemployment rate as 33.19 percent in Bangladesh in 2019 (Hossain, 2021) and the unemployment of these educated youths poses a serious challenge for a country to achieve sustainable development

which is the key for national advancement. Graduates' employment and unemployment are influenced by different factors such as economic and labor market conditions. The main barrier of graduates successfully entering the world of work is the gap between graduates' work skills and the skills needed in the labor market (Suarda et al., 2017; Mahboobi & Sharifzadeh, 2013; Aghapour et al., 2014; Teichler & Jung, 2016). After reviewing many publications from Australia and the United Kingdom, Cumming (2010) found that many graduates lack adequate employment skills which are essential for getting employed. Andreas (2018) reported that employers regularly complain regarding the absence of basic skills and abilities that they expect from university graduates. The employers demand a lot from academia in terms of producing qualified graduates, but the gap persists (Büth et al., 2017). Graduates must be adaptable to the newest technology and skill sets required by the job, as well as the ever-changing employment landscape. Such abilities not only make them efficient and valued, but they also ensure their long-term career trajectories (Hosain et al., 2021). Employers, according to Lockhart (2013), do not seek for the perfect employee; they look for the right employee. Soft skills become more significant than hard skills after a certain period of time in one's career. Azim & Ahmed (2016) opined that the responsibility of improving graduates' quality in terms of employability or industry requirement should not only be primarily entrusted to universities but employers and industry can also play an important part in this regard. In spite of having subject-specific skills, university graduates have lacking in essential employability skills (Chowdhury, 2020). So, more practical-oriented learning programs should be implemented by academic institutions in order to help graduates achieve required employability skills and practical work experience. Dewan & Sarkar (2017) found that practical work experience is cited by companies as an important consideration while hiring an employee. This emphasizes the importance of aligning teaching-learning and practical work with market demand, as well as promoting internship and apprenticeship programs that provide more hands-on experience. Teaching-learning system needs to be modified in such a way so that students can be directly exposed to the industry and can closely work with the industry as part of their educational requirements.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- to know the real viewpoints of the employers regarding the skills they seek from the university graduates while recruiting and what skills they find among the graduates.
- to identify some key skills gap between industry and academia.
- to get some suggestions from employers to reduce the skills gap in future.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study is designed entirely to analyze the responses of the survey to find out the result indicated by the research objective in the context of Bangladesh.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

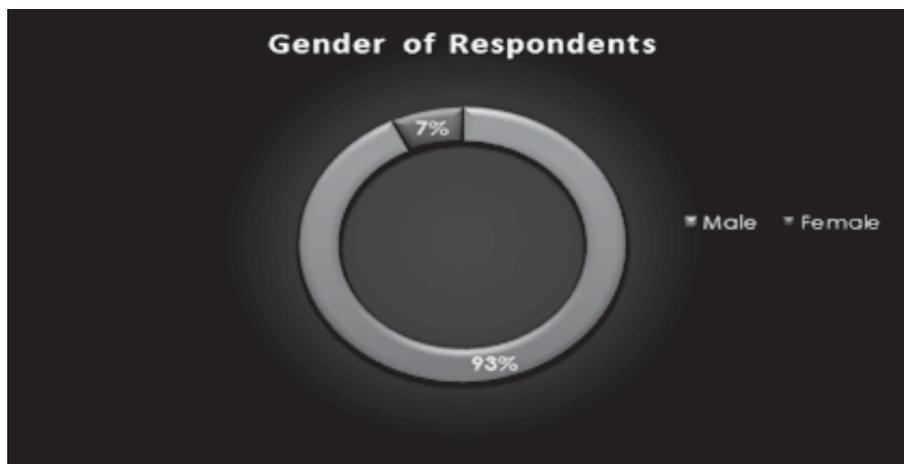
The researcher used the convenient sampling method to determine the sample size from the population and to reach the sample size as 127. The researchers selected the employers from different organizations of Dhaka, Bangladesh as the sample area. The questionnaire (in the form of Google Forms) was sent to 300 employers through email with a brief introduction and a request to complete the survey questionnaire online. From the collected data, 127 usable responses were used as sample in this study. Both the closed-ended and open-ended responses were analyzed through SPSS. The closed-ended responses were used for quantitative analysis. There was only one open-ended question related to Suggestions of Employers. The open-ended responses were analyzed by SPSS Text Analytics as a set of phrases. After analyzing the text responses, the key concepts and word patterns were extracted and classified into categories. The total of 127 responses from employers/CEOs/MDs/supervisors from a variety of industries and sectors such as: Banks & financial institutions (9), health (3), telecom (7), group of companies (14), ready-made garments (8), software & IT (22), television & media (3), MNC (3), NGO (5), manufacturing (5), consultancy (8), tourism (2), power (3), real estate (3), education (12), outsourcing (7) etc. were considered for data analysis.

5. Analysis of Findings

5.1 Respondents' Gender

Out of 127 employers' respondents, 118 respondents were male and 9 were female which have been shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Gender of Respondents

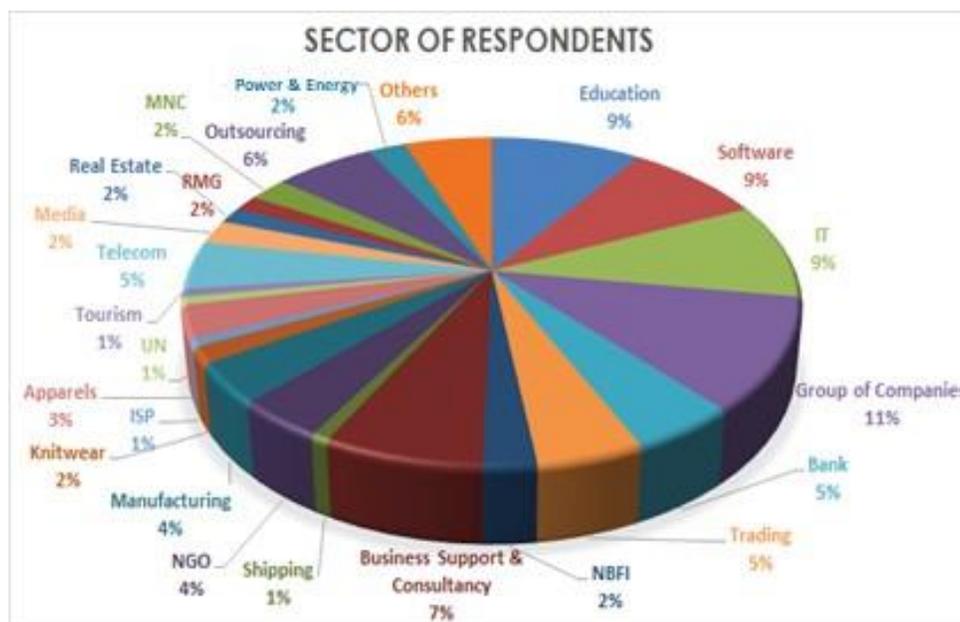


Source: Survey

5.2 Sectors Represented by Respondents

The respondents' employers covered almost all the key sectors and industries (Figure 2) which is an indication of the strength of the survey conducted.

Figure 2: Sector of Respondents



Source: Survey

5.3 Skills of Graduates Expected by Employers

The responses of the employers on their expected skills from graduates are sorted in the Table 1 which shows that the majority of the respondent employers underscored the need for effective communication skills of the fresh graduates to be employed in any organization. An effective communication skill has become a benchmarking parameter for ensuring employability of a graduate. A study conducted by Paulrajan (2011) also found communication skills as very crucial for fresh graduates. In today's information and communication technology (ICT) driven knowledge society, English is considered to be the global means of communication. English language proficiency has gained great significance in all the major fields including education, trade, commerce, and employment. Bharathi (2016) also found the English language and communication skills as very significant for ensuring employability of the graduates. The following Table was derived based on the responses taken from employers through a closed-end survey question.

Table 1: Skills of Fresh Graduates Expected by the Employers

Expected skill	Responses* Number	Percent of Cases
English speaking & writing skill	94	79.7%
Communication skill	103	87.3%
Problem solving	71	60.2%
Leadership	66	55.9%
Analytical	70	59.3%
IT	69	58.5%
Engineering	33	28.0%
Administrative	45	38.1%
Managerial	43	36.4%
Negotiating	54	45.8%
Marketing	30	25.4%
Accounting	30	25.4%
Decision Making	61	51.7%
Integrity Dedication	54	45.8%
Technical	52	44.1%
Critical thinking and creativity	75	63.6%
Adaptability	70	59.3%

Note: * indicates multiple response (Source: Survey)

The above Table reflects that majority of the respondents identified the following skills that they expect from a university graduate:

- i) Communication skill (87 percent of employers mentioned)
- ii) English speaking & writing skill (80 percent of employers mentioned)
- iii) Critical thinking and creativity (64 percent of employers mentioned)
- iv) Decision Making (61 percent of employers mentioned)
- v) Problem solving (60 percent of employers mentioned)
- vi) Analytical skill (60 percent of employers mentioned)
- vii) Adaptability skill (60 percent of employers mentioned)
- viii) IT skill (59 percent of employers mentioned)
- ix) Leadership skill (56 percent of employers mentioned)

Pandey (2012) found critical thinking skills as one of the key employability skills.

5.4 Skills Found Among University Graduates by Employers

In the survey, the employers were asked to identify the skills that they observed among university graduates. The following Table indicates the degree of skills that employers found in university graduates.

Table 2: Skills Found by Employers in University Graduates

Skills Found	Responses*	
	Number	Percent of Cases
English speaking & writing skill	87	68.5%
Communication skill	94	74.01%
Problem solving skill	45	35.43%
IT skill	66	51.96%
Leadership skill	48	37.80%
Administrative skill	23	18.11%
Managerial skill	28	22.04%
Negotiating skill	33	25.98%
Marketing skill	45	35.43%
Accounting/finance skill	20	15.74%
Decision Making skill	33	25.98%
Integrity & Dedication	33	25.98%
Technical skill	50	39.37%
Analytical skill	39	30.70%
Critical thinking, and creativity skills	40	31.49%
Adaptability	47	37.00%

Note: * indicates multiple response (Source: Survey)

5.5 Skills Gap Found

The analysis of the employers' expected skills and skills found among university graduates shows gap in the following skill set (Table 3).

Table 3: Skills Gap

Skills	Expected by Employers	Skills Found in Graduates
Problem solving skill	60.2%	35.43%
Leadership skill	55.9%	37.80%
Decision Making skill	51.7%	25.98%
Analytical skill	59.3%	30.70%
Critical thinking, and creativity skills	63.6%	31.49%
Adaptability	59.3%	37.00%

Source: Survey

Previous researchers have tried to identify skills gap between expectation of industries or employers and skills possessed by university graduates and they also suggested probable strategies to reduce or minimize that gap. Aliu & Aigbavboa (2021) found practical problem-solving competencies as one of the key factors to ensure and sustain employability. Skills gap can be minimized through incorporating professional development courses (Ejiwale, 2019). Matkovic et al. (2014) mentioned similar findings that involving industry in the execution of activities during all stages of curriculum design opens up opportunities for a more fruitful partnership between the university and industry. Afroze et al. (2019) opined that additional courses for developing essential soft skills may be added to the curriculum of academic institutions. Chowdhury (2019) found verbal communication skills and honesty as the most sought-after skills by local companies, whereas MNCs prioritize research-based internships and interpersonal communication abilities.

5.6 Arranging Skill Training Programs for Employees after Recruitment

The objective of asking this question was to know the requirement of extra training of fresh graduates after their recruitment in any organization/company. The response of the employers clearly shows that 67.7 percent employers responded that they arrange separate and focused training for the newly recruited fresh university graduates to cope them up with the norms and work environment and to show the job-specific skills required to accomplish their job responsibilities. However, 32.3 percent of the total 127 employer respondents mentioned that they do not arrange any such training for the

newly recruited fresh graduates and they feel that no such training is required by those recruited graduates to perform their duties.

Figure 3: Status of Arranging Training after Recruitment



Source: Survey

5.7 Most Required Training Areas

The study intended to know the required areas of training that are offered to the graduates after their recruitment.

Figure 4: Most Required Areas of Training from Employers' View



Source: Survey

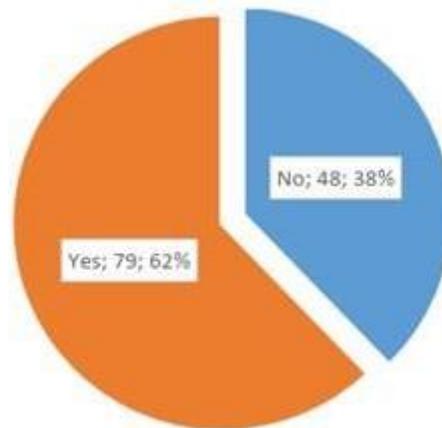
The above figure clearly shows that most of the employers (60%) provide training to newly recruited employees with job-specific training. It means they generally arrange a training session for all newly recruited employees irrespective of their skills, capability etc. to show the way or process to undertake the responsibilities of his/her position in

that specific organization. A good number of employers (42%) mentioned that they provide computer & IT-related training to the employees. More than 41 percent of the employers identified the performance management training as well as compliance and ethics training as key training areas for fresh university graduates. Performance management is considered very important as it helps an employee to learn how she/he should manage his responsibilities, assessment, monitoring and supervision for ensuring effectiveness and efficiency of both individual and team performance. Besides, about 39 percent of the employers underscored the need for office management skills training.

5.8 Sufficiency of Academic Knowledge Achieved by Graduates

Although the majority of the employers (62%) mentioned that the academic knowledge achieved by graduates is enough, a significant percent (38%) of employers also mentioned that the academic knowledge of graduates is not up to the mark which must be considered vital to remove this perception totally from the employers.

Figure 5: Academic Knowledge Achieved by Graduates



Source: Survey

5.9 Level of Satisfaction Demonstrated by Graduates' Performance

The below matrix shows that the overall performance, teamwork and leadership of graduates are more or less good. It is also found that graduates lack the job-specific skills and problem solving skills which are considered to be very crucial for having a sustainable career growth for an employee. Bharathi (2016) concluded that employers search for problem-solving skills among graduates.

Table 4: Satisfaction Level of Employers on Graduates as Employee

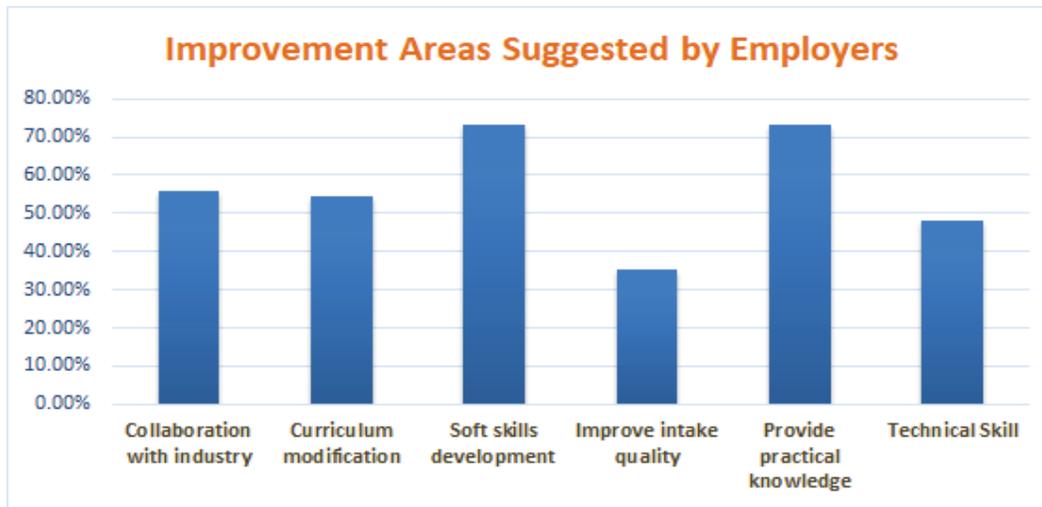
Skills	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Less satisfied	Dissatisfied	Average satisfaction (out of 4)
Overall job Performance	7	34	4	0	3.1
Job-specific skills	3	30	11	1	2.8
Problem solving	3	30	11	1	2.8
Team work	9	30	5	1	3.0
Leadership	10	24	10	1	3.0

Source: Estimated

5.10 Suggestions of Employers to Academic Institutions to Focus More for Ensuring Graduates with Proper Skills

The respondent employers have suggested a number of points for improving the quality and skills of graduates. More than seventy three percent employers underscored the need for soft skills development including English language skills (written and spoken) as well as enhancing the practical knowledge of graduates to be well-equipped in their respective job fields.

About sixty percent of employers recommended increasing collaboration with industry to bridge the gap between industry and academia. The higher education institution should work closely with the industry to know their requirements and problems and strive to solve their problems and meet their requirements. Understanding the skills and knowledge requirements of the industry and upgrading and developing the curriculum (54.33% employers recommended) in the form of incorporating practical oriented and soft skills development related courses in the curriculum along with adopting effective teaching methodology that can develop critical thinking skills among graduates and skilling up the graduates accordingly should be one of the core foci of universities. Shukla (2012) also found curriculum modification of universities as significant for ensuring graduates' employability. More practical works in different industries need to be included in the academic calendar of the students. Enhancing the technical skills of the graduates, especially the engineering graduates, has also been identified as an important recommendation of the employers to ensure the quality of graduates and growth of their career as well.

Figure 6: Improvement Areas Suggested by Employers

Source: Survey

6. Findings and Recommendations

The literature review and the analysis of respondents' data found that still the majority of university graduates lack some employability skills. Based on that, the study attempts to make some recommendations to reduce the skills gap as following:

- i) English is an international language and it is considered as one of the important soft skills of the graduates to be better suited in the employment market. Thomas et al. (2016) concluded that job seekers must have English communication skill for a sustainable employment as only subject knowledge is not enough to ensure better employment. Ting et al. (2017) found that employers consider English proficiency and communication skills as significant for graduates' employability. Universities may identify which students are weak in English language and who are not comfortable in communicating in English. It can be identified or screened out while evaluating the admission test scripts. Those identified students will need to be trained up and carefully nurtured through a separate special course on communicative English so that they can be better suited for the English-medium curriculum at universities. This special course should be continued for those students during the first two/three semesters besides their regular program-wise courses in each semester.
- ii) The higher education institution should work closely with the industry (60% employers recommended) to know their requirements and problems and strive to solve their problems and meet their requirements. Understanding the skills and knowledge requirements of the industry and upgrading and developing the curriculum (54.33% employers recommended).

- iii) As reducing skills gap is related to teaching-learning strategy, the academics may hold brainstorming sessions with industry experts and CEOs to get their direct opinion to find out possible strategies to update or modify the curricula or teaching-learning style to enhance and ensure the problem-solving skill, analytical skill, decision making, IT, critical thinking creativity and adaptability skills among university graduates.
- iv) There is a scope for each of the programs at a university to focus seriously on producing knowledgeable and skilled graduates having in-depth and practical knowledge of excellent performance management and maintaining the organizational ethics. Organizational Behavior, Business Communication and Employability skills related courses should be made mandatory for all the programs of a university which can ensure employability skills among university graduates.
- v) Each academic department should assign some faculty members to regularly keep liaison with industry relevant to the broad area of that department that will ensure strong collaboration with industry and employment generation for graduates. Sarkar (2022) mentioned industry-academia collaboration as significant to improve universities' competitiveness in terms of generating skilled human resources.
- vi) Although the majority of the employers (62%) mentioned that the academic knowledge achieved by graduates is enough, a significant percent (38%) of employers also mentioned that the academic knowledge of graduates is not up to the mark which must be considered vital to remove this perception totally from the employers. Tomlinson (2008) also mentioned that academic credential of graduates is important along with other skills to ensure a better career growth in employment market.
- vii) The students' evaluation and assessment systems need to be modified and updated and the faculty members may like to involve the students more in practical oriented assignments, projects, real case study analysis and solving real-life problems in a group etc. to ensure graduates' capability to utilize academic knowledge effectively to perform their duties and responsibilities in the practical fields. Nandamuri & Rao (2013) underscored the need for modification of existing students' assessment system.
- viii) Each academic program may target some specific employment areas and involve industry experts of those areas to teach and train in the class and in their practical field to provide and develop the job-specific skills and knowledge. Those classes may be recorded for replication and self-capacity building. It will help graduates to enter the job market with job-specific knowledge & skills which will enhance their competitive advantage in the job

market. Robst (2007) also found mismatch between the graduates' areas of study and their areas of employment that resulted lower salary and unsustainable career growth. Doyle (2021) underscored the need for job-specific skills to ensure career growth in a particular job.

7. Conclusion

The gap between the skills of graduates produced by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers' skills requirement is not narrowing down which results in frustration of the graduates in their career progression. To cope up with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and rapid changes in technology, there is a need to build competent and skilled human resources to get the optimum amenities. The employers' feedback is considered to be crucial for modifying the curricula and ensuring the graduates with skills and knowledge as required by the industry in order to keep pace with the rapid innovations. Hence, the role of higher education institutes in the form of incorporating relevant courses and industry work into curriculum is critical in developing a skill and knowledge-based sustainable society. The study attempted to know the existing skills gap among university graduates and tried to recommend some measures to be taken by HEIs to reduce the gap and ensure sustainable employment of university graduates both at home and abroad.

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