Definition of employability skills

There are different interpretations about employability. These depend on whether someone secures a job in specific period after graduation or if he is capable to maintain it and prosper in it. Some researchers argue that "If employability is measured in the simplistic terms of whether or not a graduate has managed to secure a job within six months of graduating, it only provides a very vague and imprecise indication of what the student has gained" (Pool & Sewell, 2007). This does not precisely indicate whether the skills or knowledge applied in the job derives from academic discipline, whether it has been obtained through other channels or if it is a combination of both. It also becomes intriguing to know to what extent a particular academic institution has provided the knowledge/skills applied in the job market.

According to Hillage and Pollard (1998) cited by Pool & Sewel (2007, p.278), "employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment". When looked at in more detail, the authors look at employability in terms of a person's "employability assets" that consists of their knowledge, skills and attitudes. They also look at it in terms of the "deployment" of such assets which includes career management skills including job search skills. In addition to that, "presentation" is necessary and involves "job getting skills" such as, for example, CV writing, work experience and interview techniques. Finally, understanding and coping with the environment is another component that signifies a lot to making the most of a person's "employability assets". Here, the environment may relate to personal circumstances such as family status or responsibilities and/or external factors such as the current level of opportunity within the labour market.

On the employers' side, employability skills depend on what they are looking for in the employee candidate. According to the UNESCO (2012, p. 16) "Employers want assurances that young people applying for jobs have at least strong foundation skills and can deploy their knowledge to solve problems, take the initiative and communicate with team members, rather than just follow prescribed routines. These skills are not taught from a textbook, but can be acquired through good quality education. Yet employers often indicate that these skills are lacking in new recruits to the labour market."

According to the ILO (2013) skills for the world of work would include the following

TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Basic/foundation	The levels of literacy and numeracy necessary to get work that will pay enough to meet daily needs.
Vocational or technical	Specialized skills, knowledge or know-how needed to per form specific duties or tasks.
Professional/personal	Individual attributes relevant to work such as honesty, integrity, reliability, work ethic.
Core work skills	The abilities: to learn and adapt; to read, write and compute competently; to listen and communicate effectively; to think creatively; to solve problems independently; to manage oneself at work; to interact with co-workers; to work in teams or groups; to handle basic technology; and to lead effectively as well as follow supervision

Source: ILO, 2013

When considering the job requirements and the environment in which students are likely to step in after graduating, one finds that there at least basic things that the job aspirant must learn and master as a student or must come across in preparation for stepping out of the university. Bennett et al. (1999) grouped such requirements into five components including disciplinary content knowledge (theories, concepts and techniques explaining the subject matter), disciplinary skills (description of guidelines, principles, techniques, application processes and steps), workplace awareness (knowing and understanding the workplace philosophy and values, the do's and not to do's), workplace experience (being familiar and conversant with job tasks, demonstrating the competence to execute assignments in efficient and effective manners), and generic skills (abilities to adapt and handle situations in flexible and consistent manners).

When looking at the above points, there are functional as well as personality aspects that need to be considered when defining or describing employability skills. Whilst some may be linked to entrepreneurship, others can be inclined more to management factors. By considering Watts's (2006, pp. 9-10) description of employability, his focus is on the context of planned experiences designed to facilitate the development of "Decision learning, opportunity awareness, transition learning and Self-awareness. While decision learning involves decision making skills which, in a way or another, constitutes the backbone of any successful organization, students should also learn how to detect and know what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are. In their transition from student to employee status where graduate must look for better opportunities, graduates should have acquired job searching and self-presenting skills that help them to confidently jump the transition period. Graduates should also have self-awareness with regard to interests, abilities, values, ets. that will allow them to swiftly adapt and overcome uncertainties characterizing the employment environment they join.

It is also important to recognize that the environment in which employability skills apply plays an important role in their process of development and transfer. For examples, there are two "important areas of skills development – informal education and training and workplace-based learning. The first is dominant in many least developed countries, especially in Africa. The second, one of the essential functions of most if not all enterprises, is intimately linked to skills development generally, and often parallels or complements education and training provided through the formal TVET system" (ILO, 2010). While this is much clear for vocational occupations, one might ask himself what happens to such students or individuals who are not in vocational learning, be it in formal or informal employments. This is a matter the ILO (2010) has found very challenging. It is not easy balancing supply of skills since the demand in the labour market constitutes one of the fundamental issues in skills development policy. Not only is the balancing an issue but also finding an adequate response to these challenges as "the demand for skilled labour has risen significantly as a result of globalization, changes in technology, the organization of work, new development policies, including the transition to a low carbon economy, and the recent international financial crises and subsequent worldwide recession"(ILO, 2010).

Based on such environment and embedded challenges, different individual skills sets are needed. They may include a mix of generic skills such as the ability to think logically, to plan precisely, to anticipate difficulties and to be innovative and creative so as develop and update the ―necessary capacities and skills [individuals] need to enable them to be productively employed for their personal fulfilment and the common well-being (ILO, 2008b: 9, ILO, 2010). As the ILO states, generic skills form an essential component of a sustainable institutional and economic environment in which public and private enterprises enable growth. They are essential for the generation of greater employment and income opportunities for all citizens, play a big role in allowing societies achieve their goals of economic development, good living standards and social progress. Based on such observations, there is a demand for a more skilled labour force, with more autonomous, adaptable and multi-functional workers.

Having described and defined employability skills, it is necessary to clarify that some terminologies used in different countries may be interpreted differently yet they mean/describe the same thing (Ncver, 2003).

Different terms used for generic skills or competencies

Country	Framework	Country	Framework
Australia	Key competencies	Netherlands	Core competencies
New Zealand	Essential skills	Canada	Strategy for prosperity
United States	Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) & workplace know-how	South Africa	Critical cross field outcomes
United Kingdom	Core/common skills & employability skills	Singapore	Critical enabling skills training (CREST)
France	Transferable competencies	Finland	Framework for evaluating educational outcomes
Denmark	Process independent qualifications	Norway	Core curriculum
Italy	Transversal competencies	Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary goals
Germany	Key qualifications		

Source: Australian National Training Authority, 2003

What are employability skills

There is no universal or exhaustive list of employability skills. Different publications have classified employability skills based on whether they apply to vocational and non-vocational situations. In such a classification some skills are common. However, their development and transfer approaches and means differ. Some may need more tangible, practical and technical might while others may need soft ways like a change in mindset, behavior and attitudes. In this context, people may distinguish between hard skills and soft skills.

The Georgia department of education (2012) identified ten major areas important to Employability Skill Development from which lessons may be designed for teaching these skills to students. These include: display of professional attitude, exhibits of good work ethics, demonstrate appropriate work behaviors, communicate effectively both verbally and non-verbally, build essential work relationships, show adeptness at managing self and time, perform well in a team environment, demonstrate excellent customer service skills, solve problems effectively, demonstrate job getting and keeping skills.

According to Suleman (2018, p.263) a growing body of literature has emerged to illustrate the strong pressure on higher education institutions to prepare graduates for the world of work.… Although the underlying premise of the available research is that higher education institutions and policymakers should be provided with information on employability skills, the studies examined in his paper suggest that the identification of those skills is an impossible endeavour. Agreement is only found on some cognitive, technical, and relational skills. More importantly, it is argued that the supply-side approach overlooks economic and social processes that might affect employability. The problem of graduates' employability transcends higher education institutions' provision of useful and matched skills.

Olivier et al. (2014) condensed the skills required by employers into six broad clusters: foundation skills which include written and oral communication, problem solving, and critical analysis; adaptive capacity which involves the ability to adapt to new situations and foreign workplaces, learn autonomously, develop new ideas, and innovate; team working and interpersonal skills; IT skills; employability skills related to coping with pressure and stress, being flexible and adaptable, and meeting deadlines; and technical and domain specific skills.

The ILO (2013) categorizes employability skills into four blocs each having a set of indicators that need to be considered. Though they appear in different blocs, they are very much intertwined. This interrelationship limits the possibility to separate one from the other and, on the other side, allows to impact more than just one indicator in the development or transfer process. Similarly, the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) demonstrates that the interrelationships between the discrete skills are as important as the skills themselves. Key theoretical underpinnings include social constructivism and adult learning theories which describe learning as an interactive, constructive process of meaning-making, closely aligned to the learner-centred teaching approach (CLD, 2013) .

The first category concerns "Learning to learn" which covers the knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes which enable individuals to set, plan and reach their own learning goals and become independent autonomous learners. These skills equip young people for lifelong learning. The second category is about "Communication" which covers the abilities to gain understanding from others – by listening, reading and observation, using both formal and informal, oral and written means – and to put across ideas clearly and effectively. The third category is about "Teamwork" which covers the abilities necessary to operate smoothly and efficiently within a group, including those related to both cooperation and leadership. The last involves "Problem-solving" which deals with the analytical skills required to evaluate information or situations and decide on the most appropriate ways of addressing problems. These skills include awareness of long-term consequences of actions taken and the capacity to assess and adapt plans of action.

The following table describes more.

Broad skill category	Core work skills/abilities
Learning to learn	being willing to learn, using learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills, working safely, pursuing independent learning, taking responsibility for own learning, thinking abstractly, organizing, processing and holding information, interpreting and communicating information, conducting systematic inquiry, following through to find answers, using time effectively and efficiently without sacrificing quality, selecting the best approach for tasks, beginning, following through and completing tasks, being adaptable
Communication	reading competently, reading, understanding and using materials, including graphs, charts and displays, understanding and speaking the language in which the business is conducted, writing effectively in the languages in which the business is conducted, writing to the needs of an audience, listening and communicating effectively, listening to understand and learn, using numeracy effectively, articulating own ideas and vision
Teamwork	managing oneself at work, working in teams or groups, interacting with co-workers, respecting the thoughts and opinions of others in the group, working within the culture of the group, understanding and contributing to the organization's goals, planning and making decisions with others and supporting the outcomes, taking accountability for actions, building partnerships and coordinating a variety of experiences, working towards group consensus in decision-making, valuing others' input, accepting feedback, resolving conflicts, coaching, mentoring and giving feedback, leading effectively, mobilizing a group for high performance
Problem-solving	thinking creatively, solving problems independently, testing assumptions, identifying problems, taking the context of data and circumstances into account, identifying and suggesting new ideas to get the job done (initiative), collecting, analyzing and organizing information (planning and organization), planning and managing time, money and other resources to achieve goals

Source: (ILO, 2013)

Given such classifications by different authors and organizations, all employability skills are relevant but they must be properly aligned with the context they are likely to fit well. This requires a perfect assessment of the environment they are needed in and factors that are likely to cause them produce higher or lower effects.

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