Vocational Skills Required for Pre-Service Teachers at the Hashemite University that are Employable in the 21st Century from their Perspectives

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Abstract: The main purpose of this study was to determine the vocational skills required for pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University that are employable in the 21st century based on their perceptions. The study surveyed 140 senior students who participated in the field-training program offered by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. The instrument used in this study was adapted from Robinson (2006) encompassing 67 employability skills categorized under 11 dimensions. Results indicated that respondents perceived themselves to have a major level of competence at performing the employability skills. The three most rated dimensions were communication skills, conflict management skills, and lifelong learning skills. The study ended by offering a number of implications and suggestions from the practical and theoretical standpoint. (Keywords: vocational skills, employability, workforce development, and Jordan).

المهارات المهنية المتطلبة للطلبة المعلمين في الجامعة الهاشمية والقابلة للتوظيف خلال القرن الواحد والعشرين، وذلك من وجهة نظرهم

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ملخص: هدفت الدراسة الحالية التعرف الى وجهة نظر خريجي الجامعة الهاشمية في الاردن لمستوى كفايتهم للمهارات القابلة للتوظيف واللازمة لمهنة المعلم. تكونت عينة الدراسة من 140 طالب وطالبة مشاركين في برنامج التدريب الميداني من قسم المناهج والتدريس في الجامعة الهاشمية. واستخدمت الاداة في الدراسة الاداة التي استخدمها روبنسون (Robinson, 2006) تم التحقق من صدقها حيث تكونت من 67 مهارة توظيفية موزعة على أحد عشر مجالا. بينت نتائج الدراسة أن المشاركين يتوافر لديهم مستوى عال من المهارات التوظيفية. وأن أفضل ثلاثة مجالات منها كانت مهارات الاتصال، ومهارات حل الصراع، ومهارات التعلم مدى الحياة. وخلصت الدراسة الى تقديم عدد من التوصيات البحثية والعملية ذات الصلة. (**الكلمات المفتاحية**: مهارات مهنية، معلمي ما قبل الخدمة، القابلية للتوظيف، تطوير القوى العاملة، الاردن).

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

With the increasing globalization, restructuring, and competition in the workplace, universities are being criticized for not equipping students with the necessary work skills needed to ensure viable entry and sustainability in today's workforce (Baker, 2006; Gurchiek, 2005; Krahn, Lowe, & Lehmann, 2002; Robinson, 2002). At the time of employment, there is a growing realization that discipline-specific/job-specific knowledge and skills alone will not be adequate to deal with changes in the contemporary workplace (MacLeod, 2000). Rather, general employability skills must be developed to complement the wide range of specialized skills already possessed by graduates. Today's university students are expected to develop not only "hard" technical skills but also "soft" people skills to be successful in the workplace (Shivpuri & Kim, 2004). These essential skills are often viewed as the organization's most important asset (Overtoom, 2000; Perry, 2003). Further, Krahn, Lowe, and Lehmann (2002) indicate that "employability skills are an

enduring policy concept because such skills are thought to contribute to both aggregate economic growth and improved labour market outcomes for individuals" (p. 276).

Overtoom (2000) defined employability skills as "transferable core skill groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace…necessary for career success at all levels of employment and for all levels of education" (p. 2). Employability skills are generic and universal in nature, which individuals can transfer from one occupation to another, regardless of the industry (Fallows & Steven, 2000).

Robinson (2006) identified 67 employability skills that were perceived important by educators, employers, and employees in entry level positions for employment success. These skills are grouped according to 11 dimensions. Previous research regarded communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork skills, and lifelong learning skills as the four most important and critical skills in life that is needed by employees to succeed in the workplace (Breiter & Clements, 1996; Carnevale, 1996; Covey, 1989).

Communication skills are described as "interacting effectively with a variety of individuals and groups to

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facilitate the gathering, integrating, and conveying of information in many forms" (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow., 1998, p. 78). It has been noted, that for an organization to realize success as a whole, effective communication skills must be present (Coplin, 2003). Employees must be able to follow oral instructions, listen to formal presentations, and listen actively to team members, supervisors, and other colleagues.

With regard to leadership skills, the modern workplace demands forefront employees demonstrating leadership qualities, resolving conflict, and improving organizational effectiveness (Bailey, Hughes, & Barr, 1998; SCANS, 1991). Leaders must also have vision, which is "the ability to conceptualize the future of the company and provide innovative paths for the company to follow" (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998; p. 126). Moreover, those leaders should be able to "coordinate the work of peers and subordinates and encourage positive group relationships" (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998, p. 99). Further, leaders should demonstrate the ability and the initiative to take reasonable job-related risks by recognizing different ways of meeting objectives and monitoring progress toward achieving those objectives (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998; p. 125). With regard to teamwork skills, Dunne and Rawlins (2000) noted that "teamwork is becoming increasingly important within higher education, not only because of employer demands but also as a consequence of pragmatic requirements for change due to the increase in intake of students" (p. 361). Workers must be able to work effectively as part of multiple teams, teaching one another and performing a wide range of tasks.

As far as the lifelong learning skills are concerned, Lloyd and Kennedy (1997) suggested that to become a lifelong learner, individuals must "understand how you absorb and retain information; learn when they are most alert and use this time to learn; and keep aware of external events and reflect on how those events affect you" (p. 1). Employees must demonstrate willingness and ability to learn constantly (SCANS, 1991). According to Carnevale (1996) "once an individual learns how to learn, he or she can achieve competency in all other basic workplace skills. Learning skills are required in order to respond flexibly and quickly to technical and organizational change; to make continuous improvements in quality, efficiency, and speed; and to develop applications for existing technologies, goods, and services" (p. 165). Students need to think in terms of preparing themselves for lifelong employability (as opposed to lifelong employment) through lifelong learning. They need to be able to manage themselves and communicate effectively within and outside the organization in a variety of formats, as well as manage other people and tasks as they take on leadership roles within and across teams (Atkins, 1999). Coberly (1996) emphasized that lifelong learning skills are essential for "long-term survival, particularly in time of turbulence, change, or

discontinuity" (p. 100). These skills are important to the worker who wants to remain productive in the 21st century.

Other important employability skills that employees need to possess are solving problems, making decisions, and managing conflicts. "Problem-solving consists of identifying, prioritizing, and solving problems individually or in groups" (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998, p. 64). Employers want their employees to be problem solvers in order to deal with workplace challenges (Collis, Waring, & Nicholson, 2004). Moreover, Coplin (2003) suggested that good problem solving skills require "good character, good communication skills, and excellent people skills" (p. 107). Employees also need to be able to make decisions on the basis of thorough assessment of the short-term and long-term effects of decisions, recognize the political and ethical implications, and be able to identify those who will be affected by the decision made (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). Moreover, employees need to have the ability to manage conflicts through the identification of sources of conflict between oneself and others, or between other people, and to take steps to overcome dissonance. Evers, Rush, and Berdrow (1998) added that "conflict can, if properly channeled, be an engine of innovation and change, one that can enable an organization to better adapt to the rapid social, political, economic, and technological changes that are expected to occur" (p. 21). This guides us to stress the importance of being agents of creativity, innovation, and change on the job. "Creativity, innovation, change is the ability to adapt to situations of change. At times, it involves the ability to initiate change and provide novel solutions to problems. It also involves the ability to reconceptualize roles in response to changing demands related to success" (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998, p. 121). The last two important skills discussed in the literature are interpersonal relations and organization/time management skills. Evers et al., (1998) described interpersonal skills as "working well with others (superiors, subordinates, and peers), understanding their needs, and being sympathetic to them" (p. 82). Field (1994) listed three examples of interpersonal skills, which were to: "maintain good work relations, work in a team, and discuss workplace issues and problems" (p. 41). Organization and time management skills involves being able to "handle multiple assignments over a two-or-three-week period, submitting weekly reports…" (Coplin, 2003, p. 15).

Statement of the Problem

The university system in Jordan is being called upon to graduate students who possess not only hard skills but also soft people skills to be successful in the workplace. Indeed, there is a need to determine the level of competence that university graduates possess before moving on to the national workforce. There has been limited or no research in Jordan to address the acquisition of employability skills by university graduates. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study

was to determine these vocational skills required for pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University that are employable in the 21st century based on their perceptions.

Research Question

The following question was formulated to accomplish the purpose of the study:

1. What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University in Jordan regarding the vocational skills that are employable in the 21st century?

Significance of the Study

The study of employability skills for university graduates is important for administrators, faculty members, and the school system in Jordan. Findings of this research will enable educators and employers to determine the effectiveness of the teacher education program in adequately preparing students for careers in classroom teaching. Educators need to continually assess the employability skills of their students, which are an indication of the effectiveness of the university curriculum. Educational leaders and employers may benefit from the results of this research in the area of identifying how university instruction can be more closely aligned with workplace employability skills to provide focus for curriculum development. The findings of this study may be used to guide professional development of faculty members to better incorporate employability skills into their teaching styles and strategies.

Limitations

1. The present study was limited to the population of pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University in Jordan.
2. The present study was limited to the first semester of the academic year 2008/2009.
3. Results of the study were based on the responses from the ESQ used in this study.

Methodology

Study Context

The Hashemite University, where the present study was applied, is the fifth official university in Jordan. The Faculty of Educational Sciences was established and started its programs at the beginning of the academic year 1995/1996 with the establishment of the university. Within this faculty, there is the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, which has various fields such as languages, science, math, social studies, Islamic education, and vocational education. In the first semester of 1997/1998, the field-training program was established as part of the Department. The primary stakeholders involved in the program are pre-service teachers who attend schools to receive training. In schools, each pre-service teacher receives extensive training, feedback, guidance, and supervision from the university supervisor, the cooperating teacher, and the school principal during a period of four months. Pre-service teachers are required to register for 12 credit hours in the last semester prior to graduation and are required to attend training in hosting schools Sunday through Thursday from 7:30am to 1:15pm. Based on the system of the field training program at the Hashemite University, pre-service teachers should attend the program for 16 weeks distributed as follows: the initial observation stage (2 weeks), the partial practice stage (4 weeks), and the full practice stage (10 weeks).

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was all university students from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction who participated in the field-training program at the Hashemite University of Jordan. The sample for this study comprised 145 pre-service teachers who attended the field-training program for the first semester of the academic year 2008/2009. A total of 140 usable instruments were returned with a response rate of 96%. The sample gender distribution was 19 males (13.6%) and 121 females (86.4%).

Instrumentation

A two-part instrument was used to collect data in the study. The first part of the instrument contained information related to the gender of the respondents. The second part of the instrument contained the Robinson's (2006) Employability Skills Questionnaire (ESQ) (see Appendix 1). Items in this part of the instrument are used to solicit information about the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their level of competence at performing 67 employability skills grouped under 11 dimensions namely: problem-solving skills (6 items); decision-making skills (6 items); organization and time management skills (9 items); risk-taking skills (4 items); communication skills (10 items); interpersonal relations skills (5 items); managing conflict skills (2 items); leadership skills (11 items); creativity, innovation & change skills (5 items); lifelong learning skills (3 items); and motivation-personal strengths (6 items). A four-point scale with the following anchors was used in this part of the instrument: 0 = no competence, 1 = minor competence, 2 = moderate competence and 3 = major competence. A panel of experts established the face and content validity of the instrument and a pilot study was used to establish the reliability of the instrument (Robinson, 2006). A Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 was found from the pilot test of the portion of this instrument.

Instrument Translation Process

Three translators (faculty members) bilingual in English and Arabic translated the English version of the ESQ into Arabic (forward translation). These translators were instructed to retain both the form (language) and the meaning of the items as close to the original as possible but to give priority to meaning equivalence. When the Arabic translation was finalized, the ESQ was then back-translated (from Arabic to English) by three other faculty members, bilingual in English and Arabic.

The back-translated items were then evaluated by a group of five faculty members to ensure that the item meanings were equivalent between the original English version and the back-translated version. If differences in

meaning were found between items, those items were put through the forward and back-translation process again until the judges were satisfied there was substantial meaning equivalence. The Arabic version of the ESQ was then pilot tested with a group of 10 faculty members and 10 pre-service teachers to collect feedback about instrument content and usage. The feedback from the pre-service teachers resulted in minor changes. The feedback from the faculty members emphasized that the instrument has both face and content validity.

The Arabic instrument was pilot tested with a group of 20 pre-service teachers who were excluded from the main sample of the study. Changes recommended by the validation panel and those identified as needed during the pilot test were incorporated into the instrument. These changes occurred in the wording of few items. The internal consistency of the instrument was determined using the same group of participants used in the pilot study. The calculated coefficient alpha reliability for the ESQ was 0.89. The standards for instrument reliability for Cronbach's alpha by Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman (1991) were used to judge the quality of the scales of the instrument. These standards were: 0.80-1.00 – exemplary reliability, 0.70 - 0.79 – extensive reliability, 0.60 - 0.69 – moderate reliability, and < 0.60 – minimal reliability. Based on the above guidelines, the ESQ exhibited exemplary reliability, suggesting that the instrument is suitable to measure the construct under study.

Data collection

The researcher held a meeting with all pre-service teachers participating in the study on the Hashemite University campus during the last two weeks of the first semester of the academic year 2008/2009. The researcher explained to the participants the purpose of the study and encouraged them to read the statements carefully before ticking the appropriate choice. The participants were also insured confidentiality and anonymity. Finally, the ESQ instrument was handed and collected during that meeting.

Results

Findings Associated with the Study's Research Question

The study's research question was about determining the perceptions of pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University in Jordan regarding the vocational skills that are employable in the 21st century. Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were used to answer the research question. The findings showed that the overall level of employability skills of pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University are quite high (M = 2.75, SD = 0.08). Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the respondents' self-perceived level of competence at performing the 67 employability skills represented by 11 dimensions. The mean for all dimensions was above 2.50 indicating that, on average, the respondents perceived themselves to have major

level of competence at performing the employability skills. With regard to the means and standard deviations of the 11 dimensions of the employability skills, the mean of the communication skills dimension was higher than all other means (2.95), followed by conflict management skills (2.92), and lifelong learning skills (2.90), respectively. The lowest rated dimensions were risk-taking skills (2.56) and problem-solving skills (2.65), respectively.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Dimensions of Employability Skills

Dimension	Means	Standard Deviations
Communication Skills	2.95	0.07
Conflict Management Skills	2.92	0.21
Lifelong Learning Skills	2.90	0.17
Interpersonal Relations Skills	2.81	0.18
Decision-Making Skills	2.75	0.19
Organization and Time Management Skills	2.75	0.16
Motivation-Personal Strengths	2.67	0.21
Leadership Skills	2.67	0.19
Creativity, Innovation and change skills	2.66	0.22
Problem-Solving Skills	2.65	0.20
Risk-Taking Skills	2.56	0.27
Total	2.75	0.08

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the vocational skills required of pre-service teachers at the Hashemite University who are employable in the 21st century based on their perceptions. Overall, respondents consider themselves to have a high degree of competence in all dimensions of the employability skills. In other words, pre-service teachers from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction with a major in Teacher Educator possess a major level of competence regarding the employability skills that can be used in the workplace. The dimensions of employability skills which received the highest ratings by graduates were communication skills, conflict management skills, and lifelong learning skills.

Based on their responses to the EQS instruments, pre-service teachers perceived themselves to have a major level of competence regarding their ability to listen and communicate effectively both individually and in group discussions with peers and supervisors; write internal and external reports utilizing proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation; identify and resolve conflicts among people; learn continuously from everyday experiences; and keep up-to-date knowledge about the developments in the field. Previous research has indicated that these skills are most important for teachers to succeed in any type of job (Breiter & Clements, 1996; Coplin, 2003) and to remain productive in the 21st century.

The next three dimensions which received high ratings above average were interpersonal relations

skills, decision-making skills, and organization and time-management skills. Pre-service teachers perceived themselves to possess a major level of competence in working well with peers and supervisors; making wise decisions; understanding the political and ethical implications of the decisions being made; allocating time efficiently and meeting deadlines; overseeing several tasks at once and delegating responsibility; and having strategic considerations in the plans made. Today, teachers must individually complete multiple tasks that were once performed by different individuals. This result is consistent with the studies of Evers and Gilbert (1991) who found that graduates from a variety of undergraduate programs were able to develop a wide range of skills including organization and time-management skills. Further, Schmidt (1999) stated that graduates entering the workplace must practice good decision-making skills and interpersonal relations skills.

The last five dimensions which received high ratings by pre-service teachers were motivation/personal strengths, leadership skills, creativity, innovation & change skills, problem-solving skills, and risk-taking skills. Pre-service teachers perceived themselves to have a major level of competence in working independently and marinating high energy and performance levels; coordinating and guiding the work of peers and subordinates; providing innovative paths for the future of the organization; initiating change to enhance productivity; identifying, prioritizing, and providing creative solutions to problems; and taking reasonable job-related risks. Unlike Robinson's (2006) study, which indicated that supervisors perceived problem-solving as the skill area that is in great needs of curriculum attention, the results of this study suggest that these pre-service teachers are competent in problem-solving skills. This finding is consistent with Coplin (2003) who stated that employers' desire their employees to be problem-solvers. Moreover, Evers, Rush, and Berdrow (1998) indicate the competencies students need to develop in order to enhance their employability include managing self and mobilizing innovation and change. With regard to the leadership skills, Carnevale (1996) emphasized that these skills are considered most critical in the work environment.

Recommendations

This study adds up to the growing field of literature on employability skills of pre-service teachers in an international context, and the following theoretical and practical recommendations can be suggested.

Theoretical Recommendations

- The population of the future research should be expanded to include university students with different majors.
- There is a need to explore the level of employability skills of university students between private and public universities.
- A mixed-method research design including quantitative and qualitative research should be used to gain a deeper and more meaningful

understanding of the individual, institutional, and environmental factors that may affect the level of employability skills of pre-service teachers.
- There is a need to explore employers' perspectives regarding the level of employability skills of university graduates who are already on the job.
- Research should be conducted to determine what aspects of the teacher education program mostly contribute to the development of these vocational skills.

Practical Recommendations

- Leaders of higher education should establish a university-based center to better prepare students for the national workforce. Such centers should partner with local businesses to update the employability skills needed by employers.
- Training workshops and seminars should be delivered to enable faculty members in Jordanian universities to incorporate the most effective employability skills into the curriculum and teaching strategies.
- Business leaders should have more active role in curriculum design to encompass important vocational skills that meet business needs. A well-designed curriculum which incorporates the basic employability skills desired by employers can help students to become the competitive workforce of the 21st century.

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Appendix 1
The Employability Skills Questionnaire

Skills	Items
Problem-Solving	1. Identifying problems. 2. Prioritizing problems. 3. Solving problems. 4. Contributing to group problem-solving. 5. Identifying essential components of the problem. 6. Sorting out the relevant data to solve the problem.
Decision-Making	1. Making decisions in a short time period. 2. Assessing long-term effects of decisions. 3. Making decisions on the basis of thorough analysis of the situation. 4. Identifying political implications of the decisions to be made. 5. Knowing ethical implications of decisions. 6. Recognizing the effects of decisions made.
Organization & Time Management	1. Establishing the critical events to be completed. 2. Assigning/delegating responsibility. 3. Monitoring progress against the plan. 4. Integrating strategic considerations in the plans made. 5. Revising plans to include new information. 6. Setting priorities. 7. Allocating time efficiently. 8. Managing/overseeing several tasks at once. 9. Meeting deadlines.
Risk-Taking	1. Taking reasonable job-related risks. 2. Identifying potential negative outcomes when considering a risky venture. 3. Monitoring progress toward objectives in risky ventures. 4. Recognizing alternative routes in meeting objectives.
Communication	1. Conveying information one-to-one. 2. Communicating ideas verbally to groups. 3. Making effective business presentations. 4. Making impromptu presentations. 5. Writing reports. 6. Writing external business communications. 7. Writing internal business communications. 8. Using proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation. 9. Listening attentively. 10. Responding to others' comments during a conversation.
Interpersonal Relations	1. Working well with fellow employees. 2. Relating well with supervisors. 3. Establishing good rapport with subordinates. 4. Empathizing with others. 5. Understanding the needs of others.
Managing Conflict	1. Identifying sources of conflict among people. 2. Resolving conflicts.
Leadership	1. Supervising the work of others. 2. Giving directions and guidance to others. 3. Delegating work to peers.

	4. Delegating work to subordinates. 5. Coordinating the work of peers. 6. Coordinating the work of subordinates. 7. Conceptualizing a future for the organization. 8. Providing innovative paths for the organization to follow for future development. 9. Combining relevant information from a number of sources. 10. Applying information to new or broader contexts. 11. Integrating information into more general contexts.
Creativity, Innovation, and Change	1. Providing novel solutions to problems. 2. Adapting to situations of change. 3. Initiating change to enhance productivity. 4. Keeping up-to-date with external realities related to your organizational success. 5. Re conceptualizing your role in response to changing organizational realities.
Lifelong Learning	1. Keeping up-to-date on developments in the field. 2. Gaining new knowledge in areas outside the immediate job. 3. Gaining new knowledge from everyday experiences.
Motivation/Personal Strengths	1. Maintaining a high energy level. 2. Functioning at an optimal level of performance. 3. Responding positively to constructive criticism. 4. Maintaining a positive attitude. 5. Functioning well in stressful situations. 6. Ability to work independently.