

**Conversations with Employers:  
Exploring Graduate Employability in Bangladesh**

**Imran Matin  
Tariq Ali  
Paul Wiebe**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bangladeshi graduate labour market is undergoing quite rapid and dramatic changes. The increasing importance of the private sector coupled with the intensifying forces of globalisation has considerably changed employers' needs with regards to graduate employment. Private sector employers require capable graduate employees in order to maintain international competitiveness. Changes engendered by globalisation also result in changing notions of employability. The market responses have included a mushrooming growth of private universities and changing recruitment practices, specifically, the rise of recruitment agencies and a move away from kinship-based ascribed networks to constructed networks.

Our research focuses on the employers' perspective in this rapidly changing graduate labour market. We specifically address two questions: What are the generic attributes that employers look for? And how do employers find individuals with these attributes? In order to answer these questions, we interviewed a range of employers. We did, however, focus on sectors that are desirable for BRAC University students. The major finding of this research is that the problem of employability is best understood in terms of the linkages between employability attributes, rather than the employability attributes per se. This is because the employability attributes are abstractions that function to describe a composite individual who can add value to an organisation. Skills are therefore not discrete and mutually exclusive categories and the employable graduate is more than the linear sum of employability attributes.

There is a significant body of literature dealing with notions of employability. We have found three dominant approaches to understanding problems of employability. The skills-based approach emphasises core employability skills and their ranking. This approach treats such skills as transferable objects that can be imparted independently. The skills-based approach tends to treat many attributes that are essentially aspects of a graduate's personality as a discrete skill. The USEM model, in contrast, distinguishes between Understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs and Metacognition. Understandings and metacognition allow a more sophisticated understanding of many employability attributes that are subsumed under skills in the earlier approach. The graduate's sense of self, however, is the driving force in this model. The Graduate Identity Approach, on the other hand, critiques notions of transferable skills that are important in both the previous approaches. Skills, according to this approach, are merely expressions of a graduate's identity which can only arise in specific contexts. Employability, therefore, is the development of that particular identity, particularly in the transition from the classroom to the workplace environment.

Based on our employer interviews and student discussion, we have formulated three major employability attributes. These are Subject Knowledge, understood as breadth and depth of knowledge in the applicant's area of study; Communication Ability or the abilities to absorb, understand, reflect and articulate knowledge; and General Abilities, a residual category that captures diverse other employability attributes ranging from "work ethic" and "practical orientation" to "dynamism" and "a fire in the belly." There is an observability continuum between these three employability attributes and traditionally the university's role has been

strongly focused on subject knowledge, mild to marginal on communication abilities and none on general abilities.

The remainder of the paper deals with the question of how the employability attributes are assessed during the recruitment timeframe and environment. Recruitment can be thought of as an imperfect information game where the employer and the applicant do not possess full information about each other. Given the information constraints, the players in the recruitment game rely on signals, i.e., observable attributes that are used to convey and assess employability attributes.

There are two broad stages to the recruitment game: CV sorting and Interviews. CVs are essentially a shortlist of variables that signal employability. However, these variables do not have a one-to-one correspondence with the employability attributes. The CV variables signal multiple employability attributes and they are not considered independently for any employability attribute.

The interview stage is conceptually similar to the CV sorting stage, except that the interview setting allows for Direct Questions and Direct Observations. Applicant’s responses to Direct Questions are employability signals in this stage. Broadly, there are two types of direct questions: those focused on subject knowledge and those focused on general abilities. However, responses to direct questions, just like CV variables cannot be mapped onto employability attributes in a linear way.

Our understandings of graduate employability, formulated through employer interviews, generate a few observations and implications for BRAC University.

Observation	Implication
Subject Knowledge signals more than subject specialism	Any Area of Discipline can be seen with an arena whereby students can be enabled with a range of employability attributes.
Employability attributes are not mutually exclusive. An employable graduate is more than a summation of individual employability attributes.	The University should not focus on imparting stand-alone, individual employability attributes, without reference to their inter-connections and developing the graduate’s overall employability.
The changing workplace environment requires graduates to be lifelong learners.	The curriculum, reward system and overall university environment should be geared towards developing a “malleable sense of self.”
Women face greater difficulties in signalling employability attributes.	In the short run, BU should pay attention to the particular difficulties faced by women graduates. However, there is no substitute for putting in place a student-focussed gender mainstreaming policy.
Constructed, professional networks are playing an increasingly important role and replacing more traditional, ascribed networks.	BU should enable students to tap into professional networks through carefully designed internship programs, job fairs and other exposures to facilitate a student’s transition from the classroom to the workplace.

We conducted a focus group discussion with a selected group of BU students to understand student notions of employability and the extent to which BU was addressing employability. We found that students thought that BU was addressing “subject skills” the best followed by “communication skills”. Students felt that “other skills” needed more attention. It is interesting to note that BU’s focus corresponds with traditional notions of the university’s role towards enhancing employability. However, our employer interviews indicate that all these skills are interlinked and cannot be addressed or assessed independently.

We find that the apparent contradiction between creating marketable graduates and graduates who will aspire to be ‘creative leaders’, is a false one. This study which focussed on the perspectives from employers on graduate employability came out with a conceptual framework that also clearly suggests that employability is not merely a linear sum of some set of skills that can be imparted without reference to the graduate self and her engagements with the various elements of her university life. Employability skills, if there are any, will have to be focussed on the various interlinkages among them and how these relate to the graduate as a person. Course design, pedagogy, the classroom environment, the reward system, the inclusiveness of the University environment, its regulation and its engagements with the wider social and political landscape, both local and global—all these and many more will all be important variables that will shape the agenda of enhancing graduate employability.

## Chapter I

### Introduction: Changing Graduate Labour Market

A community of university graduates is a vital component for a nation's economic growth, for developing leadership capacities, for creating and fostering a vision of an equitable, just and peaceful society. This research project focuses on the university graduate as part of the labour force. The graduate labour force is an integral part of a nation's economic growth and social development. It is, however, important to remember that a university graduate should be more than a capable employee. (S)he should be capable of making significant contributions to his/her surroundings – whether immediate, national or global.

The development of a capable labour force is considered integral to economic growth and development. Endogenous Growth Theory, particularly its chief proponent – Paul Romer – argues that economic growth cannot be accounted for by increases in inputs of labour and capital. Technological change and human capital development – or the development of an effective labour force – is considered critical towards economic growth. The creation of an effective labour force will lead to greater labour productivity and, hence, faster economic growth. The above claim, however, raises several important questions – what is an effective labour force? How does a nation create such a labour force? What must a nation do to maintain effectiveness amongst its labour force?

Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) play a central role in the creation of an “effective” labour force. HEIs, however, require a clearer understanding of the elements and dynamics of an effective labour force. This research project is designed to give BRAC University (BU) a better understanding of the constituting elements of an effective labour force and of graduate labour market dynamics in Bangladesh and, hence, enable BU to make a significant contribution towards economic growth and development.

It is, however, worth noting, even in the context of this report, that higher education does not merely create an “effective labour force”. Higher education contributes towards the creation of an educated and aware citizenry, aware and critical of their society and their

society's place in a global context. Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, in the 1991 Task Force Report on Education wrote, "Proper education changes perception and expectations as the very significance of their [the recipients of education] lives change." Higher education, Professor Ahmed believes, should enable Bangladeshi society:

to move from information to creative application, from knowledge to wisdom, from perpetuation of status, privilege for a few to an effective social mobility multiplier and from constraining impact of status conscious privilege group decision makers to liberating effect of human education free from the obfuscating dominion of power interests which stifles the potentials of the poor and the disadvantaged.

## **I.1 Globalisation and an Effective Graduate Labour Force**

The preparation of this BUILD report coincided with the release of the World Bank's 2002 report on higher education – *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*. The report, as indicated by its title, is an explicit recognition of changed and changing dimensions of a global social, political and economic regime and corresponding changes in the role of HEIs in developing countries. The new knowledge-based economy emphasises the importance of HEIs towards sustainable development and there is growing concern that developing countries will lose out because of a poor higher education structure and system. It is this concern that has prompted the World Bank and other international organisations – notably, UNESCO – to address higher education issues.

The World Bank's 2002 report is an explicit recognition of the changed and continually changing contours of the global economy. The report argues that the most critical dimensions of change are: "the convergent impacts of globalisation, the increasing importance of knowledge as a main driver of growth, and the information and communication revolution" (2002: xvii). In this radically changed economy, "the ability of a society to produce, select, adapt, commercialise, and use knowledge is critical for sustained economic growth and improved living standards" (2002: 7). The World Bank report argues that, in the context of a globalised knowledge-based economy, tertiary education systems need to:

Impart higher-level skills to a rising proportion of the workforce; foster lifelong learning for citizens, with an emphasis on creativity and flexibility, to permit constant adaptation to the changing demands of a knowledge based economy; and promote

international recognition of the credentials granted by the country's education institutions (2002: 26).

The World Bank's recommendations stem from an understanding of the current graduate labour market, perhaps better illustrated in a joint World Bank and UNESCO 2000 report on higher education – *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*. The report expresses the view that “in the knowledge economy, highly trained specialists and broadly educated generalists will be at a premium” (2000: 14). The report argues that even the most highly specialised graduate will have to have a strong element of a general education so that (s)he can “think and write effectively and can communicate with precision, cogency and force (2000: 84). The knowledge-based labour market, therefore, demands individuals with strong technical capabilities, who also possess the ability to disseminate, create and critique new forms of knowledge.

UNESCO has similarly produced a report on the *Requirements of the World of Work* as part of the proceedings of the World Conference on Higher Education, held at Paris between the fifth and the ninth of October, 1998. The UNESCO report highlights changing dimensions of the labour market, emphasising the rapid change of job structure and requirements, decline of job stability, need for computer literacy and in-depth information science knowledge and the increase of jobs requiring high-level knowledge (1998: 9). According to the report, changing educational objectives for students are to be specialists and generalists, socially and communicatively skilled, able to negotiate tensions between academic approaches and professional problem-solving, aware of social conditions of work and career and able to take initiatives vis-à-vis the world of work (1998: 9-10).

## **I.2 The Graduate Labour Market in Bangladesh**

The graduate labour market in Bangladesh has been witnessing rapid and dramatic change recently. These changes reflect the strengthening and intensifying globalisation processes. One of the most important aspects of change is the growing importance of the private sector relative to the declining importance of the public sector as a source for graduate employment. A recent BIDS study estimated that, during the 1990s, the private sector accounted for about 65% of graduate employment.



The Table below is a snapshot of the distribution of job opportunities for graduates between November 2001 and October 2002. The diagram is constructed from data collected from BDJobs.com - a web-based employment service. BDJobs.com collects job advertisements from national dailies and classifies them in the categories below. The diagram demonstrates the relative insignificance of the government sector and the larger significance of certain other sectors – notably, Marketing/Sales, Engineers and Architects and the NGO sector.

**Job vacancies as advertised in BDJobs.com: November 2001-October 2002**

Job Classification	%	Job Classification	%
Marketing/Sales	14.73	IT	6.44
NGO	11.77	Accounting/Finance	5.75
Engineer/Architects	10.69	Secretary/Receptionist	5.66
Education/Training	8.17	Government services	5.10
Garments/Textile	7.93	Others	2.38
Medical pharmaceuticals	7.80	Research/ Consultancy	1.89
General management/ Administration	7.29	Banking/Insurance	1.84
Commercial Purchase	1.36	Media/Entertainment	1.20

The private sector is also becoming increasingly linked to the global economy. The most desirable destinations for graduate employment are multinationals or firms with close links to the international economy through trade or financial relations. These firms have to compete globally and, therefore, must maintain a high degree of cost-efficiency and capability. These firms *require* a well-qualified and capable employee body, meeting the requirements of the global knowledge economy described in the World Bank and UNESCO reports. Unless the higher education system is able to fulfil this need, Bangladeshi firms will not be able to compete in an international economy.

The employers we interviewed, however, contended that they are unable to find “truly qualified” graduates. Given the pressures of the global economy and the perceived lack of good graduate labour, private sector employers face difficulties maintaining or achieving global competitiveness. These firms, therefore, need excellent Human Resource Departments (HRDs) and suitable recruitment techniques to be able to identify and attract the best graduates. The most successful private sector firms are, therefore, willing to pay

higher wages and offer increased career opportunities in order to attract the ‘best’ graduate applicants.

### **I.3 Graduate Employment and Higher Education: A Case of Bringing Coal to Newcastle?**

*Ultimately, it is those who completed their secondary schooling in St Joseph’s, the Cadet Colleges, English medium schools, Viqarunnessa that have an inescapable and unavoidable advantage [in recruitment]*  
- HR Director, Small Multinational Retail Firm.

The increased importance of quality graduate recruits has necessitated a response from the higher education system. One response has been the recent explosion of private universities, after the Non-government Universities Act of 1992 allowed the establishment of private universities, and the focus of most these institutes on business and computer science degrees.<sup>1</sup> The growing popularity of business degrees amongst university entrants is also a response to the growing demands of the private sector. Certain public universities and institutes have managed to earn a high-degree of reputability amongst private sector employers and, consequentially, there is a high degree of competition for places in these institutes amongst university entrants. The private universities charge much higher fees and are prohibitively expensive for a large proportion of university entrants.

The higher education system is, therefore, segmented in two ways: (1) between the highly reputed HEIs with intense competition for admission and those HEIs in which it is much easier to gain admission and (2) expensive private HEIs and cheaper public HEIs.

Graduates from these more reputable institutes are more likely to get a job in the most desirable segments of the private sector – multinationals and certain private sector firms. The public sector and the more traditional private sector are unable to attract the “best” graduates as they cannot match the pay-scale or offer the same opportunities as these firms. Several employers, particularly of smaller and local firms, noted that they target candidates with lower CGPAs as they are more likely to continue in the firm. The graduate labour

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<sup>1</sup>Enrollment in private universities increased to 7.5% of enrollment in public universities by 1997. Bangladesh Education Sector Review, Volume III, p. 76

market is, therefore, segmented - well-paid jobs with considerable career opportunities on the one hand, and relatively poorly-paid and dead end jobs on the other.

The higher education segmentation, therefore, maps onto the graduate labour market segmentation. The best universities produce graduates who are recruited into the most desirable private sector firms. However, the best universities usually attract students from the better secondary schools – which are either more expensive or more competitive. Hence, employers have noted that it is usually students from certain secondary schools who are likely to get recruited into the most desirable jobs.

The higher education system and the graduate labour market appear to be caught up in a classic case of ‘bringing coal to Newcastle’ – the most qualified applicants at the secondary level gain admission, competitively, to the most desirable HEI or university entrants from better socio-economic backgrounds gain admission to private HEIs or go abroad to complete higher education and consequentially find jobs in the most desirable segment of the labour market.

#### **I.4 Dimensions of Change in the Graduate Labour Market in Bangladesh**

The private sector’s increased demand for capable graduate recruits coupled with the higher education systems failure to respond satisfactorily to this demand, has necessitated change in the graduate labour market in Bangladesh. In this section, we will briefly discuss two important changes – (1) the changing nature of networks and contacts in the recruitment process and (2) the rise of firms specialising in graduate level recruitment. These changes are indicative of the increased pressures towards greater competitiveness and the difficulties in recruiting “truly qualified” graduates.

##### **Networks: From Ascribed to Constructed**

The first of these changes describe the increased inadequacy of a previously acceptable form of contacts and networks in recruiting decisions – the *chacha-mama* connections. According to employers we interviewed, the importance of kinship-based networks towards recruitment

is decreasing. Most employers noted that recruitment decisions based on *chacha-mama* ties are no longer existent and, if they continue to exist, they do so in other firms at their considerable expense. The Managing Director of a multinational, finance company admitted to have made several hiring decisions in the past on the basis of kinship recommendations; however, he regrets those decisions as all these recruits proved to be “duffers”.

The most common response to specific questions regarding the importance of *chacha-mama* networks is that a truly qualified applicant, regardless of who is *chachas* and *mamas* are is going to be recruited. The chief executive of a small manufacturing firm’s response was:

The person who complains most about networks is usually an unemployable unemployed graduate whose equally unemployable friend might have found a job through networks.

Kinship based networks are being increasingly replaced with professional networks. Employers listen to recommendations of friends and colleagues within the industry or recommendations from reputed and trusted individuals. An employer informed us that he always asks colleagues and junior workers presently employed at the firm to recommend potential employees. An HR director of a very large manufacturing company also noted that there are some recommendations that they take seriously, granting interviews to recommended applicants. They seriously consider recommendations made by existing employees and certain trusted people outside the firm.

### **Recruitment Agencies: New Service Providers**

Through the course of our research, we became aware of the rise of recruitment agencies. Firms are increasingly relying on specialised firms to locate, identify and recruit truly qualified applicants. In most cases, these firms existed in conjunction with existing HRDs and not as a substitute for HRDs. We interviewed representatives of Eshna Consulting and BDJobs.com in order to gain a better understanding of the value of recruitment agencies.

Eshna Consulting began as a consultancy firm providing business advice and research for private sector organisations. Eshna was formed by several senior executives who had retired

from prestigious positions in well-established firms. Through its consultancy work, Eshna became involved in recruitment. Eshna is primarily involved in senior level recruitment. A client will, generally, ask Eshna to locate a well-qualified and experienced individual to take over a senior, administrative post. Eshna then attempts to identify currently-employed and high-potential graduates who, they believe, will be suitable. Eshna is also becoming increasingly involved in entry-level recruitment. It recently carried out the entire recruitment process - starting from CV sorting to written examinations and interviews - for a reputed multinational bank. Eshna's clients value the high-level of expertise and experience that Eshna brings to the recruitment process.

BDJobs.com's evolution towards a recruitment agency was very different from Eshna's. BDJobs.com began its existence as an internet facility for job-seekers as opposed to employee-seekers. BDJobs.com would collect job advertisements from various national dailies and present them on the website. BDJobs.com would collect resumes from interested applicants, sort them and attempt to match them with available jobs. BDJobs.com has recently expanded to include corporate clients. There are several levels of corporate clients - at the most basic level, these clients have access to BDJobs.com database of resumes and can take advantage of BDJobs.com's resume sorting process. Clients willing to pay greater fees can have their recruitment process carried out entirely by BDJobs.com.

The Executive of BDJobs.com believes that clients derive the following advantages from using this website: (1) its much cheaper to advertise through BDJobs.com than through newspapers advertisements; (2) BDjobs.com can receive applications online and can therefore receive more applications and process them faster; (3) BDjobs.com can sort out resumes for employers; (4) the internet acts as a screen, selecting out applicants with basic computer and internet knowledge; (5) Employers can target a more international audience – particularly non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs).

The above changes in recruitment practices are responses to changes in Bangladesh's graduate labour market. These changes have made traditional employability indicators unreliable. Traditional recruitment practices are increasingly unable to find and identify truly qualified graduates. Kinship-based networks and standard HR practices are proving

incapable of providing employers with the requisite level of graduate employees. This has created a demand for new institutions, innovations and change. The rise of professional networks is one such change, with employers relying on, mostly, informal networks to identify potentially promising graduates. The professional recruitment agency, on the other hand, is an institutional market innovation that arises out of the private sector's need to do something extra to traditional HR and recruitment in order to identify potentially promising graduates.

## Chapter II

### Understanding Employability: Theoretical Frameworks

The current global workplace, as described by the World Bank and UNESCO, is undergoing rapid and dynamic change with old skills becoming redundant and new skills becoming significant at an alarming rate. Notions of lifelong employment and job security are fading in the global knowledge economy. Given the current context, employment cannot guarantee any long-term security. In order to survive and prosper in the global economy, the employee must constantly maintain his/her employability.

Employability may be defined as the characteristic of an individual that makes him/her desirable to organisations and firms within a country, or across the globe. An employable individual is a person who has the capacity to add value to the organisation in which (s)he is working. An employable individual is a person who can apply for and receive a desirable job in a relatively short period of time, should the need arise.

What, however, constitutes employability? What makes a university graduate more or less employable? What is the different between an employable graduate and an unemployable graduate? These are, in many ways, the research questions that we are trying to answer through this report. Our research is focused on the Bangladeshi graduate labour market and its state at the start of the twenty-first century.

It is, however, worthwhile to review how other people have answered questions about employability. In this section, we will review different perspectives on graduate employability. These perspectives are from the West – mostly, England. They reflect current concerns regarding graduate employability, concerns that stem from the changes being wrought by the ever-intensifying forces of globalisation.

We have chosen three perspectives to review in this section. These perspectives may be labelled: (1) the Key Skills Perspective (2) the Graduate Identity Approach and (3) the USEM Model. These approaches and perspectives offer us a variety of theoretical frameworks with which to investigate questions of graduate employability. It is not our

intention to weigh these approaches one against the other. Instead, we will investigate each for their individual value and be equally critical of all. We will incorporate our critiques of these approaches into our discussion on graduate employability in Bangladesh.

## II.1. The Key Skills Approach

This approach thinks of employability in terms of sets of skills – labelled key skills, transferable skills, core skills, etc. These skills sets include diverse elements including “work as part of a team”, “show enthusiasm and interest”, “learn new skills”, “problem solve”, “interpersonal skills”, etc (Maskell and Robinson, p. 76). Employability becomes a question of the presence/absence of these skills amongst graduate employees. An employable individual is someone who possesses a requisite level and amount of skills from the skills set.

Most of the research work done on graduate employability takes a skills-based approach. Employers are asked to list and rank the “skills” they value in their employees. Generally, the findings are in the form of a list of “skills”, ranked by employers according to their perceived value to the organisation. The research suggests that higher education be geared towards imparting these skills to students.

The research findings can, in extreme cases, become an enormous database of requisite skills. For example, M.G. Allen’s research into graduate employability produced a “model” with 108 ‘skills’ organised into eight categories within four “zones”.<sup>2</sup> Other research projects produce more modest listings and categories of ‘key skills’. The British Council’s report on *Higher Education and Employability* which lists the following key skills: presentation/communication skills, organisation and time management, problem solving and decision making, research and data analysis, interpersonal skills and team working.<sup>3</sup>

Other examples of skills-based research into graduate employability include: Park Human Resources and the Guardian’s survey titled *Graduates in the Eyes of the Employers (2000)* finds that recent graduates in the UK lack interpersonal skills, business awareness and a good

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<sup>2</sup> Allen, M.G., 1991, *Improving the Personal Skills of Graduates: Final Report 1988-91*. Sheffield, Personal Skills Unit, Sheffield University

<sup>3</sup> “Higher Education and Employability”, Report of the British Council Anglo-German conference, downloaded at: [www.britishcouncil.de/e/education/pubs/oxford99/oxford07.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.de/e/education/pubs/oxford99/oxford07.htm)



standard of English.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Capita Learning and Development's survey of employers' needs identified communication skills as the most important shortcoming of recent graduates.<sup>5</sup> The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Committee) reported the following four key skills as key to the future success of graduates: 1) communication skills, 2) numeracy, 3) the use of information technology and 4) learning how to learn.<sup>6</sup> The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) similarly presented a set of twelve "career management and effective learning skills".<sup>7</sup>

The growing dominance of a skills-based focus on graduate employability is indicated by the British Government's recent establishment of a Department for Education and Skills. Prime Minister Tony Blair is responding to Britain's "shocking position in the World League Skills Table (we [Britain] were forty-second)" (Maskell and Robinson, p. 74).

The Department recently published a report on its 2002 Employer Skills Survey. In the survey, they found the following "major areas of skill deficiency" – communication skills, customer handling, team-working and problem-solving.<sup>8</sup> The report does, however, note that "respondents [employers] had an imprecise understanding of what was meant by many of the important general skills and often merged, for example, communication and customer handling skills." This objection is, however, at best a minor footnote. The report uses the skills category extensively and discusses employability in terms of imparting specific skills valued by employers.

The key skills approach has come under considerable criticism. Len Holmes, professor at the Business School of the University of North London, argues that skills are "a flawed concept" and, at best, "a theoretical construct that does not refer to some empirically real objects." He argues that "skills are by definition inseparable from the contexts in which they are developed and displayed and... they only make sense (or, rather, the same sense) to those who have the same recognition and understanding of those contexts."

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home\\_page/The\\_graduate\\_job\\_market/In\\_depth\\_articles\\_and\\_surveys/Graduate\\_recruitment\\_what\\_do\\_the\\_employers\\_think\\_Winter\\_00\\_/p!eXeeep](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/The_graduate_job_market/In_depth_articles_and_surveys/Graduate_recruitment_what_do_the_employers_think_Winter_00_/p!eXeeep)

<sup>5</sup> [www.agr.org.uk/news/news\\_view.asp?news%5Fid=216](http://www.agr.org.uk/news/news_view.asp?news%5Fid=216)

<sup>6</sup> The full text of the Dearing Committee Report may be downloaded at: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/alt-E/dearing/index.html#report>

<sup>7</sup> AGR (1995) *Skills for Graduates in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Cambridge: The Association of Graduate Recruiters

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.skillsbase.dfes.gov.uk/Downloads/RR372.pdf>

Maskell and Robinson are equally critical, though in far more colourful language, of the concepts of transferable skills in their book: *The New Idea of a University*. They perform a rigorous critique of a document supplied by the Hereford and Worcester Careers Services in 1998. Under the heading “What are key personal skill?” was included such things as “‘work as part of a team’ and ‘show enthusiasm and interest’”. The latter may really be a skill (that is *fake* an interest) but if so is undesirable.”

The authors are very critical of one of the skills – “learn new skills”, “the skill to end all skills.” They comment on it at length, and it is worth reproducing it here, to give a sense of how ridiculous the concept of key or transferable skills may sound:

Now there’s a skill for you. Learn the skill of learning skills and what else do you need? In fact, it makes redundant even the more advanced skills also listed: ‘• problem solve [*sic*]... • action plan [*sic*] ... • speak different languages.’ Why worry if you have the skill for learning new skills? Wait until you need to action plan, or to problem solve, or to use new languages, then use your universal skills of acquiring skills as required. There is not, and in the nature of genuine skills could not be, such a skill.

## II.2. The Graduate Identity Approach

The chief proponent of the graduate identity approach is Len Holmes, whose critique of key skills was discussed briefly above. Holmes suggests that “key skills” are inappropriate analytical frameworks for investigating graduate employability. Instead, Holmes argues that the “employable graduate” is a social construct and an understanding of employability requires a detailed investigation into the construction of graduate identities.

The graduate identity approach looks closely at the transition from the classroom to the workplace. The successful graduate is an individual who can negotiate the social forces permeating the classroom and the workplace and, thereby, is successful in negotiating the transition from the former to the latter. In the workplace, Holmes emphasise the research need to “attend to the social processes by which what is taken to be learning and competent performance are construed.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.graduate-employability.org.uk/>

Holmes is arguing against the skills-based approach. The abstract and conceptualised skills categories do not, according to Holmes, provide a concrete, contextualised account of employability. He argues that,

Rather than taking 'competencies', 'capabilities', 'skills', 'attributes', 'qualities' etc (whether called 'transferable', 'generic', 'key' etc) as objective characteristics and/ or properties of individuals, the [Identity Approach] examines how such attributions arise in relation to the social practices within particular arenas, and the emergent identities of persons whose performance is being considered.<sup>10</sup>

The graduate identity approach is, we believe, valid in its criticism of the concept of key or core skills. It is also valid, in our opinion, in its emphasis on social forces and constructs. However, an important characteristic of social forces *is* key skills and attributes. Our research demonstrates that both employers and applicants enter the employment process with these 'key skills' in mind. As such, they cannot be discarded entirely. Instead, they have to be used in order to reflect employers' and applicants' opinions of employability and not as an abstract category imposed by us, the researchers, on these opinions and perspectives.

### **II.3. The USEM model**

Peter Mantz and Knight Yorke also critique mainstream skills-based approaches towards graduate employability. Unlike Holmes, however, they do not reject the concept of skills entirely. Instead they argue that employability is greater than the narrow assumption that "employability is tantamount to giving students a fistful of 'transferable' skills"(2001: 3).

Mantz and Yorke add other elements to 'skills' in formulating their employability model. They define graduate employability as the "possession of understandings, skills and personal attributes necessary to perform adequately at the graduate level" (2001:2). They, therefore, come up with a model of graduate employability that includes skills, but is wider than skills – the USEM model (2001: 5). USEM is an acronym for

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

- **Understanding**
- **Skills** (subject-specific and generic)
- **Efficacy beliefs** (and self theories generally)
- **Metacognition** (including reflection)

Mantz and Yorke emphasise the last two aspects of the USEM model – Efficacy beliefs and Metacognition. They argue that understandings and skills are components of employability but, in no means, the defining features of employability. They believe that graduates with certain theories of self, who are capable of Metacognition, are more employable than graduates with similar understanding or skills levels.

According to Mantz and Yorke, there are two categories of self-belief – either fixed or malleable (2001: pp. 6-8). Individuals with fixed theories of the self do not, according to them, have the confidence to take on difficult tasks and, quite easily, conclude that a task is beyond their abilities. However, individuals with malleable theories of the self are confident about their abilities to continually learn and acquire skills and understandings. They, therefore, develop “something of a ‘get up and go’ spirit with a low fear of risking failure” – qualities that, according to the authors, employers value.

Mantz and Yorke’s theory distinguishes between skills (numeracy, computer literacy, subject-specific abilities) and personal qualities, i.e., confidence, communicativeness, work ethic, etc. The skills approach did not, necessarily, neglect these other attributes but, rather, subsumed them under the broader category of skills. For example, the University of Central England presents “personal qualities” under the broader heading of “skills and attributes” – these personal qualities include “self-motivation” and “self-assurance.” Mantz and Yorke, on the other hand, place these ‘self-qualities’ at the forefront and argue that the attributes desired by employers stem from the graduate’s self-beliefs and through self-reflection. They are not skills that can be imparted directly; though they can be transferred between jobs as they are an integral part of the graduate’s personality. The graduate develops personal qualities from experiences and through reflecting on these experiences.

Mantz and Yorke’s argument, therefore, shares something in common with Holmes’, without going to the extent of throwing out the category of skills altogether. Like Holmes,

they believe that most categories that are placed under skills are not really skills, but instead components of the graduate's personality, character or, even, to use Holmes' term, identity. However, they believe that attributes such as confidence and communicativeness actually exist and can, in a sense, be transferred between contexts. Holmes' argues that all so-called "skills" are abstract categories imposed on real-life and contextual observations that obscure more than they illuminate.

#### **II.4. Theoretical Framework of BUILD Project**

It is not our purpose to debate the merits of these alternate approaches towards graduate employability. We believe that each approach offers legitimate views on graduate employability and that each approach is subject to legitimate criticisms. Employability is a multi-dimensional term and it is difficult to reduce employability to a single set of attributes or skills. Our purpose in outlining the above perspectives on graduate employability is to enrich our discussions on graduate employability in Bangladesh.

Employability, as defined earlier, is a particular characteristic, or set of characteristics, that make an individual desirable or attractive towards an organisation. However, this definition raises more questions: How is an individual supposed to acquire these characteristics? How does the employer identify these characteristics? How do these characteristics play out in the context of the workplace? Our research project focuses on the employer and, thus, on the second of these three questions.

The three questions imply certain stages towards graduate employability. The graduate, through classroom and life experiences, gains certain characteristics (identities). The employer sifts through these graduate and their varied characteristics hoping to identify someone who will add value to his/her organisation. The graduate employee is inserted into the workplace and his/her characteristics are played out in the specific workplace. The graduate who is able to satisfactorily meet the expectations of the workplace will gain promotions and advancements. The graduate who is unable to meet expectations will be stuck in a relatively dead-end position or will drop-out or will be fired.

Our research indicates that the employability theories discussed have varying degrees of utility in investigations of the different stages described earlier. Mantz and Yorke's USEM model is very useful in understanding how graduates may acquire certain self-theories or levels of Metacognition through classroom and pedagogical methods. The skills-based approach is quite useful in understanding recruitment – the process through which employability is identified. This is because employers and graduate applicants enter the recruitment process already thinking of particular requisite skills. The Graduate Identity Approach is useful in discussing workplace performance because of its emphasis on the social forces and processes that constitute the workplace.

These theories, however, cannot be applied uncritically even when discussing an individual stage of graduate employability in isolation. Our research questions focus on the employer's perspective and we have concentrated on the problems of recruitment and identification. The skills-based approach is, therefore, very relevant to our research needs.

We accept, however, Holmes' and other's critiques of skills. We do not view skills as discrete, real and transferable objects. Skills enter into our discussion of graduate employability because they are a vital component of the mind-sets with which employers and applicants approach recruitment. Skills are essentially descriptive terms through which employers describe employability. Further, employability is more than a linear summation of discrete skills and attributes.

From this perspective, a relative ranking of skills becomes unimportant and uninteresting. If skills are not real and discrete categories, a statement that inter-personal skills are more important than a practical orientation becomes meaningless. *Skills are expressions of a graduate's identity, self-belief and personal qualities that are revealed in various contexts.* Employer rankings of skills are not useful information because one cannot extract skills from the graduate's personality or identity.

Skills, we believe, enter the recruitment process as part of employer and applicant's mental framework. Employers and applicants think of employability as the presence/absence of skills, regardless of Holmes' criticisms. The important questions, from the employers'

perspective (as that is the perspective under investigation in our research), are: how do you decide what skills are necessary for performance? How do you identify the presence/absence of these skills in an applicant?

Our research project is, therefore, focused on developing a critical understanding of what skills mean to the employer and how employer's notions of skills play out during recruitment. Our research is meant to answer the following two questions regarding employability:

- What skills/attributes do employers use to describe employable graduates?
- How do employers identify these skills/attributes during recruitment?

## Chapter III

### Research Methodology

The basic research question that we tried to answer through our research project was: “what are employers looking for in their graduate recruits?” The answers to this question are somewhat obvious and it would have been possible to answer them without conducting any extensive research work. Employers are looking for graduates who are capable in their area of specialisation, who can communicate effectively in a variety of arenas, are hardworking, have a sense of responsibility, are willing to take initiative, are creative, flexible, and adaptable and so on. Our interviews with employers confirmed these preliminary understandings of graduate employability.

It is, however, unclear what these attributes mean and, more specifically, what does it mean to possess these attributes. Our research, therefore, addresses the questions raised by expected employability attributes: What are these attributes and how do they find concrete expressions? What does it mean to “possess” an attribute? How are these attributes identified amongst potential employees?

Our discussion of graduate employability in the previous chapter allows for a more sophisticated understanding of employability attributes and skills. These attributes, we believe, are *descriptive* terms, used to describe a composite personality and identity – that of the employable graduate. The employable graduate is, therefore, more than a linear aggregation of these attributes; that is, the ability to add value to an organisation is more than the sum of employability skills and attributes.

Our research, therefore, was meant to capture the processes through which employers come up with lists of employability attributes and skills. We were interested in *how* employers described graduate employability and, further, *what* are the implications of such a description of employability towards graduate recruitment. The qualitative data thus collected could be used to formulate a framework through which employability and recruitment could be better understood.



### III.1. Research Methodology

Given the above objectives, we felt that one-on-one and in-depth interviews with employers would be the most effective research method. We decided against large-scale questionnaire-style data collection. Questionnaires would operate to standardise the employability attributes sought by employers. In-depth interviews, on the other hand, would enrich these employability attributes with details – What does an employer mean when (s)he describes an attribute or a skill? Why is the attribute/skill important? How does an employer identify such an attribute or skill?

These details have been used to construct a framework through which graduate employability may be further explored and, also, a framework upon which a higher education institute can have a positive impact. Given these enlarged research objectives, we decided to keep our interviews open-ended. We did not enter the employer interview with a pre-formatted list of questions. Rather, our questions were responses to employer comments and were meant to draw more detailed responses from employers.

The interview began, generally, with the following question: “what makes a young and fresh graduate desirable in your eyes?” The rest of the interview was structured according to responses to this first question. Employers generally answered in terms of skills, and we would ask employers to expand on what they mean by particular skills. Occasionally, we were surprised by the employers’ omission of a particular ability/skill, and we would question him/her on why (s)he left that out.

We would ask employers about how they identify particular desirable attributes in the recruitment process. We would, further, question them regarding their processes of identification and attempted to gauge why they found a particular process of identification reliable. In our interviews, we found that employers are frustrated with certain established methods of identification. We would, hence, question them on their frustrations.

The above style of interview could have been complemented with a larger-scale questionnaire-based survey of employer opinions. However, such a research methodology

would have standardised employer responses and failed to capture the richness and detail of the employability attributes. We were more interested in questions of how and why regarding graduate employability than questions of what (which are relatively self-evident). We did not believe that a sample questionnaire would have been able to answer these questions of why employers describe employability in the way they do and how they identify employable graduates.

Our review of Len Holmes' critique of a skills-based approach in the previous chapter reveals the shortcomings of a questionnaire-based methodology. A questionnaire survey of employers would not have revealed what employers mean when they use the term 'communication skills'; instead, we would have imposed our understanding of communication skills upon the employers perspective. Hence, the questionnaire would have concealed more than it revealed.

A questionnaire-based methodology would have also enabled a ranking of skills – employers would have been asked to rank whether or not they thought communication skills as more important than work-ethic. Such a ranking, we believe, is misleading. It implies that the skills are discrete objects that can be imparted to graduates independently of each other. Instead, we have found that skills and attributes are highly interlinked: graduate possessing a particular employability attribute or skill is considered likely to possess others.

### **III.2 How did we choose employers to interview?**

Since the interviews were one-on-one and open-ended, we have had to choose firms where we, the researchers, or other representatives of BRAC and BRAC University have personal connections. We required a significant time-commitment on part of the employer and, also, we required the employer to be frank and honest in expressing his/her opinions. We have promised representatives of these firms confidentiality and will, consequentially, refer to the firm as, for example, a large manufacturing firm, or a small ICT firm. Our interviews were, in some cases, with HR representatives and, in other cases, with the Managing Director or Chairman of the organisation.

We were interested in providing a generic understanding of employability. We did not wish to produce distinctive research on employability for doctors, businessmen, financiers, lawyers, engineers, IT professionals and so on. We wanted to produce a generic framework through which graduate employability across the economy could be understood and analyzed.

As a result, we interviewed employers across a number of sectors. We looked at IT employment, employment at banks and financial companies, manufacturing firms, medical firms, and consultancy. We attempt to bring employers' opinions on employability in these diverse sectors under a common employability framework. Fortunately, our task was not too difficult as all the employers shared common understandings of employability and devised similar methods of identifying employable graduates.

We did, however, focus on the sectors in which BRAC University students are likely to apply. Our experience of BRAC's field-level recruitment suggested that BU students will not be interested in applying for these jobs. Most of the applicants for this position held National University degrees. BRAC, itself, did not sort CVs but called everyone for interviews. Very capable graduates were not hired because they were considered unlikely to stay on in the job.

On the basis of our BRAC experience, we left out segments of NGO employment – specifically, field-based staff. We did not look into mid-level employment at the many garments factories and small to medium manufacturing enterprises in the country. We concentrated, instead, on private sector employment in the emerging sector of the economy.

## Chapter IV

### Graduate Recruitment: Towards a Framework

#### IV.1 Introduction: Recruitment as a Game

The report, as has been discussed in Chapters II and III, focuses on the recruitment process and the employers' role in identifying and recruiting employable graduates. The specific research question that this report seeks to answer is: what are employers looking for in graduate recruits and how do they identify the right graduate recruit? The employer is, to put it most basically, looking for an individual who will be able complete tasks and add value to the organisation.

Employers and applicants interact in a recruitment game. Through this game, employers are searching for an employable recruit and applicants search for satisfactory employment. The recruitment game, however, is characterised by imperfect information. The employer does not possess sufficient information on which (s)he can be sure of the applicant's ability and/or willingness to add value to his/her organisation.

Due to imperfect information, the recruitment game works as a signalling game (Spence 1973). Spence argues that employers collect information on an applicant and, on the basis of this information, estimate the likelihood that an applicant will add value to the organisation. Spence labels these observable attributes 'signals'. Signals include an applicant's higher and secondary education background, grades, extra-curricular involvements, voluntary work, etc. Applicants signal their employability to an employer; the employer interprets these signals and assesses the applicant's employability.

The signals, however, are becoming noisy and unstable. Globalisation is continually changing the employers' needs and an applicant who had been able to add value before might not be able to do so now. Rapid changes in Bangladesh's higher education structure – particularly the growth of private universities – make important signals, like institutional background and CGPA, much less stable. We have discussed the growing instability of signals and market innovations to compensate for these in Chapter 1.

Recruitment is, therefore, a signalling game. This game takes place in two phases – the CV sorting phase and the Interview Phase. These phases are, obviously, distinct: interviews allows for physical interaction which the CV sorting phase does not. These differences mean that the signalling capabilities are different in the two recruitment phases. We will comment on differences between the recruitment stages later on in the chapter.

Interestingly, high-end employers (mostly multinationals and some prominent local firms) are attempting to improve the quality of signals collected during the CV sorting phase. Some employers design their own CV forms meant to capture information useful in the sorting process. Employers have also begun contracting outside the organisation for CV sorting services (e.g. BDJobs.com). These practices are the result of employers' attempts to negotiate the increasing noisiness of standard employability signals in Bangladesh.

#### **IV.2. What is being Signalled: Introducing Employability Attributes**

*Our employees must be able to communicate, must be able to work hard, must be able to learn, must be able to understand requirements, must be able to go beyond what's told them and handle independently a chunk of a problem. They must have confidence and show curiosity. They must be able to understand differences in our relationships with others, be able to respond to the questions of people of different backgrounds.*  
[Managing Director of a small multinational financial firm]

Employers are trying to gauge an applicant's ability to do the task and add value to the organisation. Employers, our interviews reveal, think of this ability in terms of sets of skills and attributes (much like those described in our discussion of skills-based approaches in Chapter II). The question "what are you looking for in graduate recruits?" usually evinced a long list of qualities, attributes, abilities and skills such as quoted above.

Employers listed and described a range of skills and attributes. Communication abilities were commonly mentioned as a key employability attribute. Attributes like work ethic, practical orientation, dynamism, curiosity, creativity, the ability to "think outside the box", responsibility, confidence in one's own subject were also mentioned. The terms used by

employers corresponded remarkably well with the skills categories used by the UK's Department of Education and Skills in their skills rankings (discussed in Chapter II).

Interestingly, students shared a common understanding of employability attributes and skills. We conducted a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with BRAC University students. One of the questions posed was: "In your opinion, what do employers look for when recruiting graduates?" In response, students responded that employers are looking for communications abilities, subject knowledge and attributes like confidence, talent, creativity, dynamism. It is indeed remarkable that the students' views on what employers want corresponded so closely with the statements made by employers to us.

The employability attributes collected from employers can be broadly defined into these three categories: subject knowledge, communication ability and general abilities. We will define these three categories, expand on their definitions and then justify our particular categorisation of employability attributes.

Subject knowledge is the applicant's breadth and depth of knowledge in his/her own area of discipline. The relevance of subject knowledge depends on the particular position and the particular vacancy. More technical jobs clearly require sufficient strength in subject knowledge. There are, however, positions for which specific subject knowledge is irrelevant.

Employers defined communications ability in a variety of ways. The HR manager of a small private bank described communication skills as "the ability to absorb directives and respond effectively." The Chairman of a large manufacturing firm described communication as the "ability to make oneself understood." The HR director of a multinational marketing firm described communication much more broadly as the ability to "relate to and form bonds with various people, from varied backgrounds, in different contexts."

We have collected these above perspectives into a single statement that defines communication abilities: communication is the ability to absorb, understand, reflect and articulate knowledge. Employers value recruits who can communicate with various people and in a variety of settings. Employers do tend to emphasize English language skills. In

spite of this emphasis, the Managing Director of a multinational finance company stated that “applicants need to communicate – whether it is in English, Bangla or Urdu.”

General Abilities are a residual category that captures the diverse other employability attributes ranging from work ethic and practical orientation to dynamism and “a fire in the belly”. General abilities, therefore, capture quite a wide range of skills and attributes. The skills that have come under the heaviest criticism from Maskell and Robinson and Len Holmes (all authors argue that something like practical orientation cannot possibly be a skill) are grouped under general abilities.

We have defined these three broad categories of employability attributes for, primarily, two reasons:

(1) The degree to which employability attributes can be assessed within the recruitment environment and timeframe may be thought of as a continuum. In this continuum, subject knowledge and communication abilities can be assessed more satisfactorily and easily relative to general abilities.

(2) There is also a continuum in traditional views on the university’s role in providing or delivering these employability attributes. Traditionally, subject knowledge is seen as the focus of university education. University’s role in enhancing communication abilities is, at best, medium to marginal. General abilities are almost considered hereditary – determined through socio-economic backgrounds and maybe from primary and secondary schooling. The Chairman of a large manufacturing company informed us that “universities do not teach any values. Values and qualities are gained from the family, the primary and secondary school.<sup>11</sup>”

Employers and applicants try to communicate information regarding these employability attributes in the recruitment process. However, employers can only partially observe

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<sup>11</sup> However, as we shall argue later, we believe that universities have to develop curricula and pedagogical methods that encourage general abilities and, further, they have to devise signals that convince employers they are developing or inculcating something additional to subject specific knowledge

employability attributes in the environment and the time-frame of the recruitment process. In order to overcome the information asymmetry, employers and applicants use signals to convey information regarding employability attributes.

The above holds true if we adopt a Graduate Identity approach towards employability. Len Holmes has critiqued these categories of employability attributes for being too abstract. According to Holmes, these attributes are expressions of the graduate's identity, formed during the transition from the classroom to the workplace. From Holmes' perspective, the recruitment context only provides another arena in which the graduate applicant can express certain attributes. The employers have access only to these attributes. These observable attributes function to signal the presence of unobservable attributes that the employer believes will add value to his/her organisation.

#### **IV.3. What are the Signals?**

Before employability attributes can start signalling each other, they themselves must be properly signalled. The signalling process is initiated from more directly observable and verifiable attributes. Employers interpret these attributes as signals for employability attributes. The following signals were emphasised by employers as signals for employability attributes:

- secondary education institute
- higher education institutes
- area of discipline
- grades or class rank
- extra-curricular activities
- internships
- voluntary work
- references

Interestingly, the BRAC University students listed out the above "signals" in response to the question: what, in your opinion, are employers looking for when recruiting graduates? Their response included the above signals *and* the employability attributes discussed earlier. Their responses, therefore, matched the employers' approach towards employability remarkably well.



#### IV.4. CV Collection

It is also worth noting that the above information is what is generally included in a CV. The signals included in the CV start of the entire recruitment and signalling game. The employers, therefore, have to collect a sufficient number of CVs that they can sort through in the hope of finding the ‘right’ signals.

High-end employers (mostly multinationals and certain prominent local firms) are beginning to use their own pre-designed form meant to capture useful information. They send these forms out in response to submitted CVs or job applications. Employers discussed a dissatisfaction with the quality of most CVs submitted and the range of useless information included in most of them.

The CV collection process has, traditionally, started with a newspaper advertisement inviting applications and CVs for a certain job. The newspaper advertisement tries to specify the type of signals being sought and, also, attempts to signal the desirability of a particular position.

Interesting changes are taking place in CV Collection processes. There is a move towards internet-based job advertisements – for example BDJobs.com. Employers are also using professional networks in order to collect CVs – for example, the director who asks existing employees to recommend workers. Job fairs have also emerged as a major CV collection venue.

Employers construct CV databanks from the CVs they are able to collect. Employers are also paying to subscribe to BDJobs.com’s databank. Increasingly, employers rely on internal CV databanks to identify potential recruits. There are obvious disadvantages to the system: individuals listed in the databank may already have satisfactory employment and may not be willing to move to a new job. However, employers have suggested that it is more cost-effective than placing a newspaper advertisement and going through the many unsatisfactory and unsuitable applications that are sent.

Changes in CV collection processes and the growing dissatisfaction with most submitted CVs are linked with rapid changes in the Bangladeshi graduate labour market. The instability of signals and employers' changing needs have made traditional CV collection procedures unsatisfactory and increasingly cost-ineffective. Hence, employers are using their own forms, collecting CVs through different venues and constructing CV databanks.

#### IV.5. Mapping Signals to Attributes: Towards a Framework

The CV essentially is a list of signals. Employers go through the list attempting to estimate the likelihood that the individual who wrote the CV possesses certain employability attributes. On the basis of these estimations, the CVs are sorted and certain applicants are called in for interviews. The signals, therefore, map onto certain employability attributes. The table below demonstrates, in the form of a matrix the signal to attribute mapping.

**Mapping CV Variables to Employability Attributes**

CV Variables	Subject	Communication	General
HSE		✓	✓
HEI	✓	✓	✓
Area of Discipline		✓	✓
Grades	✓		✓
Internship	✓	✓	✓
Extra-curricular		✓	✓
Voluntary Work	✓	✓	✓
Awards and Honours	✓	✓	✓
References	✓		✓

It is interesting to note that the signals indicate multiple employability attributes. This is because the employability attributes themselves are inter-linked. The linkages between employability attributes and signals suggest, to us, that employers try to construct complete portraits of graduate applicants. Employers describe the portrait or profile in terms of employability attributes. However, the linkages between employability attributes suggest that graduates are more than a sum of attributes.

Further, the signals do not act independently. Employers do not look at Area of Discipline independently of HEI attended. Similarly, grades are weighted according to the institute attended. Employers believe that individuals with lower grades from certain institutes

perform better than individuals with top grades from other institutes. The signals are, therefore, examined in conjunction.

The mapping of signals to attributes is a complex process. The table raises important questions regarding the strength of the mapping is dependent on the quality of the signal. Employers determine the quality of signals based upon a range of past experiences and information gleaned from various sources. We shall discuss two of these signals in some more detail and illustrate the linkages within signals and attributes and the mapping of signals to attributes.

### **Higher Education Institutions and Institutional Reputation**

Our interviews revealed that employers have strong preferences for students from certain higher education institutes. Employers expressed the strongest preference for graduates from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA). Students from other Dhaka University departments are also considered good – Economics and International Relations are two examples that stand out. Employers expressed some reservations and caution regarding private universities. Private universities, they pointed out, are too recent and employers have not had the scope to form solid reputations.

HEIs signal all three employability attributes. Employers are, therefore, beginning to look at HEIs as doing more than delivering subject-specific knowledge to its graduates. Employers credited IBA's curriculum (specifically its case-study approach) and pedagogy (its emphasis on presentation and discussion) for producing graduates with strong communication and general abilities in addition to subject specific knowledge.

Employers also stated that they prefer IBA because it is the most competitive academic institute in terms of admission. IBA admits the best students at the secondary level and, hence, produces the most capable graduates. Employers, therefore, do not look at HEI independently of secondary education backgrounds. Similarly, grades are weighted according to the HEI attended. An executive at a consultancy firm believes that an IBA graduate with a CGPA of 3.2 or 3.3 is more capable than a private university graduate with a CGPA of 3.7 or 3.8.

IBA is, therefore, a powerful signal and indicates strongly that a graduate is likely to possess the necessary employability attributes. The vital question arises: how do employers determine the signalling capability of HEIs? The question may be rephrased: how are institutional reputations formed? The employers offered the following reasons for a strong preference for IBA graduates: previously recruited IBA graduates have performed better than graduates of other institutes, IBA graduates occupy prominent positions in both the public and private sectors, IBA's internship program is excellent, and IBA's alumni society is a powerful network with connections throughout the private sector.

Certain other HEIs are also gaining in reputation. North South University (NSU) has a reasonably favourable reputation amongst employers. The national Job Fair organised by NSU exposed employers to the university and its graduates. Also, the HR manager of a private bank expressed his preference for NSU by drawing on an example from his family:

I have a nephew at NSU and another nephew at a different private university. My nephew was an ordinary student before, but now he is smart, confident and articulate. My other nephew on the other hand; well, he is a complete duffer.

The Business Studies program at Khulna University has established a good reputation with employers. The HR director of a small, multinational retail firm informed us that he is searching for Khulna University marketing graduates because he had heard, through friends in other firms in Bangladesh, that Khulna University marketing students are very good.

BRAC University has yet to establish a reliable reputation amongst employers – not surprising as BU is yet to produce any graduates. However, employers expressed optimism regarding BU's prospects. They pointed to BRAC's considerable reputation and suggested that BRAC performs well at everything it puts its hands on. They also pointed to Vice Chancellor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury and expressed optimism that he will be able to make BU an effective HEI.

The formation of institutional reputations is, therefore, the results of complex processes. Employers draw on a range of experiences and a wide source of information in deciding the

quality of an HEI and its signalling capabilities. Employers look at experiences from past recruitment rounds, family and social experiences with HEIs, information from networks of friends and colleagues, national media and public figures, etc. in forming institutional reputations. Once formed, these institutional reputations act as powerful signals for all three employability attributes.

### **Area of Discipline and the BBA/MBA Paradox**

Area of Discipline, as illustrated in the matrix-table, maps onto communication ability and general abilities. It does not, however, map onto subject knowledge. Area of Discipline indicates the *subject choice* of a graduate applicant; *not* the breadth and depth of knowledge the applicant may have gained in that particular subject.

The notion that Area of Discipline may signal communication and general abilities arose from an interesting and paradoxical observation that arose from our interviews. Business students are preferred for non-subject specific positions and responsibilities. Employers admit that there is no specific reason why a history or English graduate should not be able to do the job of business students. However, business students are more likely, from the employers' perspective, to possess the general and communication abilities necessary for these non-subject specific jobs.

The situation is paradoxical – if these jobs do not require subject-specific knowledge, then why are employers recruiting graduates with specific degrees and subjects – namely Business. The empirical finding that BBAs and MBAs are not necessarily hired for their subject-specific knowledge was puzzling. Employers described employability in general terms. They said that subject-knowledge is not really essential and there is no reason that a history graduate shouldn't be able to do the job of a business graduate.

Our research revealed that BBAs and MBAs are more likely to get recruited because of their likelihood of possessing the general abilities required for these positions. We asked employers the following question: “Why do employers prefer business degrees?” A collection of responses sums up to the following: In comparison to graduates from other

disciplines or departments, business graduates are smarter and more presentable; they have better communication abilities; their work ethic is superior; they are more practically oriented; they are easier and cheaper to train and are more flexible.

A vast majority of employers suggested that the BBA and MBA curriculum is responsible for this. The case-study approaches of business programs are credited with developing a practical orientation. The curriculum requires more presentations and demands oral participation. Rote-learning is de-emphasised in business programs. The curriculum develops analytical abilities and encourages creativity. In comparison, according to the managing director of a small, multinational financial company, “a history student stays up all night memorising dates and events, regurgitates them in the final exam, and he has a degree”. Employers suggested that HEIs should change the curricula in other disciplines and make sure the employer is informed about these changes if they want to produce employable English or History graduates.

The mapping illustrated in the above table is operationalized differently in the two stages of recruitment. After the CVs and the information contained within CVs have been collected, the CVs must be sorted and selected applicants are called for interviews. The CV sorting and the interview phases of recruitment are distinct. The physical interactivity of the interview process strengthens signals and their mappings onto employability attributes.

#### **IV.6. The CV Sorting Stage**

The CV generally includes the signals listed on the table above. The CV, generally, includes information regarding an applicant’s higher and secondary education background, area of discipline, grades, curricular and extra-curricular accomplishments, and computer and language skills. Employers interpret the signals presented in the CV and make preliminary observations regarding the likely level of an applicant’s employability attributes.

Employers, however, are finding it increasingly difficult to make decisions on the basis of preliminary information collected through CVs. The noisiness and instability of signals make the mapping of signals to attributes fuzzy and difficult. As a result, employers find it

difficult to construct a preliminary sketch of the applicant's employability. The portrait that emerges from CVs are proving 'too sketchy' to make reliable CV sorting decisions.

High-end employers have, in response, started using their own forms and are asking applicants to respond to direct questions. The Managing Director of a multinational credit agency has his own form meant to capture information he expects to be included in a CV. When job applicants send him CVs, he responds by sending out this form to the applicants. By his estimate, about half the applicants who sent in CVs respond with completed forms. He explains the usefulness of the form by pointing out the generally unsatisfactory quality of CV writing and the unreliability of standard indicators such as institutional background and grades.

Forms such as the one described in the box enable the employer to construct more coherent and complete portraits of the applicant. The applicant's ability to "be specific" in his/her responses signals the applicant's communication ability. General abilities are also better signalled by the form's insistence on specific examples that illustrate an applicant's abilities. There is, also, scope for a fuller understanding of the applicant's level of subject knowledge through questions on specific courses and project's completed by the applicant during his/her academic career.

The noisiness and instability of signals have also led employers to hiring third parties to complete CV sorting for them. One of the services provided by BDJobs.com provides to client employers is access to their database of pre-sorted CVs. Employers are also hiring recruitment agencies with greater experience and knowledge in CV sorting.

### **An Example of a Job Application Form: Innovative High end Employers**

The application form of a multinational financial organisation provides important indications of the information sought by employers. The form asks applicants to list “Academic Qualification and Training”, “Achievements, Personal Qualities and Skills”, “Employment History”, “Computer Skills”, “Oral & Written Skills”, “Analytical Skills”, and “References”.

The form asks for information on the usual, observable signals: institutional background and grades. The form also asks for information on the employability categories: General Skills (“Achievements, Personal Qualities and Skills”), Communication Abilities (“Oral & Written Skills”), and Subject Knowledge (“Analytical Skills”). However, the applicant can only signal these employability attributes through the form.

Applicants are given directions on filling in these categories; the directions, basically, ask applicants to provide signals for these employability categories. Applicants are asked to use the section for “Achievements, Personal Qualities and Skills” to indicate your experience, achievements, knowledge, personal qualities and other traits that have enhanced you professionally. You may include paid and unpaid work, including home activities and leisure interests.” Under Analytical Skills, applicants are asked for a “Brief Description of your Analytical Skills. Include analytical assignments & journal completed/participated in your academic career or other experiences. Please be specific.” Under Oral & Written Skills, applicants are asked to rank their Oral and Written abilities in English and Bengali as “Good”, “Very Good” or “Excellent”. There is a space for Other Languages.

The directions for the first two categories, basically, provide the applicant with a chance to signal, through written communication, his/her subject knowledge and general abilities. The employer is even indicating to the applicant the style of written communication preferred: “Please be specific”. The applicants are asked to provide informative signals such as “paid and unpaid work, including home activities and leisure interests” and “analytical assignments & journal completed/participated in your academic career or other experiences”.

### **IV.7. The Interview Stage**

Once the CVs have been sorted, selected applicants are called for interviews. The interview stage is specifically different from CV sorting because of the added scope for direct questioning and direct observation. Applicant’s responses to direct questions are signals for employability attributes. Employers observe applicant’s responses, reading them as signals for employability attributes.

Responses to direct questioning, much like the CV variables, signal multiple employability attributes. Employers observe the applicant’s overall employability during the applicant’s responses to questions. Hence, even the most subject specific question that an employer can ask will enable the applicant to signal multiple employability attributes.



The following conversation with the HR manager of a local bank provides an example of how responses to any and all questions asked during an interview can signal multiple employability attributes. The HR director described dynamism as the attitude and initiative an employee brings to bear on his workplace. How can you know a graduate will be dynamic in the workplace on the basis of a CV and an interview? He replied: “Well, you look at his grades, you look at his involvement in various activities, you look at his attitude during the interview. Is he engaging? Is he proactive? Is he truly interested in the questions you are asking?” Do you ask any particular questions to gauge an applicant’s dynamism? The HR director replied, “No, it should come through no matter what question is asked.”

Dynamism can, therefore, be signalled by an applicant who is “engaging”, “proactive” and “truly interested in the questions” asked during the interview. The applicant must, therefore, signal his/her level of engagement, proactivity and interest in order to signal his/her dynamism. Most importantly, all these employability attributes can be signalled in response to any question that may be posed during the interview.

Further, direct questioning allows employers to test expectations regarding employability attributes formed on the basis of CV variables. An employer can test, through direct questions and observations, whether or not an IBA graduate is indeed more likely to be a better presenter, communicator, etc. Employers can also form opinions on whether or not an applicant engaged in a particular extra-curricular activity is indeed more likely to possess employability attributes. The interview stage is, therefore, an important arena in which employers form expectations regarding CV variables

Employers ask primarily two forms of questions during the interview process – (1) questions focused on subject knowledge and (2) questions focused on general abilities. Employers do not need to ask direct questions regarding communication ability because the applicant’s responses to any and all questions signal his/her communication abilities.

Questions focused on subject knowledge signal more employability attributes than subject knowledge. Responses to subject specific questions can signal general abilities such as

analytical abilities, proactivity, dynamism, confidence, and so forth. For example, the manager of an IT company was describing an interview with an applicant who had graduated in English:

Her final thesis was on Hamlet. However, when I asked her to describe Hamlet's plot briefly she could not do so. When I asked her about the famous quote from Hamlet, she couldn't repeat it. Obviously, the girl was not recruited. If a person cannot demonstrate confidence in her own subject, after three or four years of studying it, there is no hope for her to demonstrate confidence in my firm.

The job position did not require the applicant to have read and known Hamlet. However, since Hamlet was the topic of her interest, her knowledge of Hamlet signalled her ability to acquire expertise and knowledge through a sound work ethic, a basic intelligence, etc. The applicant's lack of knowledge on Hamlet signalled a lack of general abilities to the employer.

It is, however, difficult to gauge general abilities through direct questions. Employers, in general, do not ask specifically – “are you a dynamic person?” or “describe your dynamism.” Subject knowledge can be questioned directly. General abilities, however, must be gauged in a roundabout fashion through questions that may appear off-beat, or unusual. For example, the HR director of a large manufacturing company asks applicants questions such as: “How do you fry an egg?” The Managing Director of an NGO also asks similar off-beat questions, like: “How would you respond if you are about to be mugged?” An international NGO asks its applicant's “Why do women get paid less than men?”

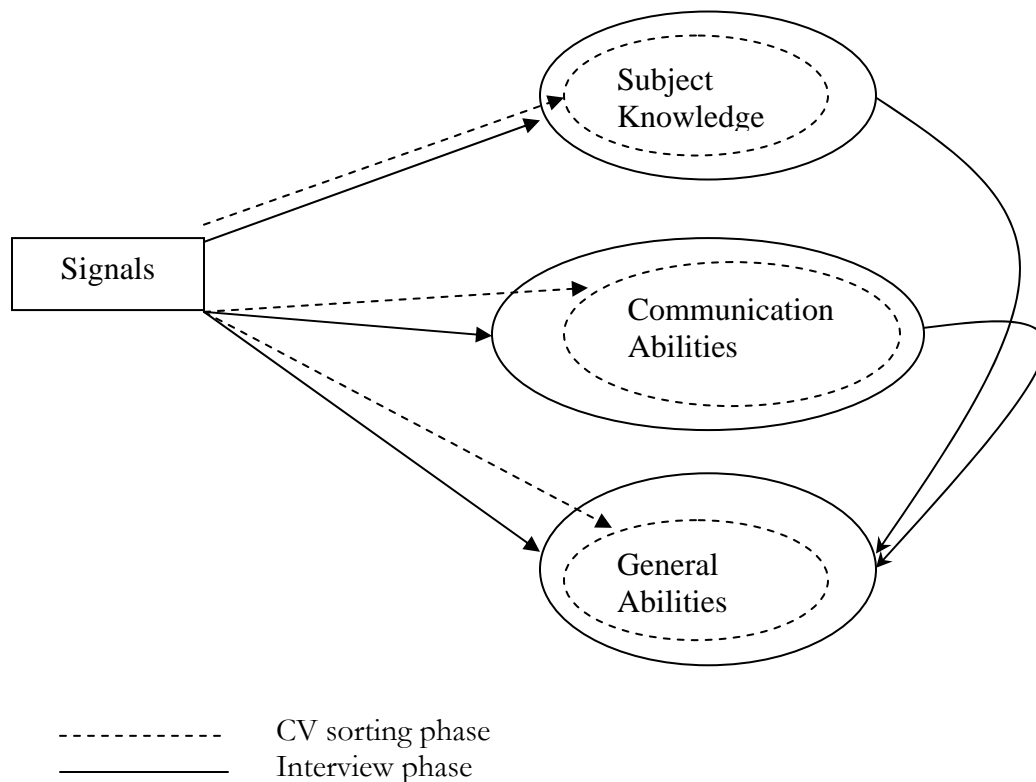
Responses to these questions are observed for signals of general abilities and communication abilities. An applicant who responds to the mugging question with a reasonably clever answer whereby (s)he manages to avoid being mugged and/or killed signals his/her “presence of mind, ability to think on his feet, and creativity”. These questions are also designed to throw applicant's off-balance. It is a question most applicants do not anticipate and, hence, their responses signal an applicant's communication abilities under unexpected circumstances.

Direct questioning and observation signals multiple employability attributes and enables employers to form an image of an applicant's employability. The attributes they can be

signalled simultaneously because they are interlinked. The employer's image of an applicant's employability is, therefore, more than a linear summation of employability attributes. It is, instead, a composite image of the applicant that may be described in terms of interlinked attributes

#### IV.8. Graduate Recruitment: An Analytical Framework

The recruitment process enables employers to construct a portrait of the graduate applicant. This portrait is expressed in terms of employability attributes. However, the linkages between employability attributes suggest that the graduate applicant is more than merely a linear sum of attributes. The diagram below illustrates the recruitment framework and the employers' attempts to construct graduate portraits.



As illustrated in the diagram, the CV sorting phase produces fuzzy and incomplete images of the employability attributes. Without the direct questioning and observation of an interview, employability attributes cannot be sufficiently signalled and, hence, their interlinkages cannot be observed.

Through the CV sorting process, employers form an image of the applicant that, at this stage, is the linear sum of fuzzy employability attributes. Only through the interview and the more satisfactory signalling of employability attributes, can employers understand the interlinkages between employability attributes. Hence, after the interview process, employers can form an image of applicants that is more than a linear sum of attributes.

The employer can, after the interview stage, compare the composite image of the applicant's employability to the fuzzier, simpler image formed during CV sorting. This comparison is a test for the reliability of CV variables as signals. If the CV variables are reliable signals the clearer post-interview image should not contrast with the fuzzier, post-CV sorting image of an applicant's employability. The interview is, therefore, an important arena in which the credibility of signals are established.

The employability image generated from the interview is, subsequently, tested against workplace performance. During workplace performance, the CV variables and the signalling capabilities of direct questions and observations are examined. If the graduate recruit proves to actually add value to an organisation, these signals are deemed credible. If the graduate fails to add value, the signals must be re-examined and re-formulated in order to provide more reliable images of graduate employability.

This recruitment framework, that is derived from the various elements of the conversations we have had with a range of employers allow us to come up with an agenda for action for HEIs, such as BRAC University. We discuss these in the next chapter.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion: Implications for HEIs

*To be market driven does not mean following the herd. The market is not a static thing and often the role of Universities is to lead rather than only follow. This is so very important in the Bangladesh context, where so much remains to be done and so much is changing so rapidly.*

F.H. Abed, Chairperson, BRAC, in an interview on Graduate Employability and BRAC University

**T**he framework for graduate recruitment presented in this report has several important implications for an HEI looking to prepare employable graduates. In this section, we will discuss five of these observations and investigate their implications for an HEI. The five observations are not meant to be conclusive; we hope the framework discussed in this report provides material rich enough to generate considerable debate on the role of an HEI in graduating employable individuals.

#### **V.1. Area of Discipline as an Arena for Developing Total Employability**

The first, and most significant, observation is that subject knowledge signals more than just subject specialism. Subject knowledge, our findings indicate, signal important general employability abilities. A business degree is desirable amongst employers because business students are considered more likely to possess all types of employability attributes – not because of the business students' subject specialism.

Business studies are successful as an Area of Discipline because it provides an arena in which other, non-subject specific employability attributes and abilities may be developed and demonstrated. Employers indicated that a history or English student is not capable because all the students have to do is memorise a few books on the eve of the exam and regurgitate it in the examination hall. These Areas of Discipline are, therefore, unable to provide an arena in which employability attributes may be developed and demonstrated.

The HEI should, in our opinion, use any and every Area of Discipline to develop employability attributes. There are many important lessons to be learnt from the curricula and pedagogy of business studies programs. Employers credited most business program's

emphasis on case studies, presentations and discussions for producing employable graduates. If these pedagogical methods and curricular designs can be adapted to different Areas of Discipline, we believe that graduates from any area of discipline will be employable.

Further, employability attributes are not disembodied and abstract concepts. Employability attributes can only be developed and demonstrated contextually. Since the traditional focus of the university is on an Area of Discipline, and students spend most of their university life studying in a specified discipline, we believe that the Area of Discipline should serve as a vehicle through which students can be equipped with a range of employability attributes.

## **V.2. Employability Attributes: Don't Miss the Wood for the Trees**

The employability attributes are not discrete and independent variables. Our findings indicate that employers are searching for a composite, or whole, graduate identity and personality. The employability attributes are merely a means of describing this composite individual. The strong interlinkages between these attributes indicate that the employable applicant is more than a linear summation of employability attributes.

The above finding implies that any effort on part of the HEI to impart employability attributes discretely and independently is misdirected. Employability attributes function together and employers infer employability attributes from each other. For example, a work ethic should not be and, probably, cannot be imparted discretely from dynamism.

The Area of Discipline provides an arena through which employability as a whole range of skills and attributes can be imparted. The curriculum and pedagogy in an Area of Discipline should not focus on individual components of employability, but rather look at employability in its entirety. The impacts of curricular and pedagogical changes can be described in terms of employability attributes; however, the true impact will be greater than the sum of those attributes.

### **V.3. Malleable Sense of Self**

The current graduate labour market demands employees who are flexible and adaptable. The employable graduate must be able to keep pace with rapid changes in technology, workplace culture and markets. Hence, (s)he will have to be a lifelong learner. Further, the employable graduate will probably have to move between tasks and functions within his/her present capacity. The employable graduate must be able to multitask.

Employers are looking for graduates who are able to fulfill these above roles. Graduates who are more likely to be multitaskers and lifelong learners are those who do not have a fixed idea of their personal abilities. They constantly work towards challenging their personal limits and expanding the horizon of their abilities. Basically, these are individuals who do not shirk additional responsibilities or tasks but accept them, almost as a challenge for their abilities.

Mantz and Yorke argue that graduates with a “malleable sense of self” are more likely to demonstrate the above qualities and, hence, be lifelong learners and multitaskers. Individuals with a “malleable sense of self” believe in their potential to constantly acquire knowledge and expand their abilities.

Mantz and Yorke suggest that HEIs have an important role to play in developing a “malleable sense of self”, specially through their reward structure. Curriculum and pedagogy that rewards effort and improvement will encourage a student to strive harder and improve. In contrast, curriculum that rewards a set standard of accomplishment may cause students to accept their inabilities and continue to work within them.

Interestingly, the BRAC University students recommended a scholarship scheme that rewards improvement. A group of students were asked to prepare a short presentation on what BU can do to improve individual results. They suggested that the scholarship scheme should reward improvements in grades in addition to rewarding overall CGPAs or semester

CGPAs. They argued that changes in the scholarship scheme will encourage students to strive harder, rather than accept low levels of achievement.

#### **V.4. Gender**

Employers did not think that the employability attributes differ between men and women, but they argued that women face greater difficulty in expressing them. They pointed to social constraints – particularly restrictions on mobility, family pressures, and household responsibilities – as the major limiting factors on the female employee’s ability to express employability.

The HEI’s ability to overcome social constraints is, admittedly, limited. The workspace and the environment surrounding organizational culture in general are probably the more appropriate arenas to explore the ways in which gender discrimination affects employability and career possibilities for women, which was not the focus of this study. We are, therefore, not making any specific recommendations. However, it is important for the university to be aware of social constraints faced by women in developing and demonstrating employability attributes. To the extent that employability attributes as argued above, are not disembodied separate skills that can be imparted without reference to the graduate person and her engagements with the various university environments and its regulation, HEI should make their students – women and men – aware of these constraints and equip them with the ability to challenge these constraints. Further, the internal atmosphere of the HEI should function to empower and include women.

This has to be a deliberate and systemic process that should serve to mainstream gender in all aspects of the university functionings. BRAC has in place an interesting and experience rich organizational gender mainstreaming process called, Gender Quality Action Learning that aims to make the organization a gendered one. BRAC University could explore this process and other related ones from other organizations.



## **V.5. Constructing Networks: From Classroom to the Workplace**

Bangladeshi employers are increasingly moving away from ascribed and kinship-based networks to more professional networks in identifying employable graduates. This was also strongly expressed during our discussion with the BRAC university students. Admittedly, the distinction between professional and ascribed networks becomes difficult to distinguish in practice because of the inherent inequalities that exist in the education system, but, the general perception both among employers and the students that professional rather than ascribed networks are appearing to be more important in certain sectors of the graduate labour market of Bangladesh suggest that universities can have a role to play in tapping their students into professional networks.

Professional networks give employers important signals about the employability of the graduate. Moreover, as traditional signals, such as CGPA become noisier, professional networks become even more important. One important signal that professional networks send is the work-place readiness of the graduate. The transition from the classroom to the work place requires major changes in orientation and outlook of the graduate. Employers would often refer to this transition ability as ‘practical orientation’.

Universities can play a major role in tapping their students into professional networks. This can be through the curriculum and pedagogy, but also through direct exposure of graduates to the workplace environment through well-designed internship programs and other types of interaction with employers. There are existing models of other Universities, both at home and abroad that BRAC University can explore, but, the mechanisms have to be developed in consultation with the students, faculties and the employers with a clear focus to facilitate the transition of the graduate student from the classroom to the workplace, rather than just a platform to impart ‘practical skills’.

## **V.6. Things Hang Together: The Employability Canvass**

As the quote at the beginning of this chapter highlights, the apparent contradiction between creating marketable graduates and graduates who will aspire to be ‘creative leaders’, is a false one. This study which focussed on the perspectives from employers on graduate employability came out with a conceptual framework that also clearly suggests that employability is not merely a linear sum of some set of skills that can be imparted without reference to the graduate self and her engagements with the various elements of her university life. Employability skills, if there are any, will have to be focussed on the various interlinkages among them and how these relate to the graduate as a person. Course design, pedagogy, the classroom environment, the reward system, the inclusiveness of the University environment, its regulation and its engagements with the wider social and political landscape, both local and global—all these and many more will all be important variables that will shape the agenda of enhancing graduate employability.