

ACADEMICS' DIVERSIFICATION ENHANCING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Current debates on higher education graduates seem to address graduates' quality and their employability. Since industries' role as future employers become central in the preparation of graduates, issues on graduate employability (GE) have become one of the heated discussion topics with the inclusion of smart partnerships and collaborations between higher education institutes and industries. As students generally spend between three and five years in higher education institutes prior to graduating, students' graduate employability relies quite heavily on the preparation for the world of work during their time in the institutions. The Ministry of Higher Education has called for academics to collaborate with the industries as a measure to enhance GE. Needless to say, academics' diversification has always directed them to be multi-taskers. Four main professional tracks inevitable amongst the academics namely; teaching, research (and publication), community service and academic leadership have made the academic profession a diversified one. While this is easy to comprehend, the task to establish and maintain linkages with industries in enhancing GE remains an issue yet to be championed by the academics who are already swamped by various academic tasks, let alone collaborating with the industries to specifically promote graduate employability. This paper examines the issues of graduate employability alongside the diversified tasks of the academics. Based on Boyer's scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), this paper aims to address how GE could be enhanced amidst the academics' diversification. The proposed framework is hoped to pave the

way forward for the academics to play their parts in enhancing GE amidst their diversification in order to achieve the Ministry of Higher Education aspiration of 'soaring upwards'.

Keywords : *graduate employability (GE), scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), academics' diversification*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutes in Malaysia have recently been introduced to the latest policy in higher education through the National Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025. The latest nation wide 2017 budget presentation by the Prime Minister has somewhat given similar impression on the government's direction dealing with higher education institutes. One of the main concerns of the Malaysian government relates to graduate employability (GE henceforth). The identified shifts and specific initiatives in the blueprint echoed by the budget allocated for promoting GE among Malaysian graduates are evidences of what lie ahead for the institutes and academics.

Out of the ten shifts, Shift 1: Holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates, has a special emphasis on the quality of graduates each higher education institute is to produce. All the other nine shifts complement each other particularly Shift 1. It is obvious the concern of GE is central.

In the National Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025), the Minister of Higher Education stated;

"...Through the 10 Shifts identified, the Ministry aspires to produce balanced and holistic graduates with entrepreneurial mindsets, nurture 'job creators' rather than just 'job seekers',..."
(2015,p. 7)

The Malaysian Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 is already in its fourth year of implementation. Unfortunately, despite the GE Blueprint and the Ministry's initiatives in enhancing GE, Malaysian employability rate seems to signal that more has yet to be done. Despite

the growing number of graduates produced, similar trend is not obvious in the graduates' employability. GE fluctuates across the year 2006 to 2015 as shown in the latest tracer study report depicted in the following diagram. The diagram indicates the percentage of employed graduates and since only 72.08% of graduates were employed in 2015, there was an indication that close to 30% of the graduates remain unemployed (Figure 1)

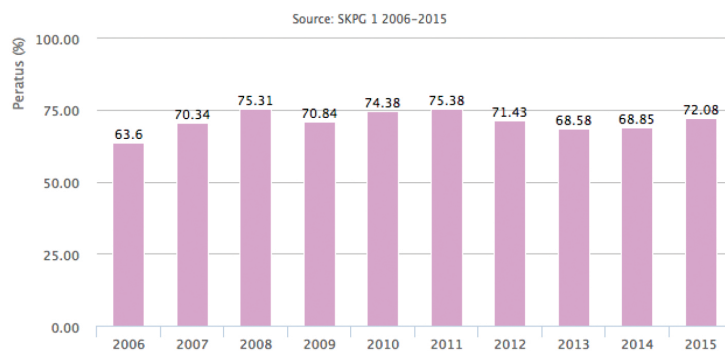


Figure 1: Malaysian graduate employability rate (source: <http://graduan.mohe.govmy/skpg-report/>)

Additionally, according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia;

“...The unemployment rate in Malaysia increased to 3.5 percent in September of 2016 from 3.3 percent a year earlier. The number of unemployed persons rose by 4.5 percent or 22.3 thousand to 512.6 thousand.”

(source : retrieved from <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/malaysia/unemployment-rate> on 16 November, 2016)

The September 2016 report produced by the Department of Statistics Malaysia on the increasing percentage of unemployment is quite alarming. Despite the GE Blueprint (2012-2017) and MOHE's initiatives since the GE blueprint's first conception in 2012, GE issues remain quite unsolved.

Employability

Employability and employment are two distinctive concepts. As stated in the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, employment is defined as the potential to secure a job at a workplace while employability is the potential to secure, maintain, and grow in a particular job at the workplace. Based on this definition, it is safe to conclude that employability requires a set of skills which could direct the individuals to get employed, maintain being employed and even possibly become self-employed and create jobs. Pereira (2016) concurs with this notion and defines employability in terms of the qualities of an individual having a job and being an employee or self-employed. In this instance, Yorke and Knight (2003) have defined GE as a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that enables the person to be aware and succeed in his career which in turn could benefit not only himself but the community and the nation's economy at large.

The descriptions of GE could be summarized in the following list.

1. Obtaining and building a fulfilling career through continuous development of skills that can be applied from one employer to another.
2. Possessing the sets of attributes and skills that match those required by industry.
3. Taking the responsibility for self-development through learning and training, either through the employer or self initiatives.

(Bennet, Richardson & MacKinnon, 2016)

Two obvious attributes of GE as could be seen from the list are the concept of life-long learning and functional competencies. Life-long learning is needed as the graduates need to continuously develop and improve their skills. Whereas, functional competencies are equally important as the graduates need to maintain their relevance and importance despite in different organizations or with different employers.

From a closer look at employability, Deakin University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Jane den Hollander stated;

“...Employability is not employment. Employability is the collection of evidence - learning outcomes, experiences and knowledge - that enable a student to be fit for the purpose of employment.”

(Bennet, Richardson & MacKinnon, 2016, p.29)

It is at this juncture that the roles played by academics in educating are seen as prominent in enhancing GE. As students generally spend between three and five years completing their tertiary studies, the academics are their main reference to the world of work. Academics need to ensure that while the teaching and learning process is taking place, the learning outcomes they try to achieve via the knowledge and experiences provided need to direct GE development.

In illustrating GE development, Gurvinder and Sharan (2008) have outlined seven primary factors which are; English language proficiency and literacyskills, ICT skills, problem solving and adaptability skills, human skills, personal organization and time management skills, leadership skills, and communication skills. Besides this, a report on Employability Skills for the Future (ACCI/BCA 2002) had identified eight employability skills for graduates. According to the report, the skills comprise communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning and technology.

Based on the identified skills needed in developing and ensuring GE, it could be deduced that academics have a lot to accomplish whilst educating and training their students. Besides focusing on the subject matter, academics need to ensure the identified skills are developed during the teaching and learning process regardless of what subject matter they teach.

Academics' Diversification and GE

Academics' diversification in this paper is referred as the varied tasks entrusted to the academics upon their appointment as an academic in the respective higher institution. It could also be referred as the set of responsibilities or performance indicators. In simpler terms, academics' diversification is the multi tasks done by the academics as the tasks are required and expected of them.

There are various conceptions about what an academic does. The most common conception is they teach at higher education levels such as in diploma, degree or postgraduates programmes (Norzaini *et al*, 2011). In fulfilling this task, the academics first need to be the expert in their relevant field of discipline. The need to be the expert requires them to continuously pursue their studies in order to be qualified. Pursuing their own studies up to the doctoral level is becoming a norm amongst academics. When dealing with teaching tasks, academics are entrusted with several teaching codes and groups of students. Teaching entails preparation of the lectures, supervising, assessing students' work, marking and grading. Besides the allocated teaching hours, the academics need to identify several hours within a week for student consultations.

The next common conception about what academics do is conducting research (ibid.). In the fast lane of university ranking and rating, research and publication are core businesses of the academics besides their teaching load. In between their teaching, academics need to find time to conduct research, which in turn leads them to join special interest groups (SIG) or research interest groups (RIG). Working with several colleagues, the academics write research proposal, apply for research grants, conduct research and produce several publications based on their research. In complementing the university's effort to be ranked accordingly, academics are given the responsibilities to contribute to the scoring of the university through their impactful research and publication. Academics are recognized as experts by their peers through research and publication activities. This leads to the credibility of the academics in the academe (ibid.).

The other common conception of what an academic does is community service (ibid.). Applying their knowledge for the greater good is one of

the identified performance indicators of an academic. Moving beyond classrooms and research labs, academics are seen as responsible to contribute to the social well-being of the community. Integrating their expertise with the needs of the community, academics could produce innovative products as solutions to real problems. As the ministry encourages collaborations between academia and industry, the task of community service could be leveraged by the financial and physical support from the industries. Getting contributions or sponsorships from the industries in fulfilling this task is also considered as the academics' contribution to their university's ranking.

Finally, the academics' diversification is also identified through the final common conception of what they do as academics; academic leadership (ibid.). Academics are naturally leaders. They are the leaders when they teach, research and provide community services. By virtue of being autonomous and self-directed in performing the variety of tasks, academics are 'leaders-ready'. Additionally, some administrative posts in the university and Ministry such as Heads of Department, Directors, Deans and Coordinators are only open to the academics. When appointed, they could hold the relevant office according to their tenure, which is commonly between one and three years. There could also be a re-appointment. It has to be noted that the appointed academic leadership is also done amidst the fulfillment of the previous three common tasks.

Academics' Diversification Overlooked

Academics are responsible to the university and mostly to their students. In this instance, they have been commonly seen responsible for the varied tasks mentioned earlier. However, in discussing the issues with GE, some other varied tasks are often overlooked.

Teaching is indeed the most common task of an academic. However, more often than not the teaching is confined within the classroom and centred on the subject matter. In a survey done by Bennet, Richardson and MacKinnon (2016), it was discovered that 63% of the students reported that they depended on their lecturers to provide them with up-to-date information on the industry and careers. It was noted too that they depended on their lecturers almost double their use of other sources for similar information.

In addition, students who participated in the survey done by Bennet (ibid.) also confirmed that they needed their lecturers to provide real professional practices or the least imitate real work-based contexts. Studies done by Scott *et al.* (2010) and Scott and Yates (2002) have shown similar findings. Both researches highlighted the need for integrated, problem-based, real-world learning and assessment.

To this end, it could be deduced that although it is easy to assume that there is already academics' diversification through the various multi-tasking of the academics, one task unfortunately has been an oversight. Academics need to be aware that they too need to be industry-conscious.

GE and University-industry Collaboration

The Ministry of Higher Education has called for academics to collaborate with the industries as a measure to enhance GE. The National Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 and the Malaysian Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017) have identified and underlined relevant measures and initiatives that could be taken by both parties; universities and industries. However, a closer look at what seems to be a potential collaboration between the two parties has resulted in what is not so promising. A survey done by TalentCorp in 2014 provided some interesting findings worthy to note (<https://www.talentcorp.com.my/facts-and-figures/matching-talents-to-jobs>).

The survey focused on the perceived quality of Malaysian graduates by the identified top employers. It also looked into the efficacy of career services in universities and government-funded graduate employability programmes. The survey respondents were 200 companies employing around 245,000 staff. The companies also represented a wide cross-section of National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs).

It is interesting to note that 81% of the respondents rated communication skills as the major skill deficit in graduates, 90% felt that more practical training should be provided for the graduates by their universities and 80% thought that the university curriculum should be revised in order to reflect the current realities of the industries.

In an attempt to confirm the industries' participation in preparing the students through relevant university-industry collaboration, it was discovered that only 10% of the respondents had experienced developing curriculum or joint programmes with universities and a mere 3% had the experience to participate in the classroom as adjunct professors. These findings are supported by the fact that 34% of the respondents had never approached universities to recruit candidates or were approached by universities to place their graduates into entry positions and 53% admitted that they had never worked with career centres (<https://www.talentcorp.com.my/facts-and-figures/matching-talents-to-jobs>).

Under the flagship of the Ministry's Academia-Industry Relations Department, universities have been encouraged to collaborate with the industries as interventions methods to enhance GE. On their part, several programmes have been conducted by the universities as evidence of their commitments towards university-industry linkages and collaborations. Some of the programmes include Bridging the Gap Programmes; Career Xcell Bridging Gap Programmes; Graduate Employability Management Scheme (GEMS), Finishing School; Grooming and English Language Special Programme (ELSP). Nonetheless despite all these efforts, more collaborative programmes still could be done as found in the survey conducted by TalentCorp.

Boyer's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Boyer first introduced the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL henceforth) in 1990 based on his observations of what academics do and the debates on teaching versus research nexus. Boyer stated;

"...We believe the time has come to move beyond the tire old "teaching versus research" debate and give the familiar and honourable term 'scholarship' a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work."

(Boyer, 1990, p. 16)

He further added his notion on the scholarship of teaching and learning as claiming;

“...academics were called upon to serve a larger purpose: to participate in the building of a more just society and to make the nation more civil and secure.”

(Boyer, 1996, p. 13)

Based on his statement, it is clear that he saw academics as important in promoting nation development and serving the society for the greater good. In promoting flexibility in broadening the academics' expertise, skills and knowledge beyond classroom and research lab boundaries and into the reality of contemporary life, Boyer proposed four types of scholarship. Briefly, the four types of scholarship are;

- i) **Scholarship of discovery**
The scholarship of discovery is the closest to what is conceptualized as research done by the academics. Academics have the rights and freedom to research as research is central to the work of higher learning. The focus is not just the outcomes but also the process and most importantly the passion “to confront the unknown and to seek understanding for its own sake” (Bowen as stated in Boyer, 1990, p. 17). The common questions academics would ask as they engage in the scholarship of discovery are; ‘What is to be known?’ and ‘What is yet to be found?’
- ii) **Scholarship of integration**
The scholarship of integration positions the academics as the experts of their discipline who could give meaning of isolated facts by making connections between the facts or disciplines and putting them in a bigger perspective. The academics' intellectual capacity to make meaningful interpretations of what they observed is the idea. In turn, these acts could bring new insight and pragmatic real life problem solutions. A common question posed by academics who engage in the scholarship of integration is ‘What do these findings mean?’
- iii) **Scholarship of application and later known as engagement**
The scholarship of integration (and later known as engagement) leads the academics into using their knowledge, expertise and skills for the real use as needed by the society. In this instance,

the academics are seen as providing services to the community through the rigour of professional activities drawn from their expertise. In simpler words, the academics provide scholarly services to the community, which in turn develop the nation, or to the least improve the quality of life in the community.

iv) Scholarship of teaching and learning

The scholarship of teaching and learning redirects the concept of academics as beyond being the sole knowledge provider and the know all. In the words of Boyer,

“...They stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over.”

(1990, p.24)

It is also central to the scholarship of teaching and learning that the academics are learners themselves. Looking at learning as a joint process between the academics and their students, academics need to also challenge themselves to co-construct and transform new knowledge together with their students.

All in all, SOTL as introduced by Boyer suggests a more comprehensive and inclusive view of what it really means to be an academic. The academic diversification if seen holistically recognizes academics as scholars whose knowledge, expertise and skills are recognized through research, synthesis, practice and teaching. There need to be a balance between all the four types of scholarship. Losing focus on one could risk the academics' scholarly attributes. While teaching and research (and publication) are serious businesses of the academics, they need to also be recognized and given merit for their community services and reflective teaching practices. Boyer commented;

“...Almost every college catalogue in this country still lists teaching, research, and service as the priorities of the professoriate; yet, at tenure and promotion time, the harsh truth is that service is hardly mentioned. And even more disturbing, faculty who do spend time with so-called applied projects frequently jeopardize their careers.”

(1996, p. 13)

Proposed Framework for GE Enhancement through SOTL

Arum and Roska (2011) put forth the possibility that students seem to risk graduating with little exploration of self or career opportunities. As an example, the students are said to possess underdeveloped skills in complex reasoning, critical thinking and communication. Additionally, students still need to develop their negotiation skills when facing challenges such as intense competition for entry-level work (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2014).

Blumenstyk (2014) claims that students need to be provided with learning experiences designed to enhance employability. There need to be explicit connections between student learning and the professional context. Most importantly, GE development needs to be done overtly to encourage meaningful learning on the part of the students.

Mason, Williams and Cranmers (2009) state that employability could be enhanced through industry placements since students' professional behaviours and skills are directly emphasized and trained within the industry. The participation of the industry in classrooms as adjunct professors could further enhance GE skills development. Additionally, the academics could also profit from industry attachment as it prosper their career paths (Bennet, Richardson & MacKinnon, 2016).

To this end, several concepts are central to the notion of enhancing GE through SOTL amidst the academics' diversification. The following conceptual framework summarizes the key concepts discussed thus far.

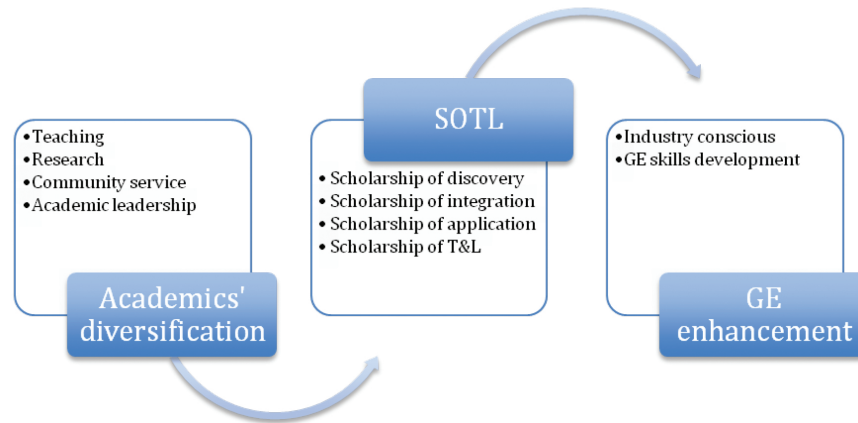
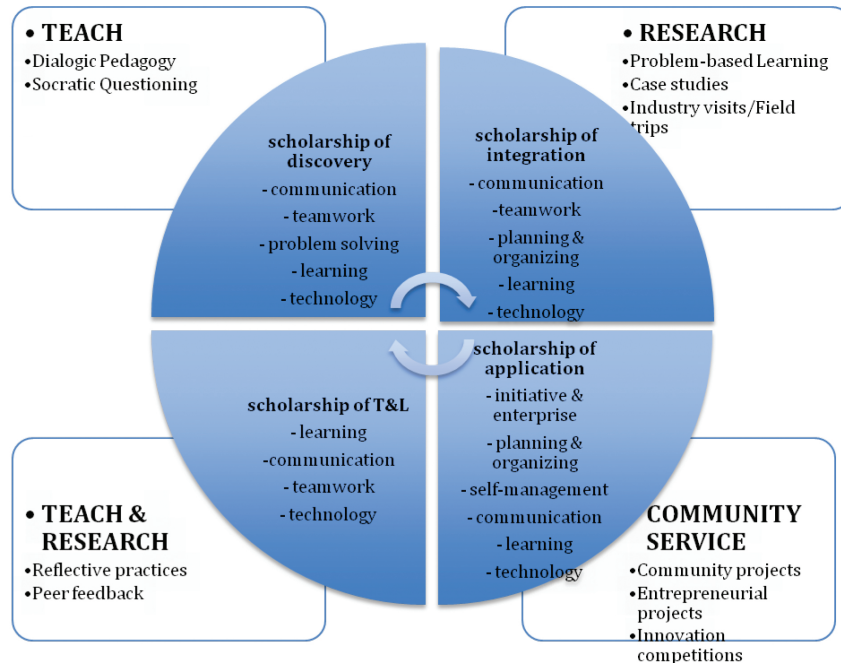


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Academics' Diversification and GE Enhancement through SOTL

Considering GE development, academics' diversification and SOTL, this paper proposes a framework, which could enable the academics to support and facilitate GE development while performing their varied tasks. In other words, the framework signifies the academics' contribution in enhancing GE regardless of their diversification. The framework is as illustrated in the following diagram.



Note:

ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP is a task available across four quadrants as academics are naturally leaders in each capacity; teach, research and community service. It is more so for the appointed academic leaders.

Figure 3: Proposed Framework for Enhancing GE through SOTL

As reported in the Employability Skills for the Future (ACCI/BCA 2002), there are eight GE skills that need to be developed in enhancing the students' employability. The skills identified comprise communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning and technology.

The proposed framework highlights specific SOTL as outlined by Boyer which could be leveraged to enhance relevant GE skills. A brief description of the proposed framework is as follows.

The teaching task of the academics is obvious in the scholarship of discovery. Scholarship of discovery could be leveraged to enhance communication, teamwork, problem solving, learning and technology. The main teaching strategies that could be applied in leveraging on this

scholarship in enhancing the relevant GE skills are Dialogic Pedagogy and Socratic Questioning.

The research task is apparent in the scholarship of integration. Scholarship of integration could enhance communication, teamwork, planning and organizing, learning and technology. Some teaching strategies-cum-student activities that could be employed and conducted to train the relevant GE skills include problem-based learning, case studies and industry visit or field trips.

The community service task is relevant in the scholarship of application/engagement. Scholarship of application/engagement could enhance initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, communication, learning and technology. Academics could leverage on this scholarship in enhancing the identified GE skills by including community projects, entrepreneurial projects and innovation competitions in their syllabus or assessments.

The tasks of teaching and research are prime in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Scholarship of teaching and learning could enhance learning, communication, teamwork and technology. Teaching strategies such as reflective practices and peer feedback could help develop those GE skills.

An important note to consider is that academics need to be industry conscious as they engage in SOTL. In other words, besides being pedagogically competent, the academics need to also become industry aware. Collaborating with industry partners at a micro level could enable the academics to be within the industry as much as the industry could be within the academics' classrooms. All in all, this framework hopes to have paved the way forward and that it is the academics who need to start making friends with the industry in embracing a teaching culture that is industry-friendly.

CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed an issue which is relevant to any higher education institute. GE has become one of the national agenda as portrayed in the 11th

Malaysian Plan. The National Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 and the 2017 Budget have put GE an agenda of prime importance. The Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 is now coming into its final year, yet much is to be desired with the trends of GE as reported by TalentCorp (2014). The proposed framework is seen as a pragmatic alternative in facilitating the academics to run their core business, amidst their diversification, not at the expense of GE development. The issue raised by Barrie (2005) as quoted at the beginning of the paper could perhaps be resolved eventually.

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