EMPOWERING FUTURE PROFESSIONALS: INNOVATIVE ONLINE SURVEY FOR EVALUATING ODL'S ROLE IN GRADUATES' SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER PREPARATION

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ABSTRACT
Transitioning from educational institution to professional setting requires a lot of things. Relying solely on academic grades is not sufficient. Degrees get you interviews, but competencies get you the job. Especially in the era of Fourth Industry Revolution, employers need graduates to be equipped with a diverse set of skills and competencies relevant to this era. To exacerbate the situation, new learning environments has emerged in the educational setting, raising concerns about the effectiveness of conventional skill development practices. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a pivotal mode of education in recent years. However, assessing the effectiveness of ODL in developing graduates' competencies and preparing them for the workforce remains a challenge. To address this, an innovative online survey tool has been designed to measure the impact of ODL on graduates' skill development and career preparedness. This study explores the development and implementation of a comprehensive online survey that evaluates key competencies gained through ODL programs and their preparedness level. This survey is unique with its response scaling that allow for skills self-assessment. This is important as responses from self-assessment method will help identify the misalignment between educational outcomes and employer needs. Ultimately, findings from this survey will offer a data-driven approach to assessing ODL effectiveness, enabling educational institutions to refine their curricula and improve learning strategies. It will also help bridge the gap between academic training and the demands of the job market. This innovation in online survey methodology contributes to the continuous improvement of ODL programs, fostering a more competent and career-ready workforce in an increasingly digital and competitive employment landscape).

KEYWORDS: *Graduates Preparedness, Industry 4.0 Workforce, ODL, Online questionnaire survey, Skills and Competencies*

PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

Barac (2009) assert that universities are not intended to function as employment preparation centers. Despite Barac's argument, qualified candidates for the labor market are graduates from universities who possess the skills necessary to thrive in a volatile market. These graduates develop the skills during their academic education (Reyneke & Shuttleworth, 2018). In other words, development essential skills for employment should occur during education, before graduates begin their careers in the industry (Roksa, Arum, & Cook, 2016). Like it or not, universities are the best platform to enhance and polish graduates' employability before they step into the industry.

Especially in the new era of Industrial Revolution, the global workforce is changing and evolving. Kamaruzaman, Hamid, Mutalib and Rasul (2019) utterly believed, for graduates to survive in

employment landscape of Industry 4.0, they must be equipped with Industry 4.0 critical skills. World Economic Forum in 2020 had introduced fifteen critical skills essential for Industry 4.0 in the year 2025 onwards (Schwab & Samans, 2016), which must now become a primary focus of higher education in preparing future-ready graduates. Graduates themselves are aware with significant changes in the workforce and hoping that universities can help them develop skills they believe crucial for their future career (Al Mallak, Tan, & Laswad, 2020). To help graduates acquire those skills, Karmani and Acharekar (2024) suggested Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the new learning modality that supports the development of workforce-ready skills essential in today's industrial landscape. This new concept of learning provides a bridge between academic outcome and industry expectation (Singh, Bhatnagar, Gupta, & Kumar, 2020).

Considering this, a survey was developed to investigate the effectiveness of ODL in equipping graduates with industry-relevant skills demanded by current global workforce. This paper aims to contribute to the development of robust assessment instruments that provide insights into how shifts in the learning context influence graduates' preparedness for employment. For that reason, it is imperative for educational research to assess and measure the graduate's employability improvement under these new revolutions and new learning environment. A comprehensive online questionnaire survey is needed to help assess the effectiveness of the new learning environment (ODL) in improving accounting graduates' employability and futures career in Industry 4.0 workforce. This article aims to contribute on the development of effective assessment instruments that are beneficial in providing greater insights into changes in the learning setting and its impact towards graduates' employability.

DESIGN DESCRIPTION

The online questionnaire survey was designed to assess the effectiveness of the ODL environment in developing critical Industry 4.0 skills and preparing graduates for future employment. Design specifically for graduates in the field of accounting, their perspectives and opinion on the ODL credibility will help evaluate ODL position and future in the educational landscape. The survey requires them to rate their proficiency in Industry 4.0 critical skills gained from ODL and skills they believe crucial for their future career. The self-rating sections will help identify gap in ODL learning setting with the industry demand and at the same time provide better understanding on the ODL roles in enhancing graduates' employability. The survey was developed as part of a PhD research study conducted by a PhD candidate at UPSI. The tool specifically targets UiTM accounting graduates who enrolled in the program during ODL period (batch March and October 2020) and successfully graduated. Graduates from this batches were selected because they have ample experience learning during ODL and know what benefit they gained from it. The survey was distributed online via Google Forms to all selected respondents.

VISUALS

The followings are the snapshot of the online questionnaire survey, and the poster created to call for participants.

Figure 1: Online Questionnaire Survey

Figure 2: Poster Calling for Participants

NOVELTY AND UNIQUENESS

The self-rating assessment was the key unique aspects of the survey. It is innovative as it helps capture the graduates' proficiency in Industry 4.0 critical which was acquired and developed during ODL period of learning. It also helps us understand what graduates believe skills they find crucial for future employment. This data collection approach allows for a better understanding of how graduates' learning experiences relate to their skill development and future career prospects. Furthermore, the developed instrument is comprehensive, addressing various aspects of the ODL environment, including its functionality, usefulness, curriculum design, stakeholder recognition, and relevance to career development, readiness, and employment opportunities. The data gathered offers deeper insights for key educational stakeholders to make informed decisions about the future of ODL and the graduates it produces. The connection between the evolving learning environment and graduates' employability in the current era remains an underexplored area. Therefore, by designing this online questionnaire survey to explore this emerging topic, it provides a distinctive and valuable contribution to the field.

BENEFITS TO MANKIND

This online survey holds significant value for researchers in the field of education. The insights obtained from the survey implementation offers meaningful contributions in various aspects. Firstly, it benefits the graduates themselves. To become a practitioner and be part of the industry, their skills and talent must be tallied and upgraded to the current industry standards. The survey allows them to reflect on the skills they successfully acquired before graduating and skills being valued the most in the job market. The innovative self-rating assessment helps identify the potential gap between the academia and industry context. Consequently, from the gap identified, it offers valuable input to the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Through this, it will HEI reformulate their employability agenda and determine the future of ODL as key contributors to national human capital development.

COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL

This survey was specifically developed was developed by a PhD candidate to address specific research questions in her study. The instrument served as a core component of her research. Beyond its original use, the survey holds potential for wider application; it may be adopted or adapted by other researchers seeking to explore similar issues within the field. It presents opportunities for broader academic or commercial use in studies related to employability, ODL, and Industry 4.0 readiness.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the development of this online questionnaire survey offers a distinctive and forward-looking approach to assessment, aligning with the evolving demands of both the educational landscape and the modern labour market. It is thoughtfully designed to capture the effectiveness of the new learning environment (ODL), while simultaneously providing a comprehensive measure of graduate employability in the context of Industry 4.0.

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