A tracer study on employability of business and economics graduates at Bahir Dar University

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to evaluate the performance of Business and Economics College graduates with regard to securing employment in the labour market. Through reference sampling method, a total of 180 previous graduates of the college and their supervisors were drawn from public and private organisations in Ethiopia. A 51 items questionnaire containing selected employability skills was prepared and distributed to graduates and their supervisors. In this study the Borich training needs assessment model was used to identify and prioritise employability skills. According to the perception of supervisors, the findings revealed that problem solving skills, information technology skills, adapting to change and risk taking skills were the skills with the highest mean weighted discrepancy score. According to the perception of graduates, identifying problems and making decisions in short time period were skills with the highest mean weighted discrepancy score and high need for curriculum enhancement.

Keywords: employability; employability skills; Ethiopia; labour market; graduates.

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1 Introduction

In today's dynamic economy, a country's economic development is highly dependent on existing human capital with essential skills and knowledge. The requirements for these skills and knowledge evolve with changes in the external environment, technological advances and globalisation (Ramirez, 2014; Hassard et al., 2008).

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in supplying the emerging needs for highly skilled human capital through teaching, research and outreach programs (Gines, 2014.

Cognisant of this fact, the Ethiopian government has embarked on an expanding of existing higher education institutions and establishing new other higher education institutions. As a result, over the past two decades Ethiopia's higher education system has been characterised by rapid expansion. The number of public higher education institutions has been increased from two in 1991 to 44 in 2017 and the total enrolments capacity has reached almost over 500,000 students in 2016 (MOE, 2017). The rapid expansion of higher education in Ethiopia has provided opportunities to produce large number of graduates that exceeds the current market demand.

However, massive expansion of higher education institutions and the attendant increase in enrolments is challenged by many constraints. Problems associated with funding, quality and quantity of staffing, teaching practices, research and community service, quality assurance and gender balance are currently among the impediments facing the Ethiopian higher education system (Van Deuren et al., 2016). There is also a lack of match between employer and stakeholder requirements and the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment methods. Employers consistently emphasised the need for graduates who display self-confidence, initiative, inquisitiveness and creativity and other competencies that can help them perform their task (Ashcroft, 2010).

The contribution of study programs and skills graduates acquired from these institutions to the world of work and the quality of these graduates are critical for employability of graduates. Various empirical studies indicated that graduates' field specific and generic skills such as communication, teamwork, planning and time management, decision making skills, innovation and creativity skills, problem solving skills, computer literacy, their work ethic and mindset and field specific competencies have been found wanting (Robinson and Garton, 2007; Gines, 2014; Cleary et al., 2006; Billing, 2003; Schmidt, 1999: Gustin, 2001; Kay and Russette, 2000; Moscardo, 1997; Tas et al., 1996; Robinson, 2006; Harvey et al., 1997; Cotton, 2008; Cox and King, 2006; Gainer, 2002) The learning environments of higher education institutions must therefore, take cognisant of this in designing their programs curricula.

Currently, Major areas of concern have been raised on the content, relevance, quality and performance of study programs and graduate skills to meet the varying needs of society. That is there has been a lack of clear relationship between University education and the employability of graduates in Ethiopia (Van Deuren et al., 2016; Ashcroft, 2010). This study is mainly designed to assess the employability status of Bahir Dar University business college graduates, assess their effectiveness in labour market and identify competency gaps of graduates. The paper looks into the basic employability skills needed by employers a perceived by both employers and graduates in Ethiopia. This research has policy implications in relation to designing an effective curriculum for producing apt workforce for the labour market. On the other hand, the paper contributes to the empirical literature, providing a clearer picture of the basic skills of graduates' employability in this dynamic work environment. In this regard, the researchers find the following research questions seek answers.

- To what extent do the graduates apply the skills and knowledge imparted?
- Do students trained with the right skills?
- What competencies do they lack?
- Which skills are more important for the industry?

2 The concept of graduates' employability

Graduates' employability as defined by Schreuder and Coetzee (2011) as an individual's capacity and willingness to become and remain attractive in the labour market, and be successful in a wide range of jobs is becoming a major research theme. According to Schreuder and Coetzee (2011) employability shows having the knowledge, understanding, skills, experience and personal attributes to move self-sufficiently within the labour market and to realise one's potential through sustainable and fulfilling employment experiences throughout the course of one's life. Knight and Yorke (2004) also added that employability is used to mean a set of achievements that comprise skills, understanding and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in his/her chosen occupation to the benefit of him/herself, the workforce, the community and the economy.

3 Perspectives on the relationship between higher education institutions and the labour market

Different perspectives have been forwarded by scholars whether the higher education institutions or the employers in the labour market are responsible for imparting employability skills. Drawing on consensus and conflict theory of Brown et al. (2003) and human capital theory of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), it has shown that the academia, particularly higher education institutions and the employers have been recognised for instilling employability skills for graduates.

The theory of consensus is based on the belief that human capital development by imparting generic skills at tertiary level will ensure employability of graduates. It concludes that the university environment is blamed for not offering sufficient skills through curriculum design and implementation through appropriate pedagogical methods.

The conflict theory on the other hand, stresses in the fact that employers have to take responsibility in providing work place experience to the graduates and not directing the responsibilities to the universities alone (Brown et al., 2003).

The human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964) argues that education increases individuals' productivity, which consequently enhances job performance. As such, education provides marketable skills and abilities relevant to job performance, and thus the more highly educated people are, the more successful they will be in labour markets in terms of both incomes and work opportunities (Yuzhuo, 2013).

It is imperative to assume here that higher education institutions have more responsibility in imparting foundational skills for graduates that enable them smoothly transit to the labour market.

4 Graduates employability skills

Within the context of continuous changes in technology, work processes and global institutional transformations, firms strive to secure competent and skilled labour. Cotton (2008), observes that employers require generic competencies such as teamwork, communication skills or problem solving skills, in combination with specific competencies acquired through experience or formal education. Governments, businesses and policy-makers connect employability rates with the level of skills and competences that Higher Education graduates have acquired (Frank and Meyer, 2007). Although many of the empirical works focused on transferable skills, other literatures however, suggests two aspects of employability as subject skills and transferable skills. Transferable skills refer to certain personal abilities of an individual, which can be taken from one job role to another, used within any profession and at any stage of his/her career while subject skills are more relevant to one's career (Cox and King, 2006). Employers want graduates with relevant subject specific skills, knowledge and understanding, but in addition to this are looking for well-developed generic skills in a number of areas (Harvey et al., 1997). In most cases, students usually leave university with a good appreciation of their chosen fields as they have studied those intensively during the degree programme (Stella

Cottrell, 2003). Nevertheless, in today's challenging business environment the possession of subject skills alone is no longer sufficient for a new graduate in meeting employer requirements; increasingly it is necessary for them to gain transferable skills which will enhance their prospects of employment (Cox and King, 2006; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Harvey et al., 1997; Warn and Tranter, 2001).

Employability skills are "those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job" (Robinson and Garton, 2008). According to Robinson and Garton (2008) these skills include reading, basic arithmetic and other basic skills; problem solving, decision making, and other higher-order thinking skills; and dependability, a positive attitude, cooperativeness, and other affective skills and traits". Kearns (2001) has also defined generic skills as 'the skills which can be used across a large number of different occupations. They include the key competencies or key skills but extend beyond these to include a range of other cognitive, personal and interpersonal skills which are relevant to employability.

Gainer (2002) has summarised out a set of skills that will give a competence to address as employable, they are: communication skills, interactional skills, computer skills, civilisation skills, ethics, personal management, vocational mature, problem solving skills, and career development skills.

In summary, multiple studies presented above have shown that skills such as problem solving skills, decision making skills, planning and time management skills, team work skills, communication skills, initiative /creativity skills, interpersonal skills, IT skills (Robinson and Garton, 2007; Gines, 2014; Cleary et al., 2006; Billing, 2003; Schmidt, 1999: Gustin, 2001; Kay and Russette, 2000; Moscardo, 1997; Tas et al., 1996; Robinson, 2006) are the generic employability skills most desired by employers in the workplace. Harvey et al. (1997) also showed that employers want graduates with relevant subject specific skills, knowledge and understanding.

According to Woods and King (2002), "effective communication is the lubricant that allows organisations to smoothly and productively operate". They further contended "the payoff for effective communication is that managers and employees who develop strong communication skills are usually strong performers on the job". Employers are looking for employees who are good communicators (Coplin, 2003). Communication skills, which include listening skills, prominently top the list of qualities employers seek for entry-level jobs including executive and blue-collar positions as well (McKay, 2005; Woods and King, 2002).

Conflict management is an employability skill that requires effective communication skills. Conflict management is the ability to resolve conflicts between oneself and others, and/or the ability to resolve conflicts between other people (Evers et al., 1998). Resolving conflicts require good communication skills (Woods and King, 2002). Resolving conflicts or providing feedback to others is an important function of every manager. A manager who is bad with feedback often creates unintended conflicts within the organisation. Most employees like to hear good news. Managers who communicate acceptable behaviours clearly and positively reinforce them can reduce conflicts since "their employees do the right things more often than not" (Woods and King, 2002).

In the modern workplace; teams, workgroups and committees are fundamental to the success of initiatives, projects, and routine assignments (Dunne and Rawlins, 2000; Wise

et al., 1990). It has long been contended that teams are synergistic in nature. The collective benefits and accomplishments of the team are greater than would be the results of individuals' independent actions (Lehman and DuFrene, 2008). Additionally, teams can be permanent or flexible, structured around core responsibilities of staff or in response to changing priorities (Gewertz, 2007; Henry, 1995; Zalesnik, 1977). Finally, numerous experts have addressed the need to consider more than personalities and work-styles (Arnold et al., 2005; Dunne and Rawlins, 2000; Gewertz, 2007). They have indicated that convening individuals based on specific talents, expertise, experience, relationships, and skills would likely result in a high-performing, high-achieving team. Within a team, the skill of facilitating dialogue so that all members feel comfortable contributing and exchanging ideas, while still respecting individuals' emotions, attitudes, and perspectives in pursuit of a shared vision and goal, is critical and highly valued (Marini and Genereaux, 1995; Miranda, 1999).

The ability to work collaboratively in a team environment has been determined to be of paramount importance to contemporary employers (Bok, 2006; Brewer and Gray, 1999; Gewertz, 2007). Teamwork as defined by Cates and Cedercreutz, (2008) as working effectively with others, understanding and contributing to the organisation's goals, demonstrating flexibility and adaptability, and functioning well on multidisciplinary teams is an important skill in the modern workplace.

According to Evers et al. (1998), analytic skills are often the skills most valued by employers. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making are the fundamental elements of analytic skills (Bridgstock, 2009; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Coplin, 2003). Being explored as a process, analytic skills can also include the ability to study a situation or issue, provide an assessment by considering all the factors, develop alternatives to address an issue, evaluate options, and select and implement an intervention or solution (Evers et al., 1998; Gedye and Chalkey, 2006). At its highest level, the analytic process also encompasses an appreciation of the unique aspect of the human, interpersonal, and functional elements of the issue as well as both the short and long-term ethical and political organisational consequences (Casner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006; Stodgill, 1950). Hence, employers consistently stress the importance of analytic skills in the workplace, regardless of occupation or industry, as essential to addressing the core responsibilities of an organisation and as a recognised contributor to individual, career upward mobility (Coplin, 2003; Dunne and Rawlins, 2000; Lehman and DuFrene, 2008). Additionally, individuals with strengths in these areas often define it as "being able to combine relevant information from a number of sources, integrate information into more general frameworks, and apply information to new or broader contexts" (Lehman and DuFrene, 2008). Problem solving skills involve from identifying problems and gathering feasible information to developing practical solutions which can contribute to community problem solving.

Planning skills which focus on the concepts of time and activity coordination and implementation in order to complete work and contribute to the achievement of organisational goals (Wise et al., 1990) is an important skill highly demanded in the workplace. In this study, the concept of planning is defined as managing projects and other resources effectively, setting goals and priorities, multi-tasking, and allocating time to meet deadlines (Cates and Cedercreutz, 2008). Individuals skilled in planning are often considered master multi-taskers with recognised talents for simultaneously managing several projects (Packer and Seiberts, 1999; Wise et al., 1990).

5 Research methods

This descriptive study was conducted on tracing the employability status of Bahir Dar University College of business and economics graduates from governmental, nongovernmental and private sector organisations.

The Borich need assessment model was used to develop the questionnaire in dual response format. The questionnaire includes relevance of some selected employability skills to the job function measured by importance of the skill to the current job an employee is performing and level of attainment of each skill in their stay in the university measured by ability to perform (Borich, 1980). Two sets of skills were considered in this study as employability skills: GENERIC skills and field specific skills. The generic skills; problem solving skills, decision making skills, planning and time management skills, team work skills, communication skills, initiative/creativity skills, interpersonal skills, it skills were taken from previous works of Robinson and Garton (2008), Gines (2014), Cleary et al. (2006) and Evers et al. (1998). The field specific skills were taken from the curricula of respective departments to measure the relative effectiveness of the curricula of respective departments.

Data was analysed using the Borich excel calculator V4.1 to enable researchers to purposefully prioritise skills based on mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS) ratings. According to Borich (1980), input, differences between perceived relevance (importance) and attainment (ability) for each skills produces identifiable 'gaps' where in-teaching learning and curricula can be evaluated to learn about the gaps.

The study was carried out in purposively selected industrial and business cities of Ethiopia. Purposive sampling was considered in this study because the selected cities were considered to be metropolitan where large numbers of employers are available. These cities include: Gondar, Bahir Dar, Dessie and Addis Ababa City.

Graduates of Business and Economics College who completed their study from 2006–2016 were the target population in this study. The total numbers of graduates in the regular program from the college of Business and economics in the study period was found to be 7,868. Hence, 329 graduates were considered for this study determined by using a sampling technique described by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The data collected from the returned questionnaire was entered into Borich's Excel calculator V1.4 for analysis. Statistical analysis was conducted on the data using the MWDS excel calculator (Borich, 1980). A pilot test of 25 respondents were distributed questionnaires before commencement of the main study. The questionnaires then were revised for clarity in the main study.

6 Results and discussion

In this study, for every organisation, two groups of respondents were considered; supervisors and graduates. 143 usable questionnaires were collected from graduates providing 43.5% response rate. In this type of study where the whereabouts of respondents is not known, up to 30% of response rate is acceptable (Badiru and Wahome 2016). The supervisors were selected using purposive sampling technique. Only supervisors who directly supervise the selected graduates were taken as respondents. As a result, 37 supervisors have contacted from 16 companies. All supervisors who directly

supervise the sampled graduates in these companies were asked to fill questionnaires. In some companies, we have found up to five supervisors who directly supervises the sampled graduates and all of them were asked to fill the questionnaires.

The graduates who are under the span of control of an identified work unit supervisors were randomly chosen. A 57 items questionnaire designed in dual response format was presented for both groups of respondents. 50 items consisting of generic/soft skills were taken from the previous works of Robinson and Garton (2007), Gines (2014), Cleary et al. (2006), Billing (2003), Schmidt (1999), Gustin (2001), Kay and Russette (2000), Moscardo (1997), Tas et al. (1996) and Robinson (2006). The remaining seven items later condensed to one item taking the average value was taken from the curricula where graduates were thought. These items were taken to measure the academic skills of graduates. The responses rates shows that 105 (73%) of the respondents were male and 38 (27%) were female from graduates and 29(78.4%) male and eight (21.6%) female from supervisors. The data was collected from former graduates of the college in the field of accounting and finance, economics, management, marketing management, logistics and supply chain management in undergraduate programs and their supervisors.

Eight commercial banks, Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation, Ethiopian Revenue and Customs Authority, Amhara Region Revenue Office, Tiret Corporate, Ethiopian Shipping and Logistics Corporation, Amhara Pipe Factory, East African Bottling Share Company, Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation, Ethiopian Human Rights commission and Amhara Development Association were the participant organisations in which data was collected. The number of participants in each organisation is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of survey participants

Name of the company	*No. of supervisors participated*	*No. of graduates participated*
Commercial bank of Ethiopia	5	32
Dashen Bank	3	6
Abay Bank	3	5
Ethiotelecom	4	26
Awash Bank	1	2
Abysinia Bank	3	6
Cooperative Bank of Oromia	1	3
Buna International Bank	1	2
Ethiopian Revenues and Customs Authority	4	12
Development Bank of Ethiopia	2	6
Amhara Pipe Factory	2	9
Tiret Corporate	2	12
Coca-Cola S.C	1	7
Ethiopian Electric Power Corp.	1	4
Ethiopian Human Rights Commission	2	4
Amhara Development Association	2	7
Total	37	143

The collected data from graduates is presented in Table 1. The employability skills were ranked from high to low according to their MWDS ratings. The Objective was to describe graduates self-perceived importance level of these skills to the job they are currently performing and level of attainment of these skills during their stay at Bahir Dar University.

7 Graduates' perception on the importance and level of competence of employability skills

In the first section of the analysis, both importance of employability skills to the current work function and the level of competence of graduates at performing these skills were evaluated simultaneously based on graduates perception (n = 143). Average values for the importance section of the items were interpreted using the following scale: 0.00–0.49 = no importance, 0.50–1.49 = minor importance, 1.50–2.49 = moderate importance and 2.50–3.00 = major importance. Accordingly, all of the employability skills included in this study was found to have mean importance ratings greater than 2.0 according to the perception of graduates.

The top ten (19.6%) items graduates perceived major importance with mean importance rate > = 2.5 were allocating time efficiently (M = 2.63), setting priorities (M = 2.61), listening attentively, (M = 2.59), working well with fellow employees (M = 2.55), identifying problems (M = 2.54,), relating well with supervisors (M = 2.54), writing external business communication (M = 2.53), being willing to learn new IT skills (M = 2.52), using ICT skills to complete activities (M = 2.51) and understanding the needs of others (M = 2.52).

The second section of the analysis was to describe graduates' self-perceived level of ability/competence in performing the employability skills which sought to show the level of attainment of these skills during their stay in the university. Average values for ability section of the items were also interpreted using the following scale: 0.00–0.49 = no competence, 0.50–1.49 = minor competence, 1.50–2.49 = moderate competence and 2.50–3.00 = major competence. The top ten employability skills graduates perceived themselves to be most competent in performing were; listening attentively (M = 2.28), communicating ideas verbally to groups (M = 2.18), responding to others' comments (M = 2.17), using properly the working language (M = 2.17), allocating time efficiently, (M = 2.16), recognising individual differences in the workplace (M = 2.15), initiating change to enhance productivity (M = 2.16), making important presentations (M = 2.16), conveying information one-to-one (M = 2.15) and setting priorities (M = 2.10).

The five employability skills in which graduates perceived to be least competent at performing were: Identifying political implications of decisions (M = 1.24), Establishing the critical events to be completed (M = 1.69), Assessing long term effects of decisions (M = 1.76), Identifying sources of conflict among people (M = 1.82), and Prioritising problems (M = 1.78).

Finally, the employability skills listed in Table 2 were prioritised as perceived by graduates by calculating MWDS using Borich's excel calculator for (n = 143). This is done to determine if discrepancies may exist between performance and importance constructs.

Table 2 Graduates' perception of the importance of employability skills and their levels of attainment/competence in performing the skills (N = 143)

Employability skills		*Importance*	*Competence*	*MWDS*
		M	*M*	
1	Making decisions in a short time period	2.48	1.87	1.53
2	Identifying problems	2.54	1.94	1.53
3	Writing reports	2.46	1.87	1.45
4	Prioritising problems	2.38	1.78	1.43
5	Applying IT as a management tool	2.45	1.88	1.39
6	Revising plans to include new information.	2.38	1.80	1.36
7	Writing external business communication	2.53	1.99	1.36
8	Providing novel solutions to problems	2.49	1.97	1.34
9	Relating well with supervisors.	2.54	2.02	1.33
10	Identifying essential components of a problem	2.43	1.89	1.31
11	Setting priorities	2.61	2.10	1.31
12	Using IT to organise data	2.49	1.97	1.29
13	Sorting out relevant data to solve problems	2.40	1.87	1.28
14	Providing innovative paths for the company	2.39	1.86	1.27
15	Being willing to learn new IT skills	2.52	2.01	1.27
16	Identifying sources of conflict among people	2.35	1.82	1.25
17	Allocating time efficiently	2.63	2.16	1.23
18	Using ICT skills to complete activities	2.51	2.02	1.23
19	Working well with fellow employees	2.55	2.08	1.20
20	Meeting deadlines	2.39	1.90	1.19
21	Understanding the needs of others	2.52	2.05	1.18
22	Adapting to situations of change	2.37	1.89	1.13
23	Making effective business presentations	2.37	1.90	1.13
24	Having a range of IT skills	2.48	2.03	1.11
25	Assigning/delegating responsibility	2.39	1.93	1.10
26	Establishing the critical events to complete	2.19	1.69	1.09
27	Assessing long term effects of decisions	2.22	1.76	1.03
28	Managing/overseeing several tasks at once	2.38	1.97	1.00
29	Taking reasonable job-related risks	2.38	1.96	1.00
30	Monitoring progress against the plan	2.27	1.83	0.98
31	Keeping up-to-date with external realities	2.43	2.02	0.98
32	Resolving conflicts	2.37	1.97	0.96
33	Listening attentively	2.59	2.28	0.82

Notes: Scale: 0 = no importance/competence, 1 = minor importance/competence, 2 = moderate importance/competence, 3 = major importance/competence.

Table 2 Graduates' perception of the importance of employability skills and their levels of attainment/competence in performing the skills (N = 143) (continued)

	Employability skills	*Importance*	*Competence*	*MWDS*
		M	*M*	
34	Recognising alternative routes to meet objecv.	2.35	2.01	0.81
35	Integrating strategic considerations in plans	2.39	2.06	0.80
36	Writing internal business communication	2.41	2.09	0.78
37	Knowing ethical implications of decisions	2.30	1.97	0.77
38	Monitoring progress toward objectives	2.34	2.03	0.72
39	Responding	2.46	2.17	0.72
40	Establishing	2.35	2.04	0.72
41	Conceptualising	2.39	2.09	0.72
42	Using	2.45	2.17	0.70
43	Communicating	2.47	2.18	0.68
44	Re-conceptualising	2.21	1.90	0.68
45	Identifying	1.62	1.24	0.61
46	Recognising	2.39	2.15	0.59
47	Initiating	2.40	2.16	0.57
48	Making	2.38	2.16	0.53
49	Identifying	2.21	1.99	0.49
50	Academic	2.2	2.03	0.45
51	Conveying	2.30	2.15	0.35

Notes: Scale: 0 = no importance/competence, 1 = minor importance/competence, 2 = moderate importance/competence, 3 = major importance/competence

For the purpose of recommending for curriculum improvements, the employability skills were prioritised according to their MWDS ratings. Major curriculum enhancement, moderate curriculum improvement and minor curriculum enhancement are considered based on the result for curriculum improvement. All employability skills with a MWDS greater than 1.5 was considered the highest discrepancy and highest need for high curriculum enhancement, all employability skills with a MWDS ranging from 1.00 to 1.49 were considered for moderate discrepancy and need for moderate curriculum enhancement and all employability skills with a MWDS ranging from 0.00 to 0.99 were recognised for low discrepancy and need for minor curriculum improvement. According to the perception of graduates, two skills; making decisions in a short time period and identifying problems (4%) scores high weighted discrepancy scores and high need for curriculum enhancement, 27 items (53%) scores a moderate discrepancy scores and moderate need for curriculum improvement. These items can be summarised under problem solving skills, Information technology skills, communication skills, decision making skills, time management skills, interpersonal and teamwork skills, 22 items (43%) scores low discrepancy scores and need negligible curriculum improvement.

8 Supervisors' perception on the importance of employability skills and graduates' level of competence in performing the skills

To triangulate the responses obtained from graduates, supervisors' perceptions of the importance of the employability skills needed by graduates in an industry and their level of performance for the skills listed were evaluated simultaneously (n = 37).

According to the perception of supervisors, 30 items (58.8%) scores mean importance of 2.5 and above. This means that supervisors perceived that most of the employability skills identified in this study are highly important for their organisations, whereas graduates perceived only 10 (19.6%) of the employability skills were highly important to the job. Besides, Identifying problems (M = 2.70), having a range of IT skills (M = 2.68), Adapting to situations of change (M = 2.68), Identifying essential components of a problem (M = 2.68) and Keeping up-to-date with external realities related to company's success (M = 2.68) were the top five employability skill perceived to be the most important by supervisors as indicated in Table 2. Similarly, supervisors' perceptions of the competence level of their employees at performing the employability skills were assessed. Identifying problems (M = 2.51), Integrating strategic considerations in the plans made (M = 2.19), Monitoring progress against the plan (M = 2.16) Setting priorities (M = 2.14) and relating well with supervisors (M = 2.14) represents the top five employability skills supervisors perceived their employees to be most competent at performing.

The five skills perceived by supervisors as least acquired consisted of applying IT as a management tool (M = 1.65), identifying political implications of decisions (M = 1.65), providing novel solutions to problems (M = 1.78), writing reports (M = 1.78) and using IT to organise data (M = 1.81). It is implied here that most of the responses obtained from supervisors are inconformity with responses from graduates.

Finally, each item was listed according to their MWDS ranking to prioritise the employability skills. The result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Supervisors' perception of the importance of employability skills and their levels of competence in performing the skills (n = 37)

Employability skills		*Importance*	*Competence*	*MWDS*
		M	*M*	
1	Having a range of IT skills	2.68	1.92	2.02
2	Adapting to situations of change	2.68	1.95	1.95
3	Providing novel solutions to problems	2.51	1.78	1.83
4	Applying IT as a management tool	2.41	1.65	1.82
5	Using IT to organise data	2.51	1.81	1.77
6	Identifying essential components of a problem	2.68	2.03	1.74
7	Sorting out relevant data to solve problems	2.57	1.89	1.73
8	Prioritising problems	2.51	1.86	1.70
9	Making decisions in a short time period	2.62	1.97	1.70
10	Keeping up-to-date with external realities related to your company's success	2.68	2.05	1.66

Notes: Scale: 0 = no importance/competence, 1 = minor importance/competence, 2 = moderate importance/competence, 3 = major importance/competence.

Table 3 Supervisors' perception of the importance of employability skills and their levels of competence in performing the skills (n = 37) (continued)

Employability skills		*Importance*	*Competence*	*MWDS*
		M	*M*	
11	Writing reports	2.46	1.78	1.66
12	Identifying problems	2.70	2.51	1.61
13	Recognising individual differences at work	2.59	1.97	1.61
14	Meeting deadlines	2.57	1.97	1.60
15	Monitoring progress toward objectives	2.57	1.95	1.60
16	Recognising alternative routes in meeting objectives	2.65	2.05	1.57
17	Taking reasonable job-related risks	2.59	2.00	1.54
18	Assessing long term effects of decisions	2.46	1.86	1.46
19	Making effective business presentations	2.57	2.00	1.46
20	Re-conceptualising your role in response to change	2.46	1.86	1.46
21	Conceptualising a future for the company	2.57	2.00	1.46
22	Managing/overseeing several tasks at once	2.49	1.92	1.41
23	Listening attentively	2.59	2.05	1.40
24	Writing external business communication	2.46	1.89	1.40
25	Initiating change to enhance productivity	2.59	2.05	1.40
26	Identifying potential negative outcomes when Considering a risky venture.	2.46	1.92	1.33
27	Assigning/delegating responsibility	2.59	2.11	1.26
28	Providing innovative paths for the company to follow	2.59	1.89	1.24
29	Responding to others' comments in a conversation	2.20	2.00	1.21
30	Working well with fellow employees	2.49	2.14	1.19
31	Relating well with supervisors	2.59	2.14	1.19
32	Using proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation of working language.	2.59	1.95	1.18
33	Establishing the critical events to be completed	2.43	2.11	1.18
34	Being willing to learn new IT skills	2.57	2.11	1.18
35	Monitoring progress against the plan	2.57	2.16	1.12
36	Identifying political implications of decisions	2.59	1.65	1.11
37	Academic skills	2.16	1.99	1.11
38	Understanding the needs of others	2.41	2.11	1.10
39	Communicating ideas verbally to groups	2.54	2.08	1.09
40	Establishing good rapport with subordinates	2.51	2.05	1.08

Notes: Scale: 0 = no importance/competence, 1 = minor importance/competence, 2 = moderate importance/competence, 3 = major importance/competence.

Table 3 Supervisors' perception of the importance of employability skills and their levels of competence in performing the skills (n = 37) (continued)

Employability skills		*Importance*	*Competence*	*MWDS*
		M	*M*	
41	Writing internal business communication	2.49	1.86	1.07
42	Making important presentations	2.32	2.03	1.06
43	Identifying sources of conflict among people	2.46	1.97	1.04
44	Conveying information one-to-one	2.41	2.11	1.02
45	Resolving conflicts	2.51	2.05	1.00
46	Knowing ethical implications of decisions	2.46	2.11	0.94
47	Using ICT skills to complete activities	2.49	2.00	0.86
48	Revising plans to include new information	2.38	2.05	0.85
49	Integrating strategic considerations in the plans	2.41	2.19	0.66
50	Setting priorities	2.46	2.14	0.65
51	Allocating time efficiently	2.43	2.17	0.61

Notes: Scale: 0 = no importance/competence, 1 = minor importance/competence, 2 = moderate importance/competence, 3 = major importance/competence.

Items with (MWDS > = 1.5) were considered as having high discrepancies. These skills represent 17 (33%) of all items. These skills comprise of having a range of IT skills, adapting to situations of change, providing novel solutions to problems, applying IT as a management tool, using IT to organise data, identifying essential components of a problem, sorting out relevant data to solve problems, prioritising problems, making decisions in a short time period, keeping up-to-date with external realities related to company's success, writing reports, identifying problems, recognising individual differences in the workplace, meeting deadlines, monitoring progress toward objectives in risky ventures, recognising alternative routes in meeting objectives and taking reasonable job-related risks. As compared to supervisors, graduates perceive themselves that they have high discrepancies on two (4%) of the employability skills namely: making decisions in a short time period and identifying problems.

Items with (MWDS = 1.00 to 1.49) were considered as having moderate discrepancies. These skills account for 28 (49%) of all items. Assessing long term effects of decisions, making effective business presentations, re-conceptualising your role in response to change, conceptualising a future for the company, managing/overseeing several tasks at once, listening attentively, writing external business communication, initiating change to enhance productivity, identifying potential negative outcomes when considering a risky venture, assigning/delegating responsibility, providing innovative paths for the company to follow for future development, responding to others' comments during a conversation, working well with fellow employees, relating well with supervisors, using proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation of working language, establishing the critical events to be completed, being willing to learn new IT skills, monitoring progress against the plan, identifying political implications of decisions, academic skills, understanding the needs of others, communicating ideas verbally to groups, establishing good rapport with subordinates, writing internal business communication, making important presentations, identifying sources of conflict among

people, conveying information one-to-one and resolving conflicts are skills under this category.

Lastly, skill with (MWDS = 0 to .0.99) were recognised as having low discrepancies. This group consists of only 5 (8.8%0) of the items listed. These are; knowing ethical implications of decisions, using ICT skills to complete activities, revising plans to include new information, integrating strategic considerations in the plans made and setting priorities.

Table 4 Summary of finding

MWDS	*Supervisors' perception*	*Graduates' perception*
(MWDS > =1.5) High discrepancy	Problem solving skills Information technology skills Adapting to change Risk taking skills	Identifying problems Making decisions in short time
(1.00 < = MWDS < =1.49) Moderate discrepancy	Communications skills Time management skills Conflict management skills Planning skills Decision making skills Team work skills Subject understanding	Information technology skills Problem solving skills Communication skills Decision making skills Time management skills Interpersonal and teamwork skills
(0.00 < = MWDS < = 0.99) Low discrepancy	Subject understanding	Knowing ethical implications of decisions Setting priorities

9 Conclusions

From the view point of graduates, it is perceived that all of the 51 employability skill items were moderately important to the current job they are working. So, graduates want to be able to equip with time management skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills, IT skills and interpersonal skills. In addition, the academic/field specific skills are the most acquired skills as perceived by both graduates and supervisors. This finding is similar with previous study by Stella Cottrell (2003) that students usually leave university with a good appreciation of their subject as they have studied it intensively for periods they were stayed.

The top ten employability skill in greatest need of curricular attention, according to perception of graduates, were making decisions in a short time period, identifying problems, writing reports, prioritising problems, applying IT as a management tool, revising plans to include new information, writing external business communication, providing novel solutions to problems, relating well with supervisors, and identifying essential components of a problem.

Graduates gave little importance on the political implications of the decisions they made. However, at a minimum, graduates perceived themselves to possess at least minor competence in performing all 51 employability skills. Graduates perceived that they were most competent at listening attentively, communicating ideas verbally to groups, responding to others' comments, using properly the working language, allocating time efficiently, recognising individual differences in the workplace, initiating change to

enhance productivity, making important presentations, conveying information one-to-one and setting priorities. Graduates also perceived that they were least competent at identifying political implications of decisions, establishing the critical events to be completed, assessing long term effects of decisions, identifying sources of conflict among people and prioritising problems.

When comparing graduates and supervisors' perception of the importance of employability skills, graduates perceive that allocating time efficiently, setting priorities, listening attentively, working well with fellow employees, identifying problems were the top five skills perceived to have greater importance. Whereas, in view of supervisors, identifying problems, having a range of IT skills, adapting to situations of change, identifying essential components of a problem and keeping up-to-date with external realities related to company's success were perceived as the five most important skills.

Regarding the level of competence, graduates perceive that listening attentively, communicating ideas verbally to groups, responding to others' comments, using properly the working language, allocating time efficiently, recognising individual differences in the workplace, initiating change to enhance productivity, making important presentations, conveying information one-to-one and setting priorities were better at performing these skills. Whereas supervisors perceive that identifying problems, integrating strategic considerations in the plans made, monitoring progress against the plan, setting priorities and relating well with supervisors represents the top five employability skills supervisors perceived their employees to be most competent at performing.

The five employability skills graduates perceived themselves to be least competent at performing were: identifying political implications of decisions, establishing the critical events to be completed, assessing long term effects of decisions, identifying sources of conflict among people and prioritising problems. However, five skills perceived by supervisors as least acquired consisted of applying IT as a management tool, identifying political implications of decisions, providing novel solutions to problems, writing reports and using IT to organise data.

Therefore, it is imperative to say that supervisors' desire employees, who can identify problems and its essential components at the workplace, adapt to situations of change and keeping up-to-date with external realities related to their company's success and demand employees who have a range of IT skills.

Supervisors recognised that graduates are most competent at identifying problems, integrating strategic considerations in the plans made, monitoring progress against the plan, setting priorities and relating well with supervisors while they are least competent at applying IT as a management tool, identifying political implications of decisions, providing novel solutions to problems, writing reports and using IT to organise data.

10 Recommendations

For the graduates to be successful in the labour market, universities in their part need to design and implement their program curricula in line with the globally acknowledged need for the long-term career development of graduates. Therefore, the current curriculum in the college of business and economics at Bahir Dar University should be enhanced to reflect the skills represented in this study. Relatively medium term apprenticeship programs, industry visit and industry project works in this regard can

provide students the advantage to understand industry problems, bureaucracies, examine career choices, know more about the industries' skill requirements, and most importantly, develop hands-on workplace skills (Walo, 2000). Hence, students will get the chance to appreciate the skill gaps. Moreover, for the students to have better understanding of these skills, the college has to create awareness among students about the need of employability skills by the industry, encourage students to extend their skill set through self-development and facilitate their exposure with the industries.

The teaching learning methods, assessments methods and course contents have to be re-examined to embed these employability skills in the course delivery system through work-based exercises and learning. These are achieved either by employers visiting the college as a guest speaker or with students having a small placement/apprenticeship with an employer so that students can develop the ability to learn the way practitioners do (McHardy and Allan, 2000).

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