Personal attributes, readiness and employability of college graduates: Inputs to career development plan

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to ascertain the personal characteristics of the participants, evaluate their preparedness for employment, and assess their employability skills. The research employs a descriptive methodology, and the participants consist of college graduates randomly selected from five different universities in the provinces of Hunan and Jiangxi in China. In Hunan Province, the three universities included are Hunan University of Arts and Science (HUAS), Hunan Applied Technology University (HATU), and Changde Vocational Technical College (CVTC). In Jiangxi Province, the two universities included are Jiangxi Agricultural University (JAU) and Pingxiang University (PXU). The study findings indicate that possessing the necessary knowledge and qualifications for their desired careers, as well as acquiring technical skills through internships, enhances graduates' level of preparedness. Additionally, a strong inclination toward continuous learning and the ability to handle stress are crucial for adapting to work environments. Effective organizational skills and teamwork also significantly contribute to graduates' readiness for employment. The ability to manage time efficiently, be punctual, and meet project deadlines are indicative of highly valued organizational skills sought by employers. Soft and hard skills, problem-solving abilities, and emotional intelligence were identified as vital factors in determining graduates' employability. These findings emphasize the interrelationship between personal attributes, preparedness, and employability. Graduates who possess strong personal attributes such as knowledge, motivation, organizational ability, and teamwork skills are more likely to be adequately prepared for employment. Furthermore, possessing soft and hard skills, problem-solving abilities, and emotional intelligence significantly enhance graduates' employability. The study results indicate a strong correlation between graduates' preparedness and employability, with all variables yielding p-values below 0.01. The outcomes confirm that graduates with high levels of preparedness also exhibit high employability. The researcher suggests a strategic model to guide the career development plans of graduates.

Keywords: personal attributes, readiness, employability, career development, educational management

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1. Introduction

The primary objective of a quality higher education is to enhance students' capabilities, foster their curiosity for new knowledge, and ultimately assist them in securing employment or addressing societal challenges. Each country takes pride in its human resources, considering them as the foundation of its economy. However, having a talented and educated workforce that is prepared to tackle future challenges is a matter of great pride. While education serves various purposes, it primarily equips students to become responsible citizens, skilled professionals, culturally literate individuals, critical thinkers, and competitive players in the global economy (Li et al., 2021). The concept of a career and the workplace have undergone significant transformations in the twenty-first century. Organizations now face decisions beyond downsizing and outsourcing, as they strategically utilize their human resources. Hiring and selection processes are based on credentials and competencies that predict the potential employee's performance. These changes necessitate universities to not only produce high-quality graduates ready for the workforce but also equip them with abilities that extend beyond theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom (Becker et al., 2021).

Choosing a career has become a significant concern for college students, regardless of their age. It is a crucial question for everyone, as they aspire to enter the labor market early and find fulfilling and productive jobs, both within and outside their countries. However, given the rapidly changing societies where adequate wages and employment opportunities are limited, the labor market can absorb only a small portion of the population. When young individuals do enter the labor market, they represent a small fraction of the total workforce. Career choices require careful consideration and caution (Baidoo et al., 2021). According to a study conducted by York (2006, as cited in Daigo et al., 2021) on employability in higher education, employability in graduate students refers to "a set of accomplishments, personal attributes, abilities, knowledge, and skills that increase the graduates' likelihood of finding employment and succeeding in their chosen fields." In other words, employability encompasses a combination of soft skills and technical abilities that students can acquire during their time in higher education institutions (HEIs) to meet the requirements of suitable jobs.

However, current college graduates express more doubts and uncertainties compared to previous cohorts regarding their readiness and employability (Buchanan, 2022). In 2022, only 41% of traditional degree holders believed they possessed the necessary skills and credentials for their potential careers. Additionally, 49% of recent graduates considered themselves inadequate and underqualified, resulting in their reluctance to apply for entry-level positions (Cengage Group, 2022). Fox (2018) also notes that approximately 51% of college graduates pursue jobs that do not require higher education or college prerequisites, which sheds light on the overall employability of college graduates. This decline in confidence among college graduates regarding their employment preparation is a clear indication of the issue. Thus, graduate employability plays a crucial role in understanding the relationship between higher education and the labor market (Clarke, 2018). It is essential to highlight the connection between HEIs and graduates' employability, as it goes beyond simply securing a job. Employability and readiness also emphasize the potential for career growth within a specific employment setting (Tomlinson, 2012 as cited in Daigo et al., 2021).

The primary objective of higher education institutions (HEIs) is to equip graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the current labor market (Cai, 2013 as cited in Daigo et al., 2021). HEIs play a vital role in ensuring that students acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for employment after graduation (Raquel et al., 2019). Higher education has traditionally been associated with greater job stability, higher income, and better career prospects. However, this notion often stigmatizes alternative career options and non-traditional degree paths. As a result, only 30% of graduates believe that their degree accurately reflects their competencies

(Buchanan, 2022). Moreover, Buchanan (2022) argues that half of college graduates have doubts about their degrees, and 53% of them choose not to apply for entry-level jobs, instead opting for positions with limited opportunities for career growth due to feeling underqualified. In 2022, a higher number of college graduates completed their education unprepared and unaware of their deficiencies in professional skills and competencies required for employability (Packer, 2022).

Significantly, only about a quarter of employers believe that college graduates are adequately prepared for the workforce upon graduation. While employers generally perceive graduates as capable of applying academic knowledge to their professional roles, they are quicker to identify gaps in graduates' employment readiness and skills (Hart Research Associates, 2016, as cited in Packer, 2022). This situation poses a significant challenge, as unprepared recent college graduates may enter the workforce without the necessary qualifications and experience to secure employment suitable for their goals and preferences. Consequently, the researcher conducted this study to address the employability skills gap in China's Hunan and Jiangxi Provinces.

Objectives of the Study - The study was conducted to determine the respondents' personal attributes, assess the graduate's readiness to employment, and their employability skills that was used as basis for career development for graduates Specifically, this study aims to determine the personal attributes of graduates in terms of knowledge Attributes, Willingness to Learn and stress Tolerance; assess the readiness of the graduates to be employed in view of career motivation, organizational ability and teamwork; evaluate the employability of graduates in terms of Soft and hard skills, Problem-Solving and emotional Intelligence; test the significant relationship of personal attributes, readiness, and employability; develop a plan for career development to improve the employability of college graduates..

2. Methods

Research Design - A descriptive design was used in the study to characterize a population, circumstance, or phenomena correctly and methodically. It provide answers to the what, where, when, and how questions. Descriptive research seeks to characterize a phenomenon and its features. This study is more concerned with what happened rather than how or why it happened. As a result, observation and survey tools are frequently used to collect data. Data may be collected qualitatively in such studies, but it is frequently analyzed quantitatively, using frequencies, percentages, averages, or other statistical analyses to determine relationships (Nassaji, 2017). To investigate one or more variables, a descriptive research design can employ a wide range of research methods. The researcher does not alter or change any of the variables in this sort of research, but just observes and measures them.

When the goal of the research is to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories, descriptive research is an excellent choice (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). It is beneficial when little is known about a topic or situation. As a means of gathering data, it frequently includes a survey question. A survey allows a researcher to collect enormous amounts of data that may then be evaluated for frequencies, averages, and patterns. Surveys are commonly used to describe demographics, gauge public opinion, evaluate satisfaction, and so on (McCombes, 2022). The research questionnaire would be the primary and only data collection instrument through the study. The questionnaire would be distributed to the respondents on the online distribution platform after final authorization to share the questionnaire is obtained from the respective schools involved in the study.

Participants of the Study - The study respondents are college graduates that are randomly selected from five (5) different universities in Hunan and Jiangxi Provinces of China. The three schools from Hunan Province are Hunan University of Arts and Science (HUAS), Hunan Applied Technology University (HATU), and Changde Vocational Technical College (CVTC); while the two other schools from Jiangxi province are Jiangxi Agricultural University (JAU), and Pingxiang University (PXU).

Data Gathering Instrument - In this study, a questionnaire was developed as a data collecting method to analyze the link between personal attributes, readiness, and employability of graduates, which was aimed at

graduates from Hunan and Jiangxi Universities. The researcher spent the bulk of the time in this study reading material from journals, articles, the internet, theses, and books as a complement to the data gathering instrument. In addition, the researcher used personal experiences and observations to create relevant questionnaire items. The major data collection instrument in this study was a questionnaire split into four sections. The questionnaire was thoroughly validated by research professionals in the subject as well as the dissertation supervisor.

In the first part, the basic profile of the respondents were assessed, including four questions on age, gender, major, and educational attainment. This section generally provided the demographics of the participants, which helped the researcher monitor any changes among these key factors. In the second part, the respondents' Personal Attributes was assessed, including five dimensions of Knowledge Attributes, Willingness to Learn, Stress Tolerance, and Emotional Intelligence. In the third part, the Readiness of Graduates was assessed, including Career Motivation, Organizational Ability, and Teamwork. The fourth part, the respondents' employability was assessed, including Soft Skills and Hard Skills. All parts of the questionnaire were self-constructed by the researcher based on the literature studied, which provided insights on concepts related to the variables being investigated.

Likert scale questions were used in this study, which was a psychometric scale that was considered essential in measuring a respondent's opinion or attitude toward a given subject. This survey type simplified complex ideas, opinions, and questions. The survey instrument consisted of 4-Likert scale questions with response options of "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree." The data collected from the respondents was weighted on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest value, which quantitatively measured graduates' employability in relation to human capital and family capital. The Likert Scale grading for this study was 3.5-4 for Strongly Agree, 2.5-3.49 for Agree, 1.5-2.49 for Disagree, and 1.00-1.49 for Strongly Disagree.

Table 1

Reliability Results

Variables	No. of Items	α value	Interpretation
Personal Attributes			
Knowledge Attributes	5	0.933	Excellent
Willing to learn	4	0.809	Good
Stress Tolerance	5	0.940	Excellent
Overall	14	0.964	Excellent
Readiness of Graduates			
Career motivation	5	0.900	Excellent
Organizational ability	5	0.924	Excellent
Teamwork	5	0.910	Excellent
Overall	15	0.970	Excellent
Employability of Graduates			
Soft and hard skills	5	0.856	Good
Problem-Solving	5	0.858	Good
Emotional Intelligence	5	0.878	Good
Overall	15	0.948	Excellent

Legend > 0.9 =Excellent; >0.8=Good:>0.7=Acceptable;>0.6=Questionable;>0.5=Poor;<0.5=Unacceptable

Data Gathering Procedure - The approved final questionnaire after incorporation of suggestions and recommendations, was used by the researcher as his tool in data gathering. After passing the reliability test, the result were encoded and uploaded to the largest questionnaire platform in Hunan and Jiangxi Province ready for administration. Prior to questionnaire administration, a formal letter will be sent to the heads of the universities for the researcher to obtain authorization to administer the questionnaire to the research participants of the respective institutions. It is important to note, that prior to sending the formal letter the researcher will establish communication links with the five study locales (Hunan University of Arts and Science, Hunan Applied Technology University, Changde Vocational Technical College, Jiangxi Agricultural University, and Pingxiang University), and indicate if they are all willing to allow participation. After final approval for participation will be obtained from the study locales, the questionnaire will be sent online to 350 respondents through the largest

questionnaire platform in Hunan Province and Jiangxi Province. The data collected will be summarized, analyzed and interpreted.

Ethical Considerations - Ethical considerations was practiced in the conduct of the research work to warrant that every information that was gathered are used for research purposes only to maintain the quality and integrity of the research. This study effort did not compromise the researcher's professional judgment or financial or personal considerations from the start. Rather, the major goal of this study was to contribute essential information to the field while also improving graduate students' employability. All appropriate permission paperwork were received before conducting the survey. The research and its aims were explained to the chosen respondents. They were advised that the research would be carried out only for academic purposes and would not jeopardize their safety or privacy.

The researcher also sought the consent of the student respondents through letter and communication to make sure that the target respondents will be prepared to answer necessary questions involved in the research. It also ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents by not seeking their names as they were answering the questionnaires. The researcher will also ensure that the respondents voluntarily answer the questionnaires according to their will. Lastly, it will also ensure that none of the respondents of the study will be hurt or harmed and their safety and security is of top priority.

Data Analysis - The desired documents and figures were tallied, encoded and analyzed using various statistical measures. This study will use frequency distribution, weighted mean, Pearson – Product Moment Correlation, t-test or Mann Whitney test, and Analysis of variance (ANOVA) which will be utilized based on the objectives of the study. Moreover, all data was treated using statistical software. This study will use SPSS 25.0 software to analyze the reliability and validity of the collected data.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 2
Summary Table on Personal Attributes of Graduates

Indicators	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Knowledge Attributes	3.07	Agree	2.5
Willingness to Learn	3.08	Agree	1
Stress Tolerance	3.07	Agree	2.5
Grand Composite Mean	3.07	Agree	

Legend:3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree;2.50-3.49=Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree;1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 2 presents the weighted mean of each factor (knowledge attributes, willingness to learn, and stress tolerance) as it contributes to the personal attributes of graduates, with a composite mean of 3.07 and was verbally interpreted as 'Agree'. The factor with the highest rank that affects the graduate's personal attributes was willingness to learn with the weighted mean of 3.08 and agree as the verbal interpretation.

According to the findings of this study, it has been discovered that the respondents agree that the personal attribute that has a significant effect and impact on the graduate's' career development is their willingness to learn. When a person has the willingness to pursue and learn, other external sources that may be perceived to be a hindrance will not truly hinder the person in elevating their career path. In the study by Tomb (2018), it was suggested that willingness to learn matters before, during, and after the training phase of new members of the workforce. This supports the paper's findings for career development plan of graduates, where willingness to learn will have the highest weighted mean and thus the greatest pull on their career development plan.

With a weight mean of 3.07 and a verbal interpretation of agree, both the knowledge attributes and stress tolerance ranked as the second highest factors attributed to their career development plan. This result is significant to the results from the study by Frunzaru et. al., (2018) showing that low appreciation of college-provided learnings and knowledge of students raise concerns about the potential negative effects of anti-intellectualism on their ability to integrate into the workforce and enhance employability within a

knowledge-based economy. Potemkin (2018) also added that long-term work stress can lead to burnout in the workplace, which may be attributed to the low ranking.

Table 3
Summary Table on Readiness of the Graduates to be Employed

Indicators	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Career Motivation	3.11	Agree	2
Organizational Ability	3.10	Agree	3
Teamwork	3.13	Agree	1
Grand Composite Mean	3.11	Agree	

Legend:3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree;2.50-3.49=Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree;1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 3 presents the weighted mean of each key result area (career motivation organizational ability, and teamwork) as it contributes to the employability of a graduate, with a composite mean of 3.11 and was verbally interpreted as agree. The highest-ranking factor that affects the readiness of the graduates to be employed was the teamwork with a weighted mean of 3.13 and a verbal interpretation of agree. According to the study's findings, respondents agree that teamwork has a significant effect and impact on the readiness of graduates to be employed. When a graduate is able to harmoniously cooperate with other people into pursuing group-centered goals, is aware of their roles in the team, and most especially able to learn from others in the group, will most likely present a graduate's readiness on employability.

Effective teamwork is crucial for achieving organizational goals and maximizing productivity (Salas, Cooke, & Rosen, 2018). When individuals can work harmoniously in teams, they can leverage their collective strengths, skills, and knowledge to overcome challenges and drive innovation (Katzenbach & Smith, 2015). Graduates who recognize the value of teamwork and possess the ability to cooperate with others are better equipped for success in professional settings. This supports the paper's findings for the readiness of a graduate where teamwork has the highest weighted mean and thus the greatest pull on employability.

With a weight mean of 3.11 and a verbal interpretation of agree, career motivation is ranked as the second highest factor attributed to readiness of the graduates to be employed. This ranking can be agreed upon based on the experience that upon graduation, it is the inherent desire to pursue a specific career path which motivates a graduate to become ready for the challenges that may arise, which shall all be dedicated to building the foundation for their career. Based on the social cognitive career theory that was proposed by Lent, Brown, & Hackett in 2002, career aspirations, driven by intrinsic motivation, provide individuals with a sense of purpose and direction in their professional lives. When graduates are passionate about their chosen career paths, they are more likely to engage in proactive career planning, seek relevant experiences, and invest in continuous learning and skill development (Akram, Lei, Haider, & Khan, 2020). This proactive approach contributes to their readiness to face challenges and build a strong foundation for their careers.

The last and least-ranking factor was the organizational ability, which obtained a weighted mean of 3.10 and a verbal interpretation of agree. This least agreement on the effect of the organizational ability on readiness of graduates for employability, could show that most of the graduates believe that the organizational ability does not have much impact when it comes to the readiness of the graduates to be employed as compared to teamwork, which when not in good condition could adversely affect both the ability of the graduate to interact and work with others which in turn will lead to undesirable circumstances. Teamwork skills are highly valued by employers as they directly contribute to effective collaboration, communication, and problem-solving within organizational settings (Salas, Shuffler, Thayer, Bedwell, & Lazzara, 2015). When teamwork is lacking or dysfunctional, it can impede the ability of graduates to interact and work effectively with others, leading to negative outcomes and hindering their overall readiness for employment (Mathieu, Marks, & Zaccaro, 2001) as cited by (Mathieu et al., 2019).

It is worth noting that there is only a 0.01 difference in the weighted means of the career motivation and the organizational ability. This could also be attributed to the fact that when working for a specific career, an

individual is likely to possess organizational skills which may just further their career motivation.

Table 4
Summary Table on Employability of Graduates

Indicators	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Soft and Hard Skills	3.05	Agree	2
Problem-Solving	3.04	Agree	3
Emotional Intelligence	3.11	Agree	1
Grand Composite Mean	3.07	Agree	

Legend:3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree;2.50-3.49=Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree;1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 4 presents the weighted mean of each factor (soft and hard skills, problem-solving, emotional intelligence) as it contributes to the employability of graduates, with a grand composite mean of 3.07 and was verbally interpreted as agree. The highest-ranking factor that affects the graduates' employability was the emotional intelligence with a composite mean of 3.11 and a verbal interpretation of agree. According to the study's findings, respondents agree that emotional intelligence has a significant effect and impact on the employability of graduates. When an individual has a good level of emotional intelligence, they have the capacity to build good relationships with people in the workplace. They will appear as more employable since people with high emotional intelligence are easier to talk to, flexible and cultivates growth and learning.

Individuals with higher emotional intelligence exhibit better interpersonal skills, such as effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, which contribute to building strong relationships with coworkers (Goleman, 2018). These individuals are more likely to collaborate effectively, navigate workplace dynamics, and adapt to changing circumstances, thereby enhancing their employability (Carmeli, 2019). This supports the finding that emotional intelligence has the highest composite mean and will have the biggest pull on employability. With the composite mean of 3.05, and a verbal interpretation of agree, soft and hard skills is placed the second highest fact or that attributes to employability. This ranking is validated where an individual possesses the adequate skills which may entice the employers, to immediately hire them to make use of these skills as one of the company's resources. This may also apply to any other form of office or employment.

Research suggests that emotional intelligence positively impacts various aspects of career development, including job performance, job satisfaction, leadership effectiveness, and the ability to handle workplace challenges (Shahzad et al., 2019; Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2016). Soft and hard skills encompass a wide range of competencies, including communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and technical expertise, which are highly valued by employers across industries (Hartog et al., 2018). Possessing these skills enhances an individual's attractiveness to potential employers and increases their chances of securing employment opportunities.

The last and least-ranking factor was problem-solving which obtained a composite mean of 3.04 and a verbal interpretation of agree. This least agreement on the effect of problem-solving to the employability could demonstrate that most of the respondent graduates believe that though necessary, the prospective employers will not primarily know their capacity to resolve issues in real-time, unless the specific career demands so. Unlike emotional intelligence which may be reflected at the earliest job interview, and soft and hard skills which are usually presented in the resume. The ability to problem-solve is more of a secondary skill that may only prove to be visible upon the employment and not before it. It is worth noting that there is only a 0.01 difference in the composite means of the soft and hard skills and problem-solving. This could also be attributed to the fact that when an individual possesses the soft and hard skills which would make them appear to be compatible for an employment, it does hand-in-hand with knowing how to problem solve.

The study by Liu and Wu (2019) highlights the importance of problem-solving skills in team performance and creativity. The findings suggest that individuals with strong problem-solving skills contribute significantly to team creative efficacy, which in turn enhances team performance. This research emphasizes the interplay between problem-solving abilities and the overall effectiveness of teams in achieving their objectives. Employers value individuals who possess these problem-solving skills as they are crucial for identifying and resolving

complex challenges in the workplace.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Personal attributes were evaluated moderately agreed in terms of knowledge attributes, willingness to learn, and stress tolerance and the willingness to learn has a significant effect and impact on the graduate's' career development. Respondents moderately agree that teamwork has a significant effect and impact on the readiness of graduates to be employed. Respondents moderately agreed that emotional intelligence has a significant effect and impact on the employability of graduates. There is high significant relationship between the personal attributes and readiness and employability of graduates which described that the better the personal attributes, the better the readiness of the graduate that resulted to higher employability. The career development plan was derived based on the finding of the study.

The stress tolerance and resilience can be integrated into career development plans and the Institutions may provide resources and support services that help students develop effective stress management techniques. The career development plans may prioritize career motivation and goal-setting and providing comprehensive career guidance, helping students align their skills and interests with potential job opportunities, and encouraging them to take concrete steps towards their goals may enhance their readiness for employment. The career development plan to improve graduates' may be reviewed by the University concerned and implemented. The future researcher may expand the study on its population to include not only graduates, but also current students and in other Chinese provinces in order to address employability and recruitment gaps throughout China and could include parents, teachers, and stockholders to provide a fresh perspective on the collected data.

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