

UK SMEs and business students: An investigation into perceptions of employability for entry-level positions in SMEs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether Small to Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) and business student perceptions of employability are in alignment. The study considered different variables associated with employability, including the most important candidate employability attribute, the skills required for employment and the skill shortages amongst students. Using qualitative primary research – in the form of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews – the study discovered that personality and experience were more significant than first assumed, due to technological advancements and changes in the working environment. The study revealed that SMEs and students' perceptions of employability do not align, and that the gap has continued to widen, therefore contributing to under-researched areas of employability literature. A limitation of the study was that it relied on a small number of respondents. The study serves as a benchmark for future research, and the author recommends further research into student and small business employability, as these areas are underdeveloped.

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INTRODUCTION

Attending a university and achieving a degree is the norm of the 21st century in the Western world (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). In the UK, the number of graduates

has increased dramatically in the last two decades, more than doubling since 1991. This has contributed to an over-supply of graduates (Rae, 2007). The competition

for employment between graduates has increased and because of this, graduates may more than likely find themselves working in SMEs (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

The rapidly evolving working environment has resulted in contemporary job mobility and the necessity to continuously keep one’s employability up to date, by enhancing knowledge and transferable skills (Van der

Heijden, 2005; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010).

Information produced by the UK Parliament (2018) shows that Small to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) accounted for 60% of UK employment, as “there were 5.7 million SMEs in the UK in 2018, which was over 99% of all businesses” (p. 5) – Figure 1 and Table 1 below show this.

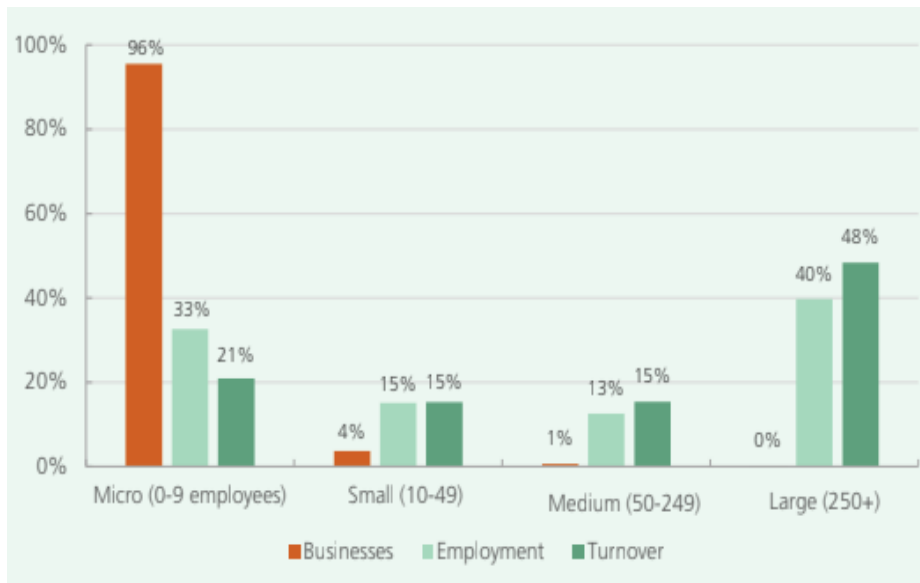


Figure 1 UK Share of Business, Employment and Turnover.

Source: (UK Parliament, 2018)

Table 1 Figures to show the UK Share of Business, Employment and Turnover.

	Businesses 1000s	Employment 1000s	Turnover £ billions	Businesses %	Employment %	Turnover %
No employees	4,278	4,643	275	75%	17%	7%
SMEs (0-250 employees)	5,660	16,284	1,994	99.9%	60%	52%
Of which: Micro (0-9 employees)	5,416	8,802	808	96%	33%	21%
Small (10-49 employees)	210	4,083	590	4%	15%	15%
Medium (50-249 employees)	35	3,399	595	1%	13%	15%
Large (250+ employees)	8	10,743	1,868	0%	40%	48%
Total, all businesses	5,668	27,027	3,862	100%	100%	100%

Source: (UK Parliament, 2018)

The study recognises the importance of considering employability from an SMEs point of view, due to the vast number of SMEs and the growing competition

between graduates. Additionally, previous research has proven to be problematic, as the types of organisations may not have been specified, possibly focusing more on

large organisation as opposed to SMEs that may require different skills and attributes or for their use in a different context.

Although employability can be complex to define, this study will use the definition by Yorke (2006) who defines, employability as “a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment” (p. 203).

Current research on employability in SMEs is limited (Belfield, 1999; Westhead & Matlay, 2005; Holden, Jameson & Walmsley, 2007; Woods & Dennis, 2009). So are the studies on to how students perceive employability. Tymon (2013) states that “the views of undergraduates, the recipients of this employability development are not well known” (p. 841). Therefore, it is important to also consider a student perspective on the topic of employability, as they are, after all, the main decision makers in the employment process.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to addressing these two research gaps. First, I will investigate the employee skills and attributes that SME employers pay attention to in their recruitment processes. Second, I will explore what students believe are the required skills and attributes to become employed by an SMEs. Last, I will compare the SME and student perspectives on employability and consider how my results relate to the current literature on the subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have been produced on employability and therefore the literature review is to focus primarily on contemporary journal articles published within the 21st century. The boundaries of the literature review are to establish the viewpoints of employers and business students on employability; with the aim being to encapsulate whether there have been any changes in the working environment. The scope of the literature will be

to compare employers’ thoughts of employability attributes and skills with those of students, resulting in a direct comparison. The literature will indicate whether employers and students’ perceptions coincide or not.

The main attribute

A degree may once have been a passport into graduate employment, as this was an indication of knowledge and intellectual ability (Harvey, 2000). Students appear to still be living by this philosophy, believing that employers wish to only recruit those whom possess the most outstanding academic records (Sales Velasco, 2012). Yorke (2006) highlights that while good academic performance is highly valued, it is no longer deemed to be enough to secure employment.

Many authors have found that employers are less concerned about an applicant’s degree subject, classification or the university attended (Branine, 2008; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin & Zehner, 2013; McMurry, Dutton, McQuaid & Richard, 2016), than about transferable skills and competences (Lowden, Hall & Elliot, 2011), wishing to see more of what graduates can do, as opposed to what they know (Jackson, 2010). However, Smith, McKnight and Naylor (2000) find that the likelihood of a student being employed, within six months of graduating, is not related to the skills they possess, but instead depends on the degree classification and subject studied.

A study by Saunders and Zuzel (2010) found that “sandwich students” understood the importance of employability skills. Morley and Aynsley (2007) mentioned that if students possess good employability skills, but did not achieve good academic records, they may be missed in the recruitment phase.

The literature presented shows that there is inconsistency in findings on both employer and student understandings of key employability attributes. What

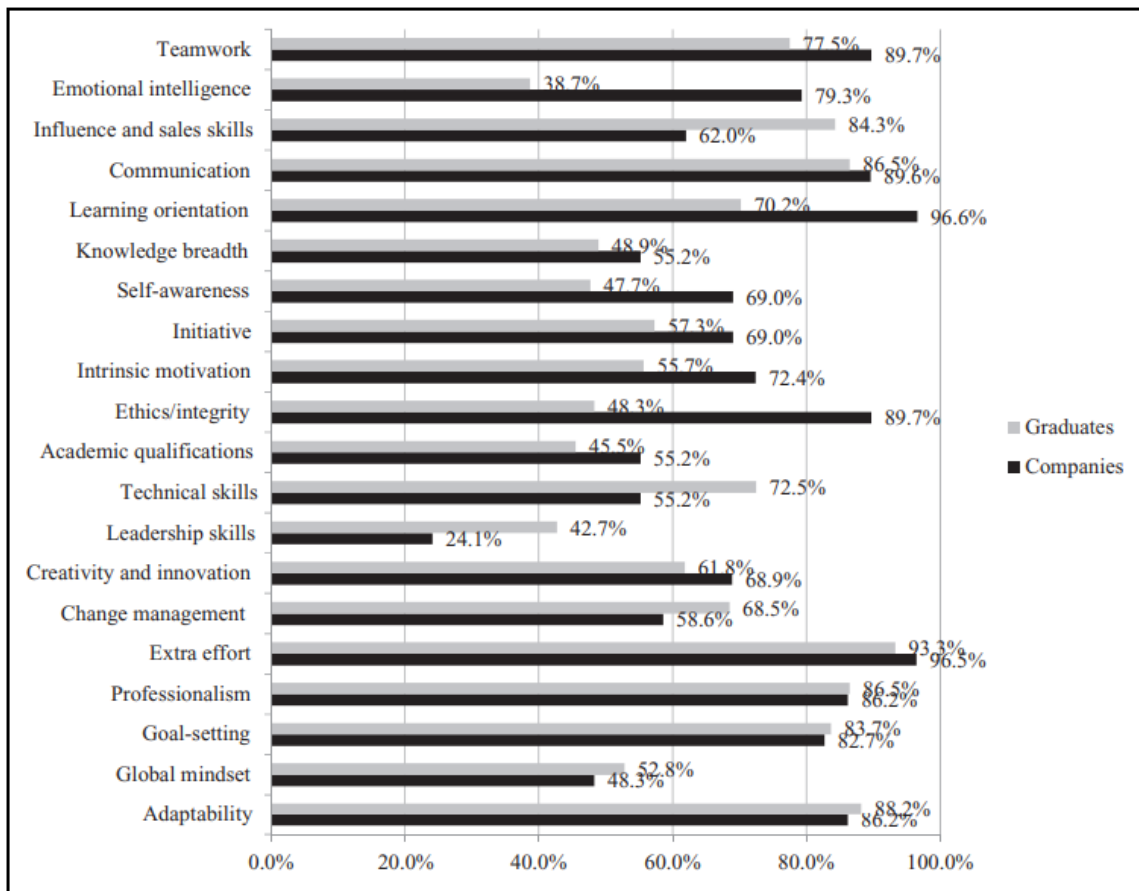
the literature is pointing to more consistently is the presence of a gap between the employer and student perceptions.

Skills

According to Archer and Davison (2008), employers believe that soft skills including intellectual ability and confidence are seen to have more power than technical skills. Furthermore, employers’ value the ability and willingness to learn, teamwork, co-operation, communication and critical thinking (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Finch et al., 2013) and seek graduates with entrepreneurial abilities (Ball, 2005).

Graduates are also invited to consider leadership (Bhanugopan & Fish, 2009; Conrad & Newberry, 2012), communication (Bennett, 2002; McMurray, et al., 2016; Jackson, 2013), self-management (Yang, Cheung & Fang, 2015), information technology skills (Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi, Al-Esmail, Eldabi, Kapoor & Irani, 2015; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012) and analytical skills (Lim, Lee, Yap & Ling 2016; Al- Mutairi, Naser & Saeid 2014). Despite the differences between employers, the focus for recruitment seems to be increasingly on soft skills (Jackson, 2010).

Figure 2 Skills graduate believe companies want compared to the skills companies actually want.



Source: (Matsouka & Mihail, 2016)

Business students perceived that, when striving to secure employment, critical thinking was an important skill to increase the likelihood of success (Jackson, 2013), rating

critical thinking, teamwork and problem-solving skills as the topmost important employability skills (Griffin & Annulis, 2013). A study by Harris and King (2015) found that students also considered communication skills to be

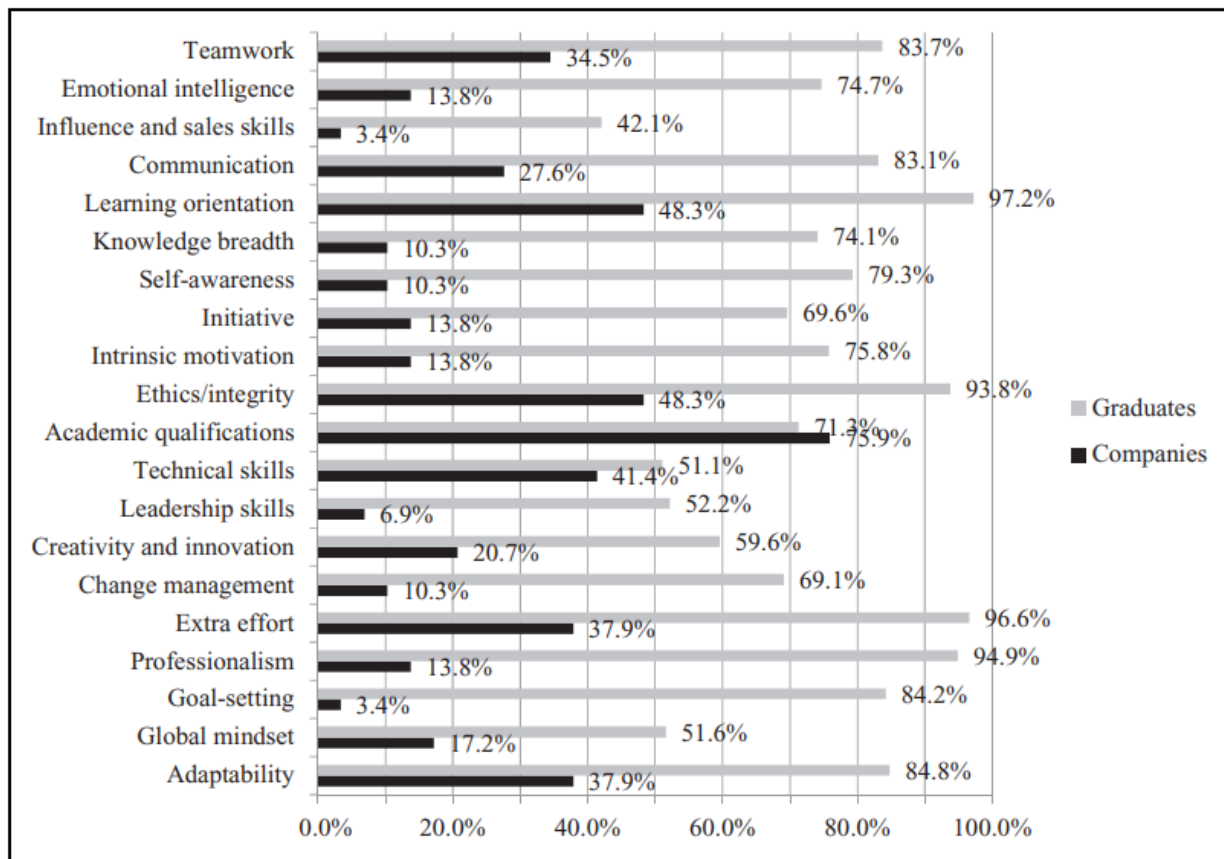
valued by employers and understood the importance of interpersonal skills for employability.

Saeed (2015) highlighted that students believe they can utilise communication when going into employment, making the transition period from education to work-life much more comfortable. A recent and significant study by Tymon (2013) revealed that students believe flexibility, commitment and dedication are personal attributes that are an important part of employability.

Together, these studies indicate that employers and students are in agreement to some degree about the skills that are required for employment. The point is illustrated by Matsouka and Mihail (2016) (See Figure 2 above).

Skill shortages

Figure 3 *Skills graduates believe they possess compared to the skills companies believe they possess.*



Source: (Matsouka & Mihail, 2016)

In a study conducted by Abas-Mastura, Imam and Osman (2013), employers believe that graduates do not have a sufficient set of skills and therefore may not be prepared for the working environment. Specifically, employers perceived business graduates to have poor creative thinking (Jackson & Chapman, 2012) and that fresh graduates particularly lacked personal and professional development, presentation and communication skills (Raza & Naqvi, 2011; Warraich & Ameen, 2011). Additionally, employers believed that analytical, commercial awareness and decision-making skills were the largest gaps in the capabilities of fresh graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008). Therefore, there is a need for business graduates to develop their communication, analytical, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Jackson & Chapman, 2009).

Students were reported to admit that their own soft skills are weak and far from employer expectations (Tran, 2013). Other studies reported that students lacked confidence in their employability, in general as well as in specific skills such as planning and development (Wang & Tsai, 2014), communication (Griffin & Annulis, 2013), and commercial and business awareness (Gilworth & Thambar, 2006). Although students have disclosed skills incompetence, it is evident that they can be reflective when elevating their employability.

These studies clearly indicate that employers and students believe students are lacking skills for the working environment. The comparison has demonstrated that there is a gap between student and employer skill expectations (see Figure 3 by Matsouka & Mihail, 2016 above).

Review summary

The literature review uncovered that employers and students disagreed on what the most important candidate employability attribute is; degree or skills. However, they managed to agree on the skills that are required for employment. The researcher was perplexed to discover that, although students understood the skills that were necessary for employment, students themselves felt they were lacking the identified skills. There is also a lack of alignment on students' shortcomings. Therefore, the research indicates that the gap between employers and students may be widening (Duzer, 2006), due to employers and students not being in alignment. The primary research will explore this further, though it could be argued that obtaining all the skills employers want is a starting point (Yusof, Mustapha, Mohamad & Bunian, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The introduction and literature have revealed what is required of future research. The purpose of this study is

to investigate a niche segment of employability by exploring student perception of employability skills, focusing on investigating whether their perceptions correspond to the skills and attributes identified as important by SMEs.

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to be able to probe deeper into employability, considering the experiences of both SMEs and students, and to explore and determine the reasons behind the selection of specific skills and attributes, whilst also comparing SMEs and student perceptions to gain an understanding of their relationship. The author adopts an interpretivist paradigm that will focus on the subjective responses of SMEs and students, providing an opportunity for theory-building (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Data collection

The data on SME perceptions was collected from the Business and Finance sector in the South Yorkshire region. The data on student perceptions was collected from final year students at the University of Huddersfield studying a Business or Finance programme. The author interviewed representatives from four SMEs. Ten undergraduate students – 5 males and 5 females – were also interviewed. Six of the ten students had conducted a placement year. Non-probability sampling that involved convenience and snowball sampling was used (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Semi-structured interviewing

Some employability authors have called for more qualitative studies on employability to counter the “survey-style research” which seemingly “dominates the small business employability research” (Holden et al., 2007, p. 223). Therefore, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used for data collection as they provide the opportunity for the researcher to “probe deeply to uncover new clues and new dimensions of a problem

based on personal experience” (Burgess, 1982, p. 107). The researcher desired to explore how students and employers understood employability (Tymon, 2013). A pilot survey was conducted to assist in the structuring of the interview protocol. The interview process involved a set of structured questions (ten questions for SMEs, eight questions for students). This allowed the researcher to remain in control of the interview, with the opportunity to clarify answers by asking follow-up questions, providing further discussion and a chance to capture rich data.

Data analysis

The researcher used thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the interview data. This involved coding the text of the interview transcripts, searching for important themes and identifying patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This allowed similarities and difference to be highlighted between the different participants’ reports.

Research ethics

Research ethics approval was granted for this study by the Department of Management at The University of

Huddersfield. The identities of all research participants were kept confidential, and their names were replaced with numbers in the report of the findings. Participants were given a consent form and information sheet prior to the interview, which disclosed all details of the nature and purposes of the study and of how their data would be used. Participants were notified that the interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed and that the recordings and transcriptions would be deleted once the study was completed.

Before the start of the interview, participants were asked whether they had reviewed the information provided, that they were happy to be recorded, and were aware that they could opt out of the research at any time without giving a reason. The interviewer debriefed the participant afterwards.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded themes consistent with those identified in the literature review. Tables were produced from the thematic analysis to provide a holistic view of the findings.

The most important candidate employability attribute

Table 2 *The most important candidate employability attribute SMEs look for when employing students.*

Main attribute	C1	C2	C3	C4
Experience	✓			✓
Degree				
Skills				
Personality		✓	✓	

Table 2 presents the responses of all company participants on the subject of the most important employment candidate attribute, showing that there is no agreement among the SMEs. C2 stated that they were “looking for someone who is a good person”, suggesting that they read between the lines of a student’s CV and were not particularly concerned with degree

classification and subject. C2 stated that they looked at students “hobbies and interests” in CV’s to see whether the candidate would fit in the organisation – giving an example of looking for someone who has a “interest in the local town”, further supporting the idea that SMEs value personality as a main candidate attribute.

C3 had a similar philosophy, giving an example of – “it is about the person and their ability to apply the skills that they have got to business, not necessarily them being a business graduate”. SMEs therefore appeared to show a lack of interest in the students’ existing skills as they believed that “what students lack we can teach them ... give them opportunity to experience what they are

missing or have not experienced” (C2; C3). C1 and C4 were in agreement and disagreed with C2 and C3, by suggesting “experience” was the most important candidate attribute, because “on day one, it is always good if you know what you are doing, and it is a quicker learning curve”.

Table 3 *The most important candidate employability attribute students think employers look for when employing students.*

Main attribute	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
Experience	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Degree	✓		✓				✓		✓	
Skills		✓		✓	✓			✓		
Personality			✓	✓	✓					

Table 3 presents the responses of all student participants, showing that most students mentioned experience as the most important candidate attribute to be successful at getting a job in an SME. However, students were not in full agreement as their responses mentioned other attributes such as personality, degree and skills.

Students believed that experience is the most important attribute because they felt it “puts you apart from the rest”. Students reported thinking that “SMEs are sort of looking for people that can start making an impact on day one”, which is supported by suggesting that SMEs “do not want to risk employing someone who does not know what they are doing”. This links to comments students made about the feeling that SMEs “do not have the time or the resources to train”. It is important to note that students did not characterise the skills as either transferable or technical, which could suggest the students did not possess an academic understanding of employability skills. A small minority touched on personality being the main attribute SMEs look for, suggesting that employers “look at your hobbies and personality” because if it is a “small company and you’ve

got someone who does not fit in, it causes a big ripple”.

It seems that there is no definitive answer to what SMEs want, but SMEs believe they can teach students the skills and knowledge, with research demonstrating the importance of experience and discovering personality to be more important than first assumed. However, many students are still undecided about the most important candidate employability attribute, as shown by their decision to provide more than one option in their responses.

Certainly, it can be identified that students are developing their knowledge of employability, paying more attention to experience and skills, though SMEs appear to be moving more towards personality and experience. Whilst there are clear links between student and SME views on experience, in the proverbial sense, SMEs have ‘moved the goalposts’ just as students were understanding what SMEs wanted. Therefore, the comparison between SMEs and students indicates that there is still a lack of alignment and that the “widening gap” (Duzer, 2006) continues.

Personal attributes required for SME employment

Table 4 *Personal attributes identified by SMEs as important for students.*

Personal attribute	C1	C2	C3	C4
Politeness	✓			✓
Work ethic	✓	✓		
Respect	✓			
Honesty		✓		
Positivity		✓	✓	
Resilience			✓	
Confidence			✓	✓
Punctuality				✓

SMEs did not strictly agree with one another, though a range of personality attributes have been identified. When questioned, all SMEs were in agreement that personality is important, with C4 stating “it is the most important thing”. This viewpoint is puzzling, as C4 originally stated experience was the most important attribute. This reiterates that employers do not know themselves what they want from students. C4 went on to

give the statement of “technology moves on, for example – businesses are not going to need people to do accounts, because it will be computerised, it is all about selling yourself, it is about the service that can be provided and it is how you explain the information to someone”. Therefore, technology appears to be a factor that is causing a change in the working environment and SMEs’ needs from students, which explains the widening gap.

Table 5 *Personal attributes identified by students as important for SME employment.*

Personal attributes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
Work ethic	✓	✓				✓		✓		
Calm under pressure	✓				✓					
Integrity	✓									
Honesty		✓			✓	✓				✓
Confidence		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Energy and Passion		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Positivity			✓		✓					✓
Determination				✓		✓				
Punctuality						✓				

The table shows that there is a particular agreement amongst students, whereby almost all agreed on the importance of confidence, energy and passion, with other attributes being repeated also. Students believed that confidence, energy and passion are important when “speaking to clients” and demonstrating you are “invested and want to work”. When questioned, all students said that personality was very important, S8 in particular stating personality is required to “sell yourself”, with S9 stating “it is what makes you unique”. Students appear about to be in agreement and made reasonable assumptions about the concept of SMEs being “family firms” and of a “friendly culture”. Students

believed that they would work within a “close-knit group”, due to the small number of people, and felt SMEs wanted to see whether you would “fit the culture”. In support, S10 stated that they had an interview with an SME, whereby they asked questions about “football” and “what do you do in your spare time.

The comparison of SMEs and student responses indicates that they are in agreement on the importance of personality, with some overlap of the specific personal attributes relevant to SME employment, including confidence, positivity, work ethic, energy and passion. SMEs made contradictory claims and showed

At first glance, students are not in agreement as the skills identified vary significantly from one respondent to another. However, on further inspection it is clear that the majority of students do agree on teamwork, communication and self-management.

Students believe that teamwork and communication “go together”, suggesting that teamwork is important for SMEs as they have “small teams” and that “getting along with colleagues” is crucial for exceptional business performance. Students stated that communication is essential in order to “get the job done” and due to having “fewer individuals”, students would be required to “do more”, meaning excellent communication is necessary to ensure the prevention of “incorrect information” being shared.

Students also assumed self-management to be significant due to the “multiple tasks and responsibilities” (S3) associated within SMEs. As previously cited, SMEs tend to have “fewer individuals”. Students presumed that

because of this, they would need to be able to “look after” themselves “independently” and to “not rely on other people”. Students demonstrated compassion and consideration for SME managers, expressing that they “do not have the time to manage new people”. Students also connected self-management with planning and organisation, suggesting that students need to “organise, prioritise and track” tasks, to help them to “make decisions”.

The comparison of SMEs and student responses indicates that there is some agreement on the skills required for employment in SMEs. There is overlap between SMEs and students on the importance of teamwork and communication, with mentions of planning, organisation, co-operation and problem-solving. Students also mentioned self-management, creative thinking and time management.

Skill shortages amongst students

Table 8 *Attributes SMEs think students lack for jobs in SMEs.*

Lacked	C1	C2	C3	C4
Adaptability	✓			
Initiative	✓		✓	
Patience		✓		
Appreciation		✓		
Computer skills			✓	
Contextualising information			✓	
Entrepreneurial skills			✓	
Communication skills				✓
Flexibility				✓

SMEs interpreted the ‘shortage of skills’ differently, looking more at what students lacked in general rather than skills specifically, resulting in a wide spread of responses. SMEs were not in agreement as the only skill to be repeated was initiative.

C1 and C3 stated that students lacked initiative because they “need to get more involved and make a contribution” – C3 elaborated by signifying that students “lacked entrepreneurial skills”. Although it has not been included in the table above due to it not being a specific attribute, C1 believes that “students find the transition from

university to the working environment quite difficult”, implying they are not prepared for the working environment, and may be interpreted as lacking adaptability. C3 in particular felt that the “syllabus within universities are out of date”, which could explain the misalignment between SMEs and students, as universities may not be keeping up with the rapidly changing working environment.

C2 in particular provided an interesting insight into personal attributes, believing that students have “a lack of patience”, feeling that they “do not want to wait”, due to the rapid advancement in technology. C2 further related this to students having a “lack of appreciation”, proposing students do not appreciate and value what someone knows. C3 criticised student’s computer skills

as “not where they are expected to be”, as well as stating that “students are poor at providing context to what they are seeing”, implying students lack the ability to contextualise information, and insinuating that they are not very good at adjusting their communicating abilities to different scenarios.

However, C3 complemented students, expressing that they find their “presentation skills to be good”. C3 also believes that universities needs to do more with “assurance of learning”, to ensure students are leaving with a level of development. Although there was no agreement among SMEs, their comments on graduate skills provide material for reflection in universities.

Table 9 *Attributes students think they are lacking for jobs in SMEs.*

Lacked	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
Presentation skills	✓						✓	✓		
Planning and organisation	✓									
Time management	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Adaptability		✓								
Critical thinking				✓						
Initiative				✓						
Commercial awareness				✓						
Practical experience					✓				✓	
Personal development						✓				
Punctuality								✓		
Analytical										✓
Computer skills										✓

Students responses on the subject of SME employability skills they may have lacked were assorted, which may have been due to them responding to the question in the context of either their own personal shortcomings or of students’ shortcomings in general. Although students did not agree on the shortcomings completely, they did agree on time management and presentation skills being problem areas.

S2 and S3 specified that students who “did not conduct a placement year, would be lacking in skills”. S6 declared

that students do not lack any skills, testifying that universities gives students all the opportunities to develop skills. S6 continued to explain that it is “more than meets the eye”, giving an example of working in a group – the activity would develop several skills, and that students are not mindful of skill development unless it is unequivocal.

Students believed they lacked planning and organisation, and time management skills, as they tended to complete “assignments last minute”. S4 in particular provided

responses of their personal weaknesses, stating they lacked critical thinking and initiative due to not “being able to make important decisions”, which may also be interpreted as possibly lacking problem-solving and decision-making skills. S10 mentioned analytical skills, specifying that students were not able to “interpret data”. S10 mentioned the lack of “computer skills”, suggesting students need to develop their computer skills beyond basic “Microsoft packages”. A large majority of students believed that “University is too theory based”, indicating that university may be to blame for students’ skill shortages.

SMEs listed various attributes they thought students lacked, but also complemented students on their presentation skills. This is confusing as students themselves believe that their presentation skills are underdeveloped, which may suggest students need to be more confident in their abilities. There was not significant overlap between SMEs and students, with initiative and adaptability being mentioned by a minority, although C3 and S10 did agree on student’s lack of superior computer skills. However, by combining the views of SMEs and students, an extensive list has been produced on the skills that students lack; perhaps universities may find this useful for potentially adjusting the curriculum to address the issue.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

On reflection of this research, the study has contributed to the field of employability by adding to the underdeveloped area of small business and business student alignment of expectations with respect of employability. The study has contributed firstly by discovering that, since previous research has been published, the working environment has changed. This is due to an advancement in technology, which has therefore led to a shift in SMEs idea of the model candidate for SME employment, revealing that employers now focus on students’ experience and personality. Students also changed their

perception, shifting towards experience, though skills, degree and personality were still mentioned, showing students still do not know what employers want. This contradicts previous research, as the literature identified that students followed a strong philosophy wherein achieving good academic scores was a necessity (Harvey, 2000; Sales Velasco, 2012) and that employers did not particularly rate students’ academic achievements as highly as skill competences (Branine, 2008; Finch et al., 2013; McMurry et al., 2016, Lowden et al., 2011). Although perceptions of the most important candidate attributes have changed, likewise within the literature, there is still a gap present between SMEs and students.

Furthermore, the study contributed to the field of employability by providing an in-depth investigation into personal attributes. SMEs and students both provided a list of personal attributes with explanation as to why they thought they were important for employment in SMEs. Although there were similarities between SMEs and students, including confidence, positivity, work ethic, energy and passion, the alignment was far from full. A minority of personal attributes mirrored previous research, including confidence (Archer & Davison, 2008) commitment and dedication (Tyman, 2013). Matsouka and Mihail (2016) – figure 2, identified personal attributes including extra effort, motivation, integrity and emotional intelligence. Although the study did not reiterate any of these, the study has further developed the list of both SMEs and students by adding additional personal attributes that are important for employment in SMEs.

The study also contributed to the field of employability by providing an in-depth investigation into skills required for SME employment. SMEs and students provided list of skills required for employment, showing an overlap for the importance of teamwork and communication, with mentions of planning, organisation, co-operation and problem-solving. The skills within the

literature were consistent with those identified by SMEs, including analytical abilities (Lim et al., 2016; Yap & Ling, 2016) and communication (Jackson, 2013; McMurray et al., 2016). The results of students also echoed within the limited literature, as students identified communication (Harris and King, 2015), critical thinking, teamwork and problem-solving (Jackson, 2013; Griffin & Annulis, 2013), in addition to recognising others outside of Matsouka and Mihail's (2016) findings. Therefore, the study contributed to the under-developed area of SME and student employment by adding extra skills that are seen to be important for SME employment.

Lastly, the study contributed to the field of employability by considering student shortcomings from the perception of both SMEs and students. SMEs found that students lacked various skills including initiative and contextualising information. Additionally, SMEs added that students lack personal attributes, as opposed to purely skills, giving the examples of patience and appreciation. This supports the literature that students do not have a sufficient set of skills (Abas-Mastura, et al., 2013), and reaffirms the specific skills students lack, as well as contributing by further adding student shortcomings. Students were reflective and acknowledged that they require further development, giving examples including time management and presentation. Ironically, students mentioned skills that they believed to be important for SME employment. This supports the literature, whereby students reported to admit their own skills were weak and far from employer expectations (Tran, 2013). Students did repeat the shortcomings mentioned in the literature, including communication (Griffin & Annulis, 2013) and commercial awareness (Gilworth & Thambar, 2006), as well as adding others.

The use of qualitative research methods added authenticity to the study, by having the ability to understand the reasons behind the thoughts of

employability from both SMEs and students, as previous research merely recorded responses through quantitative research methods, without any consideration of why. This method has produced an in-depth study, making contributions to the field of employability by adding the detail and filling the gaps of current research, with the aim of assessing the gap between SMEs and students. The findings showed that while the views of the students and SME employers are aligned in some respects, this alignment is far from full. Therefore, this study serves as a benchmark for further research on student and small business employability.

Recommendations

Whilst conducting this study, the researcher interestingly collected information on what SMEs and students thought of universities, for instance; whether university is worth it, whether it provides students with the required employability skills, quality of student experiences and the various support services that universities offer. Unfortunately, it was deemed out of scope for this study, though it would be interesting for other academics to conduct further research into this area.

The researcher recommends further research into students' views of employability, as this is still an under-researched area, as well as investigating the difference between the SME and large organisation perceptions of employability skills.

The research also recommends that more qualitative studies are considered when researching employability, as this field is dominated by quantitative research methods.

The researcher advocates that further research on employability is published more frequently, as this will help universities, students and employers create shared understandings of important employability skills.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that it relied on a small number of respondents. Further research with more participants may be beneficial as it would allow for more robust results.

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