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Enhancing the Employability of Graduates through an Industry-led Initiative

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of Vision 2020 as a national policy was aimed at gearing Malaysia for the status of a developed nation. This led to the introduction of numerous initiatives that have been carried out for almost two decades now. It was realised very early on that the move from an agriculture-based economy to one anchored to production and technology was heavily dependent on a competent, highly-qualified workforce. For this reason, the employability of Malaysian graduates became a primary national concern. While the number of institutions of higher learning and the number of graduates increased, industry players had continued to lament about the alleged mismatch between industry needs and the capabilities of graduates. This paper reports on a talent-development programme that was designed and tested to ascertain its effectiveness in preparing unemployed Malaysian graduates for real-world challenges in the industry. Drawing on a content analysis of reports prepared by trainers involved in the running of two cycles of this talent- development programme, we identified emerging themes that drew attention to key elements contributing to the gainful employment of the majority of the participants. The results reveal the importance of industry-led initiatives in dealing with the issue of graduate employability. Mentorship and a well-designed English language proficiency programme were found to have significantly increased the employability of the trainees. These key strengths of the programme serve as a framework for the development of future programmes that should be developed through the collaboration of industry players and institutions of higher learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Concerns about graduate employability can be traced over several decades. As early as the 1970s, Greenberg and Tully (1976) presented a report on the employability of graduates from an American college, based on the views of employers, while Baran and Shoemaker (1977) found employers to be strongly influenced by the effective communication and problem solving skills of potential employees. Since then, research on graduate employability has been carried out in many countries as demand for a highly competent workforce became a global concern. This continued global concern in the 21st century is illustrated by the works of Garwe (2014) who looked at initiatives aimed at enhancing the employability of graduates in Zimbabwe and Gokuladas (2010) who focused on the dissatisfaction of employers towards the skills of graduates in India. In the study by Gokuladas (2010), it was found that the non-technical skills of engineering graduates served as a stronger predictor of employability compared to their technical knowledge.

Many studies in the past have focused on the employability of graduates from specific disciplines, suggesting that the nature of individual courses is a determinant of employability. For example, while the study by Gokuladas (2010) focused on engineering graduates, Minten (2010) studied the employability of sport graduates, Winstead et al. (2009) looked at business graduates and Hagger (2008) examined the employability of psychology graduates. Studies have also looked at employability across multiple disciplines. Such cross-disciplinary studies by Mason et al. (2009), Smith et al. (2000), and Su and Feng (2008) were interested in understanding the factors that affected employability regardless of discipline.

Relatively fewer studies have been carried out on graduate employability in Malaysia. Lim (2010) identified predictors of employability to include ethnicity, English language proficiency, and the types of degree obtained. Khoon et al. (2013) reported improvement in the employability of graduates from one university but noted that the degree of improvement was dependent on disciplines of study. This correlated with the findings of an earlier study at the same university by Omar et al. (2009). The limitation of these studies was that they involved the examination of graduate employability at specific Malaysian institutions of higher learning. As such, the conclusions drawn were only relevant to the experiences of those specific institutions. Departing from such focus, Yoong et al. (2016) examined the content of the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 and observed how this policy document positions employers as powerful entities who dictated the role of institutions of higher learning in ensuring that graduates are employable.

Unlike the aforementioned studies, this paper adds a new dimension to research on graduate employability as it examines an industry-led initiative that was geared towards enhancing the employability of graduates. More specifically, this paper reports on the effectiveness of an industry-informed talent-development programme that was designed to support unemployed Malaysian graduates gain employment. The research objectives of this paper are:

To identify key elements in the training programme that led to the gainful employment of the majority of the participants

To examine the role of industry players in the organisation and execution of the training programme

Background of the Programme

The programme was conceived as an upskilling talent development program that equipped graduates from institutions of higher learning (IHL) with skills desired by multinational corporations (MNCs). The hope was that the participants would benefit from this bridging programme that would expose them to industry challenges while enhancing their communication skills and thereby making them more employable. The programme that ran for 10-12 weeks focused on the development of soft skills, hard skills, as well as management skills. In addition, the participants also underwent a Business English proficiency course.

The content of the programme itself was developed through a series of round table discussions between the programme developers, universities and industry players. Among others, the discussions focused on the mismatch as reflected by graduates who lacked competencies required by MNCs in Malaysia. Further discussions with university representatives, industry executives, and training providers led to the development of the training programme.

The programme ran in 2013 with support from 4 industry partners. A total of 333 graduates from 5 universities participated. The industry partners first carried out job interviews for various positions that were vacant in their companies, and only seven of the 333 candidates were offered positions in the companies. Next, 74 of the unsuccessful candidates were selected to undergo a 12-week training programme, designed through collaboration between universities and the industry partners. Having completed the 12-week programme, 70 of the 74 trainees found gainful employment within a period of three months, thereby suggesting that the nature of the training programme they attended contributed to their successful employment. In the following year, a training programme on a larger scale was carried out.

In 2014, the programme was run with financial support from the Ministry of Education Malaysia. It involved five industry partners and graduates from six IHLs. A total of 692 graduates applied to participate in the programme. They were asked to sit for an online English test to assess their proficiency; however, only 435 graduates participated in this assessment exercise. Of this number, 294 graduates

Table 1

Distribution of trainees to industry partners

Companies	HSBC	IBM	TECH MAHINDRA	EMERIO	AIG
Distribution of Trainees	50	23	24	22	20

achieved scores that placed them in a B2 band or higher in the CEFR[1] scale. Similar to what was carried out in the pilot programme, job interviews were held for these graduates and 30 were employed. Another 76 were offered places in the programme. As the programme could take in more trainees, another round of selections was carried out with the support of universities. Finally, 139 graduates registered for the programme, and each of them was assigned to an industry partner as reflected in Table 1.

The assignment of trainees to the industry partners was based on their academic backgrounds as well as available places as determined by the companies. All trainees were provided accommodation, insurance and medical coverage, and a daily meal allowance.

Two training providers were involved in the programme. One focused on the development of soft skills and management skills while the other focused on English language proficiency. The decision to offer these courses as part of the training programme was based on discussions between universities and the industry partners. In addition to these courses, the participants were also trained by technical trainers and Hiring Managers at the various industry partners. The training provider responsible for soft skills development worked closely with the industry partners to ensure that the correct skill sets and knowledge were being disseminated. Talks by industry leaders and human resource consultants were also organised as part of the training programme.

METHOD

Data collection involved the analysis of extensive reports that were prepared by training providers. The training providers, made up of those tasked with providing knowledge and skills enhancement as well as those tasked with supporting the development of communication skills were asked to keep detailed records about the management of the training programme as well as observable improvements in the trainees. This record keeping took the form of reflective journals maintained by the trainers. The trainers were advised to fill in the reflective journals on a daily basis so that their day-to-day observations were captured. However, it was agreed before the training programme began that the reflective

1 CEFR refers to the Common European Framework of Reference that serves as a universal guideline to describe the achievement of language learners. There are six reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), with A1 used to indicate a beginner and C2 to indicate mastery of the language. A B2 is described as an independent user of the language.

journals would only serve as a source of reference to the trainers who had to prepare reports at the end of the training programme. The trainers felt that the need to submit the reflective journals in addition to the final reports would be too taxing on them as they would feel compelled to prepare rather details reflective journals, and this would be too time-consuming for them.

Drawing on the reflective journals, each trainer prepared final reports about the management of the training programme. The trainers collectively agreed upon a set of guidelines for the preparation of the report. Among others, they were asked to include information about their experiences in developing the soft skills and management modules through discussions with the industry partners involved in the programme, namely HSBC, IBM, Tech Mahindra, Emerio and AIG. They were also asked to include feedback from the trainees. These guidelines therefore also served to inform trainers about what was to be included in their reflective journals. The final reports were then collected and analysed to unpack emerging themes through a content analysis of each report.

In addition to the content analysis to identify emerging themes, a pre-test and a post-test was carried out before and after the communication skills module was delivered. The aim of conducting these tests was to determine if the intervention activities had led to improvements in the performance of the trainees. Both tests were developed by the training provider and benchmarked against the CEFR to allow for a universal comparison of performance in English language skills.

The programme on developing the trainees English language communication skills were made up of 90-hours of a Business English course. The course itself contained a variety of context-specific activities that placed trainees in real world situations where they had to communicate in English. Beyond a focus on their productive skills of speaking and writing, the course also offered activities to enhance their receptive skills of listening and reading. The pre-test and post-tests were on-line assessments that covered vocabulary, grammar, as well as listening and reading skills. There were several versions of the test, and all were calibrated to the same difficulty level. The participants were assigned version 1 as the pre-test and version 2 as the post-test.

The results did not provide a passing or failing score. Instead, the numerical score was matched to the 6 bands in the CEFR. It must be noted however, that the assessment was carried out independently by the training provider and no external body was involved in verifying that the assessment process was indeed CEFR-aligned.

Limitations of the Study

The researchers were invited to analyse the reports of the trainers only after the programme had ended. For this reason, other methods of data collection such as observations of the training sessions, and interviews with the trainees could not be carried out to triangulate data gleaned from the trainers' reports.

The findings and conclusions drawn in this paper are based solely on an analysis of reports prepared by the trainers involved in programme. These reports in turn were prepared based on reflective journals that were maintained by the trainers as well as feedback from the trainees. As there was no opportunity for the authors of this paper to observe the practices during the running of the programme or to speak to the trainees, claims made in the report could not be verified. As a case in point, claims of improvement in English language proficiency as reflected in the pre-test and post-test scores. Benchmarking assessments against the CEFR is a complex process and it should be noted that the CEFR does not necessarily guarantee that different trainers used the proficiency scales in comparable ways (Harsch, 2018). Furthermore, the fact that the training providers were both the trainers and assessors of the participants' performance weakens the validity of their report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of reports prepared by the training providers revealed the emergence of the following themes which guide the discussion in this section:

i. Content development through collaboration

ii. Sharing of tacit knowledge by industry partners and mentorship

iii. Improved communication skills and overall confidence and drive

iv. Commitment of industry partners

Content Development through Collaboration

The reports revealed that the training programme itself was conceived through discussions between training providers, universities and industry partners. These discussions centred on the apparent mismatch between the skills graduates possessed and what was required by industry. Observations on this mismatch are reiterated in various studies around the globe (Allen & De Weert, 2007; Hennemann & Liefner, 2010; Wong, 2016), and all highlight the importance of ensuring that graduates possess the right skill set for the workplace. Clearly, institutions of higher learnings need to work closely with industry players when developing programmes for students as stakeholders are likely to have different understandings and expectations of programmes that prepare graduates for the workplace (Fleming & Haigh, 2017). The analysis of the reports revealed that discussions between training providers, universities and industry partners led to the decision that the training programme should focus on the enhancement of English language proficiency, soft skills and management skills. In addition to this, it was also collectively decided that the trainees would be provided with hands-on work experience by assigning them to various industry partners. Indeed, exposure to the demands of the workplace is a key determinant in the success of training programmes preparing graduates for employment (Goldberg et al., 2014; Smith-Ruig, 2014).

Beyond collaborating in the development of the programme content, industry partners also contributed to the success of the training programme by providing the trainees with the opportunity to gain first-hand work experience through a mentorship programme. This was yet another theme that emerged from the reports that were analysed.

Sharing of Tacit Knowledge by Industry Partners and Mentorship

Modules were developed for the training programme, and some of them were created with an emphasis on developing an understanding of the industry and the company that every participant was assigned early on in the training programme. These modules were handled by corporate trainers, and upon completion of the modules, the trainees were provided access to real work experience at the companies.

When the trainees were asked to evaluate the modules introducing them to the organisations that they were assigned, these were some of the remarks they provided:

• Helped trainees to prepare for the working environment

- Helped trainees to gain required skills for employment in MNCs
- Helped trainees to manage time and money effectively and wisely
- Helped trainees to gain confidence in presentations
- Helped trainees to practice English in communication by doing regular presentations.
- Good course with good experienced corporate trainers.
- Helped with teambuilding , confidence and got to know new people
- Very good modules as they fulfill current requirements
- Trainers are very supportive and knowledgeable
- The syllabus covered relevant topics

Clearly, the opportunity of being trained by corporate trainers added a dimension that the participants were very receptive to. It provided them an opportunity to experience the kind of on-the-job training that they would experience in the real world. Corporate trainers are in a unique position to offer trainees access to a great deal of information and knowledge that academics in institutions of higher learning may not have access to (Kessels, 2001). This is because, unlike academics, corporate trainers are able to tap into tacit knowledge that often remains within the individual industries.

As mentioned earlier in this section, every trainee in the programme was assigned to an industry partner. This was done early on in the training programme and the distribution of the trainees to the industry partner was dependent on the availability of places within each organisation as well as the academic background of the participants. The decision to assign each trainee to an industry partner appeared to have a positive impact on the trainees. The trainees

reported feeling a sense of pride because they felt they belonged to a prestigious organisation. This was encouraged by the fact that throughout the training period, they were constantly being identified in relation to the organisation they were assigned.

In addition to completing the corporate training modules, the programme also included industrial attachments where the participants received on-the-job training at the organisations they were assigned. Equipped with the knowledge they gained through the corporate training modules, the trainees were able to begin their industrial attachment with a greater degree of confidence. As part of their commitment to the programme, the industry partners agreed to assign each trainee to experienced personnel. They would serve as mentors to the trainees. Among others, the mentors trained the participants in specific skills needed to carry out their roles and responsibilities within the organisation. The trainees themselves reported favourable experiences in relation to the mentoring they received, consistent with the findings of Harris et al. (2015), who reported that the overwhelming majority of trainees in a provincial government ministry mentoring programmes found learning to be effective. The receptiveness of trainees towards mentoring programmes is because such training offers the situational context into which knowledge can be applied (Naweed & Ambrosetti, 2015). Furthermore, being mentored also gives trainees the opportunity to impress upon their mentors their dedication and keen interest in joining the organisation, and this possibly makes them more appealing candidates for a permanent position at the organisations. However, an important determinant in the success of any mentoring programme is quality mentors who encourage committed newcomers (Lam et al., 2002).

Improved Communication Skills and Overall Confidence and Drive

A pre-test was given to ascertain the students' English language proficiency level at entry point into the programme. At the end of the programme, a post-test was administered to gauge if there was improvement in the trainees' English language skills. Tables 2 and 3 that follow show the pre-test and post-test results of the trainees based on the CEFR scale as well as the mean and standard deviation values of both tests:

Table 2

Number of trainees in relation to performance in pre-test and post-test

CEFR Scale	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	Total
Pre-test	1	21	88	28	1	139
Post-test	0	4	42	79	7	132*

* 7 trainees were absent for the post-test due to personal reasons

Table 3

Mean and standard deviation in pre-test and post-test

	Pre-English Score	Post-English Sore
Mean	53.86363636	68.60606061
Standard deviation	11.93351348	10.7998852
Observations	132	132
P value	0.000**	

P < 0.005 (two-tailed test)

(N=132)

Table 2 reveals that all except four of the trainees achieved a minimum B2 after completing the programme. Table 3 displays the pre-test and post-test means, standard deviations and P value. The mean scores for the pre-test and post-test are 53.86 and 68.60 respectively. The difference between means is statistically significant. In the above table, since the P value is 0 (< 0.05) at 5% level, it can be concluded that there is significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores. Given the significant paired-sample *t* tests, it can therefore be concluded that the students' English language proficiency was greater at the end of the program than at the beginning of the program. As revealed in Table 2, the majority of the trainees (79) were found to be at C1. The observable improvement of the majority, particularly from B1 to B2, and B2 to C1, clearly correlates with the gainful employment of the programme participants and supports the observation by Waldron and Leveitt (2009) in their longitudinal study which reported how communication-intensive training programmes led to the employment of 40% of trainees in a training programme.

Both language teachers assigned to teach on the Business English course and the corporate trainers focusing on soft skills and management skills commented on the trainees' English language proficiency in their individual reports. According to the teachers' reports, the programme participants were initially found to be reticent and uncomfortable using English for communication. The early reticence was probably caused by the fact that the trainees almost never used English in daily interaction. However, the programme required the trainees to be immersed in an English speaking environment for an extended period of time and this appeared to benefit the trainees. Among others, the trainees had to be reminded frequently to converse only in English at all times. The language teachers observed that after approximately two weeks of the immersion programme, the trainees became accustomed to communicating in English among themselves, and required less reminders. Further observations were also found in the trainers' reports:

i. ... most of the students had a lack of proficiency in using the English Language.

Only two or three students were comfortable in the English Language and were able to express their thoughts well. Class participation was limited to the same group of students who felt at ease using the English Language but as a facilitator I encouraged and prompted the others and this slowly brought most of them out of their "shells".

ii. ... However, at the culmination of the 10-week programme, there was a discernible difference in the students' level of confidence and they were more forthcoming in using the English Language.

iii. The students were very quiet and very reluctant to participate in the first week. Subsequently they began to interact. English language was a great challenge to overcome. By the end they exhibited great confidence and able to communicate in English reasonably well.

iv. They had courage to participate though their English level was below requirement. Due to their courage they improved the language tremendously during the programme.

v. Some of them had much difficulty in communicating in English during the beginning of the programme but by the end they were able to do presentations in English.

Several factors contributed to these observable improvements. First, rapport between the language teachers and the trainees was seen to be important in helping the trainees gain confidence. This is a point stressed by Carter and Henrichsen (2015) who highlighted the importance of "teacher pedagogical practices and behaviours" that helped create a learning environment conducive for adult ESL/EFL learners.

Second, the English language training provider also held discussions with representatives of the various companies to which the trainees were assigned and this was also believed to have contributed to the success of the language course. During these discussions, the language trainers were able to discern the specific language skills that were desired by the various organisations, and this in turn helped them design activities and develop supplementary material that helped trainees hone the right skills. This collaboration to identify the real world needs for English at the workplace is key for the development of an effective English language programme (Kassim & Ali, 2010).

Third, trainees were asked to assess the language teachers and the Business English course at regular intervals rather than at the end of the programme. This allowed the teachers to make changes to their delivery of lessons as well as changes to materials selection to realistically meet the needs of the trainees. The observations in this study are well supported by Black and Wiliam (1998), Kim and Kim (2017), and Shute and Kim (2014) who asserted that regular feedback based on assessments could indeed enhance learning.

Commitment of Industry Partners

The last and perhaps most significant theme emerging from the analysis of the reports was the theme of commitment. Besides the obvious commitment to the programme by the trainees who were

extrinsically motivated to gain employment, the commitment of the other stakeholders in the programme, particularly the industry partners appeared to play a crucial role in the success of the programme. As reported earlier, the role of the industry partners was felt most prominently in the assignment of highly skilled and experienced corporate trainers from the organisations to collaborate with academics in developing the training modules, and in the opportunity provided to the trainees to gain industry experience under a mentoring programme. Because the modules were developed by highly experienced corporate trainers, much of the content was designed with the needs of managers in mind. Content such as this, according to the training providers, allowed trainees to develop strong management skills. Among others, the activities in class focused a great deal on problem-solving and being creative in addressing problems. Teamwork was also emphasised through projects with tight deadlines.

The background of the trainers was also reported to be a key contributing factor towards the success of the programme. The good rapport between trainers and trainees was also seen as contributing to the overall effectiveness of the programme. All trainees were asked to rate the trainer assigned to them by group and the following was the average approval rating of each trainer:

Trainer A (IBM) - 97.6%
Trainer B (HSBC – 1) - 98.2%
Trainer C (HSBC – 2) - 97.6%
Trainer D (EMERIO) -98.6%
Trainer E (TECH MAHINDRA) - 97.6%
Trainer F (AIG) - 99.3%

In addition to the modules and mentoring, the trainees were also exposed to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes managed by the organisations. The aim of incorporating this element into the training programme was to help the trainees develop their soft skills, that is, the development of interpersonal qualities needed to work in a team to resolve problems related to people (Taylor, 2016). The CSR element was worked into the training with trainees completing reflection essays on their participation at the CSR activities. The training providers were with the trainees at these events and reported on how the activities shaped the much needed skills and values needed in the corporate world. Among others, the training provider asserted that the CSR activities encouraged the development of leadership skills, the ability of the trainees to plan and work in a team as they were sensitised to their social responsibilities. The CSR activities included the organisation of recycling projects, helping out at old folks' homes and running competitions for children from underprivileged homes. According to the trainers, the trainees exhibited maturity, confidence and independence when organising and participating in the various CSR activities. These observations are consistent with those of Canziani (2014) who asserted that immersing interns in CSR activities would allow them to engage better with goals such as learning

about stewardship and ethics. The trainees themselves provided the following feedback based on their CSR experiences:

- It taught us to be more appreciative and be humble
- The CSR program gave me the opportunity to learn more about the *Orang Asli* (Malaysia's indigenous tribe) and my view of them has changed
- It was a very inspiring activity and has opened my mind to using the skills at my future company
- I learnt to think differently

The observation of the trainers and feedback from the trainees themselves support the findings of Mozes et al. (2011) and Supanti et al. (2015) who found that participation in CSR activities increased motivation to work among employees.

Resulting Change in Participants

As a result of quality content development, the sharing of tacit knowledge by industry partners, a focus on communication skills and the overall commitment of industry partners, the trainers made the several observations in their respective reports with regard to changes they observed in the participants. The analysis revealed subthemes of commitment to the programme, self-directedness, and knowledge enhancement. Some of the observations of the trainers are reproduced here:

Commitment of the Programme. i. The participants generally displayed an interest in the programme. However, at the onset of the programme, most of them were even lacking confidence in their abilities to delve into the corporate world.

ii. The participants were very determined and committed to learn more.

iii. Another point to note is that the soft skills taught helped to develop their competency and knowledge which gave them the confidence to venture into the corporate world. What these students showed was that even an average graduate could be moulded to take on a job with a High Impact Company like IBM.

iv. Most of them were participative from the onset. They were very determined to succeed. The students generally were very enthusiastic. Apart from a few who struggled with the English language, the majority was conversant. They also exhibited good team spirit and they were the class that performed best in the CSR project. The students exhibited interest in what was being taught and some of the students actually asked pertinent questions in relation to the modules taught. This showed that they were applying their critical thinking skills.

v. Two of the students had job offers in the midst of the training but they opted to turn down the offers as they were impressed with the training and they felt that this training would bode well for their future.

Self-directedness. i. They even organized themselves by ensuring that every student was required to do a presentation before the commencement of their classes. They also made it a point that they kept changing the seating arrangements everyday so that the

students would mingle and learn to adapt to changes thrust upon them.

ii. Overall the students were average but again this was not a handicap at all as they were able to grasp what was being taught. The class was highly participative and they also did well in their CSR project. Some of them also displayed strong tendencies to be entrepreneurs.

iii. This was an ambitious group who was willing to take risks and displayed good communication skills and has high potential with proper coaching and guidance.

iv. On many occasions, they took their own initiative to plan and organise learning skills and to hone their skills.

Knowledge Enhancement. i. (At the beginning) they were not receptive to the importance of soft skills as compared to technical knowledge. It was only at the end of the programme that they recognised the fact that soft skills are also necessary and equally important in the corporate world. They were committed in learning and were very comfortable in the working environment.

Despite strengths of the programme which led to the gainful employment of the majority of the trainees, there were also some participants who provided critical feedback for improvement:

- English class should have specific schedule to be followed.
- No proper system on monitoring the trainees to make sure if they are speaking in English
- Job scope that will be offered to graduates after this programme is not clearly stated
- Choice of companies limited which means the trainees do not have choices
- The schedule changes (weekend activities) should be informed earlier.
- The trainees don't have the chance to do on-the-job training at [name of organisation omitted]
- Should provide sufficient information about this program so people don't hesitate to join this program
- Do not know the future path after the end of training.
- Feel insecure because of the uncertainty in job future
- Not given specific training for job or task

The comments above reveal that there are gaps within the programme that need to be address for further improvement. While the overall experience appeared to have been good, there were trainees who did not benefit as much as others. For example, while the mentoring programme appeared to have worked well, there was a trainee who felt that he/she did not receive the exposure that other trainees received.

CONCLUSION

The programme boasts an impressive success rate of 96% gainful employment within 3 months after completing the training programme. It can be concluded

that the formula used in conceptualising and executing the talent-development programme was an effective one and can serve as a model for future programme aimed at empowering unemployed graduates with the knowledge and skills necessary for successful employment. The findings suggest that collaboration, specifically between higher learning institutions and willing industry partners, is needed to address the supposed mismatch between the graduates universities produce and the employees the industry desires. A mechanism is definitely needed to ensure that the conversation continues between industry and higher learning institutions. Beyond this conversation, industry partners must be willing to invest time and effort in ensuring that fresh graduates are ready for the challenges of the workplace.

In relation to collaboration between university and industry partners, independent researchers should be included in future training programmes from the onset. This is necessary so that all key elements of the training programme, from conceptualisation right up to execution, are effectively captured. Conclusions drawn about the effectiveness of such training programmes can also be properly validated. Indeed, future studies on talent development programmes should focus on aspects of measurement and assessment to determine how improvements are defined and measured.

The fact remains however, that the programme supports the gainful employment of a significant majority of trainees. The development of the course content through collaboration between higher learning institutions and industry partners appears to have greatly contributed to the success of the training programme. This finding supports Kramer-Simpson's (2018) assertion that higher learning institutions should work towards establishing long-term relationships with industry partners and seeked the support of strong mentors for internship programmes. It is therefore recommended that the development of future training programmes and perhaps even existing university courses involve collaboration between higher learning institutions and industry partners so that graduates are better prepared for real world needs. References to the importance of the mentorship programme indicate the need for effective internship programmes for university students. Corporate organisations have to be more willing to accept undergraduates for internship programmes so that they are better equipped with the desired knowledge and the skill set.

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