

Perception of Graduating Students towards their Professional Settlement

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ABSTRACT

This research article aimed at unraveling the perceptions, aspirations and efforts of the graduating students towards professionalism development and enabling the sense of professional placement in them. The researcher adopted qualitative research paradigm and narrative inquiry method for it. The information were generated from four purposively selected graduating students representing diverse fields via in-depth interview and group discussion. The findings revealed that the academic leadership was unable to promote the sense of professionalism development in the graduating students due to the lack sufficient efforts in skilling them. Their own attempts were also found insufficient due to various causes including lack of sufficient career awareness, limited professional opportunities, and adverse working environment in the nation.

Key Terminologies: Educational leadership, professionalism, employability, entrepreneurship, placement

The Context of the Study

Human capital, careers advice, and career ownership are important aspects of self-perceived employability (Donald et al., 2019). Education tends to enable the students make timely professional settlement after the completion of their formal education. Academic institutions support the students “reconcile their competing micro-identities by recasting a new individualized professional entrepreneur identity” (Zainuddin & Mukhtar, 2022). The educational institutions bear responsibility of preparing students for it in addition to the formal certification as summative evaluation. They are, therefore, expected to prepare the students for their professional life as demanded by their projected fields and implant propensity of the graduates to exhibit anticipated attributes in them (Tomlin, 2017).

Educators and policy makers bear responsibility to design curricula, develop global employability capabilities and relevant policies to prepare employable graduates across the globe (Mohan Dass et al., 2018). We need to train our students in dealing positively with praise or setbacks or criticism and help them to be able to understand, negotiate

and balance various views and beliefs to reach workable solutions (Kivunja, 2014). The students develop their professional skills gradually along with their academic degree and prepare readiness to face fiercely competitive professional arena. Kivunja (2014) further states that social constructivist learning processes can be enriched, extended and improved to levels hitherto unseen, as a result of computer mediated learning, critical thinking and problem-solving, innovation, creativity and teamwork.

Educational leaders bear responsibility of preparing their students for adjusting in the rapidly changing world and the society in which they live and proceed their professional life having 21st century challenges. The students find the professional world confusing and tough to tackle in their own if they are not well equipped with the professional skills and basic life skills for which educational institutions bear responsibility. How do the academic leaders train, guide, orient and inspire those graduating students during their formal studies? Have those efforts been adequate in this regard? Do the students feel that they are getting appropriate career guidance before entering the professional world? These all concerns have opened avenue for conducting this research.

Literature Review

Literature review helps to determine whether the topic is worth studying, and it provides ideas into ways in which the researcher can limit the scope to a needed area of inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This article has been developed on the basis of the literature related to leadership theories, influence and inspiration from the college leaders and graduating students' perceptions towards their professional settlement. The relevant and available literature has been discussed under the following sub-headings:

Leadership Role in Career Guidance

Career development is related to the transformational leadership, education, training, and motivation (Riwukore et al., 2022). Academic leaders inspire high-quality preparation practices, and acknowledge the importance of stimulating professional development (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Knowledge sharing, entrepreneurial behavior and psychological empowerment motivate the students towards entrepreneurial activities during their studies (Fauzi et al., 2021).

The inspirational and motivational role of the academic leaders can be lively narrated as the exploration of the real life perception. The academic leaders are the role model to the students, and their guidance plays vital role in all the aspects of life including the professional sector. The guidance from their college prepare them for the forth-approaching professional life. Riwukore et al. (2022) further associate that transformational leadership and education and training foster career development. The role of educational leadership, in this regard, has to be that of a catalyst or change agent in envisioning the capability for professional adjustment.

Professionalism and Career Development

Powell and Snellman (2004) opine that the rise of opportunity markets allow rich parents to buy elite education and other desirable outcomes for their children. Such market driven educational programs ensure their economic prosperity and aspired status distinct from the reach of common people. The students' performance could excel and deliver better results if the area of study is matching and aligned with the intrinsic factors of the individual's personality, leading to motivation and commitment to work (Ahmed et al., 2017).

Robertson et al. (2021) stated that human capital theory locates the desired outcome of education as economic value and uses the imagery of money to clarify how education can support the development of career and the production of wider forms of social and economic value. Under the conditions of globalization, the competitive advantages provision is achieved on the basis of the development of efficient human capital (Podra et al., 2020) that best adjusts in the most challenging economic arena.

Wittorski (2022) states that academic development is generally viewed from the angle of students' placement in their respective profession via job or self-employment. These two fields of profession are chosen by the people having distinct attributes in them. Gowsalya and Kumar (2015) conclude their article with the remark that the employers mostly seek foundational professional skills, knowledge of technology, communication skills and aptitude for chosen work at the time of fresher recruitment. Saunders and Zuzel (2010), in their quantitative research, drew conclusion of the primary data that skills such as enthusiasm, dependability and team-working scored higher than subject knowledge skills, whilst commercial awareness, negotiation and networking were given lowest priority.

Regarding entrepreneurship development, Gonsalves and Rogerson (2019) propose the skills of team competence, competitiveness, technological innovation and enthusiasm as the basic qualities in an entrepreneur or business incubator. Ahmad et al. (2011) emphasize high business operating skills, skills to obtain market share that suits the size and capability, and skills to offer more special services for success in business market. Schmitt-Rodermund (2004) reviewed previous literature and put combined remark that entrepreneurs seem to have a high need for achievement, show creativity and initiative, are risk takers and self-confident, have an internal locus of control, need independence and autonomy, accomplish their tasks with great energy and commitment, and, finally, are persistent in following their aims. The article further emphasizes the characteristics such as leadership, team spirit, self-efficacy, and positive competition for success in entrepreneurship development.

The propensity to act and entrepreneurship education give positive entrepreneurial intention among undergraduate students. Higher education has responsibility to nurture young generation to learn more about entrepreneurship (Astiana et al., 2022). Putting employers' need above the purpose of subject knowledge creation and development will change the nature of higher education (Cheng et al., 2022). The literature focuses on the creative role of academic institutions as expected to insert in their esteemed students such concepts of professional skills along with the curricular requirement.

Bridging Academia Industry Gap

Are the academic achievements enough for the best adjustment of the graduates in the professional lives? How much responsibility do the educational leaders bear in regards to fitting the students in the job or business market? How can the perceived gap between the academia and industry be filled? Büth et al. (2017) opine in the line of minimizing the gap that the existing curriculum must be extended by didactic elements of problem-solving, applied knowledge and utilization of communication skills. In the views of Carpenter and Stimpson (2007), the systematic learning is achieved through both and non-formal educational experiences. In this sense, education has the prominent role in developing professionalism in the learners which is highly contextual and subjective in nature.

If the educational institutions are too formal and rigidly directed by the prescribed curriculum only, the professional market remains aloof and there is need of additional attempts for skills (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Etzkowitz and Zhou (2017) evaluate the role of academic institutions and propose they extend their teaching capabilities from educating individuals to shaping organizations in entrepreneurial education and incubation programs. A 'soft skill development program' should be embedded in the curriculum to yield productive graduates with synergized combination of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills (Zeidan & Bishnoi, 2020). Fadel and Trilling (2010) urge the students apply essential 21st century skills—problem solving, communication, teamwork, technology use and innovation, and adjusting and adapting strategies to accommodate new circumstances is an essential "flex-ability" that everyone must develop in fast-changing times.

In the words of Etzkowitz et al. (2000) the university becomes a key element of the innovation system both as human capital provider and seed-bed of new firms in a knowledge-based economy. They further opine that the interaction of government, industry and academia is shifting, from previous modes of separation or control, into a 'triple helix' of overlapping, yet relatively autonomous, spheres. The combined efforts of three vital sectors i.e. government, industry and academia are expected to play the role of catalyst in bridging the gap between academic institutions and career markets.

Academic institutions enable the students prepare the “new face” of 21st century skills and develop a diversely skilled and entrepreneurial workforce that is better equipped to serve the society (Ghafar, 2020). The multitude of possibilities characteristic of the digital world implies that adaptability is based on self-direction and professional decision making (Dishon & Gilead, 2021). The ideas foster ways to contextualize knowledge, develop skills, and personalize the core entrepreneurial competencies so as to accumulate to the all-round development of human capital. The brighter aspect of this phenomenon is to empower the graduates with the skills and capacity for sound future in the most competitive professional world. The summarized version of the above literature indicates some revised role of the academic leaders so as to ease professional settlement of the students.

Methods

This research applied qualitative research paradigm and narrative inquiry method. Narrative inquiry method, according to Lyons and LaBoskey (2002), is “the fundamental activity of mind, constituting an intentional, reflective activity in a form of story as perceived by the narrator” (p. 21). These narratives contain accounts of human progress, perfectibility, decline and loss within a framework of culture and worldview (Mertova, 2007). This method is applicable in depicting the lived experiences of the informants full of struggles, excitements and achievements. The form of narration refers to the art of delivering the contents as the natural flow of lived experiences.

The four informants of this research were purposively selected from various subjects of diverse bachelor level classes of both general and technical fields. Two of them belonged to yearly system where as the other two represented semester system classes in order to draw opinions from diversified methodological practices. I conducted in-depth interview in person and little discussion in pairs regarding the major issues or research questions. Their perception and expectation from the college regarding their career advancement was the central attention during the interview.

The theme wise discussions were followed by interpretations in support of generated primary data and relevant literature as the secondary sources of information. The discussions and interpretations were proceeded via thematizing and narrating in the forms of major findings of the research. The researcher’s own observation of the present professional world was also given due spaces during interpretation. Finally, the conclusion was drawn as the perception of young learners towards their professional settlement in the nation or elsewhere.

Findings

As directed by the research design, the students were inquired on various grounds of their life struggle related to educational achievements, skills generation, projected profession, perception towards achieving the career goal, guidance from the college leaders, and progress in professional settlement. The participants of the research expressed their perceptions about career choice, guidance, perceived struggles and professional settlement. Regarding the future profession, the participants were found still in confusion or not firmly decided yet. In this regard, Participant A expressed his view:

[]I never thought of going abroad for work as I intend to do something in my own country but I have not decided exactly what to do. I prefer job to business but I don't have any idea about the exact job and the process of joining it. I have heard that it is hard to find a job in Nepal and I need to make hard efforts. In fact I don't know how I can prepare for my future profession.

The above remark indicates that the students need effective career counseling and career guidance to decide the appropriate profession. They get confused in the selection of suitable profession as per their nature, interest and capacity. The career choice of the students is greatly influenced by the level of their social status, financial resources, affordability and future employability (Ahmed et al., 2017). But the awareness regarding the choice needs some sort of guidance and inspiration from reliable and trusted persons including the academic leaders.

While inquiring about learning basic skills at the college for easy adaptation in the working field, Participant B was confused in the beginning and finally remarked:

.....You mean? Skills? In fact, we are giving priority to the studies in all subjects so that we could get good marks. Besides this we have not attended any kind of trainings or learning sessions for it and no one has suggested us to join any additional skill related trainings so far. The campus has not organized such trainings formally and we haven't approached outside either.

This opinion also highlights the fact that in present context, theoretical knowledge and academic degrees are prioritized by educational institutions over professional skill development. The cultivation of 21st-century skills would allow students to adapt to a rapidly changing technological and professional world (Dishon & Gilead, 2021). The globalized and complicated professional world demands well skilled and efficient human resources in every field.

In the next interview session, Participant C was asked whether the college leaders would orient and counsel them for their easy professional settlement. She opined:

[].....*basic orientation program organized at the beginning of the first year class simply covers the activities related to teaching learning and evaluation. The teachers give briefing about the courses and some rules to follow. We are simply suggested to become successful person which is intended to ensure better performance in the studies. We don't get any additional guidance for our future profession. The college has given due importance to maintain regular classes, home assignments, copies correction and our participation in learning. The campus chief and the coordinator enter the classroom time to time and encourage us for better learning. .*

The ideas clarify that the entire college is well concerned and devoted for the sake of better academic results but there is limited orientation in the line of placing the graduates professionally. Teaching 21st century skills should not be seen as additional “obligation” of teaching and learning paradigm of an institute but on the contrary, it should be embedded in the mission of education (Ghafar, 2020). It means 21st century skills were not embedded in the teaching learning procedure adopted in the college that Participant C belongs to as per the nature of the courses and classes.

Participant D, in the same regard, expressed his view that they are sent to the targeted field for the internship as a mandatory provision of their course. She expressed her view thus:

[]*We are the students of technical field and study in semester system. In addition to our theory courses, we are taken to the concerning fields from time to time for collecting ideas of the work field. We are sent to the field as an internship practice as full work load at the time of our final semester. We get the certificate of completion after the internship which can be supportive for job.*

The students of technical field, sent for their internship service as directed by their curriculum, are trained for the intended work. The experiences and certificates support them in their professional settlement. Will the internship certificate ensure their expected job in the future? In reply to this question Participant D expressed his views thus

[].....*the certificate of our internship simply makes us able to work in the field and supports in joining normal type of jobs in the related field. In case of better jobs we need to face highly competitive job market. A large number of candidates apply for the limited seats and selection is made via written test, interview and practical work. But the competition takes place among a large mass of the technical people having basic internship certificate.*

The views of Participant D clarify that various skills play supporting role in the working field even in the technical sector as well. She further informed that the students were fully loaded with the content related courses during their studies and had no spare

time with them for the participation in any kind of additional trainings. Donald et al. (2019) are of the opinion that the university careers service center is responsible for managing relationships with industry, showcasing employer opportunities and preparing students for the application process. While inquiring about career guidance and support from the college regarding the professional settlement, Participant A opined thus

[] *...as a regular student of my college I participate in most of the extra-curricular activities. I don't remember any kind of program conducted in the campus directly related to my job or profession. Sometimes our teachers suggest us to think about Public Service Commission (PSC). I had requested to my campus chief to help me find a job for me and he had promised to contact in different places. However, he could not manage any opportunity for me.*

The ideas of Participant A further inspired me to think about the matter seriously because he was found in heavy confusion being such a regular and sincere student of the college. Two of his friends, promptly available, were called for the discussion about their perception and expectation towards the college. They expressed their views anonymously that they wished to prepare for their future profession and needed some sort of guidelines for it. They were ready to spend extra time if the college could organize trainings for it. They expected a heavy gap between their expectation from the college and the actual services provided to them especially related to their future profession.

Discussions

Participant A and Participant B expressed their similar version that the entire college management was devoted to effective teaching learning and better results but the concept of employability was not the agenda of discussion in the management. Their efforts of imparting quality education were simply oriented to effective output i.e. result with good percentage or grade. This situation is adverse to the provision in the UK where the government designates the responsibility for employability as an important task for HEIs (Cheng et al., 2022).

Regarding the efforts of the college in professional settlement of the students, Participant C opined that the college would organize orientation program at the beginning of the session but it was simply concerned about college rules and regulations including teaching learning and evaluation. The program was limited in the discussion about course coverage and effective exam participation. The teachers would also motivate and encourage them from time to time in the same line. None of the programs would inspire and motivate them to generate the essential skills that their professional world would demand. This situation contradicts the idea of Mohan Dass et al. (2018) that the employability skills demanded by various employers across the globe are in a state of flux and companies, policy-makers and academic institutions need to work together to design an inclusive, modern human capital strategy.

The opinion of Participant D, representing the technical subject category, seems unclear and incomplete in regards to professional preparation. It means the teaching learning activities are comparatively productive and creative in the technical subjects but the efforts from the side of the leadership are almost similar to the other non-technical subjects which contradicts the ideas of Okolie et al. (2020) that teaching generic skills is inadequate due to poor learning environment, lack of staff with industry experience, and over-dependence on theoretical content teaching. The short provisional internship, just intended for the curricular formality, is insufficient but supportive in the professional development in the graduates.

Participant D further remarked that the certificate of internship completion they receive is simply a part of their curriculum and is mandatory to receive their transcripts after the completion of their degrees. Therefore, many of them simply take that something beneficial for their professional settlement. Moreover everyone graduating from the same institution get similar certificate of internship completion regardless of the differences in efforts given and other factors like regularity, punctuality, working efficiency etc. that could differentiate the higher achievers in their selection.

All the interviewees of the research expressed uniformed expression that the colleges ensure them with the academic degrees but are far away from the basic skills for the professional settlement. Their expectations cover career counseling from professionals of respective fields, field works related to their targeted professions and trainings for the skills as per the demand of the works side by side during their graduation. They argued that they could join the work within a short period after graduation if they were prepared for the profession during the regular studies.

Conclusion

The researcher inquired the perceived reality of the graduating students on the grounds of attempting professional settlement amid full of struggles and hardships. The informants expressed their anonymous voice that they are failing to get basic guidance and support from their colleges in their professional preparation and the entire efforts are centralized to better academic degrees. Their perceptions do not match the ideas of Okolie et al. (2019) that academic institutions need to inspire and motivate students to increase the knowledge, skills, self-efficacy and qualities required by the labor market. Professional world, on the contrary, demands highly efficient and skillful human resource in this massively globalized competitive age (Robertson et al., 2021). The informants, as the most responsible youths of the nation, see various causes behind the situation including lack of sufficient career awareness schemes, limited professional opportunities and adverse working environment in the nation.

The focus of the academic leaders, as the findings reveal, has to lay on offering professional skills along with the degrees or academic certificates. They are found inefficient in helping graduating students envision the sense of professionalism development in the graduating students and skilling them accordingly. The findings further signal that the provisional internship programs of some of the technical subjects also focus on mere curricular requirements. Neither the profession related skills are integrated with the prescribed curriculum nor initiated by the leadership additionally. It has been the cause of frustration and low achievement of the students. The academic institutions have to bear responsibility of preparing their graduates as per the demand of their professional world. Incorporating professional skills in the regular curriculum and making additional efforts in skills generation could be some possible ways out.

The findings, however, are the outcome from single dimension i.e. students' perception about their placement in professional career. The context can be further studied from other angles that is the perception of the academic leaders and the employers with their long term lived experiences. It can be recommended for the future research in broader sense so that it could open avenue in narrowing the academia industry gap and minimizing the unemployment problem of the nation.

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