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EMPLOYABILITY BEYOND THE DIPLOMA: REASSESSING THE ROLE OF PRACTICAL TRAINING IN UZBEKISTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Introduction

Among developing education systems, the importance of higher education has been shifting from simply graduating students to ensuring that graduates enter into the workforce successfully. This is not an exception in Uzbekistan. The country has made a huge step towards higher education in the last ten years, with the opening of new universities, raising the number of students per university and positioning education as an important pillar in the national process of modernization. However, there is a growing concern that is shared by both students and employers and by educators in general: many graduates from universities are still entering the labor market without the skills necessary to operate in the workplace.

This is a larger global shift in the perception of employability. In the past, hiring managers only considered the grade point averages of graduates, but that's not the case anymore. Instead, they are more interested in communication, teamwork, adaptability, digital literacy, critical thinking, and work experiences. Under such conditions theoretical education is frequently not enough.

This challenge is especially evident in the post-Soviet educational environments, where higher education has traditionally focused on theoretical strictness and formal learning. These systems have good academic content but may offer less in the way of experiences and professional activities. This means that students often struggle to transfer the skills they have learnt to their working environments, which are often dynamic.

Practical training — including internships, fieldwork, simulations, and workplace-based learning — has therefore become an increasingly important component of higher education reform. In addition to skill acquisition, hands-on experience helps students appreciate corporate culture, clarify workplace expectations and gain confidence in their decision-making in the real world.

The current article analyzes the correlation between practical training opportunities and job preparation level of students in Uzbekistan. It is suggested that employability is not solely a product of academic learning but also of the ability of universities to incorporate experiential learning into the educational process. Meanwhile, the article critically reflects upon structural barriers that persist in the lack of meaningful practical experience.

The Changing Meaning of Employability

The idea of employability has undergone significant change in the last 20 years. The educational role of the university was viewed mainly in the light of the transfer of knowledge. Today, however, the term employability has come to mean that a graduate can adapt, communicate, collaborate, and work in the workplace.

International experience has shown time and time again that transferable skills are as important as academic specialization to employers. A graduate should be able to deal with uncertainty, solve problems and apply theory to practical situations. Consequently, universities are increasingly being challenged to train students both academically and professionally for the world.

The national policy of Uzbekistan in this regard is especially topical because of the accelerated pace of economic modernization in the country. As industries grow, they will need employees who

can thrive in competitive and evolving work environments. But, there is some evidence that there is a mismatch between the demands of the labour market and the content of higher education courses.

According to Karimova (2025), internship systems provide the opportunity to use the theoretical knowledge in real-world situations, and it gives students a chance to enhance their communication skills, self-confidence, and professional awareness. Analogously, Khasanova and Orzibekov (2025) point out that practical training is also an important part of being adaptable, team-oriented and responsible.

Notwithstanding these benefits, there are still disparities in universities' offering experiential learning opportunities. Internships in many cases are not meaningful learning experiences but a formality instead. Placements are not required to have a formal mentorship program, professional feedback or significant involvement with responsibility within the workplace.

This is a sign of an institutional challenge. Employers often seek graduates to have some practical skills that may not be fully developed in higher education institutions as mentioned by Utkirov (2024). As a result, graduates frequently come out of University with a high education level but a limited skill set.

The purpose of this lesson is to provide students with practical experience in developing their professional identity.

A major result of practical training is the establishment of professional identity. While students learn disciplinary knowledge in classrooms, learning in a work place gives them insight into how this knowledge applies in actual institutional settings.

Internships and work placements provide students with samples of the organizational structure, communication, hierarchy, and expectations within an organization. Students start to appreciate things they cannot experience at school that are a part of the real world in the workplace.

But, more importantly, practical learning builds confidence. Meaningful internships often result in students feeling more comfortable in communication, making better decisions, and being more aware of the culture of the workplace. When we go to work, we learn what we were uncertain about, which lowers the uncertainty.

Confidence and employability go hand in hand. People who have already had contact with the professional world are better at conducting interviews, working in a team and dealing with organizational tasks, than those who have only had contact with the academic world.

Self-Awareness also comes from practical training. Students may find communication, time management or adaptability to be one of the areas they need to improve in when they go on internship, and they have the opportunity to enhance their skills and grow professionally before joining the workforce. In this dimension, experiential learning is not only about the learning of skills, but socialization of professionals.

Institutional Limitations and Unequal Access

Although practical training offers substantial benefits, access to high-quality experiential learning remains uneven. There are many students who face major difficulties when it comes to getting a workplace placement or internship.

A common one is inadequate institutional coordination. Universities might not have good connections with employers who offer meaningful professional opportunities for students. In some cases, however, students are on their own to find internships, which can further widen the gap in outcomes according to the networks or social connections the students have.

There is great variation in the quality of internships. Some positions offer great mentorship opportunities and active involvement in work projects, whereas others are repetitive administrative

tasks with little educational significance. If not well organized and monitored, internships might turn into hollow experiences.

Communicate between university and students is another challenge. Commonly, participants complain about the lack of information on opportunities, lack of clarity about expectations or weak institutional guidance in the internship process.

The academic workload also makes participation in practical learning difficult. It is not always easy for students to manage their courses, exams and internship at the same time. This implies that the experiential learning should not be treated as an add-on to the conventional learning in universities but be woven into the university learning process.

Importantly, inequitable access to practical experience can also help to replicate social inequalities more broadly. Individuals with a more developed personal network or urban privilege might be able to obtain better opportunities than others without institutional or social support. So, ability is not the only thing that determines employability, it is also about access.

Reimagining the Role of Universities

With the increasing emphasis on employability for educational outcomes, universities must rethink the educational success definition. While higher education is still a key objective, the 21st century requires a combination of knowledge and skill in preparation for a career.

To improve employability outcomes, universities should establish long-term collaboration with employers, establish internship programs more systematically in the curriculum, and develop clear learning goals and mentorship for internships.

Career development services are also important. Students are supported by professionals in providing guidance information about workplace expectations, networking and career planning strategies. Higher education institutions that foster and promote the shift from university to work are more likely to result in graduates who are professionally ready.

At a more basic level, experiential learning should not be seen as a supplement to teaching and learning. Rather, practical training should be deemed as part and parcel of higher education.

Conclusion

This is part of a global discussion on the role of universities in modern society and its relationship with employability in Uzbekistan. The acquisition of knowledge and understanding is the main purpose of education, but the ability to apply those learnings in real working life is becoming more important for graduates.

The hands-on training is a key component of confidence, communication, team-work and professional awareness. But access, quality and institutional support remain uneven and insufficient, reducing the effectiveness of EL opportunities.

While increasing internship opportunities is important for improving graduate employability, it is not enough. Practical learning in universities needs to be structured, meaningful and accessible, with potential to fill the gap between education and practice.

The capacity of universities to incorporate experiential learning into the learning process will be one of the key determinants of the success of higher education graduates in the future in the context of the constant reform of the higher education system in Uzbekistan.

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